

## The 50th Anniversary of a Historic Speech

By Dr. Gary Scott Smith

This week marks the 50th anniversary of John F. Kennedy's historic speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association in which he countered religious objections to his candidacy and promised to honor the separation of church and state. This speech played an important role in Kennedy winning the closely contested 1960 election and helped set the stage for reducing religious prejudice in politics.

To understand Kennedy's speech, the historical context must be examined. The only previous Catholic presidential nominee of a major party—Governor Al Smith of New York—lost to Herbert Hoover in 1928, partly because of antipathy toward his religious faith. In 1960 numerous evangelical and fundamentalist leaders strongly opposed Kennedy's candidacy because they believed that a Catholic president could not be independent from the pope. Despite Kennedy's many assurances, they questioned whether he truly could resist pressure from church leaders.

For example, the editor of *Eternity* magazine argued that although Kennedy pledged to abide by the separation of church and state, the Catholic Church would not allow him. It was "unmistakably clear" that he must be a Catholic first and president second in matters involving their church.

An article in *Christianity Today*, widely distributed as a pamphlet by the organization Protestants and Other Americans United for Separation of Church and State, predicted that if Catholics became a numerical majority and gained political control, they would make Catholicism the nation's official religion, restrict Protestant worship, prohibit evangelistic services, and forbid criticism of the Catholic Church in print or on the air. The National Association of Evangelicals, the Church of God, and the Southern Baptist Convention expressed similar fears.

Even liberal Protestants such as Charles Clayton Morrison, the long-time editor of *Christian Century*, insisted that contemporary democratic societies faced "two powerful monarchical" competitors—"the Communist Dictatorship and the Infallible Papacy"—and argued that Kennedy's allegiance to the Constitution "would be qualified by his prior and equally sacred allegiance to another State."

A group of 150 Protestant ministers espousing varied theological perspectives, including Norman Vincent Peale, well-known author of "The Power of Positive Thinking," and Daniel Poling, editor of *Christian Herald*, issued a public statement on September 7 questioning whether a Catholic president could successfully resist pressures from the Catholic hierarchy.

Although many Protestants denounced this statement, it prompted Kennedy to address the religious issue directly, in a speech on September 12, before the Greater Houston Ministerial Association. Hoping he could satisfy the qualms of Protestants while not antagonizing Catholics, Kennedy sought to refute religious objections to his candidacy and convince Americans that he would respect church-state separation.

Kennedy insisted that no Catholic prelate should tell a Catholic president how to act and that no Protestant minister should tell his parishioners for whom to vote. The United States, he argued, was not officially Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish. No public official should request or accept "instructions on public policy from the Pope, the National Council of Churches or any other ecclesiastical source." Religious bodies must not try to impose their "will directly

or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials." He asked prospective voters to "judge me on the basis of my 14 years in the Congress—on my declared stands against an ambassador to the Vatican [and] against unconstitutional aid to parochial schools."

Kennedy protested the widespread dissemination of printed materials that used quotations from Catholic leaders, usually from other countries and centuries, often out of context, to argue that the Catholic Church opposed the separation of church and state. These publications also ignored the 1948 statement by the American bishops endorsing the concept, which reflected the views of almost all American Catholics. "I do not speak for my church on public matters," he assured the audience, and "the church does not speak for me." If elected, he would decide issues "in accordance with what my conscience tells me to be the national interest and without regard to outside religious pressures or dictates."

Kennedy kept his word. In fact, he avoided taking stances that favored Catholics. He had far fewer Catholics on his staff than Richard Nixon later did and did not appoint a significant number of coreligionists to major administrative posts. The bill the president sent to Congress in 1961, requesting \$2.3 billion over the next three years to construct, operate, and maintain public schools and pay teachers' salaries, excluded sectarian schools. The federal government increased its support of birth control by expanding research grants, cooperating with United Nations efforts, and furnishing information to nations requesting it. Unlike Harry Truman, Kennedy did not send an ambassador to the Vatican. Numerous Catholic leaders complained that Kennedy was less supportive of the Catholic political agenda than any Protestant president would have been.

Kennedy's election was a milestone in American political history. Although numerous Americans voted against him primarily because he was Catholic, his victory opened the door for other Catholic (and Jewish) candidates to run for the nation's highest offices. While 40 percent of Americans today say they would not vote for an atheist to be president, whether a candidate is Protestant or Catholic seems to make little difference to most Americans.

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