



Will Mormons Join – and be Welcomed into – Alliances against Trump's Nativism and Constitutional Violations?

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During a visit with Mormon relatives in Utah during the 2016 election season, I learned about the conflicted views of members of the Church of Latter Day Saints, typically a Republican Party mainstay. Polls bear out what I heard in person. According to an analysis by Pew, only 61% of Mormons voted for Donald Trump – a much lower percentage than the 78% who voted for Mitt Romney in 2012 and the 80% who supported George W. Bush in 2000. This 2016 GOP drop off in Utah suggests that many Mormons have reacted to Trump's nativist and racist stances in the light of their own group's historic experiences of persecution. Mormon political choices also remind us that the U.S. Christian right is diverse – and potentially divided on key issues.

Mormons in the Contemporary U.S. Christian Right

The prevalent image of the U.S. Christian right as a monolithic force glosses over the significant organizational and theological efforts that have gone into bringing together fragmented and mutually hostile Protestant denominations, Catholics, and Mormons since the 1970s. Today's alliance between Evangelicals and conservative Catholics represents an astonishing shift from a long history in the United States of Protestant condemnations of the Catholic Pope as the "Antichrist." And the Christian right's inclusion of Mormons is equally transformative – reflecting a very recent increasing yet wary acceptance of a faith still considered by many evangelical leaders to be part of a non-Christian cult.

Recently, Mormons have achieved growing acceptance on the Christian right. During a 2008 California referendum battle on Proposition 8 reversing same-sex marriage rights, the Church of Latter-Day Saints won accolades for supporting the overturn from evangelical conservative leaders James Dobson of Focus on the Family and Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council. By the time of a 2014 Pew survey, moreover, 70% of Mormons identified as Republican or Republican-leaning, more loyal to the GOP than any other religious group. Mormon involvement with the GOP culminated in the selection of Mormon Mitt Romney as the Republican presidential candidate in 2012. Even in that year, only half of Republicans and only 35% of white evangelical Protestants said they believe Mormonism to be a Christian religion. Those doubting Mormonism's Christian bona fides were less likely to support Romney in the primaries, leaving analysts to wonder whether such voters would support him in November 2012. But once Romney secured the nomination, only 15% of Republican identifiers (and 23% of white evangelical Protestants) reported feeling uncomfortable with his Mormonism – and even that residual discomfort was not enough to reduce their likelihood of voting for Romney over Obama.

But then Donald Trump came along. Though officially neutral, the Church of Latter-Day Saints issued a pointed primary-season statement in December 2015 affirming theological support for religious freedom. Unlike the way other conservatives deploy this concept, Mormon leaders were not using coded language for discrimination against gays, lesbians, and other marginalized individuals. They were instead genuinely standing up for minority religious groups, Muslims in particular, by quoting from Latter-Day Saints Church founder Joseph Smith, who was himself killed by a religiously prejudiced mob in 1844: "If it has been demonstrated that I have been willing to die for a 'Mormon,' I am bold to declare before Heaven that I am just as ready to die in defending the rights of a Presbyterian, a Baptist, or a good man of any denomination; for the same principle which would trample upon the rights of the Latter-day Saints would trample upon the rights of the Roman Catholics, or of any other denomination who may be unpopular and too weak to defend themselves."

This affirmation of religious tolerance contrasted pointedly with the reported two-thirds support among Republican primary voters overall for Trump's often-applauded calls for entry bans and special surveillance directed at Muslims. This Mormon perspective on religious liberty and tolerance is grounded in distinctive

historical memories of the dangers of nativist religious persecution.

Mormonism and “Whiteness”

In the 19th century, nativist white Anglo-Saxon Protestants excluded Mormons from the construct of “whiteness.” By now Mormons are coded as “white” and considered a homegrown religion. But U.S. Protestants once associated them with non-white populations as a separate polygamous “Mormon race.” After the religion’s founding in 1830, mobs tried to drive Mormons from their homes and government officials called for their expulsion.

Over the course of the twentieth century, Anglo-Saxons gradually accepted once excluded ethnics, even Mormons, expanding the ranks of “whites” in the face of African American political assertion and increasing non-white immigration from places like Latin America and Asia. Nevertheless, Mormonism remains a young religion with intense historical memories of the dangerous consequences of nativist religious intolerance. Mormons may no longer be the maligned “other” of yesteryear, but their different perspectives and values, grounded in a history of persecution, are in some tension with Trump’s ethno-nationalism, so enthusiastically embraced by white Protestant evangelicals.

Charting a New Course for Mormon Alliances in the Trump Era

Finding themselves in tension with usual allies can be bewildering to Mormons, as it was for Salt Lake City resident Angie Melton, who saw no choice but to support Hillary Clinton. “I’m upset by this turn of events,” she said. “I’ve always voted Republican.” More generally, many votes from Utah Mormons that would typically have gone for the GOP candidate went to Independent Evan McMullin and other minor party candidates. During the election, Mormon favorite Romney remained an outspoken Trump critic. Conservative Mormon radio host Glen Beck voted for McMullin and continues to criticize Trump’s racism

Given President Trump’s continuing anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant actions and his open challenges to basic constitutional rights, centrist or leftist advocates concerned to protect vulnerable groups should realize that many Mormons can be allies. No matter how white and politically conservative they seem today, Mormons suffered persecution for a significant chunk of their history – and thus remain wary of the nativism, racism, and religious bigotry so openly expressed by Trump and his enthusiasts.