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A QUESTION OF LOYALTY THE CAMPAIGN OF 1960 AND AMERICAN CATHOLICISM

by Terry Lee Rioux

Robert N. Bellah introduced the civil religion concept. He asserted that the sacred texts of the American faith were the Declaration of Independence and The Constitution of the United States. The Deism of the nation's founders protected the church from the state and the state from the church. God, not Jesus Christ, was invoked. Ritual and symbol were institutionalized from the nation's beginning. It seemed understood that the nation had the favor of God. Artistic and metaphorical interpretations of the civil religion were based in the Christian and Western culture. But the Deistic import of the principles – and scripture – protected the American spirit from being exclusively Protestant. The Gettysburg Address might be interpreted as the “New Testament” of the national creed. In this train of thought, Abraham Lincoln was martyred for the regeneration of the union.¹ However, throughout American History citizens have questioned whether or not an American Roman Catholic could be included automatically in this transcendent American civil religion.

The question of loyalty on the part of Roman Catholics in America has been the subject of historians, sociologists, religious writers, and bigots. The focal point of many of these discussions has been the election of 1960, the Catholicism of John F. Kennedy, and the Greater Houston Ministerial Association address in September 1960. This is a complex subject, made more so because it is an event within our living memory and stirs painfully visceral responses. Kennedy's martyrdom has import as heavy and pervasive as Lincoln's but perhaps its meaning is still unrealized.

John F. Kennedy embodied the conflict inherent in the term “Catholic American.” An examination of the campaign of 1960 and its import suggests what divides us; it also shows the overriding loyalty that keeps the nation together. As interviews with two Texas historians – one Catholic, the other Southern Baptist – demonstrate, national history can be a personal history.

When Ralph Wooster was a child in the 1930s, he never knew a Catholic. If there was a white Catholic family in the small community of Wooster, Texas, they did not “advertise themselves.” There were no contacts with Texans of Mexican descent. His father, John Wooster, was a modest working man, and for him religion was not a priority. Ralph was introduced to religion through a friend's father who was a deacon in the newly formed Wooster Baptist Church. There were Presbyterians, Methodists, and a few Jews in town. His world seemed quiet, orderly, and without active hatred.

At Wooster Baptist Church, a favorite theme of the pastor's sermons was the Spanish Inquisition. Whoever spoke out against the Catholic Church would be punished. The Inquisition and the terrors before the Reformation were presented to encourage appreciation for the great independence and self

determination of the Baptist way of Christianity. Freedom of expression, a personal relationship with God, and the fundamental separation between church and state would always be central to Ralph Wooster. There was to be no authority above the individual, no middleman or hierarchy to interfere. One's actions were his own responsibility, and only he could answer for them. There would be "no church between me and my God." Wooster's great childhood hero was Roger Williams; tolerance and liberty were his watchwords.

In the local schools, Wooster was taught about the founding of this country. The Puritans came to America because of religious persecution and in a child's mind, from the way it was presented, it seemed that Catholics were somehow behind that persecution. Religious freedom was why this country was established as a Protestant country. In sum, the Catholic church was a mysterious thing and little or nothing of the modern American Catholic church was discussed.

It was the military that gave Wooster personal encounters with a variety of people. In 1953, he went through basic training at Fort Jackson with a large number of New Yorkers, including Catholics and Jews; they were mostly college students. These men did not hide their ethnicity or religious backgrounds. The chaplains who came and went through Wooster's military life could have been anything. They served in a broader sense and Protestant or Catholic made no difference.

Wooster's real contact with the American mix of religions and races began with his move to Beaumont, Texas, in 1955, to teach at Lamar State College of Technology. A city with a large dose of French Acadian culture, Beaumont had a significant Catholic presence. Beaumont, Texas, in the late 1950s was a world away from Wooster, Texas, of the 1930s.

It was approximately at this time that a native of Beaumont was settling in the sprawl of Houston. James Vanderholt never really knew a Protestant. He grew up in an integrated part of Beaumont and lived in a Catholic culture. While his family seemed to have no overt prejudice, such things were not openly discussed. Beaumont adults worked together and went through daily life together, except on Sundays. In matters of the Church there was also no discussion or dissent in the Vanderholt home. There was a perception of distrust between Catholic and Baptist communities. There was little direct communication or common cause. It was recognized that the worst interpretation of the Catholic Church was keyed on by ignorant Protestants. For young Vanderholt, there was a feeling of being different. Vanderholt went to Catholic school, then to St. Mary's Seminary, and in 1957, Father Vanderholt was ordained and sent to serve the people of Houston.

The divisiveness of the campaign of 1960 belonged to the generation of Wooster and Vanderholt, and it occurred during one of the most frightening and revolutionary periods of American History. The White Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture was jarred from its World War II confidence and accomplishments by Communism, fear of nuclear holocaust, racial upheaval,

and government intervention. The civil rights movement and feminism called the most basic and private Southern mores into question. When a Catholic made a serious bid for the presidency it seemed too much for the old "inativist" society to bear.

