

# John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Faith, 1960-1963

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John F. Kennedy's presidential candidacy and administration (1960-1963) coincided with and helped to fuel recurrent religious controversy. A digest of my Ph.D. dissertation, this presentation situates in the early 1960s an important turning point in the intersection of faith and politics in the United States. Old denominational boundaries and suspicions broke down while liberals and conservatives of different faiths reorganized themselves along ideological lines. By the way he navigated a series of landmark debates, many of them tied to the separation of church and state, the first Catholic president played a central role in this realignment of American religious life.

## I. The Religious Issue



**Paul Blanshard**, attorney and anti-Catholic polemicist, at Harvard (1950):

The Roman Catholic Church is "a great system of government which is political in character . . . when the Pope speaks, all down through that gigantic structure of power the Catholics of the world are ordered to obey."

"[T]he Catholic hierarchy has never accepted that principle [of church-state separation]."

He is back at it in 1960 with *God and Man in Washington*.

**Dr. W. A. Criswell**, First Baptist Church of Dallas (1960):

"Roman Catholicism is not only a religion, it is a political tyranny."

**John F. Kennedy** in Houston (September 12, 1960):

"I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute, where no Catholic prelate would tell the president (should he be Catholic) how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote; where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference."

"I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant nor Jewish; 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."

**Criswell**, quoted in *The Waco News Tribune* (1960):

"One, he's either a sorry Catholic in which event he oughta get out of the church. Two, if he's a good Catholic he shouldn't be president."

## II. Continuing Controversy, 1961-1962

Recent estimates of Kennedy's support on **Election Day**:

83 percent of Catholics... and 34 percent of white Protestants



**Fr. Francis J. Lally**, editor of *The Boston Pilot* (1962):

"The old image of the Catholic Church in America as self-seeking, power-ridden, obstructionist, and monolithic does not die easily . . . [it] cannot be expected to disappear merely because it was shattered in the presidential campaign of 1960."

### a) Federal Aid to Education

Policy: No funds for parochial schools.  
Catholic opposition.  
Compromise package in April 1961.

### b) Peace Corps Contracts

Policy: Project contracts for denominational groups.  
Protestant opposition.  
Policy reversed in Dec. 1961.

### c) Agency for International Development

Policy: U.S. funding for religious education abroad.  
Protestant opposition.  
Policy reversed in Sept. 1962. Funding persists.



## III. Challenges and Opportunities

### Rulings on Religious Education in Public Schools

*Engel v. Vitale* (1962): Barred prayer in public schools.

*Abington v. Schempp* (1963): Barred devotional reading in public schools.

Kennedy does not endorse the Becker Amendment, which would reverse the rulings.



**Kennedy** (June 27, 1962):

"[W]e have in this case a very easy remedy, and that is to pray ourselves, and I would think that it would be a welcome reminder to every American family that we can pray a good deal more at home and attend our churches with a good deal more fidelity, and we can make the true meaning of prayer much more important to the lives of all of our children."

The **Pope John** Effect:

- Encyclicals: *Mater et Magistra*, *Pacem in Terris*
- Second Council of the Vatican: Reformation?

**Kennedy** on *Pacem in Terris* (April 20, 1963):

"As a Catholic I am proud of it, and as an American I have learned from it . . . it closely matches notable expressions of conviction and aspiration from churchmen of other faiths . . . We are learning to talk the language of progress and peace across the barriers of sect and creed."

## IV. Fractures and Realignment, 1962-1963



### a) Civil Rights Movement

**Martin Luther King**, SCLC (January 17, 1963):

"In this area the Church has failed Christ miserably. In the midst of a nation rife with racial animosity, it too often has been content to mouth pious irrelevances and sanctimonious trivialities . . . it has too often remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows."



"If the Church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become little more than an irrelevant social club with a thin veneer of religiosity."

### b) Foreign Policy

- Nuclear test ban treaty with the Soviet Union
- Anti-war movement

## V. Legacy: The Sixties in American Religious History

There is no religious issue when Catholic congressman William E. Miller becomes the Republican vice-presidential nominee in 1964.

An ecumenical, liberal, politically active movement emerges... at the top.

E.g. Daniel and Philip Berrigan, John Cogley, Maurice Eisendrath and Abraham Heschel, Eugene Carson Blake, Dana McLean Greeley, and James A. Pike; the National Council of Churches; periodicals, e.g. *The Commonweal*, *The Christian Century*.

Conservatives unite in reaction to...

- Secularization
- Ecumenism
- Church activism in the civil rights and peace movements

With the "culture wars," we see among them a new faith-based activism.



Many thanks to the Graduate School, the Department of History, and my dissertation committee: Ellen Fitzpatrick, Kurk Dorsey, Jason Sokol, Michele Dillon, and Timothy Naftali