

A Catholic for President?: John F. Kennedy and the “Secular” Theology of the Houston Speech, 1960

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At 8:55 on the evening of Monday, 12 September 1960, John Fitzgerald Kennedy—the youthful but somewhat weary Democratic candidate in that year’s closely fought presidential race—sat down on the dias in the ballroom of the Rice Hotel in Houston, Texas. “We can win or lose the election right there in Houston on Monday night,” Ted Sorensen, one of Kennedy’s closest political advisers, had told a friend the previous weekend in Los Angeles, and Kennedy had flown back “east” from barn-storming on the Pacific coast just for that evening’s event. That “event” was an invitation to address the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, three hundred evangelical clergymen strong, who had been gathering for close to an hour when Mr. Kennedy sat down next to the evening’s moderator (a Presbyterian pastor) five minutes before the meeting was to begin.¹

Kennedy’s address to the assembled clergymen that evening—ostensibly about the role of religion in American politics, but actually about Kennedy’s own “religious affiliation” (as he so singularly put it for a Roman Catholic)—represented *both* an unexceptional instance of American political rhetoric (“I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant, nor Jewish”), and a rather extraordinary “theological” reflection on the role of religion in American public life

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1. Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President, 1960*, 2nd ed. (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1969), 260. For an overtly hostile account of the Houston speech, see Victor Lasky, *JFK, The Man and the Myth* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), 490.

("I want a Chief Executive whose public acts are . . . not limited by any religious oath, ritual or obligation."). Indeed, within a very short time of the address itself, both Catholic and Protestant commentators, no less than hard-nosed secular political pundits who cared not a whit for theology, opined about the nature of the "theology" informing Kennedy's speech.²

Kennedy, of course, was attempting to address the neuralgic "religion issue" in the 1960 presidential campaign that September evening in Houston, and, to judge by the results of the November election two months later, he had offered a reasonably cogent answer to the question of "how can a Catholic live in the White House." Like Al Smith in the 1928 presidential campaign, Kennedy had found his Catholicism to be a troublesome and recurrent issue in his bid for the presidency, and had reiterated in the Houston speech the hard-line "separationist" position on church and state that had marked his political career from its inception.³

On one level, the very issue of Kennedy's religion in the campaign could easily be seen as ironic, as Jack Kennedy had never been accused of being overly pious at any point in his life. His wife Jacqueline had reportedly told journalist Arthur Krock that she was mystified over the religion issue, as "Jack is such a poor Catholic." Likewise, close advisers to JFK would later report that, while Kennedy resented his portrayal in the press as not deeply religious, "he cared not a whit for theology, [and] sprinkled quotations from the Protestant Bible throughout his speeches." Indeed, Ted Sorensen—arguably JFK's most intimate counsel in public life and himself a Unitarian—recalled that "during the eleven years I knew him I never heard him pray aloud . . . or, despite all our discussions of church/state affairs, ever disclose his personal views on man's (sic) relation to God."⁴

But Kennedy's Catholicism was in fact a key (if diffuse) issue in the campaign: the religious distrust that Kennedy had to address in order to be a viable candidate for the presidency in 1960 spanned the cultural spectrum from a crude prejudice against "micks"—pressed by hooded "patriots" who burned crosses in the night—to highly literate, liberal

2. "On Church and State: Remarks of John F. Kennedy Addressed to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association," 363-76, in *The Kennedy Reader*, ed. Jay David (Indianapolis, Ind.: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc, 1967), 364, 365.

3. Albert Menendez, *John F. Kennedy: Catholic and Humanist* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1978), 31ff.

4. Jacqueline Kennedy's remark reported in Menendez, *Kennedy: Catholic and Humanist*, 2. For a secular reading of Kennedy's "faith," see Bruce Miroff, *Pragmatic Illusions: The Presidential Politics of John F. Kennedy* (New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1976), 5-9, 10. Sorensen's recollection is in Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965), 19.

concerns—voiced by some of the most respected seminary professors in the nation—about the hegemonic designs of a religious institution that had held, for many centuries, that “error has no rights.” The Houston speech was the Kennedy team’s most organized effort to address the entire spectrum of doubters—from “mick-haters” to bureaucrats in the “God Box” on Morningside Heights—and to, finally and permanently, put the issue to rest.⁵

Much has been made, both at the time and since, of a Catholic being successfully (albeit closely) elected to the presidency in 1960. Some have seen in Kennedy’s election one of the most visible signs of the Catholic “coming of age” in American culture—the public event that marked the movement of the Catholic community from the cultural ghetto into the mainstream of American life. Others have portrayed the 1960 election as the public funeral of what Arthur Schlesinger termed “America’s oldest prejudice”: with Kennedy, the three centuries-long tradition of anti-Catholicism in American culture appeared at an end, and a genuinely “post-Protestant America” appeared (finally) to be a-birthing. Still others have analyzed the Kennedy victory and presidency as the moment when the twentieth century came “into its own” in American public life: as the first president born after 1900, JFK seemed to be the perfect icon for a generation that had left behind the “bogey”s of the nineteenth century—ethnic, racial, and religious prejudices among them. The intellectual and moral “toughness” called for in the sobering game of *realpolitik* that defined the post-1960 “New Frontier” appeared to have little time for religious (or any other kind of) bigotry.⁶

Further, it is possible to read the theological vapidness of Kennedy’s “religious affiliation”—at least as expressed in public pronouncements like the Houston speech—as the legitimate child of what has been called the “Religious Revival” of the Fifties. Whatever one thought of the putative “revival” of religion that marked the opening years of the Nuclear Age—and scholars of American religion have portrayed it as

5. The phrase, “error has no rights,” was a dictum of the 1917 *Code of Canon Law*. During the 1960 presidential campaign, well over three-hundred different anti-Catholic tracts—aimed specifically at the Kennedy ticket and much of it scurrilous—were sent out to over twenty million homes by Protestant groups organized against Kennedy because of his religion. Likewise, Dr. George Ford of the National Association of Evangelicals, attempted to make “Reformation Sunday” on 30 October 1960—nine days before the election—into an event that would feature anti-Kennedy sermons in Protestant churches across the land. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 194, 195.

