

Faith of His Fathers

If Mitt Romney wins the Republican nomination, it will be due in large measure to his splendid and moving defense of his faith delivered Dec. 6 at the George Bush

Presidential Library.

The address was courageous in a way John F. Kennedy's speech to the Baptist ministers was not. Kennedy went to Houston to assure the ministers he agreed with them on virtually every issue where they differed with the Catholic agenda and that his faith would not affect any decision he made as president. He called himself "the Democratic Party's candidate for president who happens also to be a Catholic."

It was like saying: "I happen to be left-handed. I can't help it."

Romney did not truckle. He did not suggest that his faith was irrelevant to the formation of his political philosophy. While declaring, "I will serve no one religion, no one group, no one cause and no one interest," he did not back away an inch from his Mormon faith.

"There are some for whom these commitments are not enough," said Romney. "They would prefer it if I would simply distance myself from my religion, say that it is more a tradition than my personal conviction, or disavow one or another of its precepts. That I will not do. I believe in my Mormon faith, and I endeavor to live by it. My faith is the faith of my fathers. I will be true to them and to my beliefs."

"If this costs me the presidency," said Romney, "so be it."

That is the kind of defiance this country can never hear enough of.

What Romney was saying was if you so dislike or resent my faith you will not

vote for me if I stay true to it, don't vote for me. But that may say more about you than it does about me.

Questioned repeatedly on what he, as a Mormon, believes about Jesus Christ, a matter crucial to evangelicals, Romney replied, "What do I believe about Jesus Christ? I believe that Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of mankind. My church's beliefs about Christ may not all be the same as those of other faiths. Each religion has its own unique doctrines and history. These are not bases for criticism but rather a test of our tolerance. Religious tolerance would be a shallow principle if it were reserved only for faiths with which we agree." Surely that is right.

After defending his own faith, Romney declared himself a fighting ally of traditionalists and conservatives in the culture war against a militant secularism that is hostile to all faiths rooted in supernatural beliefs and that seeks to de-Christianize America.

"[T]he notion of separation of church and state has been taken by some beyond its original meaning," Romney said. "They seek to remove from the public domain any acknowledgement of God. Religion is seen as merely a private affair with no place in the public life. It is as if they are intent on establishing a new religion in America—the religion of secularism. They are wrong.

"We should acknowledge the Creator as did the Founders—in ceremony and word. He should remain in our currency, in our pledge, in the teaching of our

history and, during the holiday seasons, Nativity scenes and Menorahs should be welcome in our public places."

Romney understands that while the First Amendment proscribes the establishment of religion, it guarantees the free expression of all religions, even in the public school. Supreme Court, take note. "I will not separate us from the God who gave us liberty," said Romney.

This was a *tour de force*, and it was delivered before perhaps the largest audience Romney will have for any speech before the January caucuses and primaries. It will be the subject of editorials and columns in coming weeks. And it is hard to see how Romney does not benefit hugely from what was a quintessentially "American" address.

With this speech, Romney has thrown on the defensive his main rival in Iowa, Mike Huckabee, the Christians' candidate who, when asked if Mormonism is a cult, left the impression it might well be.

The issues of religious tolerance, what it means to be a Christian in politics, and secularism versus traditionalism are all now out on the table and will likely be the social-moral issues on which the race turns between now and January.

To this writer, Romney is on unassailable grounds. Nor is he hurt by the fact that his wife and five children testify eloquently that he is a man of principles who lives by them.

Mike Huckabee's ascendancy and Romney's address defending his faith, refusing to disavow his beliefs and making this a test of tolerance while launching an offensive against secular humanism, tell us that God is back—in the presidential campaign. ■

Devaluing Doctrine

Do religious teachings matter to religious conservatives? Mitt Romney hopes not. If they do, his appeal to America's "great moral inheritance" will be in vain, and

his religious confession will doom his presidential bid.

"Americans tire of those who would jettison their beliefs, even to gain the world," Romney declared in his speech at the Bush Library. It seems that there are still a few beliefs the former governor will not alter for the sake of political expediency. But he has a problem: according to a recent poll by the Pew Research Center, at least a quarter of all Americans and over a third of evangelicals are less likely to vote for a Mormon. Apparently there are still some candidates many Americans would jettison because of their beliefs, and Romney has the misfortune of being one of them.

Anti-Mormonism is an attitude shared by voters from all backgrounds and both parties (being slightly more common among Democrats than Republicans), but finds its strongest and most explicit expression among evangelical Christians. They make up more than a third of likely caucus-goers in Iowa and over half of the Republican primary electorate in South Carolina, the two early states where Romney's campaign has been struggling in recent weeks. Having invested so heavily in organizing and advertising in the early states as part of his traditional primary strategy, Romney's campaign cannot politically afford defeats in both places. Yet it seems increasingly likely that neither will break his way.

Romney's religion predicament is a classic no-win situation. His opponents in the Republican electorate cannot be persuaded to accept something they regard

as inherently flawed and dangerous to salvation, which is how seriously many of them take this, while Romney cannot accommodate his critics without conceding fundamental beliefs. In trying to square this circle, Romney only encouraged more discussion of his religion without providing the kind of straight talk that skeptical and curious conservatives want.

Having goaded him into making it, the media agreed that Romney's speech was going to be a disaster. They assumed that he would address the issue of anti-Mormonism and would have to navigate the treacherous waters of affirming his own religious faith without antagonizing a large bloc of religious conservative voters whose support he needs. In the end, it was merely a mistake. While he made basic concessions to largely non-existent fears that he would be taking orders from LDS church authorities and rejected mythical calls for him to abandon his beliefs, he mostly refused to address the main issue that had occasioned the speech in the first place. As he has done so often before, Romney avoided the question.

Instead, he framed his remarks in terms of maintaining a united religious conservative front against "the religion of secularism" while preserving the "vibrancy of our religious dialogue." By endorsing a strong public role for religion, however vaguely defined, and declaring his faith in Christ as "the Son of God and the Savior of mankind," Romney drew attention once more to his own religion, about which he had virtually

nothing substantive to say. Having made one religious confession in his speech, he argued that discussing anything else about his religion amounted to an unconstitutional test, rendering his position both incoherent and misinformed.

He delivered what was, by most estimates, an effective speech, but if the target audience was skeptical Christian voters, it failed in a number of ways. Instead of stressing his religion's political irrelevance, Romney made his religion more of a legitimate subject and target of criticism than before. He has validated the basic assumptions of his fiercest critics by stating his strong support for a public role for religion.

At stake in all this is the definition of what religious conservatism will be in America. The outcome will also reveal whether Christians view the role of religion in public life as essentially instrumental. If that becomes the case, something significant will be lost. For a religious conservatism defined solely by "shared values" will eventually become unmoored from the theological truths that give values their foundation and enduring meaning, and increasing religious diversity will throw into doubt what these "shared values" really are.

Anti-Mormonism in electoral politics is just one reaction against the progressive devaluation of religious truth in a largely secularized public square. If faith is going to have an increased role, it seems unavoidable that the vague rhetoric will lose ground to arguments derived from specific claims of revelation.

If Christian conservatives yield to the logic of Romney's "values" alliance, they should not be surprised if their doctrines become as irrelevant to public life as Romney wants them to be for elections. ■