

GOD IN THE WHITE HOUSE: A HISTORY

How Faith Shaped the Presidency
from John F. Kennedy to George W. Bush

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PREFACE

This book aspires to answer a relatively simple question: How did we get from John F. Kennedy's eloquent speech at the Rice Hotel in Houston on September 12, 1960, in which he urged voters effectively to bracket a candidate's faith out of their considerations when they entered the voting booth, to George W. Bush's declaration on the eve of the 2000 Iowa precinct caucuses that Jesus was his favorite philosopher?

A simple question, perhaps, but the answer is rather more complex. Any responsible attempt to solve this puzzle must take into account the shifting tectonics of ethnic and religious prejudices, the extent to which religious convictions did (or did not) affect policy, various presidential scandals, the appeal of candidates viewed as outsiders to Washington, the politicization of evangelical voters, and the probity of individual presidents. Presidential politics over the course of these four-plus decades, 1960 to 2004, saw the election of the first Roman Catholic to the presidency, the first presidential resignation, the first man to ascend to the Oval Office who had never been elected either president or vice president, the first president who claimed to be a "born again" Christian, the first

woman and (later) the first Jew on a major-party ticket, the first all-Southern Baptist presidential and vice-presidential ticket, and only the second presidential impeachment in American history.

These forty-four years also saw some of the closest presidential elections in American history—Kennedy-Nixon in 1960, Nixon-Humphrey in 1968, Bush-Gore in 2000, and Bush-Kerry in 2004—as well as some of the most lopsided results—Johnson-Goldwater in 1964, Nixon-McGovern in 1972, and Reagan-Mondale in 1984. Two successful candidates over the course of these four decades, Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush, offered themselves to the voters as “redeemer presidents,” promising to cleanse the temple of the White House of the sins of their predecessors.

In other words, it was an eventful four-plus decades in presidential politics, and attitudes about religion, specifically about the candidates’ faith, have varied widely over that span of time, from studied indifference to careful scrutiny. Briefly, the narrative arc of these forty-four years looks something like this:

Kennedy, acting out of political necessity and seeking to displace the Protestant establishment in 1960, argued that a candidate’s religion was not a legitimate criterion for voting decisions, an argument that endured for more than a decade, until the Watergate scandal forced Richard Nixon’s resignation in 1974. Jimmy Carter, a Washington outsider who offered himself as a redeemer president, reintroduced matters of faith and belief into the arena of public discourse. For a variety of reasons, not least the rise of the Religious Right in the late 1970s, many of the same evangelical voters who had helped propel Carter into office turned emphatically against him four years later in favor of Ronald Reagan, who also claimed to be an evangelical Christian. Since 1980, with

the single exception of the Clinton presidency, candidates who have made forthright professions of evangelical faith and who have enjoyed the support of Religious Right leaders have occupied the Oval Office. Even the Clinton “aberration” might be explained by Bill Clinton’s extraordinary skills as a politician and by his ability to speak the evangelical language of sin and redemption—this despite the fact that leaders of the Religious Right utterly despised him and did everything in their power to discredit him. George W. Bush’s narrow victory in 2000 can be viewed as an attempt by voters to cleanse the Oval Office of Clinton’s personal transgressions, just as Carter’s election in 1976 represented an attempt to purge the nation of Nixon-era corruptions.

All of this is not to suggest that faith or religion played a singular, much less a decisive, role in any of these elections. Not at all. Every campaign—every presidency—rises and falls on the waves of political circumstances and historical vicissitudes as well as such nebulous factors as personal charisma, economic conditions, and the shifting sands of public opinion. Still, the fact remains that Americans were content to disregard religion as a criterion for voting in 1960, whereas by 2004 they had come to expect candidates fully to disclose their religious views and to expound on their personal relationship to the Almighty.

This book attempts to trace that transition.

I should also say a word about what this book is not. It does not pretend to be a comprehensive history of how religion has shaped the presidency or presidential campaigns from 1960 to 2004. I do not scrutinize, for example, how every attitude toward, say, civil rights or women’s rights or every policy decision affecting

the Middle East might or might not be dictated by a president's religious convictions. Nor do I devote much attention to polling data to determine popular attitudes. It's not that I distrust polls or pollsters—well, maybe I do. As Mark Twain once observed, the world is rife with “lies, damned lies, and statistics.” So much depends on how questions are formulated, and I think it's especially dicey to determine people's religious attitudes because nomenclature tends to be fraught—who is or is not a Christian, for instance, or an evangelical. I'll leave the numbers to the statisticians and to the political scientists.

Nor do I talk much about “civil religion,” the conflation of religious devotion with nationalistic symbols. It's not that I dispute the existence of civil religion. It's just that discussion of the matter long ago passed from exhaustive to tiresome, and I don't think, frankly, that it adds all that much to this account.

I offer instead a narrative that tells the story not only of the politicization of religion in the final decades of the twentieth century, but also the “religionization” of our politics. I reflect, finally, on the implications of this shift, which has reverberated in both worlds, religious and political.

Although I recognize that no author can be entirely objective, I have tried very hard to be fair. For those anxious to sort out my sympathies, I'll make it easy. I consider myself an evangelical Christian whose understanding of the teachings of Jesus points him toward the left of the political spectrum. I am no fan of the Religious Right, whose leaders, I believe, have distorted the gospel—the “good news”—of the New Testament and have defaulted on the noble legacy of nineteenth-century evangelical activism, which invariably took the part of those less fortunate.

P R E F A C E

I am not arguing, however, that people of faith should not be involved in the political process. Far from it. I happen to believe that the arena of public discourse would be impoverished without voices of faith. And, although I don't think it's necessary, I have no particular problem with political candidates offering their religious views to public scrutiny. At the same time, however, I think there is a real danger to the integrity of the faith when it is aligned too closely with a particular political movement or political party, because the faith then loses its prophetic voice. My reading of American religious history suggests that religion always functions best from the margins of society, not in the councils of power.

That, I believe, is only one of the cautionary lessons from the final four decades of the twentieth century.

ONE

PROTESTANT UNDERWORLD

John F. Kennedy and the “Religious Issue”

On a Monday evening, September 12, 1960, the junior senator from the commonwealth of Massachusetts approached the dais in the ballroom of the Rice Hotel in downtown Houston. “While the so-called religious issue is necessarily and properly the chief topic here tonight,” John F. Kennedy began, “I want to emphasize from the outset that we have far more critical issues to face in the 1960 election.” The Democratic nominee for president had just completed another hot, exhausting day of campaigning across the state of Texas. Together with his running mate, Senator Lyndon B. Johnson, Kennedy had already visited El Paso, Lubbock, and San Antonio in what the *New York Times* characterized as “the largest aerial campaign armada in history.”¹

Kennedy had been greeted by “tumultuous cheers from many thousands of Texans” that day, but his reception at the Rice Hotel was

1. “Kennedy Team Cheered,” *New York Times*, September 13, 1960.

noticeably more tepid. “I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant nor Jewish,” Kennedy continued, “where no public official either requests or accepts instructions on public policy from the pope, the National Council of Churches or any other ecclesiastical source—where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials—and where religious liberty is so indivisible that an act against one church is treated as an act against all.”²

Kennedy issued a ringing endorsement of the separation of church and state that evening—“I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute,” he said—but he clearly wanted to be addressing issues other than religion. And by standing before the gathered members of the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, the Democratic nominee had entered the belly of the beast. Houston was not exactly friendly territory for a Roman Catholic running for president, and the events of the preceding weeks clearly had frustrated the young senator, who had hoped that, by this late stage in the campaign, he would have been able to shrug off what was almost universally described as the “religious issue.”