6. Kennedy received 34,221,463 votes (49.7 percent of the number cast), while Richard Nixon received 34,108,582 votes (49.6 percent), making Kennedy’s the closest presidential election in American history. See White, *The Making of the President*, 350. On the “American Way of Life” as the *real* American religion, see Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1960), ch. 5.

fostering everything from the "suburban captivity of the churches" to the cult of "social anesthesia"—one could not deny that one of that revival's most important effects was both the high visibility and the almost content-less theology of the "Piety on the Potomac" that had marked the Eisenhower years in the White House. Monsignor (later Bishop) Fulton J. Sheen had played a key role, along with the Reverend Norman Vincent Peale and Rabbi Joshua Liebman, in making the "Judeo-Christian tradition" (a religious tradition that now included Catholics and Jews along with Protestants) the now agreed-upon basis of public rhetoric. This new religious piety—its appeal to a three thousand-year-old tradition notwithstanding—had found its most popular and visible high priest in Eisenhower himself, who had opened his presidency (and stunned the Washington establishment) with reading his own prayer during his inauguration ceremony, and who thereafter punctuated his public addresses with transcendent if vague references to the "Supreme Being." If "vagueness" was thus a theological virtue in presidential rhetoric after the Eisenhower years, then John Kennedy certainly had done his divinity homework well.⁷

All of these interpretations offer important insights into the political events of November 1960, as well as into the "theology" of Kennedy himself. But the Houston speech, and the theological agenda informing it, might also offer other, less optative, lessons for understanding the role of religion in the brave new world of late twentieth-century American life, quite apart from the depth of piety felt or expressed by the young senator from Massachusetts. These lessons have less to do with the demise of religious prejudice in American culture, or with the new post-Eisenhower religious inclusiveness in "the American Way of Life," than with a "naked public square" in which religious impulses were marginalized in public discourse.

Precisely because John F. Kennedy was a Roman Catholic—an adherent (however poorly) of a religious tradition that had been successfully excluded from the "high priesthood" of American politics for almost two centuries—it might be argued that he had to "secularize"

7. On the history of the "Judeo-Christian Tradition" as a cultural and political term in America, see Mark Silk, "Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America," *American Quarterly* 36 (1984): 64-85, esp. 74ff. On the "suburban captivity of the churches," see Gibson Winter, *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches: An Analysis of Protestant Responsibility* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1962). On the piety of the 1950s "revival" abetting the mind cure gospel of "social anesthesia," see Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers: Religion as Pop Psychology from Mary Baker Eddy to Oral Roberts*, 2nd ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), ch. 23: "Social Anesthesia." On "Piety on the Potomac" as a political/religious phenomenon during the Eisenhower presidency, see Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 7th ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977), 954.

the American presidency in order to win it. Indeed, it is the contention of this essay that Kennedy's Houston speech can be fruitfully seen as a key moment, not only in American Catholicism's "coming of age," but also of the articulation of the terms of that rite of passage.

The Houston speech—and the "theology" that undergirds it—is all the more dramatic when considered in the context of the traditional role of the American presidency in fostering devotion to the American "civil religion." At least since Abraham Lincoln's mytho-religious musings about the "almost-chosen people," through Woodrow Wilson's millennial perceptions of America's role during and after the First World War, to Dwight David Eisenhower's famous regular but vague incantations as the "pontifex" of the American public cult, American presidents had regularly and clearly elucidated the Christian foundations of the American experiment. Indeed, just a few years before Kennedy's campaign, President Eisenhower had announced that the American experiment made no sense without a "deeply felt religious faith—and I don't care what it is." Thus, Kennedy's stark new vision of an exceedingly high and solid wall of separation between church and state elucidated at Houston was all the more dramatic and noteworthy—and was noted as such at the time—precisely because he appeared after one of the more willing practitioners of the national religious cult.⁸

Kennedy's "secularizing" of the presidency was not aimed at the disappearance or denigration of religion or religious impulses; rather, it took the form of the privatization of religion as described by sociologist Peter Berger. In Berger's theory, the social and epistemological pluralism endemic to "complex modern societies" like that of the United States after World War II almost inexorably leads to the removal of religious impulses from the public to the private spheres; but such removal, while gaining social comity and political order, also comes at a price:

Private religiosity, however "real" it may be to the individuals who adopt it, cannot any longer fulfill the classical task of religion, that of constructing a common world within which all of social life receives ultimate meaning binding on everybody. Instead, this religiosity is limited to specific enclaves of social life that may be

8. In his Second Inaugural, Lincoln offered a distinctly religious content to the "bonds of affection" that bound North and South together: "Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God." See Sidney Mead, "Abraham Lincoln's 'Last, Best Hope of Earth': The American Dream of Destiny and Democracy," in *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976 [1963]), 73. In calling for American support for the Fourteen Points after World War I, Woodrow Wilson had announced that "America had the infinite privilege of fulfilling her destiny and saving the world." See Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1968), frontispiece, 173-75, 209-13, 224-25. An excellent discussion of the implications of President Eisenhower's famous statement can be found in Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, 16.

effectively segregated from the secularized sectors of modern society. . . . The world-building potency of religion is thus restricted to the construction of sub-worlds, of fragmented universes of meaning, the plausibility structure of which may in some cases be no larger than the nuclear family.⁹

In such a reading of the events of 1960, the Houston speech of 12 September represented a landmark in the "secularization" of American politics, no less than in the "mainstreaming" of American Catholicism. The "privatization" of transcendent impulses that Kennedy's address represented, however understandable on the level of political reality, represented a "severe rupture of the traditional task of religion, which was precisely the establishment of an integrated set of definitions of reality that could serve as a common universe of meaning for the members of a society." If, indeed, Kennedy understood and meant what he stated at Houston—that he represented a vision of the presidency "not limited by any religious obligation"—then he built better than he knew. Presidential discourse between Kennedy and Jimmy Carter—that is, until the rise of what the secular press christened "The New Religious Right"—would be marked by a singular and new absence of religious metaphors and Christian imagery.¹⁰

