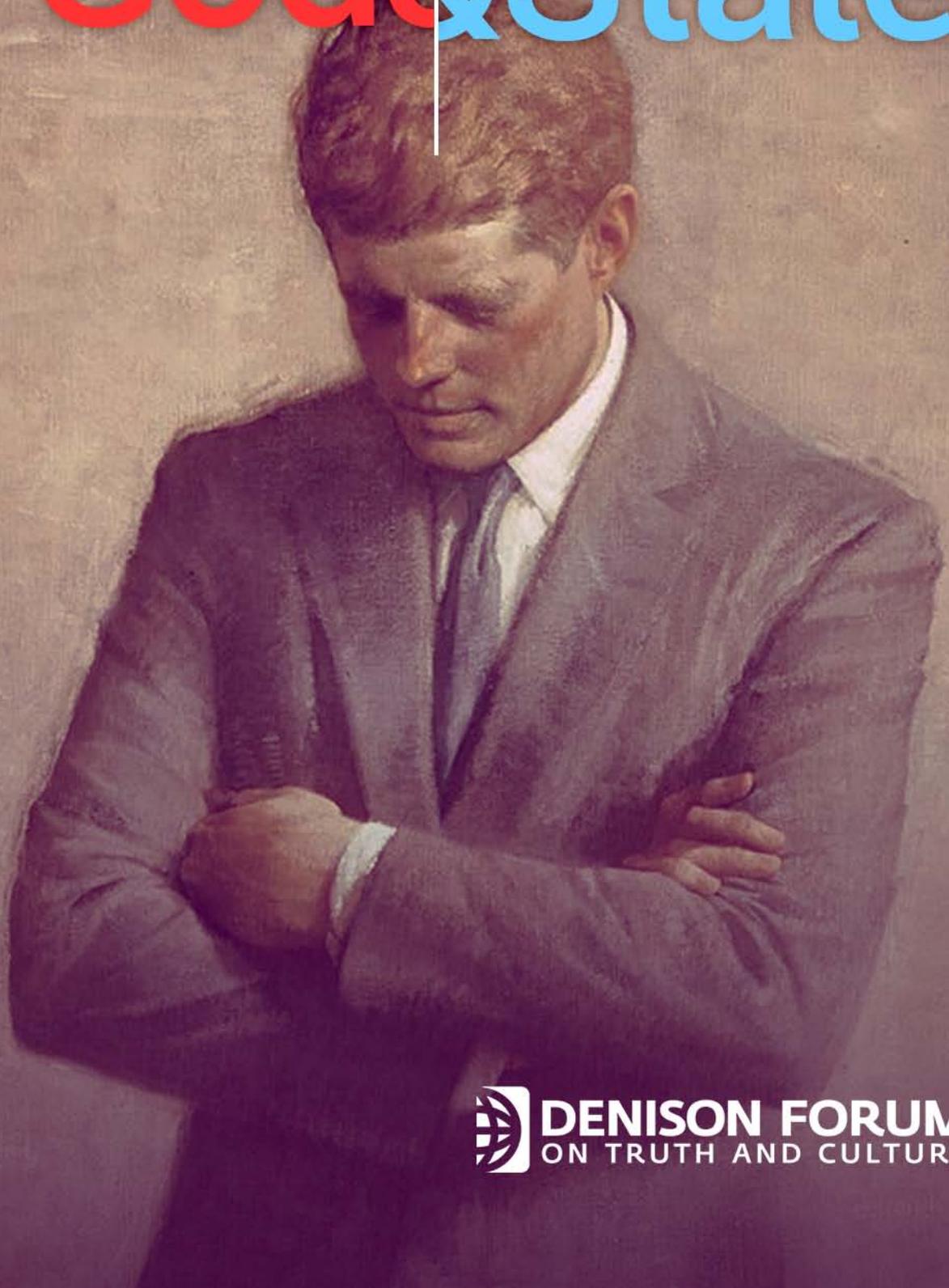


separating

*The faith of  
John F. Kennedy*

# God & State



**DENISON FORUM**  
ON TRUTH AND CULTURE

**Separating God and State:  
The faith of John F. Kennedy**  
James C. Denison, Ph.D.  
Denison Forum on Truth and Culture  
[www.denisonforum.org](http://www.denisonforum.org)

Adolf Hitler told the German clergy, "You take care of the church. I'll take care of the German people." At the time, the German population had become accustomed to the doctrine of the "two spheres": Christ is Lord of the church while the Kaiser is lord over the political sphere.<sup>1</sup> We know the results of such spiritual bifurcation.