Kennedy, of course, was not the first Roman Catholic in American history to run for the presidency. In 1928 Alfred E. Smith, the governor of New York, had won the Democratic nomination and the right to square off against Herbert Hoover, secretary of commerce under Calvin Coolidge and the Republican nominee. In December 1923, as Smith was gearing up for an earlier run at the Democratic nomination, William MacDonald,

2. “Kennedy Team Cheered.” For the full text of Kennedy’s speech, see Appendix 1.

pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Queens, New York, had organized an anti-Smith rally. Five thousand people attended, according to the *New York Times*; MacDonald led the congregation in the singing of “Stand Up for Jesus” as white-robed Klansmen processed into the auditorium. A particular Klansman, known as the “Human Dynamo,” concluded his remarks by shouting, “Thank God there are six million people in the United States who have pledged their lives that no son of the Pope of Rome will ever sit in the Presidential chair!” Several days later, two fire companies were summoned to tear down a flaming cross, twenty-five feet high and fifteen feet wide at the crossbar, near the site of the Klan rally.³

In the course of the 1928 campaign, Smith sought to defuse the issue of his religious affiliation with a speech in Oklahoma City, but his Catholicism continued to dog him throughout the campaign. He tangled with John Roach Straton, the arch-fundamentalist pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in New York City, who identified the Democratic candidate with “the forces of vice, lawlessness and drunkenness.” Nativist groups charged that Smith would be a tool of the Vatican, and scurrilous pamphlets warned that as president, Smith would annul Protestant marriages and establish Roman Catholicism as the religion of the United States. Although the Democratic platform promised “an honest effort to enforce” Prohibition, Smith’s long-standing opposition to the Eighteenth Amendment revived the nineteenth-century nativist associations between “Rum and Romanism.” Hoover, on the other hand, defended Prohibition as “a great

3. “Cross Is Fired Near Scene of Klan Attack on Smith,” *New York Times*, December 21, 1923.

social and economic experiment noble in motive and far-reaching in purpose.” In the traditionally Democratic South, the Ku Klux Klan campaigned for Hoover, a Quaker, and against the Roman Catholic.⁴

When Hoover won decisively in the 1928 election—58 percent of the popular vote and 444 to 77 in the electoral college—popular lore had it that Smith sent a one-word telegram to the Vatican: “UNPACK.”

Protestant suspicions of Roman Catholicism, however, refused to abate. The fact that the sons of Catholic immigrants enlisted for military service during World War II demonstrated their patriotism, even though they sometimes fought against the countries from which their parents and grandparents emigrated. The G.I. Bill of Rights, passed by Congress in 1944, provided these same second-generation immigrants the opportunity to attend college and thereby to toe the first rung on the ladder of upward mobility toward the middle class.

Many American Catholics made that ascent in the postwar years, but not without resistance. In 1949 nativism once again reared its ugly head. In March of that year, Beacon Press, a liberal publisher in Boston, issued the first edition of Paul Blanshard’s *American Freedom and Catholic Power*. “When a church enters the arena of controversial social policy and attempts to control the judgment of its own people (and of other people) on foreign af-

4. Quoted in “Smith Demands Straton Let Him Answer Attack in Church; Pastor Willing,” *New York Times*, August 8, 1928; David Burner, *Herbert Hoover, A Public Life* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 218. Straton also indicated in his sermon that, although he generally voted Democratic, he would not vote for Smith, the Democratic nominee for president.

fairs, social hygiene, public education and modern science,” the author warned, “it must be reckoned with as an organ of political and cultural power.” The book cited Catholic efforts to oppose birth control and divorce laws, noted the segregation of Catholic children into parochial schools, and suggested that the political muscle of American Catholics was being exerted “to bring American foreign policy into line with Vatican temporal interests.”⁵

What made Blanshard’s treatise so remarkable was its provenance. Unlike the sensationalist nineteenth-century nativist literature, much of which salaciously conjured the supposed goings-on in Catholic convents, Blanshard was both a journalist and an attorney, educated at Michigan, Harvard, and Columbia. He viewed himself not as a reactionary nativist, but as a liberal who was concerned that “a misunderstanding of the nature of tolerance” represented a real “danger to the democratic way of life.” *American Freedom and Catholic Power* pointed out that “the Catholic people are not citizens but subjects in their own religious commonwealth,” which rendered Catholicism inimical to democracy. “The secular as well as the religious policies of their Church are made in Rome by an organization that is alien in spirit and control,” Blanshard warned, and Catholics “are compelled by the very nature of their Church’s authoritarian structure to accept nonreligious as well as religious policies that have been imposed on them from abroad.”⁶

5. Paul Blanshard, *American Freedom and Catholic Power* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949), 3, 4. Mark Massa examines the importance of Blanshard’s book at various points in *Catholics and American Culture: Fulton Sheen, Dorothy Day, and the Notre Dame Football Team* (New York: Crossroad, 1999).

6. Blanshard, *American Freedom*, 4, 5.

American Freedom and Catholic Power became a best-selling book; Beacon Press ordered eleven printings in as many months. So when a Roman Catholic senator from Massachusetts began mulling a run for the presidency in the 1950s, the experience of Alfred Smith and the lingering anti-Catholicism evident in the popularity of Blanshard's book was very much on his mind. Paradoxically, Kennedy himself was not particularly devout, unlike his mother. His reputation for womanizing, both before and after his marriage in 1953, may not have been widely known, but it was locally known. "I think it's so unfair of people to be against Jack because he's Catholic," Jacqueline Kennedy said of her husband during the 1960 campaign. "He's such a poor Catholic."⁷

Kennedy, having supported the nomination of Adlai Stevenson, flirted with the notion of being the vice-presidential nominee in 1956. Indeed, the idea had won some support from newspaper editorial pages, in part because Kennedy's strong identity as a Roman Catholic, it was argued, might blunt some of the criticism directed at Stevenson for having been divorced. But other Democratic leaders believed that Kennedy's religion would doom a Stevenson-Kennedy ticket.

According to Theodore Sorensen, the senator's longtime aide and speechwriter, Kennedy was initially ambivalent about the vice-presidential slot, but, in view of a possible bid for the White House in the future, Kennedy did not want to be excluded from consideration solely because of his faith. Sorensen produced

7. Quoted in Garry Wills, *Bare Ruined Choirs: Doubt, Prophecy, and Radical Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 80–81.

a document, which was artfully leaked to the media, showing that a Catholic on the national ticket actually could enhance Stevenson's prospects. Sorensen later insisted that it was by no means an objective study; rather, it was "a political answer to the sweeping assertions made against nominating a Catholic for Vice President." Regardless of the outcome at the 1956 Democratic National Convention—Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee got the vice-presidential nod—the "Bailey Memorandum," as it was known (for political reasons, the Kennedy camp attributed it to John Bailey, chair of the state Democratic committee in Connecticut), "at least reopened the previously closed assumption that a Catholic on the ticket spelled defeat."⁸

As Kennedy considered his own run for the presidency, he was well aware that religion would factor into the equation and that he would have to pursue the nomination determinedly. "If I were governor of a large state, Protestant and fifty-five," he remarked, "I could sit back and let it come to me." Kennedy sought repeatedly to bracket the issue of his faith from his candidacy, offering assurances of his opposition to the use of taxpayer money for religious schools and emphasizing the presidential oath to uphold the Constitution. He cited both the First Amendment, which enshrined the notion of church-state separation, as well as Article VI of the Constitution, which prohibited any religious test for officeholders. In a letter to Harold Brown, president of the Oregon Council of Churches, Kennedy elaborated on his understanding of the disestablishment clause of the First Amendment: "Under the First Amendment our government cannot—directly

8. Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 83.

or indirectly, carelessly or intentionally—select any religious body for either favorable or unfavorable treatment.”⁹

As the prospect of a presidential candidacy by a Roman Catholic in 1960 began to look more and more likely, a group of Jewish and Christian leaders organized themselves into an entity called the Fair Campaign Practices Committee. The organization included prominent rabbis, Catholics, various Orthodox and Protestant leaders, and Carl F. H. Henry, editor of *Christianity Today*, the flagship magazine of evangelicalism. The group also included George Romney, a Mormon and the president of American Motors, who would be elected governor of Michigan in 1962 and who would mount his own candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination in 1968. The Fair Campaign Practices Committee met at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington on March 24–25, 1960, to prepare a “Special Statement on Religion in the 1960 Campaign.”

