On Campus

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington?

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|
Spring 2012

In 1967, Gallup asked Americans whether they'd be willing to vote for a Mormon presidential candidate and found that one in five would not. Now it's 2012, we're months from a presidential election, and this number has barely changed. Americans are much more likely to vote for a Jewish, Catholic, black, or female candidate than they were forty years ago, but not a Mormon. If you're Mitt Romney, a devout member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and the presumed Republican nominee, this is problematic.

This semester, Columbia's Institute for Religion, Culture, and Public Life held a two-day conference on Mormonism and American Politics to explore the faith's role in the presidential campaign and its treatment in the public sphere. The second day began with a screening of *The Religious Test*, a 2011 documentary in which academics, religious leaders, and ordinary citizens discuss Mormons in politics. "There can be no religious test to hold public office," one of the interviewees says, then adds, "But I'd have some big problems voting for Tom Cruise."

That many Americans confuse Mormonism with Scientology, which is not broadly accepted as a religion, explains the frustration that many Mormon attendees expressed throughout the conference, held in the Kellogg Center, in the International Affairs Building. Non-Mormons, they said, simply do not understand the Mormon faith.

During an audience discussion after the film, a School of the Arts alumna admitted that she had felt uncomfortable telling her Columbia classmates that she was Mormon. "Secular people are the problem, not Evangelicals," she said emphatically, and referred as an example to the atheist writer and commentator Christopher Hitchens, who once said that he'd never vote for a Mormon.

“Yeah, well, he’s dead!” shouted a man wearing a plaid tie.

Peggy Fletcher Stack, a journalist for the *Salt Lake Tribune*, gave a talk on Mormonism in the media. She suggested that the media have a difficult time covering the Mormon Church because they don’t understand the religion’s language.

“People don’t know that a nineteen-year-old boy, or even a fifteen-year-old, can be an ‘elder,’” Stack said, noting also that in Mormonism, “prophets” are not only mystical figures from the Bible but current-day church leaders. She told an anecdote about one such Mormon church leader who introduced himself to a reporter as an “apostle.” Upon hearing this, the reporter thought, “Yeah, right. And I’m the Virgin Mary!”

Stack’s story had the Mormons in the room cracking up. It took everyone else a few seconds to get the joke.

While mainline Christian sects have plenty of differences among them, they share the New Testament as the primary source of their religious belief. But Mormons have an additional narrative of revelation — Joseph Smith’s story — which many Christians consider heretical. This puts American Mormons at a double disadvantage: they are seen as outsiders, and they see themselves as outsiders.

Russell Arben Fox, an associate professor of political science at Friends University, a small Christian liberal-arts college in Kansas, told the audience about monthly “testimony meetings,” in which Mormons gather to reaffirm the truth of their religion to one another. “Mormons say they’re the only true church on the face of the earth,” Fox said, “and they say that to each other *a lot*.”

Before the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960, the public’s attitude toward Catholic politicians was similar to its view of Mormon politicians today. The conference speakers agreed that if America could overcome its religious prejudice then, it can do so now. But how? Some in the audience proposed greater exposure. And that’s exactly what Mormons are getting today: through two presidential candidates (Romney and former Utah governor Jon Huntsman, who dropped out of the race in January) and popular culture like HBO’s hit drama *Big Love*, the TLC reality show *Sister Wives*, and the Broadway smash *The Book of Mormon*. Whether this exposure is beneficial or even accurate (despite what you see on *Sister Wives*, the Mormon church outlawed polygamy in 1896) — or whether it will help Romney get nominated or elected — isn’t clear. Mormons want to be known, but they’re also wary of the

portrayals.

A young man in the audience summed up the contradiction. “Most Mormons won’t go see the *Book of Mormon* musical,” he said, “but we love that there is one.”

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