But there is a delicious irony to the story as well: the Houston speech, which marked an America well on its way into the secular city no less than marking Jack Kennedy on his way to the White House, was itself the logical end result of Protestants such as Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale highlighting Kennedy's religion as a problematic issue in the 1960 presidential campaign. The very issue that they made of his Catholicism helped to insure the "privatization" of religion in public rhetoric.¹¹

II

At least since the famous—or infamous—presidential election of 1928, when the "wet" Democratic governor of New York, Al Smith, had lost the election by a landslide, many in the Democratic Party leadership had believed that a Catholic candidate for the presidency would lose more votes than could be gained by adherence to that faith. This common wisdom, in fact, represented one of the most discussed and

9. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 133-34.

10. There is, of course, a daunting mass of social scientific literature addressing the question of just what "secularization" might mean, and how it has (or has not) affected modern American culture. This article will take as axiomatic Peter Berger's classic definition of "secularization" as the "privatization of religious impulses," and their marginalization in public discourse.

11. *Ibid.*, 134. The phrase "nation with the soul of a church" was coined by G.K. Chesterton in answer to his question, "What Is America?"—the title of one of his essays.

debated issues in the Democratic Party—especially given Roman Catholicism's status as the largest religious body in the nation, and its "majority status" in key presidential electoral states like New York, Pennsylvania, and Illinois. Indeed, this party discussion had reached a critical point by 1956, when two Roman Catholics, along with two "Dixiecrats," were being considered by the Democratic Party leadership for the number two spot on the presidential ticket: New York City mayor Robert Wagner, and the young senator from Massachusetts, John Fitzgerald Kennedy.¹²

Kennedy himself (and a number of politicians who supported his bid that year), believed that his religion would help defend his party's ticket against Republican charges that the Democrats were "soft on communism," as well as help counter the divorced status of the party's presidential contender, Adlai Stevenson. Further, the Kennedy camp based their argument in favor of the young Massachusetts senator on more than just bravado.¹³

John Bailey, state chairman of the Connecticut Democratic party and a fervent Kennedy supporter, had distributed to party officials a report subsequently known as the "Bailey Memorandum," although it had, in fact, been written by Kennedy's chief aide, Ted Sorensen. The Bailey memorandum contended that millions of Catholic Democrats who had voted for Eisenhower in 1952 would return "home" to the Democratic Party if a Catholic were chosen as Stevenson's running mate. The memorandum likewise challenged the so-called "Al Smith Myth" within the party by presenting statistical and historical arguments to show that the 1928 candidate had lost not because of anti-Catholic bigotry, but rather because 1928 was a "Republican year" due to prohibition, distrust of Democratic Party "bossism," and a host of other concerns completely unrelated to Smith's religion. Indeed, the Memorandum asserted that Kennedy would be an ideal candidate to shoo away any lingering shadows of Smith and bring into the Party fourteen pivotal "Catholic states" which carried, among them, 261 electoral votes.¹⁴

As Sorensen himself later observed, the Bailey Memorandum—aimed at convincing Protestants no less than Catholic stalwarts of the Party—"made no pretense of being a comprehensive and objective study. It was a political answer to sweeping assertions made against the nomination of a Roman Catholic for vice president." Unfortunately, the memorandum failed to galvanize party support for Kennedy. Sev-

12. Menendez, *Kennedy, Catholic and Humanist*, 25; Lasky, *JFK*, 173-79; White, *The Making of the President*, 241.

13. White, *The Making of the President*, 241; Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 81.

14. Lasky, *JFK*, 180-81. See also Appendix B: The "Bailey Report," 587-588, #591ff.

eral political scientists on the Party's payroll claimed to have discredited its statistical data, while others observed that it had made no ethnic distinctions among Catholic Democrats, thus raising questions about the veracity of its conclusions. Further, liberal Protestant journals (to the "left of center" politically and sympathetic to Democrats' social agenda) voiced their lack of conversion to the Kennedy cause after the Bailey Memorandum: the issue, the *Christian Century* opined in an editorial just days before the Party's convention, had more to do with the style of Wagner and Kennedy's religion than its brand. Neither had manifested much independent thought, religiously or otherwise, during their political careers, so that Protestant worries about either Catholic in the Oval Office—even in so progressive a journal as the *Christian Century*—were hardly put to rest. Neither Kennedy nor Wagner were nominated for the Democrats' number two spot in 1956.¹⁵

Thus Kennedy supporters within the Party turned their eyes to the 1960 race. In preparation for that campaign, Kennedy himself began to reiterate his rather "strict constructionist" reading of separation of church and state questions in a number of interviews and speeches, perhaps most famously in a March 1959 interview with Fletcher Knebel in *Look* magazine. In answering a question put to him during that interview about possible conflicts between his (Catholic) conscience and the presidential oath to uphold the Constitution—a somewhat tendentious and insulting question, given Kennedy's by-then well known views about public aid to parochial schools, an ambassador to the Vatican, and other "Protestant fears"—Kennedy had answered, in what would later be termed an "unvarnished" way, that "whatever one's religion in private life may be, for the officeholder, *nothing* takes precedence over his oath to uphold the Constitution in all its parts—including the First Amendment and the strict separation of church and state."¹⁶

However understandable Kennedy's political concerns may have been to allay Protestant fears about a candidacy that was yet to be formally announced, the Catholic press took immediate and hostile exception both to the questions asked in the *Look* interview and to Kennedy's answers to them. Why, they asked, should Kennedy have submitted to a "loyalty test for Catholics only"? The Diocese of Baltimore's *Catholic Review* stated that it felt Kennedy "appears to have gone overboard in an effort to placate the bigots," while John Cogley,

15. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 83; Lasky, *JFK*, 181-82; *Christian Century* 33 (15 August 1956): 941. For an editorial reflection on the "import" of the Democratic Party's decision in 1956 not to run Kennedy as vice president, see "Senator Kennedy and the Convention," published in *America*, 4 September 1956, in *The Kennedy Reader*, 359-61.