The statement articulated five “simple principles which we hope will commend themselves to American voters.” The Kennedy camp could hardly have hoped for more. “It is proper and desirable [*sic*] that every public official should attempt to govern his conduct by a personal conscience informed by his religious faith,” the statement began. “No candidate for public office should be opposed or supported because of his particular religious affiliation,” it continued. “A campaign for a public office is not an opportunity to vote for one religion against another—

9. Quoted in Sorenson, *Kennedy*, 97, 109; Letter, G. Bromley Oxnam to John F. Kennedy, April 20, 1959, “Church and State” folder, Pre-Presidential Papers, Senate Files, Box 535, John F. Kennedy Library; “The Religious ‘Issue’ in the Presidential Campaign,” circular “Authorized and paid for by the District of Columbia Committee for John F. Kennedy,” John F. Kennedy Library.

er.” The statement concluded with admonitions against “stirring up, fostering, or tolerating religious animosity” and calling instead for “intelligent, honest, and temperate public discussion of the relation of religious faith to the public issues.”¹⁰

Kennedy worked hard to neutralize the religious issue in advance of the campaign. “Whatever one’s religion in his private life may be,” Kennedy told *Look* magazine in 1959, “for the officeholder nothing takes precedence over his oath to uphold the Constitution and all its parts—including the First Amendment and the strict separation of church and state.” Kennedy added, “The First Amendment to the Constitution is an infinitely wise one.”¹¹

As early as April 1959, the senator from Massachusetts met with a delegation of Methodist bishops. Afterward, one of the bishops assured Kennedy that “the church a man belongs to ought not to be the decisive factor in a political situation.” Rather, he continued, “It is his belief, his record, his character, his word that really counts.” Even Paul Blanshard, author of *American Freedom and Catholic Power*, weighed in on the Democratic senator from Massachusetts. “Regardless of one’s attitude toward Kennedy the candidate,” Blanshard wrote in 1959, ten years after the release of his book, “Kennedy the Catholic deserves credit for speaking out

10. Bulletin of the Fair Campaign Practices Committee, Inc. [mimeograph], April 1, 1960, “Religious Issue: Correspondence” folder, Robert F. Kennedy Papers, Pre-Administration Political Files, General Subject Files, 1959–60, Box 47, John F. Kennedy Library.

11. Quoted in James Reston, “The Catholicism Issue,” *New York Times*, December 16, 1959.

with candor on the side of the Supreme Court's interpretation of the Constitution concerning the payment of public funds for the central activities of sectarian schools."¹²

When Kennedy stepped to the podium on January 2, 1960, however, to announce his candidacy for the Democratic nomination, he recognized that the religion issue would bedevil him unless he found a way somehow to neutralize it. He tried a number of strategies to do so, including humor. At the 1959 annual Alfred E. Smith dinner in New York, a rite of passage for presidential aspirants, Kennedy had reminded the audience of a previous election that he thought had special relevance to the 1960 presidential campaign looming on the horizon. "I think it well that we recall what happened to a great governor when he became a Presidential nominee," he began. "Despite his successful record as governor, despite his plain-spoken voice, the campaign was a debacle. His views were distorted. He carried fewer states than any candidate in his party's history. To top it off, he lost his own state that he had served so well as a governor." Kennedy paused. "You all know his name and his religion," he said solemnly. "Alfred F. Landon, Protestant."¹³

Many Protestants in the run-up to the 1960 campaign refused to budge from their conviction that a Roman Catholic should never occupy the Oval Office. "Senator Kennedy's active

12. Letter, Paul Blanshard to *Washington Post*, March 27, 1959.

13. Quoted in Paul F. Boller Jr., *Presidential Campaigns: From George Washington to George W. Bush* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 296. Toward the end of the presidential campaign in 1960, after Harry Truman, in his characteristically salty language, told Southerners that if they voted for Nixon they could go to hell, Kennedy allowed, tongue-in-cheek, that Democrats should "try to refrain from raising the religious issue" (Boller, *Presidential Campaign*, 300).

participation in the presidential nomination, in our opinion, is almost certain to result in his failure to receive the coveted post at the Democratic national convention,” an editorial in the *Olewein* (Iowa) *Register* noted just days after his announcement. The editorial articulated an anxiety apparently shared by many Americans, namely that a Roman Catholic president “would place the instructions of his church above public duty.” A Lutheran pastor from Eau Claire, Wisconsin, expressed similar concerns. “I would find great difficulty in my Conscience if I were to vote for a member of the Roman denomination,” he wrote in his parish paper. “And the history of the Roman church and its ‘meddling’ in government at all levels is not a pretty picture.”¹⁴

The initial showdown over religion occurred in West Virginia. Back in December 1959, Kennedy’s pollster, Louis Harris, assured him that he enjoyed a 70 to 30 percent edge over Hubert Humphrey, his principal rival for the nomination, in the state. Although there was no compelling reason for Kennedy to enter the West Virginia primary—the election was not binding on the delegates—the Kennedy camp saw it as an opportunity to force a confrontation with Humphrey; if Kennedy could prevail in an overwhelmingly Protestant state, then the campaign could put to rest the notion that a Roman Catholic could not be elected president.

That strategy very nearly backfired. Three weeks before the May 10 primary, the growing public awareness of Kennedy’s religion prompted almost a complete reversal of the earlier poll

14. Editorial, *Olewein* (Iowa) *Register*, January 8, 1960; “From the Pastor’s Study,” Grace Lutheran Parish Paper (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), March 10, 1960, “Catholic Issue” folder, Pre-Presidential Papers, 1960 Campaign, Box 1044, John F. Kennedy Library.

numbers: 60 to 40 percent in favor of Humphrey. The Kennedy machine went into full operation, but the issue of the candidate's faith hung like the sword of Damocles over the entire campaign.

Some of Kennedy's advisers urged him to address the matter directly, while others counseled him not to call attention to it. "A number of your friends in the Cambridge community have asked me to urge you once more to consider making a very serious, full-dress speech upon the relationship between Church and State," Archibald Cox of Harvard wrote to Kennedy. "Although nothing can be said which will impress the prejudiced, there is a sizable group of thoughtful people who are seriously troubled about the prospect of having a President whose religion is what they regard as authoritarian. Their doubts are far more serious than such silly questions as the weight of the Vatican upon our domestic or foreign policies for they deal with such philosophical questions as intellectual freedom." Cox urged Kennedy to deliver a speech that would "stress the development of our American tradition of the separation of Church and State in the light of the institutions of other countries," even as it made "the affirmative case for religion as part of a nation's life and culture."¹⁵

The candidate chose to confront the issue. "I need your help in my campaign for President of the United States in the West Virginia Primary," a letter to West Virginia Democrats read. "But there are some who would not give me a chance to put that program into effect simply because I go to the church of my parents on Sunday." Then, on Sunday evening, May 8, two days before

15. Letter, Archibald Cox to John F. Kennedy, April 8, 1960, "Religious Issue: Campaign Material" folder 2, Theodore C. Sorenson Papers, Campaign Files, 1959-60, Box 25, John F. Kennedy Library.

the primary, Kennedy made what presidential historian Theodore White called “the finest TV broadcast I have ever heard any political candidate make.” Kennedy affirmed the notion of the separation of church and state and then, looking directly into the camera, talked about the oath a president makes to uphold the Constitution, including the First Amendment. “And if he breaks his oath,” Kennedy solemnly declared, “he is not only committing a crime against the Constitution, for which the Congress can impeach him—and should impeach him—but he is committing a sin against God.”¹⁶

Kennedy won West Virginia the following Tuesday and the Nebraska primary the same day. Humphrey promptly pulled out of the race for the Democratic nomination. “I think,” Kennedy declared at his victory press conference in Charleston, West Virginia, “we have now buried the religious issue once and for all.”¹⁷

A coterie of determined Protestants had other ideas. Kennedy’s candidacy resurrected all manner of scurrilous anti-Catholic rhetoric, which frequently took form in various tracts, many of them printed and distributed anonymously. “Don’t let any Catholic convince you that his oath to his State or Government comes first,” a mimeographed broadside read. “A Catholic is bound to his Church from infancy. Therefore his Church comes first in all

16. Letter draft, John F. Kennedy to West Virginia Democrats, April 18, 1960, “Religion” folder, Pre-Presidential Papers, 1960 Campaign, Box 997, John F. Kennedy Library; Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1960* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), 107–8.

