

Broadway to Campaign Trail, Mormon's the Buzz

Written by Ginny Grimsley
Monday, 20 February 2012 15:12

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From Romney and Huntsman's Polygamist Ancestor to Christian Critics, Expert Shares Insights

For a religion many Americans still describe as “cultish” and “secretive,” the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has gained a lot of mainstream clout in the past couple of years.

On Broadway, the irreverent musical satire “The Book of Mormon” was the hands-down favorite of 2011, winning nine Tony Awards. On television, “Big Love,” a fictional HBO series about a Mormon polygamist, enjoyed a five-year run ending last March. And on the GOP presidential campaign trail, front-runner Mitt Romney and Jon Huntsman are both Mormons with deep roots in the 181-year-old church.

Los Angeles attorney Robert P. DesJardins studied the religion and its history for his newest novel, *Land of the Saints* (<http://robertpdesjardins.authorsxpress.com/>). He found a history that provided him not only with plenty of mystery and intrigue for his fiction, but also gave him insights into the religion's role in contemporary America.

Did you know?

- Former governors Romney and Huntsman share a common ancestor: Parley Pratt. An original apostle of the church founded in 1830 by Joseph Smith, Pratt was Romney's great-great grandfather and Huntsman's great-great-great grandfather, DesJardins says. Pratt was said to have had 12 wives in the years before polygamy was banned by the church in 1890. (Current members practicing plural marriage are excommunicated.) Pratt was killed in 1857 by the estranged husband of a woman with whom he'd become involved.

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- Romney and Huntsman are not the first church members to run for president. Joseph Smith, who founded the church in 1830, began his run for president on Jan. 29, 1844. It ended with his assassination five months later on June 27.

- Contrary to popular belief, the church's growth has slowed dramatically since 1999. From 1974 to 1994, it was said to be the fastest-growing American-made religion, but the numbers started dropping in 1999, DesJardins says. There are now about 14 million Mormons worldwide and they comprise just 2 percent of the U.S. population, which is interesting, DesJardins notes, since they comprise 28 percent of the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates.

- One issue that surfaces in heavily evangelical Christian states such as Iowa and South Carolina is whether Mormons are Christians. "Mormons believe in God the father, Jesus the son and the Holy Ghost. They believe in Jesus as our savior and Messiah," DesJardins says. "So how why would anyone say they're not Christians? The difference is, they do not believe the three gods are one. And they believe in human deification – that humans can become gods. Those are two fundamental reasons why some Christians say Mormons do not share their faith."

- The Latter-day Saints is well-known as the keeper of the largest genealogical library in the world, with more than 2.4 million rolls of records on microfilm, and a database with names of 600 million dear departed. Why all the data on non-church members? Mormons can assure ancestors are together for all eternity through baptism of the dead; living church members stand in as proxies.

The church has long been regarded with suspicion, and even outright violence. Despite its growing prominence in American culture, those attitudes still prevail, DesJardins says.

"The church itself hired two ad agencies in 2009 to research public perception and was disappointed to find Americans still describe it as 'cultish,' 'secretive' and 'sexist,'" DesJardins says. "It set about to change that with a multi-million-dollar TV, billboard and Internet campaign in 2010."

The campaign expanded in 2011.

DesJardins expects it will do little to help a religion that still idolizes its authoritarian founder, carefully guards secrets and ceremonies, and reserves positions of power within the church for men.

About Robert P. DesJardins

A successful Los Angeles lawyer for more than 35 years, DesJardins is now a lecturer, private judge and judge pro tempore for the California Superior Court - in addition to being a novelist. In *Land of the Saints*, his third book, his main character is an attorney who finds himself drawn into the mysterious and dangerous world of Mormon spirituality after a friend is charged with murder. DesJardins is also the author of "The Mistral and A Darker Shade of Orange."