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Romney on the rise? [1]

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Mitt Romney, the former governor of Massachusetts and Republican presidential hopeful, has enjoyed buoyant support in the key early states in the primary calendar ? due in large part to his social conservatism. However, the boost in support for the blues-guitar playing Baptist minister Mike Huckabee has seen some of his popularity ebb away. The main problem seems to be Romney's Mormonism, which troubles many American voters. Last week he sought to put this behind him, with a speech only a few miles from where JFK allayed concerns about his membership of the Catholic Church in 1960.

The thought of a candidate giving a major campaign speech about their religious faith is troubling to many Europeans. However, the word ?Mormon? was used only once in the 20-minute speech, in which Romney focused more on the relationship between faith and public life than on his own religious convictions. As Joe Loconte wrote [3] in response to Romney's speech, the purpose of American secularism "is not to quarantine religion from public life, but to protect the religious liberty of people of all faiths, or none." So just as Romney promised not to serve any one religious or interest group while in office, and demonstrated clear enthusiasm for the institutional separation of church and state, he simultaneously promised not to separate America from "The god who gave us our liberty".

Romney went on to tell of the strong admiration he had for every faith he had encountered, and how he wished that aspects of them were present in his own. In his most confrontational moment, he warned of the perils of an established state religion, pointing to Europe where he claimed that magnificent cathedrals had become little more than a "postcard backdrop" thanks to government dominance.

Clearly, the primary goal of this speech was to diffuse Christian concerns about Romney's Mormonism just a month before the primary selection process begins, but it also offered a brave and refreshing explanation of the place for religion in a structurally secular country in which faith remains an important part of many people?s lives. It remains to be seen whether Romney has overcome his doubters, but if he has, the Republican race could be blown wide open.

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