The New York Times
nytimes.com

July 22, 2007

THE NATION

God '08: Whose, and How Much, Will Voters Accept?

By MICHAEL LUO

THE probing about his Mormon beliefs has by now become familiar to the Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney. But when Mary Van Steenis, a teacher at a local Christian school, took the microphone at a recent "Ask Mitt Anything" forum in Pella, Iowa, to ask her question, it still felt as if some sort of unspoken boundary of social etiquette had been breached.

Mrs. Van Steenis wanted Mr. Romney to say where the Book of Mormon would figure in his decision making as president.

"Where would the Bible be?" she asked. "Would it be above the Book of the Mormon, or would it be beneath it?"

Although the Constitution bars any religious test for office, if polls are to be believed, Mr. Romney, the former Massachusetts governor, faces a serious obstacle to winning the presidency because of his faith. Surveys show a substantial percentage of Americans would be less likely to vote for a Mormon, or for that matter a Muslim or an atheist. But how rigid is that sentiment?

The answer, of course, is complicated. Historical precedent and other polling information offer clues that many voters are willing to make at least certain concessions when it comes to a candidate's religious observance when they pull the curtain behind them in the voting booth.

But could voters accept a president who believes in the Book of Mormon? What about one who believes in the Old Testament but not the New? Or one who venerates Muhammad, or Buddha?

There does seem to be at least one bottom line for many voters: belief in God.

"This is a deeply religious nation by many standards," said Mark Rozell, a professor of public policy at George Mason University. "They want their leaders to be believers. They want them to believe in something higher, to have a moral framework as they lead the country."

Indeed, the religion test imposed by voters has evolved over the years, said John C. Green, a senior fellow at the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

As has been widely noted, Mr. Romney's situation has parallels to John F. Kennedy's in 1960. In 1928, pervasive anti-Catholic sentiment helped derail Al Smith's bid for the presidency. Several decades later, however, Kennedy managed to turn back similar questions, declaring before a gathering of Southern Baptist ministers in Houston that he would resign from public office if there were ever a conflict between his religion and the national interest.

Kennedy's decision to confront the issue directly helped alleviate the fears of many Protestants. Mr. Romney's aides said he was now weighing whether to do something similar.

Polls in recent years have shown a clear shift in religious considerations. The vast majority of Americans at this point, said Mr. Green, care less about sectarian affiliation, at least among members of faiths that are now perceived to be part of the American mainstream — Protestants, Catholics and most recently Jews — and more generally about whether the candidate believes in God and how that lends itself to a moral framework.

A national telephone survey released earlier this year by the Pew Research Center asked which traits, including being black, a woman, a Mormon, a Muslim, or a homosexual, would help or hurt a candidate the most. The worst trait for a candidate to possess? "Doesn't believe in God."

The basic standard might help explain why the Republican frontrunner in national polls, Rudolph W. Giuliani, a divorced

Roman Catholic who favors abortion rights and has studiously sidestepped questions about his spiritual beliefs and church attendance, is still faring well among many evangelical Christians.

Even though little is known about his spiritual practices, Mr. Giuliani, who grew up attending Catholic schools and even considered being a priest at one point, is at least a part of a mainstream church. He has also sought to demonstrate something of a moral backbone by sticking to his stance on abortion, despite its unpopularity among the Republican base.

When Senator Joseph I. Lieberman of Connecticut, an observant Jew, became the Democratic nominee for vice president in 2000, few raised any serious concerns about his religion. Christian conservatives liked his championing of religious values in the public square but voted overwhelmingly for the Bush-Cheney ticket anyway.

Skepticism persists, however, about those who belong to certain religious minorities. The Pew survey, for example, found 46 percent would be less likely to vote for a Muslim presidential candidate.

Nevertheless, the 110th Congress, which took office this year, included for the first time, two Buddhists and a Muslim.

An important part of overcoming the suspicions of voters, said Keith Ellison, a Minnesota Democrat and the only Muslim ever elected to Congress, is to allow them to get to know the candidate as an individual.

“Could we elect a Muslim, or a Mormon, or someone from any other minority religion, is a different question from, ‘Could we elect Keith Ellison to represent the Fifth Congressional District,’ ” Mr. Ellison said. “Could we elect Mitt Romney? He’s a Mormon, but it’s not the only thing there is about Mitt Romney. Mitt Romney does not just represent Mormonism. Mormonism informs him, but he is fundamentally an individual. I think people are going to get that.”

Mormons at this point only represent about 1.5 percent of the population. In the Pew survey, 30 percent of respondents said they would be less likely to vote for a Mormon candidate.

When challenged about his beliefs, Mr. Romney has sought to emphasize points of commonality with Protestants and Catholics, often asserting that he considers Jesus Christ his lord and savior.

But Charles W. Dunn, dean of the school of government at Regent University, founded by the religious broadcaster Pat Robertson, advised caution on this approach.

“That doesn’t play well with let’s say an evangelical audience,” he said. “Doctrinally, they understand, ‘No, we don’t worship the same God. We don’t have the same approach.’ ”

Instead, he said, like Kennedy before him, Mr. Romney should seek to emphasize religious tolerance. Indeed, Mr. Romney’s response to Mrs. Van Steenis ultimately settled on this message.

“This is a nation where people come from different faiths, different doctrines, different churches,” Mr. Romney said. “But, unlike the people we’re fighting over in the Middle East, we don’t have a religious test to say who should be able to run our country. It’s over there where people say, ‘You don’t go to my church, you can’t run our country.’ ”

When he finished, his audience applauded.