17. Quoted in White, *Making of the President 1960*, 114.

things.” This pamphlet, purportedly written and distributed by J. F. Murphy of Boston, who described himself as a “Sincere Free-Thinking Catholic,” warned that a Roman Catholic elected to the presidency would appoint only Catholics to his cabinet. “After that every key Government head would also be a Catholic,” the attack read. “Within one four-year term as President, America would be under full Catholic control. The Pope wants rich America under Catholic control. All other Catholic-controlled countries are poor, and always have been.”¹⁸

“A CATHOLIC PRESIDENT? No, I’m sorry. It would be like voting for a Fascist, a Nazi, in one respect.” So read another broadside, this one from Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin. A tract published by an organization calling itself the Conversion Center, in Havertown, Pennsylvania, also resurrected the specter of fascism, an accusation that still carried considerable potency among a people with lingering memories of the Second World War: “The Roman Catholic Hierarchy is conducting a massive campaign to hide its true doctrines, and to gain public sympathy. It is using the doctrine of the ‘Big Lie,’ employed so successfully by Hitler and Stalin.”¹⁹

As Kennedy closed in on the Democratic nomination, a flurry of tracts appeared. This one, purportedly written by a

18. Mimeographed letter, J. F. Murphy, Boston [“Sincere Free-Thinking Catholic”] to “All Who Love America and Religious Freedom,” n.d., “Catholic Issue” folder, Pre-Presidential Papers, 1960 Campaign, Box 1044, John F. Kennedy Library.

19. Ditto letter, Kenneth F. Klinkert, Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin, n.d., “Catholic Issue” folder, Pre-Presidential Papers, 1960 Campaign, Box 1044, John F. Kennedy Library; Tract, “Who Says Refusal to Vote for a Roman Catholic Presidential Candidate Is Bigotry?” published by The Conversion Center, Inc., Havertown, Pennsylvania, “Catholic Issue” folder, Pre-Presidential Papers, 1960 Campaign, Box 1044, John F. Kennedy Library.

“Converted Roman Catholic Priest,” spelled out the dimensions of the supposed Vatican conspiracy:

DID YOU KNOW

That the Roman papal hierarchy is an enemy to our American government, and an enemy in disguise, in that it is a corrupt foreign political machine operating under the mask of religion?

That the Roman papal hierarchy seeks to destroy our free public schools, to do away with free speech, free press, soul liberty and to force its oriental, ancient, superstitious, idolatrous, un-Christian practices upon the nation?

That the forceable [*sic*] enslavement and incarceration of women in Roman nunneries is a blot on the good name of America and is certainly a shame to twentieth century civilization?

That a Roman Catholic president in the White House is the next step planned by the hierarchy of enthroned cardinals, bishops and priests?

That Rome looks upon Washington as the future center of her power, and is filling our government departments with papists?

... And this group take their orders from the man-god in the Vatican at Rome trying to make America Roman Catholic, capture the White House and rule over the

United States of this great Protestant nation. In Christ's name, Americans awaken—stand guard—it shall not be so—"They Shall Not Pass."

The tract concluded with an almost desperate admonition: "Scatter this tract quickly. Put one in every letter you write. Help us defeat the Roman political machine from 'Making America Catholic.'"²⁰

"Doubtlessly all our readers are aware that this is an election year, and one of the avowed candidates for the Democratic nomination is a Romanist," the editor of the *Baptist Examiner*, published out of Russell, Kentucky, began. "I hardly think that our country is ready to elect a Roman Catholic president as yet, but we need to be warned, and the alarm needs to go out concerning Roman Catholicism." The editor protested that he had "not one single thing against any Roman Catholic," but the peril facing the nation was real. "I am definitely opposed to everything Roman Catholicism stands for, especially its position relative to religious freedom and church and state. It is our desire to direct the minds and the thoughts of our readers in a channel opposing Roman Catholicism." The editor concluded that, although he was a Democrat, "I serve notice that I will not vote for a Roman Catholic." Elsewhere in the same issue, another writer announced, "I would no sooner vote for a Roman Catholic than for a communist."²¹

20. Tract, "The Enemy Within Our Borders, compiled by A Converted Roman Catholic Priest," published by Prayer Sanctuary, Minneapolis, Minnesota, "Catholic Issue" folder, Pre-Presidential Papers, 1960 Campaign, Box 1044, John F. Kennedy Library.

21. Editor's note, "The Roman Catholic Issue," *The Baptist Examiner* (Russell, Kentucky), May 7, 1960, 1; Bob L. Ross, "Why I Would Not Vote for a Roman Catholic Candidate," *The Baptist Examiner* (Russell, Kentucky), May 7, 1960, 3.

The number of anti-Catholic tracts, however, was probably fewer than the number of anti-Catholic sermons. On July 3, 1960, for instance, W. A. Criswell, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, warned his auditors that “Roman Catholicism is not only a religion, it is a political tyranny.”²²

By mid-summer, after Kennedy had secured the Democratic nomination at the convention in Los Angeles, worried dispatches from the heartland began to filter in to Kennedy campaign headquarters. “May I have your urgent attention for the problem of religion in the farm belt,” John Kenneth Galbraith, the Harvard economist, wrote in a confidential memorandum to Kennedy. “Religion in the rural corn belt, Great Plains and down into rural Texas has become an issue greater than either income or peace,” he warned. “One of the problems in Iowa and the surrounding states is that local leaders in thought and ideas are not yet actively combatting the tendency to decide the issue on religious grounds,” Galbraith continued. “They are the people who must say that to allow religion to enter the decision is to decide for reaction.” Noting that “religious prejudice is a stalking horse for reaction, a diversion from the real and important issues,” Galbraith echoed the advice from his fellow Harvard professor Archibald Cox earlier in the campaign. He urged Kennedy to address the religion issue directly and to solicit strongly worded endorsements “from Protestant liberals and scholars who are known to know and respect you,” adding that “the fact remains that where prospects are bright, as say Minnesota, Michigan or (less certainly) Wisconsin,

22. Quoted in Chandler Davidson, *Race and Class in Texas Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 214.

it is partly because you have articulate liberals in power and making your case.”²³

In assessing the progress of the campaign in mid-August, Theodore Sorensen was generally positive, though he continued to worry about the religion issue. “Given the normal Democratic majority, and assuming that his personal appeal, hard work, and political organization produce as before, Senator Kennedy will win in November unless defeated by the religious issue,” Sorensen wrote in an internal memorandum. “This makes neutralization of this issue the key to the election.” He advocated the formation of “national, state and local committees of leading Protestants, both lay and clergy, willing to attack this issue and work with and through state and local council of churches and ministerial associations.”²⁴

Kennedy was not without defenders. “The danger facing us is not, as some would have us believe, a religious hierarchy,” the Episcopal bishop for the Diocese of Pittsburgh wrote. “It is the hierarchy of suspicion, fear and bigotry that is really dangerous.” James A. Pike, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of California, deplored the circulation of what he called “hate literature” targeted against Kennedy and the Roman Catholic Church. The attempt, he said, “to seek to persuade citizens that they should in no wise vote for a man simply because he is Roman Catholic is outright bigotry and is a violation of the spirit of the constitutional prohibition of a religious test for public office.” Speaking at the Michigan

23. Letter, John Kenneth Galbraith to John F. Kennedy, August 25, 1960, “Religious Issue” folder, Pre-Presidential Papers, 1960 Campaign, Box 993, John F. Kennedy Library.

24. Memorandum on the Religious Issue, Theodore C. Sorensen, August 15, 1960, “Religious Issue: Campaign Material” folder 2, Theodore C. Sorensen Papers, Campaign Files, 1959–60, Box 25, John F. Kennedy Library.