In Beaumont, Wooster was looking forward to the changes in society. Tolerant of difference and change; he was committed to civil rights. He believed Kennedy would be a proponent of civil rights and progressive. He admired Kennedy and believed him when he told the country in so many different ways that the Constitution of the United States was paramount. Wooster would judge a man by his record, his American service, and his agenda for leadership.

Professor Wooster was an active participant in the life of a large Baptist congregation in those years. He served as a youth educator at the First Baptist Church and was a faculty member of Lamar's Baptist Student Union. The young people, he observed, were open to change but the elders were divided. Early in the Kennedy campaign the Beaumont Pastor T.A. Patterson stepped up the frequency and vitriol of his warnings about Catholics and the undermining of the liberties basic to the American identity. The old tales of the Inquisition were steadily preached to the people of Beaumont. In one disagreement with Wooster, the pastor pointed out that the Inquisition was not even in textbooks as evidence that the realities of popery were being concealed by historians. That was because of Catholic influence – Catholics stamped out the truth.

Wooster was "shocked and dismayed." He regretted that history had been twisted and censored to convince the public of unfounded conclusions; "I'm very sensitive about history...I just get tired of people [saying] historians have ignored this or that...well [we] haven't ignored it, it's just that people haven't listened to us." The result was continued sparring between Patterson and Wooster and an eventual break in their relationship.

Father Vanderholt in Houston was also dismayed; the letters to the editor in the city's papers were truly disturbing. If a Catholic became President, religious freedom would disappear. All the old arguments were brought out again. Some Catholics, including Bishop Reicher of the Diocese of Austin, would have preferred that a Catholic not run, feeling that it simply was not time. There was a concern that, in the face of the "papal threat," relations with Protestant America would decline and ugly incidents would arise. It might galvanize the most extreme element of Protestantism. On the other hand, Pope John XXIII was an open and pastoral man and there was an opportunity for Catholics, especially in America, to make social progress under a Catholic President of the United States.

The central fear was that the Catholic Church's "never-changing motive is to dominate every man, woman and child in the world, soul, mind and body, in things temporal, as well as things spiritual," wrote J.B. Gambrell, editor of the *Baptist Standard*, on April 8, 1900. He used the contemporary Italian press to prove his opinion, and he did it well. Minds did not change with the

decades. E.S. James, editor of the *Baptist Standard* on February 17, 1960, wrote, "the Catholic clergy always reserves to itself the right to control every action of all its subjects." James conceded that if the nation must have a Catholic president, then Kennedy was the man for the work; but until the Catholic citizens renounced their loyalty to the hierarchy of the Church and until a "declaration of freedom" was rendered, there could be no Catholic in the Oval Office. The fear of excommunication and eternal hell controlled the Catholic laity, and a Catholic president would be controlled the same way.

In a letter to the *Baptist Standard* editor, John F. Kennedy responded directly to James, "I appreciate your generous statements about my record and views...in the conduct of my office and the fulfillment of any Constitutional oath, my undivided political allegiance is to the best interests of this country...without domination from any source." The nation faced serious questions about the Roman Catholic commitment to the First Amendment and equally serious concern about the Protestant dedication to the Constitution of the United States. America was at a transitional point in history. The people and Kennedy knew it.

Reverend Vanderholt related a small Catholic joke: "In 1928 [defeated] Al Smith sent a one word telegraph to the Pope, saying, 'UNPACK'." That a Catholic American might throw the Constitution away in favor of a repressive unity of church and state was only an anachronism. Vanderholt explained that in Spain in 1960, under Franco, credence was given to concern over the separation of church and state. The Republic of Ireland had a Jewish mayor in Dublin and a Protestant president with an overwhelmingly Catholic people and civil structure. As with so many things, it was a matter of focus and perception. The power of the Church as a civil authority, with the Pope as straw man, was the center of Southern Baptist fears.

Professor Wooster had some apprehension as the Kennedy campaign approached Texas. Kennedy's support grew throughout the year. He campaigned hard and won people over with his humor and personality. But Wooster feared that the media in Texas would highlight the most negative aspects of the Southern Baptist membership and it could be embarrassing. These images would not be representative of the faith. The Southern Baptists had freedom and liberty as their cornerstones but the campaign could bring out the extremists among those who would oppose Kennedy no matter what his religion because Kennedy was perceived as a liberal. For such people to cloak their political opposition in religion was distasteful to Wooster. This was a truly dangerous combination of church and state.³