16. "A Catholic in 1960," *Look* Magazine, 3 March 1959. Emphasis added.

in his column in the liberal Catholic weekly *Commonweal*, intimated that Kennedy had perhaps leaned a little *too* far in the direction of accommodation to Protestant fears, and that a Catholic president “would have to acknowledge that the teachings of the Church are of prime importance to him.” The Jesuit-edited *America* magazine likewise noted on its editorial page that “We were somewhat taken aback by the unvarnished statement that ‘nothing takes precedence over one’s oath.’ Mr. Kennedy doesn’t really believe that. No religious man, be he Catholic, Protestant, or Jew, holds such an opinion.”¹⁷

James Pike, one-time Catholic himself and Episcopal bishop of the Diocese of California in 1959, offered one of the most perceptive readings of the entire *Look* affair in his book published a few months later. Pike, writing by his own admission to separate “legitimate concerns” about a Kennedy presidency from anti-Catholic fears arising from prejudice, observed that Kennedy’s statement in *Look*, “far from posing the threat of ecclesiastical tyranny, would seem rather to represent the point of view of a thorough-going secularist, who truly believes that a man’s religion and his decision-making can be kept in two watertight compartments.” For Episcopal Bishop Pike, Kennedy’s problematic “religious” values thus had little to do with his Catholicism.¹⁸

Further, the *Look* interview had certainly done little to put to rest fairly consistent rumors of widespread opposition to the Kennedy ticket among the hierarchy of the American Catholic Church itself. Such opposition among Catholic bishops only rarely manifested itself in a public way—as when New York’s Francis Cardinal Spellman publically (and warmly) welcomed the Republican candidate, Richard Nixon, to his city. But whether the American Catholic bishops considered Kennedy’s political or religious views too “liberal” (usually meaning “accommodationist”), whether they feared a revival of anti-Catholic hostilities that a Catholic candidate would engender, or whether they felt that a Protestant candidate would be more likely to “woo” their support than a Catholic, the hostile silence of many American Catholic bishops to the Kennedy ticket clearly belied Protestant fears of an organized “clerical plot” behind Kennedy’s campaign.¹⁹

On Saturday, 2 January 1960, the forty-two-year-old Kennedy announced his candidacy for the presidency, and was challenged forthwith by Hubert Humphrey—the other likely contender for the

17. “Catholic Censure of Kennedy Rises,” *New York Times*, 1 March 1959; “Cushing Backs Kennedy on Church-State Replies,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 10 March 1959; “On Questioning Catholic Candidates,” *America*, 7 March 1959; James A. Pike, *A Roman Catholic in the White House* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960), 39.

18. Pike, *A Roman Catholic in the White House*, 39; Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 19.

19. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 112.

Democratic ticket—to match political “gospels” in the Wisconsin and West Virginia primaries. Kennedy immediately (and correctly) recognized the gauntlet thus thrown by Humphrey as the crucial test of the “religion issue” in the 1960 election: in neither primary would he be running as the “favorite son” in states (like New York and Illinois) where the Catholic vote guaranteed him a good showing. Wisconsin represented a campaign field where Protestant and Catholic voters were about evenly divided, while West Virginia represented a state in which 95 percent of the voters were Protestants—and heavily evangelical Protestant at that. Kennedy had recognized that “I had to prove that a Catholic could win in heavily Protestant states. Could you imagine me, having entered no primaries, trying to tell the [Party] leaders that being a Catholic was no handicap?”²⁰

By the end of the Wisconsin primary, Kennedy felt that he could say that, whatever other qualifications he might bring to the White House, “I knew Wisconsin better than any other President.” And while Kennedy had systematically attempted to avoid the religion issue in the campaign, the local and national press would not let it go: pictures of Kennedy greeting groups of nuns were printed across the nation, while other pictures were left on the newsroom floor; frequent questions from student audiences regarding his religion were invariably and extensively reported, while other questions about labor and agriculture went unnoticed. As Kennedy himself noted in amazement and anger, voters at his rallies were beset by reporters outside the hall and asked their religion—“not their occupation or education or philosophy or income, only their religion.” One newspaper’s political analysis of his campaign, he noted, mentioned the word “Catholic” twenty times in fifteen paragraphs.²¹

The Wisconsin primary results confirmed *both* Kennedy’s hopes and fears: he had won the April 5th footrace with more votes than any candidate in the history of that state’s primary. But pollsters (especially at CBS)—hard pressed to explain how his reception of 56 percent of the Wisconsin vote exceeded the 53 percent they had predicted—attributed his win to Catholic Republicans “returning home” from Ike’s party, and his losses to Protestants and farmers. Humphrey had run best in the least Catholic areas, it was correctly reported, but few pointed out that those areas were near the Minnesota border (Humphrey’s home turf). Wisconsin thus (ironically enough)

20. The “religion issue” was hotly debated throughout February and March 1960, including in the “liberal” religious press. For a sampling, see Robert Michaelsen, “Religion and the American Presidency, I,” *Christian Century* 37 (3 February 1960): 133-35. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 122, 127; quotation on 128.

21. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 137.

threatened to make religion the issue in the campaign, despite Kennedy's resounding victory in the primary. Indeed, a Lou Harris poll taken immediately after the Wisconsin race showed a sharpened new awareness of the religion issue among voters in the state hosting the next crucial primary, West Virginia.²²

It was the ironic highlighting of the "religion issue" after the Wisconsin primary (despite Kennedy's more than respectable showing there), as well as the prospect of campaigning in (Protestant) West Virginia, that led Kennedy to a "switch of tactics" regarding religion: if he was to be felled by the "Catholic question," then he would go down fighting. And Kennedy's conversion to new tactics on the religion issue entailed three immediate decisions: he would switch the topic of an upcoming address at a national meeting of newspaper editors from foreign aid to religion; his staff would organize a group of nationally prominent Protestant clergy to issue a public letter to their colleagues, calling for an end to religious prejudice and "insinuation" in political ads; and, unlike his strategy of silence on the religion issue in Wisconsin, he would make a direct and open appeal in West Virginia for "fair play" regarding religion.²³

His address to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Washington, D.C. represented one of Kennedy's most direct expositions of his views on church and state, birth control, and diplomatic relations with the Vatican. In it Kennedy emphasized, yet again, what he felt had been his position since the outset of his campaign:

There is only one legitimate question. . . . Would you, as President, be responsive in any way to ecclesiastical pressures or obligations of *any kind* that might in *any fashion* influence or interfere with your conduct of that office in the national interest? My answer was—and is—no. . . . I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I am the Democratic party's candidate for President who happens to be a Catholic. I do not speak for the Catholic Church on issues of public policy, and no one in that Church speaks for me.²⁴

When he concluded his address, Kennedy called for questions, but there were none from the assembled newspaper editors—a silence, in fact, that made Kennedy both disappointed and suspicious: many of the editors present would continue to print stories about Catholic voting blocs and Kennedy's "cold-blooded" utilization of them. Likewise, the second plank of his revised tactical approach to the religion issue—an open letter from nationally prominent Protestant clergy—proved a

22. Ibid., 137, 139.

23. Ibid., 142.

24. "The Responsibility of the Press. Address to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Washington, D.C. April 21, 1960," in *Let The Word Go Forth: The Speeches, Statements, and Writings of John F. Kennedy*, ed. Theodore Sorensen (New York: Delacorte Press, 1988), 126, 128.

more difficult project than initially perceived. Evangelist Billy Graham was approached by Kennedy staffer Pierre Salinger, who asked the revivalist to consider organizing a "fair play" letter to fellow ministers. Graham promised to give the idea "prayerful consideration," but shortly thereafter decided that such a letter would itself make religion an issue in the campaign, and declined. Both Kennedy and Salinger had reason to question the real motive(s) for Mr. Graham's "prayerful" declining of Salinger's proposal later that spring, however, when Graham declared that religion would definitely be a legitimate major issue in the campaign "whether we like it or not," and proceeded that fall to lead a Nixon rally in prayer.²⁵

Finally, on 3 May—one week before the West Virginia Primary—Francis Sayre (Dean of the Washington Episcopal Cathedral), Methodist Bishop Bromley Oxnam (whose long years of opposition to the American Catholic hierarchy as a leader of the lobbying group, Protestants and Other Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, gave him "impeccable" credentials for the task), and eleven other Protestant leaders issued an open letter to their "Fellow Pastors in Christ." "Quite apart from what our attitude toward the Roman Church may be," the letter said, "we think it unjust to discount any one of [the candidates] because of his chosen faith."²⁶

Likewise, shortly after the Episcopal Bishop of Wheeling, West Virginia announced his opposition to a Catholic candidate for the presidency on religious grounds alone, Kennedy launched into the third of his reconsidered tactics: if religion were a valid issue in the presidential campaign, he told a West Virginia audience, "I shouldn't now be serving in the Senate, and I shouldn't have been accepted into the U.S. Navy," for the oath of office was essentially identical in each case: an oath sworn on the Bible to defend the Constitution.²⁷

The response to Kennedy's new tactics on the religion issue, especially in the national press, was mixed: some accused him of fanning the controversy and "running on the religious issue" in West Virginia, while others opined that he had acquitted himself honestly and fairly in an issue not of his making. Kennedy held his own counsel as to the success or failure of the new tactics, but steeled himself for defeat in a primary state so overwhelmingly Protestant. The returns late on the evening of 3 May 1960, however, must have outshown his rosier hopes: Kennedy had carried the state by a 61 percent to 39 percent margin, winning in all but seven of the state's fifty-five counties. He

25. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 143.

26. *Ibid.*, 144.

27. *Ibid.*

had carried districts dominated by the United Mine Workers, in both farm and urban areas, and (most significantly) he had carried the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant vote. That very evening, Kennedy accepted Hubert Humphrey's gracious withdrawal from the presidential race. The religion issue, he announced a tad too precipitously, had been "buried here in West Virginia."²⁸

Kennedy continued his non-stop campaigning in the primaries that summer, although the results seemed no longer uncertain. Indeed, by 9 July—two days before the opening of the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles—Kennedy told an interviewer on "Meet the Press" that he was fairly certain of winning the Convention's nomination. But to many Kennedy's confidence appeared as arrogance, and even foolhardy: Eleanor Roosevelt, echoing the sentiments expressed in a famous column by Walter Lippmann, expressed the hope that Kennedy's "unselfishness and courage" would lead him to take the *vice-presidential* position, in which he would have "the opportunity to learn and grow," while Hubert Humphrey—so gracious in West Virginia—announced that he was supporting Adlai Stevenson for the presidential nomination, "out of concern for my country." But to the delight of the Kennedy forces, and to the dismay of all the political pundits predicting a Convention deadlock (in part over the question of Kennedy's Catholicism) Kennedy won on the Convention's first ballot.²⁹

The "religion issue" thus appeared over after the dramatic victory in West Virginia as well as Kennedy's first-ballot nomination in Los Angeles. Indeed, by the end of the summer—after the Republicans had met to nominate Richard Nixon as their candidate—*The Christian Century* offered an editorial that seemed to bury the issue by deprecating the faith of both candidates. How to choose between Nixon and Kennedy on religious grounds, the editorial asked, as

Mr. Nixon is a Quaker who works at Quakerism so little that he could be a naval officer in World War II. Mr. Kennedy is a Catholic who has repudiated so many of the official positions of his church that he has been attacked repeatedly in the Catholic press. So the country will have to choose between two men who have much in common, yet differ at crucial points.³⁰

This "burial" of the religion issue by the end of the summer, however—much like the reports of Mark Twain's death—was revealed yet again as being somewhat exaggerated on 7 September 1960, when a new organization of prominent Protestant clergy, the National Conference of Citizens for Religious Freedom, flung a gauntlet to the Kennedy ticket after a day-long meeting presided over by the "king of mind

28. *Ibid.*, 146.