State Fair, Pike called on Christians “of whatever denomination” to “vigorously deplore and earnestly seek to counteract this rising tide of ‘hate’ literature in our midst.”²⁵

A newspaper in Kansas, a state not known for its Roman Catholic population, also defended Kennedy. “Much of the campaign against Catholicism is filthy slander, the product of diseased minds,” the *Wichita Beacon* opined on August 26, 1960, just as the fall campaign lurched into motion. The editorial, entitled “Let’s Play Fair with Catholics,” urged responsible Americans to “protest against vicious lies and outrageous attacks on the character and loyalty of a large segment of American society” and noted that “Catholic people generally measure up at least as well as Protestants in matters of morality, patriotism and good-neighborliness.” The editorial concluded with an appeal to Protestant leaders. “Protestants of the decent sort owe it to themselves to challenge all immoderate and vehement statements against the Catholics. And when the statements have the purpose of inciting hatred and violence there is nothing to do but turn away from the hater.”²⁶

A group of Protestant leaders, however, those of the putatively responsible sort to which the *Wichita Beacon* appealed, sought unabashedly to derail Kennedy’s candidacy. And their opposition posed a greater, more credible threat than the scurrilous anti-Catholic literature flooding the electorate. Norman Vincent

25. Statement of the Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, “Religion” folder, Pre-Presidential Papers, 1960 Campaign, Box 1049, John F. Kennedy Library; “Pike Denounces Campaign ‘Hate,’” *New York Times*, September 5, 1960.

26. “Let’s Play Fair with Catholics,” *Wichita Beacon*, August 26, 1960.

Peale, pastor of Marble Collegiate Church in New York City, fired the opening salvo just days after the West Virginia primary, when Kennedy mistakenly—hopefully—declared that his victory had “buried the religious issue once and for all.” Peale released to the press a letter he had written to Robert Kennedy, the candidate’s brother and campaign manager, quibbling with his use of language. “I hope you won’t mind if I respectfully call your attention to the implication of superiority in your use of terms,” the minister said. “By the phrase ‘non-Catholic’ it seems to me that you are actually deprecating the majority of people in this country.” Peale concluded: “I wonder how you might react to the term ‘non-Protestant’ as designating members of your Roman Catholic Church?”²⁷

Peale, unabashedly partisan on behalf of Richard Nixon, the Republican nominee, was just getting started, and he enjoyed the cooperation of several other Protestant leaders, including Billy Graham, another Nixon loyalist. Donald Gill, a Baptist minister, took a leave of absence from his position as assistant secretary for public affairs at the National Association of Evangelicals to head a group that sought to raise questions about the suitability of a Roman Catholic as president. Graham convened a meeting of approximately thirty Protestant leaders in Montreux, Switzerland, on August 18, 1960, in order to strategize against Kennedy.²⁸

Peale was present, as was Harold Ockenga, pastor of Park Street Congregational Church in Boston and president of Fuller

27. “A Kennedy Irks Peale,” *New York Times*, May 21, 1960.

28. Graham recounts his involvement with these activities in his autobiography, *Just As I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1997), 391–92.

Theological Seminary, and L. Nelson Bell, Graham's father-in-law and an editor of *Christianity Today*. The proceedings are still shrouded in secrecy, and the only solid evidence survives in a letter from Ruth Peale, wife of the Marble Collegiate minister. "Norman had a conference yesterday at Montreux, Switzerland," the letter reads. "They were unanimous in feeling that the Protestants in America must be aroused in some way, or the solid block Catholic voting, plus money, will take this election."²⁹

The Protestants gathered in Switzerland decided to set up a meeting with Nixon and then to organize a forum to address the religious issue. Peale, the most prominent person in the group, headed the meeting, which took place on Wednesday, September 7, two days after Labor Day, the traditional start of the fall campaign. The venue was the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, the same place, paradoxically, where members of the Fair Campaign Practices Committee had met in March to issue a statement calling for religious toleration. Despite Peale's public protestations—"As a Protestant minister I would be recreant if I told people how to vote," he said—the statement coming out of the September meeting, adopted unanimously, declared that Kennedy's Catholicism was a "major factor" in the presidential campaign and that a Roman Catholic president would face "extreme pressure from the hierarchy of his church." The Mayflower gathering, which became known almost immediately as the "Peale group," decided

29. The Montreux meeting was discovered by historian Carol V. R. George; see *God's Salesman: Norman Vincent Peale and the Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 200. An excerpt from Ruth Peale's letter is quoted in Alva James, "Leaders Mixed State, Religion," *Syracuse (NY) Post-Standard*, December 7, 1992.

to organize as the National Conference of Citizens for Religious Freedom.³⁰

Peale characterized the meeting of 150 Protestant leaders at the Mayflower Hotel as “more or less representative of the evangelical, conservative Protestants.” The statement noted that the Catholic Church “is a political as well as a religious organization” which had “repeatedly attempted to break down the wall of separation between church and state.” Harold Ockenga, standing along side of Peale at the news conference, suggested that Kennedy’s repeated affirmations of the separation of church and state should be discounted, comparing them to the statements of Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet premier, regarding world peace. Like Khrushchev, Ockenga said, Kennedy is “a captive of a system.” Finally, when asked if the gathering had discussed how Nixon’s Quaker faith affected his policies, Peale allowed that “I don’t know that he ever let it bother him.”³¹

Graham’s role in organizing the Washington meeting, having earlier convened the smaller group in Montreux, belied the assurances he had given Kennedy just days before the August 18 strategy session in Switzerland. “There is a rumor circulating in the Democratic Party that I intend to raise the religious issue publicly during the presidential campaign,” Graham wrote to Kennedy on August 10. “This is not true. In fact, I would like to commend you for facing it squarely and courageously.” Graham

30. “Peale to Head Protestant Forum on Religious Issue in Campaign,” *New York Times*, September 4, 1960; Peter Braestrup, “Protestant Unit Wary on Kennedy,” *New York Times*, September 8, 1960.

31. Braestrup, “Protestant Unit”; quoted in Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 188; “Religious Issue Stirs Controversy,” *New York Times*, September 11, 1960.

went on to concede that “I shall probably vote for Vice President Nixon for several reasons, including a long-standing personal friendship. I am sure you can understand my position.” He closed the letter, which he hoped would remain confidential, by assuring Kennedy of his support should the Democratic nominee win the election: “I will do all in my power to help unify the American people behind you.”³²

I will leave it to others to judge whether Graham was being disingenuous. He had forged a friendship with Nixon during the previous decade when both men were anti-communist crusaders, and few Americans doubted his support for Nixon. Later in the campaign, Graham visited Henry Luce at the Time & Life Building and, according to his autobiography, said, “I want to help Nixon without blatantly endorsing him.” Graham drafted an article praising Nixon that stopped just short of a full endorsement. Luce was prepared to run it in *Time* magazine but pulled it at the last minute. Still, the fact that Graham was working behind the scenes effectively to discredit Kennedy’s candidacy because of his faith, notwithstanding his protestations to the Democratic candidate, appears to contradict the spirit, if not the letter, of Graham’s assurances.³³

Because Graham remained in the background, however, Peale took a great deal of criticism for the gathering in Washington and the statement calling Kennedy’s fitness for office into question. The blatant excesses of the statement from the “Peale group” may have

32. Letter, Billy Graham to John F. Kennedy, August 10, 1960, “Religion” folder, Pre-Presidential Papers, Senate Files, Box 550, John F. Kennedy Library.

