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Friday, December 7, 2007

Romney tackles Mormon faith issue

He quotes ex-President Kennedy in landmark speech on personal religion.

Thomas Burr / Salt Lake Tribune

COLLEGE STATION, Texas -- Facing an electorate skeptical about his Mormon faith, GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney appealed Thursday for religious tolerance and pressed shared values among the "symphony" of religions.

Speaking at the George Bush Presidential Library and Museum here, Romney said there should be no religious test for office and steered clear of any talk of specific Mormon doctrines, which some evangelicals consider heretical.

"There are some who would have a presidential candidate describe and explain his church's distinctive doctrines," Romney told 400 invited guests. "To do so would enable the very religious test the founders prohibited in the Constitution. No candidate should become the spokesman for his faith. For if he becomes president, he will need the prayers of the people of all faiths."

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Romney, who has seen his lead in the Iowa polls slip and rival Mike Huckabee, an ordained Baptist minister, gain ground, attempted to allay concerns about his religion by pointing to broad ideals of American tradition. The former Massachusetts governor mentioned the word "Mormon" only once in his speech, covered by nearly 100 news outlets and carried live by cable broadcasters.

While praising the separation of church and state, Romney blasted those who would remove all notion of faith from the public sphere. No religion should dictate government actions and no government should control a religion, he says.

Consultants, commentators and religious conservatives have lobbied Romney to address his faith in a way similar to how John F. Kennedy took on anti-Catholic rhetoric in a 1960 speech.

Romney referenced Kennedy's speech, including the Democrat's line that he is "an American running for president, not a Catholic running for president."

Romney's remarks drew a mixed reaction in Michigan, where his father, George, was once governor and where the former Massachusetts governor has been running strong in the polls.

Before the speech, Rep. Pete Hoekstra, R-Holland, a Romney supporter, said he thought the timing was right for Romney to address his faith -- especially with Huckabee's rise. Hoekstra pointed to a Huckabee television ad airing in Iowa, which prominently labels Huckabee, a Baptist minister, as a "Christian leader."

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"When a candidate starts running ads that day they're the Christian candidate ... what is clearly not said, but clearly implied in the ad, is that the other guy is not," Hoekstra said.

Some of Romney's most vocal critics are from his native state, and they said their minds were not changed. Anti-abortion activists Gary Glenn (a Huckabee supporter) and Jerry Zandstra (who is backing John McCain) and University of Detroit Mercy professor Harry Veryser (a Ron Paul supporter) held a

conference call after the speech in which they labeled Romney unconvincing.

"My concern has never been the fact that Romney is a Mormon," said Zandstra. Mormon theology "really isn't a question that's appropriate regarding the presidency of the United States." Zandstra said it is Romney's shifting positions on issues such as abortion and gay rights that should raise questions among social conservatives.

"The problem isn't that he's a Mormon," Glenn said. "It's that on core values such as family and protecting life, he hasn't been Mormon enough."

Gordon Trowbridge of The Detroit News Washington Bureau contributed to this report.

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