29. *Ibid.*, 154-55, 159-61.

30. "Religious Affiliation," *The Christian Century*, 17 August 1960, 939-40.

cure," the Reverend Norman Vincent Peale. Peale, the nationally-famous pastor of "America's hometown church" and the author of the self-help "bible," *The Power of Positive Thinking* as well as a close personal friend of Richard Nixon's, had already marked out his "turf" on the Kennedy ticket a month before the West Virginia primary: in a speech in Charleston, West Virginia on 14 April 1960, Peale had argued that not only was it relevant to raise the religious issue in the campaign, but it was essential to do so. Indeed, Peale (who counted Nixon and his wife among his parishoners at the Marble Collegiate Church when they were in New York) opined that the basic issue in the primary to be held in West Virginia was whether, if Kennedy were president, he would be "as free as any other American to give 'his first loyalty to the United States'."³¹

The 7 September meeting of "Peale Group" (as "Citizens for Religious Freedom" quickly became known in the press and among politicians to the distress of Peale himself) had been planned the previous summer in Europe, when the vacationing Peale had met with Billy Graham, Harold Ockenga (charter member and strategist for the National Association of Evangelicals), and twenty-five other American evangelicals in Montreux, Switzerland, to discuss how they might organize Protestant support for the Nixon campaign. By the time of the September meeting in Washington D.C.'s Mayflower Hotel, the Peale Group included Dr. Glenn Archer (head of Protestants and Others United for Separation of Church and State), Dr. Clyde Taylor (an officer of the National Association of Evangelicals), and 150 other "representatives" of the Southern Baptist Convention, the National Council of Churches, and "other groups not related to any of these." The concern of them all, it was announced, was to be "fair, factual, and candid in expressing Protestant concern."³²

At the conclusion of the day-long conference, Peale met with the press and made available copies of the group's statement, which consisted of a five-point indictment of the "politics" of the Roman Catholic Church, which had served as the focus for the day's discussions. The statement charged the Catholic Church with being a political as well as a religious organization, a fact seen most clearly in countries (as in South America) where it constituted the majority of citizens. And the statement concluded with the observation that, however sincere Ken-

31. *Charleston Daily Mail*, 14 April 1960; quoted in Carol V.R. George, *God's Salesman: Norman Vincent Peale and the Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 195.

32. George, *Peale*, 200-01. The "Statement of Purpose" of the group is from a letter from Donald Gill to Norman Vincent Peale, 29 August 1960, in the Norman Vincent Peale Manuscript Collection, at Syracuse University.

nedy himself might be regarding his commitment to upholding the principles of the First Amendment, he could never be free of his church's "determined efforts . . . to breach the wall of separation of church and state." Indeed, that there was a "religion issue" at all in the campaign was "not the fault of the candidate. It is created by the nature of the Roman Catholic Church which is, in a very real sense, both a church and also a temporal state." The Reverend Harold Ockenga, pastor of the resolutely evangelical Park Street Church at the corner of the Boston Common (known to Bostonians as "Brimstone Corner" because of the dour preaching famous in that congregation) also met personally with the press and likened Kennedy to the Russian Premier Krushchev in being a "captive of the system."³³

It was thus both expedient and wearying (in about equal measure) that Kennedy should accept an invitation—not unlike that of the spider to the fly—from the Greater Houston Ministerial Association to address a group of Protestant clergymen five days after the meeting of the "Peale Group." Not surprisingly, the candidate elucidated a "separationist" position on church and state that evening that was aimed at strangely warming the heart of Peale and everyone else who had been at the Washington meeting five days before.

At the very outset of his remarks on the evening of 12 September in Houston, Kennedy observed that far more critical issues than his personal religious beliefs needed to be addressed in the 1960 presidential campaign:

the spread of communist influence, until it now festers only ninety miles off the coast of Florida . . . the hungry children I saw in West Virginia, the old people who cannot pay their doctor's bills, the families forced to give up their farms—an America with too many slums, with too few schools, and too late to the moon and outer space. These are the real issues which should decide this campaign. . . . But because I am a Catholic, and no Catholic has ever been elected President, the real issues in this campaign have been obscured—perhaps deliberately in some quarters less responsible than this.³⁴

Kennedy then launched into his personal—and somewhat singular—credo: "I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute . . . where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference." Indeed, the "absoluteness" of the separation between church and state that Kennedy envisioned was shortly adumbrated with breathtaking clarity: "I believe in a President whose views on religion are his own private affair, neither imposed on him by the nation nor imposed by the nation upon him as a condition

33. *New York Times*, 8 September 1960, reported in George, *Peale*, 202; Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 188.

34. David, *Kennedy Reader*, 363, 364.

to holding that office." These resolutely "private" views of the highest officeholder in the land represented "the kind of Presidency in which I believe, a great office that must not be humbled by making it the instrument of any religious group."³⁵

But Kennedy's speech that evening adumbrated a "wall of separation" between religion and public service that went considerably beyond what might be termed the allaying of bigoted fears; indeed, Kennedy's "theology" appeared to outline a relationship between "private" belief and "public" action that social scientists and scholars of religion have termed the "privatization of religion":

I want a chief executive whose public acts are responsible to all and obligated to none—who can attend any ceremony, service or dinner his office may appropriately require him to fulfill—and whose fulfillment of his Presidential office is not limited or conditioned by any religious oath, ritual, or obligation.³⁶