33. Graham, *Just As I Am*, 392–99. Graham claims to have been relieved that Luce pulled the article.

played out to Kennedy's advantage by stirring a reaction. The editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*, a Nixon supporter, said that he was "deeply disturbed" by the Washington gathering. "Dr. Peale and his collaborators have rendered our country a disservice in giving the religious issue a respectable front," Lewis I. Newman, a rabbi on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, declared. "The Protestant statement is a bald and unashamed bid for the election of the candidate of a political party." A rabbi from the Bronx compared the sentiments behind the statement to apartheid in South Africa and segregation in the South. Israel Goldstein, rabbi at B'nai Jeshurun in Manhattan, said, "It is disturbing to see that there are sections of American public opinion which in effect are saying that a Catholic must never be President."³⁴

John C. Bennett, president of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and Reinhold Niebuhr, also of Union, accused the "Peale group" of "blind prejudice." Bennett attributed the statement to "a kind of Protestant underworld" and declared that voting against a candidate because of his faith was "bad politics and worse religion." Bennett noted the partisanship of both Peale and the entire Washington gathering; they would never support a liberal Democrat, Bennett insisted, "no matter what his religion." *World Outlook* magazine, a Methodist publication, wondered why the Protestant group didn't grill Nixon on how historical Quaker commitments to pacifism might influence his foreign policy. The *Catholic Courier-Journal*, the official publication of the Diocese of Rochester, New York, also weighed in on the matter. "The fact that anti-Catholic bias is rampant in Southern states comes hardly as a surprise," the

34. George, *God's Salesman*, 206; "3 Rabbis Assail Electoral Bias," *New York Times*, September 11, 1960.

paper said, “but when men of the caliber of Dr. Norman Vincent Peale join the prejudiced ranks then we are not only surprised we are also deeply disappointed.”³⁵

Peale, stung by the criticism, severed his ties with the National Conference of Citizens for Religious Freedom and went into hiding. He protested that he did not convene the Washington meeting, but that he was merely an observer whose role was “relatively minor,” a fine point lost on the media but confirmed by other insiders, including (much later) Billy Graham. The *Philadelphia Inquirer*, published by Peale’s friend Walter Annenberg, dropped his syndicated column, “Confident Living,” as did the *Pittsburgh Press* and other newspapers around the country. Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson of Washington, chair of the Democratic National Committee, suggested that the title of Peale’s famous book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, should be changed to *The Power of Positive Prejudice*. When Peale emerged from seclusion, recognizing that his reputation had been badly damaged by his association with such a blatantly partisan group, he submitted a letter of resignation to his New York congregation. The church refused to consider it.³⁶

35. Quoted in George, *God’s Salesman*, 202; “‘Protestant Underworld’ Cited as Source of Attack on Kennedy,” *New York Times*, September 11, 1960.

36. “Ends Tie to Protestants Who Doubted Kennedy Could Resist Vatican,” *New York Times*, September 16, 1960; George, *God’s Salesman*, 206; Tom Wicker, “Jackson Urges a Press Inquiry on ‘Organized’ Hate Campaign,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1960. In his autobiography, Graham acknowledges that Peale took a disproportionate amount of blame for the Mayflower meeting and said that he later apologized to Peale for letting him twist in the wind. Graham remained unscathed, even though the gathering in Montreux, which he had convened, laid the groundwork. See Graham, *Just As I Am*, 392. About the Washington meeting, Graham writes: “I encouraged Peale to go, privately glad that I would still be in Europe and therefore unable to attend” (Graham, *Just As I Am*, 392).

* * *

In the Kennedy camp, the statement emanating from the “Peale group” prodded them to action. Kennedy himself, though he hoped that the West Virginia primary had laid the religious issue to rest, predicted that “it will come on the stage again.” Peale and his confreres had brought it to center stage. Kennedy reluctantly accepted an invitation to address the matter before the Ministerial Association in Houston on September 12, just five days after the Mayflower meeting. During the previous weekend, while campaigning in Los Angeles, the candidate had worked on his speech together with Sorensen, who remarked to a friend, “We can win or lose the election right there in Houston on Monday night.”³⁷

Three hundred ministers gathered in the pink-and-green-carpeted Crystal Ballroom, along with an equal number of observers. The candidate, seated next to the Presbyterian minister who chaired the group, fidgeted almost imperceptibly, waiting for the lights of the television cameras to blink on at nine o’clock. Earlier in the day, while campaigning in San Antonio, Kennedy and Johnson had encountered pickets that read: “We Want the Bible and the Constitution” and “We Don’t Want the Kremlin or the Vatican.”³⁸

Kennedy strode to the podium. “I am not the Catholic candidate for president,” he insisted. “I am the Democratic Party’s candidate for president, who happens also to be a Catholic.” The

37. Quoted in Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 175; quoted in White, *Making of the President 1960*, 260.

38. Merle Miller, *Lyndon: An Oral Biography* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1980), 265.

issue at stake, he said, is “not what kind of church I believe in, for that should be important only to me, but what kind of America I believe in.” I believe in an America, the Democratic nominee said, “where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the president who might appoint him or the people who might elect him.” Kennedy declared that the presidency “is a great office that must be neither humbled by making it the instrument of any religious group, nor tarnished by arbitrarily withholding its occupancy from the members of any religious group.” He argued for a president “whose views on religion are his own private affair, neither imposed on him by the nation or imposed upon him as a condition to holding that office.”³⁹

Kennedy’s speech was being televised live on twenty-two stations throughout Texas, and he sought to clinch his argument with a local reference. He cited his own distinguished military service in World War II and noted that there was “no religious test” at the Battle of the Alamo: “For side by side with Bowie and Crockett died Fuentes and McCafferty and Bailey and Bedillio and Carey—but no one knows whether they were Catholics or not.” The audience of Protestant ministers, restive and suspicious at the beginning of the speech, remained silent throughout the eleven-minute address. Kennedy expressed his hope that he would be judged by his qualifications for office and by his policies, not by his faith. If the 1960 presidential election, he said, “is decided on the basis that forty million Americans lost their chance of being

39. Gladwin Hill, “Reaction of Ministers,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1960. Kennedy’s speech at the Rice Hotel has been reprinted often and is widely available. One source for the text is White, *Making of the President 1960*, Appendix C. It also appears in this book as Appendix 1.

president on the day they were baptized, then it is the whole nation that will be the loser in the eyes of Catholics and non-Catholics around the world, in the eyes of history, and in the eyes of our own people.”⁴⁰

Theodore Sorensen judged Kennedy’s speech at the Rice Hotel “the best speech of his campaign and one of the most important in his life,” surpassed only by his inaugural address four months later. Kennedy took questions from the audience, some of them hostile; several of the acrimonious exchanges, according to the *New York Times*, were prompted by conservative ministers who generally shunned the meetings of the Ministerial Association. Kennedy, however, handled them with grace, wit, and aplomb. Then he concluded:

Let me finally say that I am delighted to come here today. I don’t want anyone to think, because they interrogate me on this important question, that I regard that as unfair or unreasonable or that somebody who is concerned about the matter is prejudiced or bigoted.

I think religion is basic in the establishment of the American system, and, therefore, any candidate for the office, I think, should submit himself to the questions of any reasonable man.

My only limit would be that if somebody said, “Regardless of Senator Kennedy’s position, regardless of how much evidence he has given that what he says he means,

40. Gladwin Hill, “Reaction of Ministers,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1960. Quotations from speech are taken from White, *Making of the President 1960*, Appendix C.

I still won't vote for him because he is a member of that church."

I would consider that unreasonable. What I consider to be reasonable in an exercise of free will and free choice is to ask Senator Kennedy to state his views as broadly as possible. Investigate his record to see whether he states what he believes and then make an independent and rational judgment as to whether he could be entrusted with this highly important position.

So I want you to know that I am grateful to you for inviting me tonight. I am sure that I have made no converts to my church, but I do hope that, at least, my view, which I believe to be the view of my fellow Catholics who hold office, I hope that it may be of some value in at least assisting you to make a careful judgment.

The campaign thought that the senator's performance had been so effective that they published transcripts and produced a thirty-minute film for distribution beyond Texas in an effort finally to quell the so-called religious issue. Even Sam Rayburn, speaker of the House of Representatives, offered his assessment of Kennedy's appearance in Houston. "As we say in my part of Texas," Rayburn drawled, "he ate 'em blood raw."⁴¹

41. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 190; Hill, "Reaction of Ministers," *New York Times*, September 14, 1960; Transcript, September 12, 1960, "Religion" folder, Pre-Presidential Papers, 1960 Campaign, Box 1049, John F. Kennedy Library; Memorandum, James Wine to John Siegenthaler, October 5, 1960, "Religious Issue: Correspondence" folder, Robert F. Kennedy Papers, Pre-Administration Political Files, General Subject Files, 1959–60, Box 47, John F. Kennedy Library; quoted in Boller, *Presidential Campaigns*, 298.

