

Mormonism: Why Mitt Romney isn't anxious to talk about his religion

Posted: Thu, 21st Jun 2012 by [Admin](#)

As the US Presidential race gets into gear, the Republican challenger to Barack Obama is Mitt Romney.

Mr Romney is a Mormon, something that seems to befuddle many Americans. Little is known about the origins of this fast-growing religion: is it a branch of Christianity? Does it condone polygamy?

Mr Romney is not anxious to talk about his faith except in the most general terms. But as CBS News commented

"The Mormon faith is not something that a President Romney would passively carry with him into office; it would be a central driver of his presidency. "If you want to offer to America the full package of who he is, if you don't [talk about his religion], you lose a very important half of what's shaped his life," says Clayton Christensen, a professor at Harvard Business School and author of *How Will You Measure Your Life?* "I don't think there's a whole lot for him to be ashamed of--as you dig deeper and deeper you'll be able to show exactly who he is."

Well, let's take a look at the history of the Church of the Latter Day Saints – the religion that apparently motivates Mr Romney - and its founder, Joseph Smith. Then you can make up your own minds.

Joseph Smith was born in 1805. He was the son of a Vermont farmer, and when he was ten, his father, Joseph senior moved to Palmyra, New York, with his wife and nine children. It was a period of feverish religious activity in America, with the various sects – Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist – expanding at an explosive rate as they made new converts.

Joseph's mother Lucy became a convert to Presbyterianism, which had been established by John Calvin in Geneva in 1536, as did two of Joseph's brothers and his sister Sophronia. Joseph attended meetings of the various warring sects, and as he listened to them denouncing one another, he gave a great deal of thought to religion.

In the spring of 1820, after reading passages in the Epistle of James which declared that those in perplexity should ask God, he went to a grove of trees to pray. There he had a revelation – a pillar of light descended, in which he saw two men; one of these pointed to the other and said: "This is my beloved son. Hear him!"

Smith then asked God which sect he ought to join, and was told "None of them". They were all wrong and all creeds were an abomination in His sight. When Joseph came to his senses he was lying on his back. Back at home he told his mother that he had just learned that Presbyterianism was not true.

The revelation had no profound effect on him, and he later admitted that he continued to enjoy "jovial company" and to behave in a way that was not suitable for one who has been "called of God".

Three and a half years later on 21 September 1823, Joseph was saying his prayers in bed when the light appeared again and he saw a man dressed in a white robe "whose feet did not touch the floor".

The visitor explained that he was an angel called Moroni, who went on to talk at length about the scriptures, then told Joseph he had written a history of the ancient inhabitants of America on plates of gold. After this, Moroni ascended to heaven in a shaft of light. A few minutes later he reappeared and repeated everything he had just said, then vanished again. Soon he was back again, repeating the whole thing once more. The next day he reappeared as Joseph (in a state of understandable fatigue) was crossing a field, and described where the plates were to be found.

Obedying his instructions, Joseph went to a hill called Cumorah, about four miles away. On the top, he found a large stone, which he levered up with a pole. In the hole underneath was a box, and in this he found some gold plates, a breastplate and a pair of silver spectacles – which Moroni had called Urim and Thummim – and which would enable him to translate the words on the gold plates.

In 1827, Smith was finally allowed to take the gold plates away with him. He carried them home on a borrowed buggy, but seems to have shown them to no one, not even his wife Emma, who went with him to collect them.

Two months later, with fifty dollars presented by his first disciple, a farmer called Martin Harris, Smith and his wife went to Harmony, Pennsylvania, and there Joseph settled down to translating the plates with the aid of the silver spectacles. He did this behind a screen, so that no one actually saw the plates.

Martin Harris called at some point and took away a piece of paper with a transcription of some of the characters on it – they were apparently in a script called "reformed Egyptian" – and showed them to a New York professor called Anton, who gave him a certificate saying the characters were genuine. But when he heard that they had been obtained from an angel, Anton tore up his certificate.

So the Book of Mormon came into existence. It told how America had been originally settled by people from the Tower of Babel in the fifth century AD. These settlers gradually degenerated into men of violence. Eleven hundred years later, more settlers arrived in Chile, including four brothers. From one of the brothers, who was fair, descended a white race, the Nephites; from the other three, who were dark, descended the Indians (or Lamanites). After his death on the cross, Jesus Christ appeared in America and preached the gospel. And in AD 385, after the Nephites were almost wiped out by the Lamanites near the Hill Cumorah, their prophet, Mormon, wrote the history, which was then buried in the hill.

