

October 16, 2007

POLITICAL MEMO

Gingerly, Romney Seeks Ties to Christian Right

By [MICHAEL LUO](#)

He has invoked the Rev. Rick Warren, a popular evangelical author and megachurch pastor. He has quoted Scripture and alluded to the Gideon Bible as favorite late-night reading. And he has cited his belief in Jesus Christ as his personal “savior.”

As [Mitt Romney](#) has had to grapple with suspicions about his Mormon religion during his presidential run, he has tried in various ways to signal his kinship with evangelical Christians, who represent a crucial constituency of the Republican base but consider his religious beliefs to be heretical.

He faces a delicate task in trying to stake out common ground with conservative Christians, while not running afoul of deeply rooted evangelical sensitivities about any blurring of distinctions between Mormonism and conventional Protestantism.

“He has to be very cautious,” said Oran P. Smith, president of the Palmetto Family Council, a conservative Christian group in South Carolina. “When he actually says things that make Mormonism sound like orthodox Christianity, I think that’s where he runs into a lot of trouble.”

Mr. Romney faces one of his most important tests on Friday, when he addresses a gathering of conservative Christians at the Values Voter Summit in Washington. His advisers are still undecided about whether Mr. Romney will directly address concerns about his religion in his 20-minute address and, if so, how much to dwell on it relative to his stances on particular social issues. In the end, they said, because his religion is so personal to him, Mr. Romney’s own feelings on how to handle it will be most important. They made clear it would not likely be a major address on his religion, akin to how [John F. Kennedy](#) confronted the issue of his Catholicism in 1960. The decision about if and when to give such a speech, they said, has still not been settled.

Mr. Romney’s advisers, however, believe there is now an opening for him with members of this pivotal constituency in the Republican base. [Fred D. Thompson](#), the former Tennessee senator for whom many conservative Christians had held out hope, has faltered in the rollout of his campaign. Former Gov. [Mike Huckabee](#) of Arkansas, another potential evangelical standard-bearer, is struggling to raise money. And prominent conservative Christian leaders are becoming increasingly restive about the prospect of former

Mayor [Rudolph W. Giuliani](#) of New York, a supporter of abortion rights, winning the Republican nomination.

Much depends on how Mr. Romney continues to handle the complicated obstacle of his religion as voters begin to focus more on their choices, especially in early-voting states like Iowa and South Carolina, where conservative Christians dominate the nominating process for Republicans.

Polls continue to show that significant numbers of Americans would not vote for a Mormon. But the questions about Mr. Romney's religion that consumed his candidacy early on, largely retreated into the background in recent months as he struggled to parry attacks about his authenticity.

The questions have begun bubbling up again, however, with the continuing uncertainty among Christian conservatives about whom to support and after a Newsweek cover article recently that focused on Mr. Romney's reluctance to embrace his personal faith on the stump.

On the campaign trail, Mr. Romney deflects questions about the specifics of Mormon beliefs, saying he is not a spokesman for his church. Instead, he seeks to emphasize common values across religions.

"The values of my faith are much like, or are identical to, the values of other faiths that have a Judeo-Christian philosophical background," he said at a campaign event in New Hampshire this month. "They're American values, if you will."

But he has sometimes edged further in his efforts to establish a common bond with Christian conservatives. His references to Jesus as his personal savior align with evangelical vernacular. Although it is consistent with Mormon doctrine, evangelicals caution that this is potentially dangerous territory for Mr. Romney, because their conception of who Jesus Christ is differs markedly from what Mormons believe.

"Doctrinally, they understand, 'No, no we don't worship the same God,'" said Charles W. Dunn, dean of the school of government at Regent University, an evangelical institution founded by [Pat Robertson](#).

Joseph Smith founded Mormonism as a restoration of what he considered to be the true Christian church. Among the major differences with traditional Christianity: Mormons do not believe in the concept of the unified Trinity; the Book of Mormon is considered to be sacred text, alongside the Bible; and Mormons believe that God has a physical body and human beings can eventually become like God.

Nevertheless, at a speech in April before a conservative group, Mr. Romney offered something of a Sunday school lesson when talking about the recent shootings at [Virginia Tech](#).

"I picked up my Bible yesterday to reread the account of the senseless murder of Abel by his brother," he said. "It's only one page after the fall of Adam and Eve from the garden, where they were told by God that he

would place what he called ‘enmity’ on the earth.”

Peter Flaherty, Mr. Romney’s deputy campaign manager and a Roman Catholic who coordinates the campaign’s outreach to religious conservatives, said Mr. Romney personally wrote those lines into the speech. Similarly, Mr. Flaherty said, it was Mr. Romney’s idea to refer to Mr. Warren’s best-selling book, “The Purpose-Driven Life,” in speeches. Mr. Romney had met with Mr. Warren while governor of Massachusetts and is a fan of his book, Mr. Flaherty said, even though its thrust is decidedly evangelical.

Mr. Romney alluded to the book over the summer at a house party in Iowa, sponsored by the Iowa Christian Alliance, explaining that America’s strength as a nation came from its culture, which included the belief in “something greater.”

“Rick Warren’s book, ‘The Purpose-Driven Life,’ suggests something — the idea of something greater in life than just yourself,” he said. “And by virtue of belief in a creator, there’s a sense of the worth of each individual.”

More recently, in a Fox News interview, Mr. Romney made an unusual aside when he described how charged up he often gets after a day of campaigning.

“I find myself having to read for an hour or so before I can fall asleep,” he said. “And thanks to the Gideons, I’ve got good material.”

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