The issue refused entirely to die. Although an array of religious leaders, including Protestants, hailed Kennedy's speech—one erstwhile critic conceded that Kennedy had “lifted himself above that issue”—others stepped up their criticisms. “No matter what Kennedy might say, he cannot separate himself from his church if he is a true Catholic,” Ramsey Pollard, president of the Southern Baptist Convention, declared. “All we ask is that Roman Catholicism lift its bloody hand from the throats of those that want to worship in the church of their choice.” Pollard, protesting that he was not a bigot, boasted that his church “has enough members to beat Kennedy in this area if they all vote like I tell them to.”⁴²

Another Southern Baptist, W. A. Criswell, pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, persisted in his crusade against Kennedy. “It is written in our country's constitution that church and state must be, in this nation, forever separate and free,” Criswell wrote in a publication called *United Evangelical Action*. Religious faith, the redoubtable fundamentalist declared, must be voluntary, and “in the very nature of the case, there can be no proper union of church and state.” K. Owen White, pastor of First Baptist Church in downtown Houston, credited Kennedy with being “forthright and frank” in his speech to the Ministerial Association, but he continued to object to a Roman Catholic as president because the church requires its members “to take positions on public matters.” The Permian Basin Baptist Association, in West Texas, responded to Kennedy's speech in Houston with a resolution charging that

42. Charles Grutzner, “Poling Praises Kennedy's Stand on Religion Issue,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1960; quoted in Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 194.

the Democratic candidate was “either denying the teaching of his church or is seeking to delude the American people.”⁴³

Some of the Baptist opposition to Kennedy was thoughtful. “I am not opposed to Catholicism as such, but to the clerical control of most of the Catholic people,” E. S. James, editor of the *Baptist Standard*, wrote to the candidate. “To me, government is a moral matter, and any administrator of government would be guided in a large measure by his interpretation of the moral issues. Therefore, I cannot see how it would be possible under the present clerical system of Roman Catholicism for any man to be faithful to those tenets of the Catholic church and still be absolutely free to exercise his own judgment rather than the judgment of the hierarchy in his church.”⁴⁴

The opposition to a Roman Catholic candidate on the part of Baptist clergy was not entirely without warrant, even though the criticism frequently edged into the realm of prejudice rather than principle. The two hallmarks of Baptist belief are adult, or believer’s, baptism (as opposed to infant baptism) and the notion of liberty of conscience and the separation of church and state. These ideas can be traced to Roger Williams, the founder of the Baptist

43. W. A. Criswell, “Religious Freedom and the Presidency,” *United Evangelical Action* 19 (September 1960), 9–10; quoted in Hill, “Reaction of Ministers,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1960; “West Texas Baptist Criticizes Kennedy,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1960.

44. Letter, E. S. James (editor, *Baptist Standard*) to John F. Kennedy, March 11, 1960, “Religious Issue: Campaign Material” folder 2, Theodore C. Sorenson Papers, Campaign Files, 1959–60, Box 25, John F. Kennedy Library.

tradition in America. Williams came to the New World in 1631 as pastor of the Puritan congregation in Salem, Massachusetts. Very quickly, however, he ran afoul of the Puritan authorities in the colony because he warned of the dangers of conflating church and state. Williams wanted to protect what he called the “garden of the church” from contamination by the “wilderness of the world,” and he sought to do so by means of (again, his words) a “wall of separation.”

This notion that church and state should function as separate entities was a new idea, one that the Puritans, in their impulse to form a theocratic order in Massachusetts, regarded with utmost suspicion. Williams was expelled from the colony, whereupon he went to what became Rhode Island and founded there both the Baptist tradition in America as well as a colony that enshrined his ideas of liberty of individual conscience and the separation of church and state. Throughout American history—until the rise of the Religious Right in the late 1970s—Baptists have been guardians on this wall of separation between church and state. From Williams himself in the seventeenth century to John Leland and Isaac Backus in the eighteenth century to George Washington Truett and W. A. Criswell in the twentieth century, Baptists have fervently believed that religion functions best apart from entanglements with the government.

Baptists have stoutly defended the First Amendment, especially the disestablishment clause: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.” The Baptist objections to Kennedy’s candidacy, therefore, cannot be dismissed simply as religious bigotry. To the extent that Criswell and others actually believed that Kennedy’s election represented a threat to the First Amendment—a not wholly unreasonable position, given the

history of Roman Catholicism in Europe—they were expressing legitimate concerns.

Whether the articulation of those principles served really as a proxy for anti-Catholic or anti-liberal or anti-Democratic sentiment, on the other hand, remains difficult to determine, especially at a remove of several decades. The fact that Criswell (among many other Baptists) abandoned the Baptist principle of church-state separation in his embrace of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s—on August 24, 1984, during the Republican National Convention, Criswell declared: “I believe this notion of the separation of church and state was the figment of some infidel’s imagination”—Criswell’s inconsistency calls into question his motives during the 1960 campaign. But that judgment reads history retroactively and for that reason probably is not entirely fair.⁴⁵

Not all Baptists opposed Kennedy. “There are many valid issues upon which the forthcoming Presidential campaign should be waged,” the *Crusader*, a magazine published by the American Baptist Convention, declared, “but voting for or against a candidate on the basis of his religious affiliation is not one of them.”⁴⁶

J. H. Jackson, president of the National Baptist Convention, the largest denomination of African American Baptists, sent an open letter to Billy Graham in response to an article Graham had written entitled “Graham Predicts Religion at Polls.” “You

45. Quoted in Richard V. Pierard, “Religion and the 1984 Election Campaign,” *Review of Religious Research* 27 (December 1985), 104–5.

46. “The Religious ‘Issue’ in the Presidential Campaign,” circular “Authorized and paid for by the District of Columbia Committee for John F. Kennedy,” John F. Kennedy Library.

make a sweeping judgment about the Catholic Church and then jump to the conclusion regarding the fitness of an American to be president of these United States,” Jackson admonished his Baptist brother. “The American people are not planning to elect a Catholic for the president of the United States. They are planning to elect an American citizen. It matters not what his religion might be.” While professing respect for Graham, Jackson continued: “We should urge the American people to rise above prejudices of every kind and go to the polls in November and vote as Americans for an American to be president of Americans.” Finally, Jackson appealed to quintessential Baptist principles: “If religion is present at the polls in November I hope it will be an inclusive religion that embraces the fact of the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God, and then leaves every particular denomination and group to choose his own theology, his own ritual, and his own form of church government.”⁴⁷

As the presidential campaign of 1960 wound down, the religious issue persisted. Henry Jackson, head of the Democratic Party, called on Nixon “to repudiate Dr. Peale and his group by name.” Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic presidential nominee in both 1952 and 1956, also called on Nixon to disassociate himself from Peale. Harry Truman, the Democratic former president, charged that, in his hometown of Independence, Missouri, “the Republicans are sending out all the dirty pamphlets they

47. Open letter, J. H. Jackson (president, National Baptist Convention) to Billy Graham, August 25, 1960, “Religion” folder, Pre-Presidential Papers, Senate Files, Box 550, John F. Kennedy Library.

can find on the religious issue,” though he exonerated Nixon himself.⁴⁸

Intelligence coming into the campaign headquarters from around the country reported “a serious intensification of distribution of anti-Catholic literature.” “Tracts against Catholics, and against the election of a Catholic President, are flooding into Central Ohio, delivered by mail, and door-to-door,” the co-chair of Ohio Citizens for Kennedy reported to Robert Kennedy on October 29. “Tomorrow a number of Protestant fundamentalist churches are celebrating ‘Reformation Sunday’ with sermons on such topics as ‘God’s choice for President.’” The correspondent characterized the situation in Ohio as “nasty.”⁴⁹

Campaign strategists recognized that they had no chance of swaying hard-bitten anti-Catholics. But they sought some way to turn the bigotry to their advantage among more reasonable voters. “If these people can be made aware that there *is* a mammoth, vicious anti-Catholic drive underway, that the forces of bigotry and prejudice *are* working ceaselessly to prevent the election of JFK,” an internal campaign memorandum read, “that the appeals made by the anti-Catholic forces are distorted, inaccurate and

48. Tom Wicker, “Jackson Urges a Press Inquiry on ‘Organized’ Hate Campaign,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1960; John Wicklein, “Niebuhr and Bennett Say Raising of Religious Issue Spurs Bigotry,” *New York Times*, September 16, 1960; “Truman Hails Nixon on Religious Issue,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1960.