A similar trend is at work in American culture today. For instance, a recent poll indicates that 72 percent of Americans, including 67 percent of evangelicals, believe it's permissible to disagree with church teaching on abortion. Separation of church and state has become separation of faith and state. In a nation that leads the industrialized world in teenage pregnancy, with 100,000 child pornography websites, where illegal drugs cost our country \$215 billion annually, how is our spiritual bifurcation working for us?

John F. Kennedy was the second Catholic candidate for president in American history. Facing vociferous opposition from Protestants amid allegations that he would be unduly influenced by the Vatican, Kennedy repeatedly stated: "I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I am the Democratic Party's candidate for President, who happens also to be a Catholic."

Kennedy continued to claim that religion is personal while politics are public. This segregation allayed the fears of the voting public and constitutes his lasting effect on religion in America. Has this effect been positive or negative? How does it relate to faith and culture today?

### **The faith of John F. Kennedy**

"I don't think he was a dedicated Catholic, like his mother and sisters, but he was a good Catholic. I cannot remember in my life when Jack Kennedy didn't go to Church on Sunday. . . . I never, never, never remember in my life Jack's missing prayers at night on his knees. He always went to confession when he was supposed to." So remembers Lem Billings, one of John Kennedy's lifelong friends.<sup>2</sup>

One occasion when Kennedy allowed the public a glimpse into his religious commitments came with the baptism of his son. Photographs documented the joyous event, and *LIFE* magazine made the baptism its cover story. Reverend Martin J. Casey presided over the baptism, which took place in the chapel of Georgetown University Hospital. Here the public saw a new side of Kennedy, as this was one of the few times he was seen publicly practicing his religion.

During his first congressional campaign he surprised an aide by impulsively ducking back into a church where they had just attended Mass so he could light a candle for his deceased brother. After National Prayer Day in 1961, he slipped out of the White House to sit alone in a rear pew at Washington's St. Matthew's Cathedral. He participated so fully in a 1962 Mass in Mexico City that the congregation burst into applause.

These were exceptions, however. Kennedy was typically reticent to make public his faith, for two reasons. One was his aversion to shows of emotion. His father often told the children, "There'll be no

crying in this house." One of John's friends said of him, "when his friends were hurt or a tragedy occurred or his child died, I think he felt it very deeply. But somehow public display was anathema to him."<sup>3</sup>

The other was his sensitivity to "the Catholic issue," a political problem he did not want to exacerbate through public demonstrations of his Catholic commitment. In 1928, Al Smith was the Democratic candidate for president. An estimated 10 million anti-Catholic leaflets, handbills and posters were circulated against him. The mainline Protestant journal, *Christian Century*, claimed that Smith's election would mean "the seating of the representative of an alien culture, of a medieval, Latin mentality, of an undemocratic hierarchy and of a foreign potentate in the great office of the President of the United States."<sup>4</sup> Smith lost to Republican Herbert Hoover in a landslide.

The Kennedy campaign was very concerned about a similar anti-Catholic backlash. The late Ted Sorensen, Kennedy's speechwriter and close aide, once noted that "the single biggest obstacle to his election was his religion. You should have seen the hate mail that came in, both from rednecks and from liberal intellectuals who should have known better."<sup>5</sup> In September 1960, 150 Protestant ministers supportive of Richard Nixon organized as the National Conference of Citizens for Religious Freedom. They began arguing that Kennedy could not be trusted to put public duty before his Catholic allegiances.