Kennedy had Lyndon Johnson and Sam Rayburn to prepare the way in Texas. Johnson, of Southern heritage, received such hate mail as, "you are a disgrace to the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution." Governor Price Daniel and John Connally attempted to keep the Democratic stronghold of Texas together. On September 8, Kennedy accepted an invitation to address the Ministerial Association of Greater Houston.⁴

Lyndon Johnson was very much concerned that Kennedy's performance in Houston would win or lose Texas, and possibly the entire country. Kennedy advisors were concerned that the candidate's statements could alienate Catholics if he went too far in attempting to reassure the ministers. John Courtney Murray, an eminent Catholic theologian, was called in to review the prepared statements. The Ministerial Association insisted that Johnson and Rayburn not attend its event on September 12. To appease Johnson, a rally was slated earlier on the 12th.⁵

Father Vanderholt attended the old-fashioned political rally staged at the Sam Houston coliseum in downtown Houston. He hurried home to watch the televised meeting of Kennedy and the Ministerial Association at the Rice Hotel. The Crystal Ballroom of the Rice Hotel was filled with approximately 600 ministers and spectators. The Reverend George Reck, a Lutheran, presided. As Kennedy waited, Reck saw his hands shaking. Reck asked the crowd for civility and restraint.⁶ Herbert Meza, program chair, said in his introduction of Kennedy, "Contrary to foreign propaganda, the South is not a hotbed of religious and racial intolerance. There are many honest minds that are raising honest questions."

John Kennedy began, clearly and forcefully. He explained modern Catholicism from an American vantage and challenged his listeners to see the evening's event in light of history:

For while this year it may be a Catholic against whom the finger of suspicion is pointed, in other years it has been, and may someday be again, a Jew-or a Quaker-or a Unitarian-or a Baptist. It was Virginia's harassment of Baptist preacher, for example, that led to Jefferson's statute of religious freedom. Today, I may be the victim-but tomorrow it may be you-until the whole fabric of our harmonious society is ripped apart at a time of great national peril.⁷

Unfortunately, there were obtuse questions referring to *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, and a resolution that asked for a "declaration of freedom" from the Vatican that would authorize Kennedy's views on church and state, and religious freedom. The resolution assumed Kennedy himself would have to "appeal" to Cardinal Cushing of Boston to route it to the Vatican. Kennedy replied after the applause, "I do not accept the right of any, as I said, ecclesiastical official, to tell me what I shall do in the sphere of my public responsibility...I do not propose to ask Cardinal Cushing to ask the Vatican to take some action...I think that the viewpoint I have expressed tonight publicly represents the opinion of the overwhelming majority of American Catholics." Kennedy was also asked about the statement that he would resign the presidency if there was a *conflict with the Church*. Kennedy corrected him, "No, I said [conflict] with my conscience."⁸

Reverend Vanderholt explained the misunderstanding. It is not the written tract that defines a Catholic:

"[We] have clear social ethics and official Church documents that Catholics are expected to use relative to whatever job or office they have.

Our social ethics are clear and definite. When you take the step from the abstract value to the concrete specific application...that's where the free will of the Catholic is. I didn't see Kennedy articulate [this]. The freedom of the Catholic is in the application. That's an important distinction. In fact that is what conscience is in the Catholic tradition."

Herbert Meza, chairman of the Houston event, was disappointed in the performance of his fellow Protestant pastors: "...one of the results was that it showed prejudice so ugly...that many people were repelled by this kind of religious dogmatism." The Catholic journal *Commonweal* urged readers to follow the example of John F. Kennedy at the Houston event in dealing with worried or ignorant non-Catholics. *Commonweal* editors, though, seemed to understand that Kennedy, while minimizing his Catholicism, was describing a nearly religious devotion to civil laws and agencies. *Commonweal* insisted that the Constitution "has not become a basis for a new religion...The citizen is not half American and half Catholic – or Protestant, Jew or agnostic. He can be completely both." Because it is the Constitution that guaranteed one's freedom to be completely both. Reinhold Niebuhr, a prominent Protestant scholar, wrote that the Catholic American can not be held responsible for nearly 2000 years of official Catholic dogma and activity. The American Catholic laity was often out on its own, conducting its own life without a strong sense of Church history and theological examination. Niebuhr made an indirect reference to the ministers' use of *The Catholic Encyclopedia* at the Houston event when he wrote on Al Smith. "Al Smith was challenged in the 1928 campaign by an Episcopalian parson about his loyalty to Catholic doctrine as stated in various papal encyclicals, Smith summoned his advisors to help him to compose an answer. And he opened the meeting of his entourage with the question "Will someone tell me what the hell a papal encyclical is?" Niebuhr stated that "...opposition to Senator Kennedy on religious grounds is surely an object of just suspicion, since previous attitudes make it apparent that the opposition is motivated, not by religious but by economic and political convictions."