Martin Harris provided the cash for publication, and The Book of Mormon appeared in 1830. Meanwhile, the gold plates had been returned to the Angel Moroni, no one but Smith having even glimpsed them, although a young school teacher named Oliver Cowdery, helped with the translation from the other side of the screen. The first 116 pages of the manuscript had already been lost when Martin Harris's indignant wife threw them on the fire.

Reviews of the book were contemptuous: no one had any doubt that Smith was a confidence trickster who had invented the whole story. But the critiques at least aroused curiosity, and Smith soon began to accumulate followers. He also began to accumulate enemies, and decided to move to some less hostile state.

The Latter Day Saints – as the Mormons now call themselves – decided to move west. The "missionaries" had already established a church in Kirtland, Ohio. There, Smith received a revelation that all members of the Church should deed their property to the community, and a bishop would give each family back what he felt they required.

Problems arose. The citizens of Kirtland objected to the Saints. In 1836, the Saints established their own bank and printed their own money; in 1837, it collapsed, causing much hardship; five of Smith's twelve "apostles" denounced him as a fallen prophet and left. Smith saw it all as a test of the faithful.

Other Saints had already established themselves in Missouri; Smith joined them there. By now even Martin Harris and Oliver Cowdery had left in disillusionment. When angry mobs drove the Mormons out of Missouri– after Smith had spent several months in jail – they moved on to found the town of Nauvoo in Illinois.

But Illinois' inhabitants proved just as hostile as those in Missouri. Smith may have made things worse in July 1843 by publishing a document declaring that God had ordained polygamy, or "plural marriage" – although at this stage it was not openly announced. (Smith himself must have been practising plural marriage long before he announced its legality, for he seems to have married twenty-seven women, and possibly as many as forty-eight.) Finally, a dispute with the governor became so bitter that, early in 1844, Smith decided it was time to go further west to found a City of the Saints.

Governor Ford was worried as the surrounding communities armed themselves and talked about massacring the Saints. In June, Smith and his associates – including his brother Hyrum – were charged with "riot". Convinced that he would be killed, he decided to flee, but then changed his mind and returned to give himself up. This seemed to defuse the threatened violence, and Joseph Smith, his brother Hyrum, and two followers, were lodged in Carthage jail.

On June 27 1844, at four in the afternoon, a hundred men rushed the jail. Governor Ford had marched his forces off to Nauvoo to restore order, and there were only eight men in charge of the prisoners. Hyrum was shot by a bullet that came through the window, and collapsed on the floor. Joseph Smith opened the door and emptied his six-shooter into the mob. Then the attackers flung open the door and started shooting. One of the disciples, John Taylor, tried to jump out of the window, but was hit by a bullet. Joseph Smith attempted to leave the same way, and was hit several times; he fell out of the window twenty feet from the ground. Staring out of the window after him, the other disciple, Willard Richards, saw that he seemed to be dead.

A cry of "The Mormons are coming" caused the crowd to scatter, and Taylor and Richards managed to take refuge in a safer place in the jail. In fact, no Mormons were coming. But since Joseph Smith and his brother were now dead, the crowd dispersed.

It was left to Smith's chief lieutenant, Brigham Young, to lead the Saints on their great trek westward, to the place where, in 1847, they founded Salt Lake City. With tremendous energy, they irrigated the desert, and arranged the transportation of thousands of converts from Europe. (The Mormons always attached great importance to proselytising.)

When Young announced the doctrine of polygamy in 1852, he was deprived of the governorship of the territory. "Plural marriage" was finally disowned by the Church in 1890, but when Young died in 1877, he had seventeen wives and fifty-six children.

Mormonism always aroused fierce opposition. As early as 1834, E.D. Howe, an investigative journalist of the period, published a collection of affidavits from friends and neighbours of Smith who described him as a lazy and mendacious religious con man. Another investigator discovered a novel by the Reverend Simon Spalding that was alleged to be the true source of the Book of Mormon. In the mid-1920s, Brigham H. Roberts, the official historian of the Mormon Church, appealed to Church leaders to help him "resolve problems" about the Book of Mormon, one of which was that it contained so many similarities to a book called *A View of the Hebrews* published in 1823 by the Reverend Ethan Smith. Another problem is that the Book of Mormon refers to the ancient Hebrews use of steel, and to domestic animals that were unknown in ancient times. Referring to many similar discrepancies, Roberts concluded: "The evidence, I sorrowfully submit, points to Joseph Smith as their creator."

Despite the overwhelming evidence that Mormonism came into being as a money-making scam, Smith remains one of the most successful messiahs of the nineteenth-century.

But to a rational and objective observer, the development of Mormonism seems like one big confidence trick – a set of religious beliefs that, given the known facts, are difficult to give credence to.

Mitt Romney's family history and connection with Mormonism is chronicled [here](#).

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