Kennedy's campaign was denounced by the Southern Baptist Convention. A direct mail campaign sent more than 300 different anti-Catholic tracts to some 20 million homes before the election. Norman Vincent Peale led the charge against Kennedy, stating that the Roman Catholic Church is "a political as well as a religious organization" that has "repeatedly attempted to break down the wall of separation between church and state." He warned that "our culture is at stake" and claimed that a Catholic president would "be under extreme pressure by the hierarchy of the church to accede to its policies with respect to foreign interests."<sup>6</sup>

### **John F. Kennedy on faith and state**

In March 1959, Kennedy responded to his anti-Catholic critics in an interview with *Look* magazine. Here he stated, "Whatever one's religion in private life may be, for the office-holder, 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."

His message did not persuade all Protestants. In fact, some saw it as rendering faith irrelevant to public life. Episcopal bishop James Pike claimed it seemed to represent "the point of view of a thoroughgoing secularist, who really believes that a man's religion and his decision-making can be kept in two watertight compartments." Lutheran church historian Martin Marty worried that Kennedy was "spiritually rootless and politically almost disturbingly secular."<sup>7</sup>

Kennedy confronted the religious issue again on September 12, 1960. He spoke in the Crystal Ballroom of the Rice Hotel in Houston, Texas, where he was invited to address the Greater Houston Ministerial Association. Several hundred mostly Protestant pastors heard his speech, which lasted a little over 10 minutes and was televised across Texas. Sorensen later called it "the best speech of the campaign and one of the most important in his life."

Here Kennedy stated:

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. So it is apparently necessary for me to state once again 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 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; and 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.

Then Kennedy added this assurance:

Whatever issue may come before me as president—on birth control, divorce, censorship, gambling or any other subject—I will make my decision . . . in accordance with what my conscience tells me to be in the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressures or dictates." He added: "If the time should ever come—and I do not concede any conflict to be even remotely possible—when my office would require me to either violate my conscience or violate the national interest, then I would resign the office; and I hope any conscientious public servant would do the same."<sup>8</sup>

In short, the candidate assured his audience that his religious beliefs were a private, personal matter. His Catholic convictions and religious activities would not affect his decisions as president. At worst, if he perceived a conflict between his Catholic beliefs and his public duties, he would resign his office. But he was adamant that such a choice would not be necessary.

This bifurcation of faith and state did not arise with John Kennedy, of course. Western culture since the ancient Greeks has been tempted by transactional religion—put your sacrifice on the altar so the gods will bless your crops. If you're going to war, you sacrifice to Mars; if you need wisdom, you sacrifice to Athena. In Christian context, go to church on Sunday so God will bless you on Monday. And keep your religion to yourself, lest you offend someone else.

While this impulse to privatize faith has been part of Western heritage, it became academically more appealing in the generations leading to the Kennedy presidency. The "postmodern" denial of absolute truth, already dominant in Europe, began making headway in America. The Bible became a diary of religious experience for many seminary professors. Society's distrust of authority would culminate with the Vietnam protests, Woodstock, and Watergate.

However, Kennedy's assertion that faith is private while politics are public endorsed this position and made it more appealing to political leaders. His speech "left a lasting mark on American politics," according to Catholic Archbishop Charles J. Chaput. He calls it "sincere, compelling, articulate—and wrong. Not wrong about the patriotism of Catholics, but wrong about American history and wrong about the role of religious faith in the nation's life."

Why? Because the speech "began the project of walling religion away from the process of governance in a new and aggressive way. It also divided a person's private beliefs from his or her public duties.

And it set 'the national interest' over and against 'outside religious pressures or dictates.'" Chaput adds that "John Kennedy didn't create the trends in American life that I've described," but his speech "clearly fed them."<sup>9</sup>

Colleen Campbell agrees that Kennedy's speech and subsequent victory "marked the beginning of a new era of secularization in American politics" and created "what Fr. Richard John Neuhaus has called 'the naked public square.'" She describes that "square":

It is a sanitized space where political arguments are unwelcome if they spring from religious conviction, appeals to once self-evident truths are neither embraced nor challenged but reflexively dismissed as mere opinion, and debates about life's most fundamental questions are ruled out of bounds before they can begin. God and man, private truth and the public ethic is absolute and impermeable.