This was the kind of America Kennedy had fought for in the South Pacific, "and the kind of America my brother died for in Europe." Indeed, Kennedy observed that "no one suggested then that we might have a 'divided loyalty,' that we did 'not believe in liberty,' or that we belonged to a disloyal group that threatened 'the freedoms for which our forefathers died.'" This, in fact, was *precisely* the kind of freedom for which "our forefathers (died) when they fled here to escape religious test oaths that denied office to members of less favored churches."³⁷

It was on *this* understanding of the church-state relationship that Kennedy was running for president, not on the basis of pamphlets that "carefully select quotations out of context from the statements of Catholic Church leaders, usually in other countries, frequently in other centuries." To all such half-baked historical accusations and scurrilous insinuations, Kennedy announced: "I do not consider these quotations binding upon my public acts—why should you?" Those who had repeatedly stressed Kennedy's "religious affiliation" during the campaign had simply deflected serious attention away from more serious issues, for "I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I am the Democratic Party's candidate for President, who happens also to be a Catholic. I do not speak for my church on public matters, and the church does not speak for me."³⁸

35. Ibid., 364-65.

36. Ibid., 365.

37. JFK, "On Church and State," 365. The emphasis in the quotation is added.

38. Ibid., 366.

III

Religious leaders and political pundits at the time (and since) of Kennedy's "Houston Speech" have raised searching questions about the implications of a faith "not limited or conditioned by any religious obligation," about a theology that is one's "own private affair," and about denominational membership in which one does "not speak for [the] church, and the church does not speak for me." Indeed, a month after the Houston affair, Winthrop Hudson, commenting in the *Christian Century*, observed that Kennedy as well as Nixon appeared to hold the "general cultural conviction that religion is a good thing but nonetheless a purely private affair which has few implications for the political order."³⁹

A thoroughgoing theological analysis of such a resolutely private faith like that elucidated by Kennedy in Houston poses problems for the student of religion, as such a faith would appear to have very little social import or public manifestation. Indeed, such a faith might very well provide evidence for Bishop Pike's estimate of Kennedy as a "thoroughgoing secularist," or *The Nation's* famous portrayal of Kennedy as "close to being a spiritually rootless man." Catholic journalists at the time certainly remarked upon the singular expression of Kennedy's "take" on his faith.⁴⁰

Ted Sorensen, recalling later the preparations for that evening in Houston, remembered reading the text over the phone to Jesuit theologian and church-state theorist John Courtney Murray, then teaching at Woodstock College in Maryland. Likewise, on the plane to Houston, the speech was reviewed by one-time *Commonweal* editor John Cogley. According to Sorensen, both men—Catholic intellectuals familiar with the Roman Catholic Church's theological tradition and with the American constitutional circumstance—apparently approved the main outline of the text. Indeed, several scholars have argued for Murray's role as intellectual preceptor to Kennedy on precisely this issue.⁴¹

But positing such a mentoring role for Murray demands a sophisticated understanding of the Catholic natural law discourse in which Murray was engaged—an understanding that would not have immediately furthered the political goals of Kennedy in any event, however conversant Kennedy may have been with scholastic philosophy (an unlikely eventuality). Murray's best-selling collection of articles published in 1960, *We Hold These Truths*, had sought to provide a "public space"

39. Winthrop Hudson, "The Religious Issue in the Campaign," *Christian Century* 37 (26 October 1960): 1239.

40. Lasky, *JFK*, 326.

41. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 190.

for Catholicism in American society while also avoiding church-state entanglements. But one of the underlying themes of that collection had been a refutation of the “democratic heresy” that believed that “all issues of human life—intellectual, religious, and moral issues, as well as formally political issues—are to be regarded as political issues, and are to be settled by majority vote.” This “heresy,” a combination of what Murray termed “democratic monism” and secularism, was rampant in the modern West, and appeared to be especially virulent in post-war America.⁴²

One of Murray’s major agendas in his 1960 magisterial work had been to offer a natural law reading of the American political circumstance that allowed the Catholic Church to accomplish its mission—a resolutely *public* mission, finally—while avoiding the traditional scholastic distinction between “thesis” and “hypothesis” that had been used by earlier American Catholic theorists to justify the First Amendment. While Murray offered a brilliant “end run” around this scholastic position by arguing that the issue for the Catholic tradition was *not* the establishment of the church but rather its freedom to accomplish its social (public) mission, neither his nor the earlier scholastic reading of the situation would have gone far toward silencing the fears of nervous Protestants like Peale and Ockenga. Indeed, Murray’s argument might very well have been read as being the more insidious because of the perceived republican clothing that hid the scholastic wolf inside.⁴³

Presenting either Murray or Cogley as the architects of Kennedy’s near-total privatization of his “affiliation” would thus appear to be, at best, unlikely. Several years after the speech Murray himself opined that Kennedy had been “far more of a separationist than I am,” while Cogley had been an open critic of Kennedy’s “creed” as expressed in

42. John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960). Murray had observed in his book, at 202-03, that “the inspiration of this democratic monism is partly a sentimental mystique—the belief that power vested in the people, in distinction from all other powers, is somehow ultimately inevitably benevolent in its exercise. [But] Christianity has always regarded the state as a limited order of action for limited purposes, to be chosen and pursued under the direction and correction of the organized moral conscience of society, whose judgments are formed and mobilized by the [Catholic] Church.”