In the end, Kennedy won the election by a razor's edge in Texas and in the nation. How this happened, who cast the votes and why, continues to be examined. E. S. James wrote in *The Baptist Standard* on November 16 that many Catholics voted, as did many Baptists, by their religious affiliation. James counted on Kennedy as a man and an American to "experience the most definite separation of Church and State during the next four years that this century has known." He hoped that the world would see the great exception to the lessons of Catholic history. He called on all Christians to support the President, "so long as he is right."

Not everyone voted according to the religion of the candidate. Wooster and many other Protestants supported Kennedy throughout. Among devout Catholics the quality of Kennedy's Catholicism stirred some doubts. Vanderholt explained, a president who happened to be a Catholic was not genuine. "So JFK was not...Now we know he was never...much of a Catholic to begin with." Kennedy would not identify his conscience as having been shaped by Catholic teachings. He never acknowledged that the matter was

relevant. Vanderholt and many like-minded Catholics consequently did not support Kennedy for president.

Kennedy's assassination put a seal on the rumblings of extremist Protestantism for a time. He died as an American president and the nation and world mourned him as such.

The editors of *Commonweal* insisted in 1960 that the United States Constitution was not the basis of a new religion, yet it has become evident that what keeps the nation together is the supremacy of American civil religion. Indeed, it was the American bishops who accomplished the declaration of religious freedom for all the world's peoples, not exclusively for Catholics or Christians, in Vatican II, and it was an American, John Courtney Murray, who wrote it. Vatican II itself might be read as an Americanization of the Catholic church. The ideals of Vatican II strongly reflect the ideals of the American civil religion.

Wooster believed that the American identity was indeed the strongest element in our national lives, above religious affiliation and heritage. When asked if there was an American Catholic Church as opposed to a Roman Catholic Church, understandably, Reverend Vanderholt was a bit surprised by the idea; he would have to give the question further consideration.

If we take the civil religion concept to its end we could argue for the spiritual and temporal reality of the Deist's beliefs. If we accept our experience gazing at the Lincoln Memorial or standing near the unquenchable flame at Kennedy's grave, we can appreciate these places as hallowed ground in every sense of the term. The martyrdom of John F. Kennedy brought the nation closer to an attainment of the promises of the scriptures of American Civil Religion.

Civil religion is the most powerful and embracing force in America. If it were not so the nation would have destroyed itself long ago. Separate from the capitalist structure that constantly challenges its authenticity, American civil religion is the call of humanity. Vatican II incorporates American civil religion while denying the capitalist system. And across the world American Civil Religion is taken in like rain in a parched land. Arthur Schlesinger points out in *The Disuniting of America* that, "When the Chinese students cried and died for democracy, [freedom and human rights] in Tiananmen Square, they brought with them not representations of Confucius or Buddha [or Jesus Christ] but a model of the Statue of Liberty."¹⁰

NOTES

Interviews with Vanderholt conducted in February and April of 1998. Wooster interviews, October, 1997, February and April, 1998.

¹Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief* (New York, 1970), pp.168-186; Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood* (Athens, 1980), pp.1-17.

²Al Smith's joke was related by his son through actor Arthur Treacher, May 23, 1960 on Jack Parr's NBC broadcast; W.W. Whitley, letter, *Baptist Standard*, June 6, 1960.

³Wooster points out that these and like-minded people were the same ones who would pan Jimmy Carter, a devout Baptist, and rally for Ronald Reagan, a man never known for his religiosity.

⁴Linda L. Briggs, "The Religious Issue in the 1960 Presidential Campaign in Texas" (M. A. thesis, Lamar University, 1969), p.47.

⁵Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, *Lyndon B. Johnson: The Exercise of Power* (New York, 1968), pp. 318-319; Dean A. Kemper, "Your Generous Invitation," *Houston Review*, 3 (Fall, 1981), pp. 300-303.

⁶Kemper, "Your Generous Invitation," pp. 304-306; U.S. Congress, *The Speeches of John F. Kennedy*, Final Report 87th Congress (Washington, D.C., 1961), pp. 203-218.

⁷John F. Kennedy, "Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy on Church and State; Delivered to Greater Houston Ministerial Association, Houston, Texas, Sept. 12, 1960," reprinted as Appendix C, Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1960* (New York, 1961), pp. 260-262.

⁸US Congress, *The Speeches of John F. Kennedy* Final Report 87th Congress (Washington, D.C., 1961), pp. 203-218.

⁹Kemper, "Your Generous Invitation," pp. 305-306; Briggs, "The Religious Issue in the 1960 Presidential Campaign in Texas," pp. 71-74; *Commonweal*, September 23, 1960, pp. 507-508; *Commonweal*, September 30, 1960, pp. 5-6; Reinhold Neibuhr, "Catholics and the State," *New Republic*, October 17, 1960, pp. 13-15; Reinhold Neibuhr, letter, *New Republic*, October 31, 1960.

¹⁰Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (New York, 1992), p. 129.