Kennedy's belief that "religion should be relegated to the private realm and deprived of its meaning-making role in American democracy" would soon "dominate American public life." It was connected to "the social upheaval of the 1960s that unraveled the nation's rough consensus on religion and morality."<sup>10</sup>

How has this spiritual privatization worked for Americans? In the decades since John F. Kennedy's election,

- The number of couples living together outside marriage has increased tenfold.<sup>11</sup>
- The percentage of Americans getting divorced has more than doubled.<sup>12</sup>
- While our population has nearly doubled, violent crime has grown six-fold.<sup>13</sup>
- The percentage of Americans approving of sex before marriage has doubled.<sup>14</sup>
- The suicide rate among teenagers has more than doubled.<sup>15</sup>
- In the early 1960s, one of every six Americans belonged to the seven largest Mainline Protestant denominations. Today, it's one out of every 15.<sup>16</sup>
- Catholic church attendance has fallen from more than 70 percent to 45 percent.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, John Kennedy is not personally to blame for these trends. But the privatization of spirituality he endorsed has continued to dominate our culture, with clear and dangerous consequences.

### **Private faith and the kingdom of God**

Religious privatization is inconsistent with nearly every religious worldview today. Jews are to obey the Law in private and in public (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). Islamic sharia law applies to every dimension of life. And Christianity is intended to be a full-time commitment to Christ as King (Matthew 6:33).

Jesus began his public ministry with the announcement, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 4:17). He instructed us to pray, "your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). When he returns, his name will be "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" (Revelation 19:16).

All through Scripture, God is a King:

- "The Lord reigns, he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed in majesty and is armed with

strength. The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved. Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity" (Psalm 93:1-2).

- "The Lord will reign forever and ever" (Exodus 15:18).
- "I am the Lord, your Holy One, Israel's Creator, your King" (Isaiah 43:15).
- "O Lord, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth" (2 Kings 19:15).
- "The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord is enthroned as King forever" (Psalm 29:10).
- "How awesome is the Lord Most High, the great King over all the earth!" (Psalm 47:2).
- "Say among the nations, 'The Lord reigns'" (Psalm 96:10).
- "The Lord reigns, let the earth be glad; let the distant shores rejoice" (Psalm 97:1).

If God is your King, you're breathing his air, wearing his clothes, walking on his planet. He's your King on Monday, not just Sunday. He's King of what you keep, not just what you give. He's King of what you do in private, not just what you do in public.

Tragically, in our culture God is a hobby. Our society believes that Christianity is for church, religion for Sunday. Our faith is to be kept separate from the "real world."

Consider the logic of this assertion for political leaders. They are to ignore the wisdom of an omniscient God, decline his omnipotent help, and disregard his benevolent support. Even though his will is "good, pleasing and perfect" (Romans 12:2), they are to seek it only for their private lives, not for the public they serve. While God loves the entire world (John 3:16) and wants only the best for each of his children, political leaders are to relegate him to the sidelines of our culture.

America today faces the continued threat of radical Islam, global economic stagnation, and rising climate disasters. Only one in three of us say we are very happy; young adults are considered the "most stressed" generation in history.<sup>18</sup> Could it be that our spiritual bifurcation is preventing our Father from giving us the wisdom and help we so desperately need?

"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" (Matthew 22:21) does not mean that our leaders must divorce their faith from their actions. Rather, it suggests that they should serve both God and country well. In fact, the more they serve God, the better they serve the world.

## **Conclusion**

Jesus told those who would be his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23, ESV). Christianity offers not transactional religion but transformational relationship. When we commit ourselves unconditionally to God as our King, we position ourselves to experience his best for us, the "abundant life" Jesus alone can offer (John 10:10).

Are you tempted to keep your faith private today? Jesus called you the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world" (Matthew 5:13-16). Salt is no good in a saltshaker; light is invisible under a basket. If the enemy cannot keep you from placing your faith in Christ, he will try to keep you from sharing it with others.

John Stott was right: "Every Christian should be both conservative and radical; conservative in preserving the faith and radical in applying it." Would Jesus say he is your hobby or your King?