43. In scholastic thought, the “thesis” represented the ideal social and political situation, while the “hypothesis” sought to address actual social circumstances. Thus, Catholic scholars had argued during much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that, while Catholics were the minority in the United States (the “hypothesis”), they could and should support freedom of religion and separation of church and state; but should Catholics ever become the majority of citizens (the “thesis” situation), they would have a moral obligation to establish the Catholic Church as the official religion of the country. A classic statement of this argument can be found in John A. Ryan and Moorhouse F.X. Millar, *The State and the Church* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1922). See esp. Ryan’s “Comments on the Christian Constitutions of States,” 26-61.

the 1959 *Look* interview. Likewise, positing Kennedy himself as a "thoroughgoing secularist" (his wife's observations to Arthur Krock notwithstanding) presents problems for the historian, given Kennedy's consistent claims to be a good Catholic, with a consistent record of mass attendance to prove it. A more neutral historical "take" on the Houston affair—avoiding both "secret architects" and *ad hominem* analysis—is that Kennedy's *realpolitik* reading of the political and social situation in the fall of 1960 mandated an almost-total privatization of his Catholic faith—a privatization that was politically expedient, however theologically problematic it might be.⁴⁴

And such a privatization—while offering a dichotomization that poses significant theological problems—makes perfect sociological sense, especially in light of Peter Berger's insights into the close relationship between social pluralism and religious secularization. Berger has observed that "modernity plunged religion into a very specific crisis, characterized by secularity to be sure, but characterized more importantly by pluralism." For Berger, then, contemporary societies like the United States are marked by a modernity that "pluralizes *both institutions and plausibility structures*." This pluralistic cultural situation, in "demonopolizing" any single religious tradition in a pluralistic culture, makes it progressively more difficult to maintain or to construct anew viable religious "plausibility structures"—those pre-conscious and epistemologically perspicacious "proofs" for the veracity of one's worldview:

The plausibility structures [of any single religious tradition] lose massively because they can no longer enlist the society as a whole to serve for the purpose of social confirmation. Put simply, there are always "all those others" that refuse to confirm the religious world in question. . . . [Religions] become "subjectivized" in a double sense: their reality becomes a "private" affair of individuals. And their "reality," insofar as it is still maintained by the individual, is apprehended as being rooted within the consciousness of the individual rather than in the facticities of the external world.⁴⁵

Thus, a key characteristic of all pluralistic situations that aim at social peace is the voluntary—and thus by definition private—nature of religious belief and observance. In these social situations, religion tends to become more concerned with the therapeutic needs of its adherents, and less concerned with offering a comprehensive worldview for the whole of culture. Such "privatization" of religious belief thus manifests itself in the prominence given to "private problems":

44. Letter of John Courtney Murray to Mrs. J.M. Devine, 19 May 1967, in The Murray Papers, Woodstock College Collection, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.

45. Quotation in the paragraph from Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1970), xi, 17; quote from *The Sacred Canopy*, 151-52.

the emphasis on family and neighborhood as well as on the psychological "needs" of the private individual. It is in these areas that religion continues to be "relevant" even in highly secularized strata, while the application of religious perspectives to political and economic problems is widely deemed "irrelevant" in the same strata. This helps to explain why the churches have had relatively little influence on the economic and political views of even their own members.⁴⁶

Such a reading of the social and political world of "modernity"—when applied to the social circumstance of the United States in the fall of 1960—goes a significant way toward explicating both Kennedy's Houston speech and the "secularity" that it represented. Indeed, it might be argued that Berger offers a cogent reading for the "secularization of American politics" that emerged with such dramatic clarity during the turbulent 1960s: precisely because Kennedy was not an adherent of that mainstream Protestant religiosity that had created and buttressed the "plausibility structures" of political culture at least since Lincoln, he had to "privatize" presidential religious beliefs—including and especially his own—in order to win that office. A number of social and political factors abetted that privatization: his own party leadership's quite practical and nonideological concern about the chances of a Catholic in a presidential election after the sobering precedent set by Al Smith; the alacrity with which the press sought out and reported "the religion issue" as a key divisive issue in the campaign; his own less than missionary reception of his "religious affiliation." All of these factors played a role in shaping the "theological" statements in the Houston speech. But these factors must also be placed within the larger picture of the "pluralization" of American culture along the lines adumbrated by Peter Berger. The "secularity" that was emerging in mid-twentieth-century American culture rarely manifested itself as a frontal attack on religion or religious language, although both Madeline Murray O'Hair early in the decade and the "Death of God" movement at the end of it represented numerically insignificant but culturally powerful impulses that did assault traditional religious belief. Likewise, the secularity expressed in the Houston speech never denigrated the personal importance of religious conviction. Rather, the secularity that the speech did advocate represented a near-total privatization of religious belief—so much a privatization that religious observers from both sides of the Catholic/Protestant fence commented on its remarkable a-theistic implications for public life and discourse.

But the irony of the cultural context that helped to shape the Houston speech is often missed or ignored, and the irony here is rich and deep, whether one happens to be a Niebuhrian or not. Cultural observers as diverse as Eleanor Roosevelt, Billy Graham, and Norman Vin-

46. *Ibid.*, 147.

cent Peale had commented (in both overt and covert ways) on the problem posed by Kennedy's adherence to an ecclesiastical tradition outside the American religious mainstream for living in the White House. Whatever the validity of their concerns about Kennedy's religious and ethical principles for holding the highest office in the land—and even today there appears to be divided opinion on the question—their raising of the issue itself went a considerable way toward “secularizing” the American public square by privatizing personal belief. Their very effort to “safeguard” the religious aura of the presidency, in such a reading, contributed in significant ways to its secularization.

Democratic Party strategists, secular journalists, and Protestant religious leaders had all made the point that a “Catholic in the White House” was both historically unprecedented and (potentially) revolutionary because of the Protestant roots of the American “democratic faith.” The pluralism of the post-war situation that made such an eventuality remotely likely—considered in the light of the recurrent harping on just this issue—made the privatization of religion the best political strategy for a pragmatist like Kennedy, whatever the theological problems posed by such a course. Considered in such a light, the Houston speech may or may not witness to Kennedy's personal secularity, the shallowness of American public religiosity in the aftermath of the “Fifties Religious Revival,” or the growth of religious tolerance in the United States. It *does* point to the pluralism of the American circumstance after World War II, and the (ironic) privatization of religion that occurred as a result of that pluralism.⁴⁷

47. One of Reinhold Niebuhr's most famous and influential works was *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner, 1952). The phrase “American democratic faith” was coined and defined by Ralph Henry Gabriel in *The Course of American Democratic Thought: An Intellectual History Since 1815* (New York: The Ronald Press Co., 1940).