49. Memorandum on the Religious Issue [author unknown], October 20, 1960, “Religious Issue: Correspondence” folder, Robert F. Kennedy Papers, Pre-Administration Political Files, General Subject Files, 1959–60, Box 47, John F. Kennedy Library; Memorandum, Mrs. Robert A. Rennie (co-chair, Ohio Citizens for Kennedy) to Robert F. Kennedy, October 29, 1960, “Religious Issue: Correspondence” folder, Robert F. Kennedy Papers, Pre-Administration Political Files, General Subject Files, 1959–60, Box 47, John F. Kennedy Library.

scurrilous, and that JFK *is* in danger of losing several states not because of his position on the issues, not because of his ability, not because of his program, but merely because he is a Catholic, then there is a real possibility of winning some of these votes.”⁵⁰

The voting on November 8, 1960, produced one of the closest elections in American history. Kennedy won 49.7 percent of the popular vote to Nixon’s 49.5 percent. Kennedy’s election finally laid to rest the notion that a Roman Catholic could never be elected president of the United States. The 1960 election also represented an almost eerie reversal of the 1928 campaign, when Alfred E. Smith, a Roman Catholic, lost to Herbert Hoover, who became America’s first Quaker president. In 1960, however, the Roman Catholic prevailed over the Quaker, Richard Nixon—who also happened to be Hoover’s eighth cousin, once removed. The victory of a Quaker over a Roman Catholic in 1928 produced the first Quaker president in American history; the triumph of a Roman Catholic over a Quaker in 1960 produced the first Roman Catholic president.⁵¹

Historians and political scientists have attributed Kennedy’s victory to several factors: Kennedy’s superior performance in the televised debates, especially the first debate in Chicago; Nixon’s

50. Memorandum on the Religious Issue [author unknown], October 20, 1960, “Religious Issue: Correspondence” folder, Robert F. Kennedy Papers, Pre-Administration Political Files, General Subject Files, 1959–60, Box 47, John F. Kennedy Library.

51. Regarding Nixon’s relationship to Hoover, see William A. DeGregorio, *The Complete Book of U.S. Presidents: From George Washington to George W. Bush*, rev. ed. (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2002), 464.

brief hospitalization, which sidelined him during a crucial juncture of the campaign; popular weariness with the Eisenhower-Nixon years; even the conspiracy theory that Richard J. Daley, mayor of Chicago, stole the election for Kennedy. All of these variables (with the possible exception of the latter) doubtless played a role. But religion also was a factor. Although Reinhold Niebuhr and John Bennett of Union Seminary declared that the statement emanating from the “Peale group” had “loosed the floodgates of religious bigotry,” the overall effect was quite the opposite. Peale and his Protestant colleagues at the Washington gathering created a backlash of sympathy for the Democratic nominee, which had the effect of silencing his most credible religious critics, thereby minimizing the issue.⁵²

Finally, in a twist of irony, it may have been a Baptist who provided the critical margin in Kennedy’s favor. On October 19, two days before the final Nixon-Kennedy debate, Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested in Atlanta for trying to desegregate a restaurant. He was sentenced to four months of hard labor and taken, under cover of darkness, to the state prison in Reidsville. Coretta, King’s wife, was six months pregnant and frantic about her husband’s safety as a black man in a distant prison. She called Harris Wofford, one of Kennedy’s campaign aides, and sought his help. Wofford went over the head of Robert Kennedy, the campaign manager, and pleaded with Sargent Shriver to ask the candidate to place a phone call to Coretta. “That’s a wonderful idea,” Kennedy said.⁵³

52. Quoted in Wicklein, “Niebuhr and Bennett.”

53. Quoted in David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 147.

The brief phone conversation had the immediate effect of reassuring King's wife, but the ripple effects arguably swept the Democrat into office as news of Kennedy's gesture of support spread rapidly through the African American community. Robert Kennedy was initially miffed at Wofford's actions (and told him so), fearful that alignment with the civil-rights activist would jeopardize Kennedy's standing with white Southerners. But, on reflection, Robert Kennedy sought to intercede with the judge on King's behalf. After his phone call, the judge agreed to King's release on bond. When the civil-rights leader arrived at the airport, back from incarceration, he declared that he was "deeply indebted to Senator Kennedy."⁵⁴

King's father, Martin Luther King Sr., was even more effusive. The elder King, senior pastor at Ebenezer Baptist Church, had been leaning toward Nixon in the 1960 campaign, in part because of Kennedy's religion. But the Democratic candidate's phone call changed his mind. "Because this man was willing to wipe the tears from my daughter-in-law's eyes," he declared, "I've got a suitcase of votes, and I'm going to take them to Mr. Kennedy and dump them in his lap."⁵⁵

Kennedy's determination to bracket religious affiliation from political considerations was compelling to just enough Americans to allow him to squeak into office and thereby to

54. Quoted in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 148.

55. Quoted in Boller, *Presidential Campaigns*, 300. For Coretta's account of the Kennedy phone call and its repercussions, see Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969), 195–97. When told of the elder King's comment about Catholicism, Kennedy quipped: "Imagine Martin Luther King having a bigot for a father." Then, after a pause: "Well, we all have fathers, don't we?" Quoted in King, *My Life*, 195–97.

demolish the shibboleth that no Roman Catholic could ever be president. Prejudicial statements against Catholics, however, did not disappear altogether. In 1962, for instance, a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary who identified himself as an evangelical, Loraine Boettner, published a tome of nearly five hundred pages called *Roman Catholicism*, which warned about “the advances that Romanism is making today in this nation and in other parts of the world.” Boettner drew a distinction between Christianity and Roman Catholicism and asserted that “American freedoms are being threatened today by two totalitarian systems, Communism and Roman Catholicism.” Boettner’s anti-Catholic screed, appearing as it did following Kennedy’s election and prior to his assassination, played to lingering nativist fears. In the United States, he warned, “Romanism is growing faster than is Communism and is the more dangerous since it covers its real nature with a cloak of religion.”⁵⁶

Boettner’s *Roman Catholicism* provided a theological gloss to Paul Blanshard’s earlier warnings about the threat posed by Catholicism to America’s freedoms. And it supplied incontrovertible evidence that, despite Kennedy’s election, anti-Catholic sentiments still found a hearing among some Americans. The overwhelming public grief surrounding the death of the young president finally, albeit temporarily, stilled those voices.

In mid-January 1960, just days before Kennedy’s inauguration, Billy Graham had called on the president-elect in Palm Beach,

56. Loraine Boettner, *Roman Catholicism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1962), 2, 3.

Florida, for lunch and a round of golf. “I believe President Kennedy will become the most prayed-for man in the world,” Graham told a press conference at the Washington Hotel in Palm Beach. The evangelist suggested that Kennedy’s victory had demonstrated that there was less religious prejudice among American voters than many had feared. He ventured that the outcome of the 1960 presidential campaign may have diminished forever the importance of religion in American elections.⁵⁷

Graham, as it turned out, was only partially prescient. Kennedy’s election did indeed silence—or at least muffle—the strident voices of anti-Catholicism in American society, the naysayers who insisted that a Roman Catholic could never rise to the presidency. Kennedy’s persuasive argument in the course of the 1960 campaign that religion should not play a role in political considerations, coupled with the overreaching of the “Peale group,” ushered in an era during which matters of faith had little bearing on presidential politics or political decision-making. Ironically, it was the morally bankrupt presidency of Graham’s friend, the man whom Kennedy defeated in 1960, that set the stage for a reinsertion of faith and religious sentiment into presidential politics.

57. “Dr. Graham Says Election Aids Church Unity,” *New York Times*, January 17, 1961.