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<sup>1</sup> Erwin W. Lutzer, *When A Nation Forgets God: 7 Lessons We Must Learn from Nazi Germany* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2010) 17, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Jessica McElrath, "Kennedy's Catholic Faith," *netplaces* (<http://www.netplaces.com/john-f-kennedy/the-personal-side-of-john-f-kennedy/kennedys-catholic-faith.htm>, accessed 12 November 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Thurston Clarke, *JFK's Last Hundred Days: The Transformation of a Man and The Emergence of a Great President* ([http://books.google.com/books?id=ixNDi6w2FnIC&pg=PT273&dq=jfk%27s+last+hundred+days+the+re%27ll+be+no+crying+in+this+house&hl=en&sa=X&ei=\\_wCEUpTGG-PB2wW-3YFo&ved=0CC8Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=jfk%27s%20last%20hundred%20days%20there%27ll%20be%20no%20crying%20in%20this%20house&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=ixNDi6w2FnIC&pg=PT273&dq=jfk%27s+last+hundred+days+the+re%27ll+be+no+crying+in+this+house&hl=en&sa=X&ei=_wCEUpTGG-PB2wW-3YFo&ved=0CC8Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=jfk%27s%20last%20hundred%20days%20there%27ll%20be%20no%20crying%20in%20this%20house&f=false), accessed 13 November 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Colleen Carroll Campbell, "The Enduring Costs of John F. Kennedy's Compromise," *CatholicCulture.org* (<http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=7572>, accessed 12 November 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Steve Shaw, "JFK and the So-Called Religious Issue," *Huffington Post*, March 7, 2012 ([http://www.huffingtonpost.com/steve-shaw/jfk-the-socalled-religiou\\_b\\_1305721.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/steve-shaw/jfk-the-socalled-religiou_b_1305721.html), accessed 12 November 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Campbell.

<sup>8</sup> "Transcript: JFK's Speech on His Religion," *NPR*, December 5, 2007

(<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16920600>, accessed 12 November 2013).

<sup>9</sup> "JFK speech on faith was 'sincere' but 'wrong,' Archbishop Chaput states," *Catholic News Agency*, March 2, 2010

([http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/jfk\\_speech\\_on\\_faith\\_was\\_sincere\\_but\\_wrong\\_archbishop\\_chaput\\_states/](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/jfk_speech_on_faith_was_sincere_but_wrong_archbishop_chaput_states/), accessed 12 November 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Campbell.

<sup>11</sup> "Divorce Rate Down, But What Does It Mean?" *CBS News*, November 2, 2010

([http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-201\\_162-2789615.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-201_162-2789615.html), accessed 12 November 2013).

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.divorceinfo.com/statistics.htm>, accessed 12 November 2013.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.disastercenter.com/crime/uscrime.htm>, accessed 12 November 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Theodore Caplow, *Recent Social Trends in the United States, 1960-1990*

(<http://books.google.com/books?id=gwBvm8aF2bsC&pg=PA435&lpg=PA435&dq=pornography+since+1960&source=bl&ots=n2dljTcMvt&sig=CkVPrMRiSk62ZnnbLCpnAmwh0dg&hl=en&sa=X&ei=kZyCUobgG9OE2gWK3oHoBA&ved=0CG4Q6AEwCA#v=onepage&q=pornography%20since%201960&f=false>, accessed 12 November 2013).

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.suicide.org/suicide-statistics.html#death-rates>, accessed 12 November 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Tooley, "End of the Mainline," *The American Spectator*

(<http://spectator.org/articles/33823/end-mainline>, accessed 12 November 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Linda Saad, "Churchgoing Among U.S. Catholics Slides to Tie Protestants," *Gallup*, April 9, 2009 (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/117382/church-going-among-catholics-slides-tie-protestants.aspx>, accessed 12 November 2013).

<sup>18</sup> "Happiness Index: Only 1 in 3 Americans Are Very Happy, According To Harris Poll," *The Huffington Post*, June 1, 2013 ([http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/01/happiness-index-only-1-in-n\\_3354524.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/01/happiness-index-only-1-in-n_3354524.html), accessed 12 November 2013).