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John F. Kennedy

Q&A With the Great Houston Ministerial Association



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Mr. Meza: Due to the press of time we should begin immediately with the question and answer period. You know the ground rules; are there any questions?



Question: Senator Kennedy, I'm Glenn Norman, Pastor of Second Baptist Church in Corpus Christi. I think I speak for many that do not in any sense discount or in any sense doubt your loyalty and your love to this nation, or your position, that's in accord with our position, in regard to the separation of church and state. But could I bring it down to where we stand right here tonight, as two men of just nearly equal in age, just standing facing each other. If this meeting tonight were being held in the sanctuary of my church -- it's the policy in my city, that has many very fine Catholics in it, but it's the policy of Catholic leadership to forbid them to attend a Catholic -- a Protestant service -- If we tonight were in the sanctuary of my church, just right as we are, would you and could you attend, as you have here?



Senator Kennedy: Well, yes, I could. I can attend any -- as I said in my statement -- I would attend any service in the interest -- that had any connection with my public office, or, in the case of a private ceremony, weddings, funerals and so on, of course I would participate and have participated. I think the only question would be whether I could participate as a participant, a believer in your faith, and maintain my membership in my church. That, it seems to me, comes within the private beliefs that a Catholic might have. But as far as whether I could attend this sort of a function in your church, whether I as Senator or President could attend a function in your service connected with my position of office, then I could attend and would attend.



Question: Closely allied to it was the position in regard to the Chapel of the Chaplains that was dedicated and which I believe you once had accepted the invitation to attend, and then the press said, I believe, that Cardinal Dougherty brought pressure and you refused and did not attend.



Senator Kennedy: I will be delighted to explain. That seems to be a matter of great interest. I was invited in 1947, after my election to the Congress, by Dr. Poling to attend a -- a dinner to raise funds for an interfaith chapel in honor of the four chaplains who went down on the *Dorchester*. This was 14 years ago. I was delighted to accept, because I thought it was a useful and worthwhile cause. A few days before I was due to accept, I learned through my administrative assistant, who had friends in Philadelphia -- two things. First, that I was listed -- and this is in Dr. Poling's book in which he describes the incident -- as the spokesman for the Catholic faith at the dinner. Charles Taft, Senator Taft's brother, was to be the spokesman for the Protestant faith. Senator Lehman was to be the spokesman for the Jewish faith. The second thing I learned was that the chapel, instead of being located as I thought it was as an interfaith chapel, was located in the basement of another church. It was not in that sense an interfaith chapel, and for the 14 years since that chapel was built there has never been a service of my church because of the physical location. I, therefore, informed Dr. Poling that while I would be glad to come as a citizen, in fact, many Catholics did go to the dinner, I did not feel that I had very good credentials to attend as the spokesman for the Catholic faith at that dinner to raise funds when the whole Catholic church group in Philadelphia were not participating and because the chapel has never been blessed or consecrated. Now I want to make it clear that my grounds for not going were private. I had no credentials to speak for the Catholic faith at a dinner for a chapel which has never -- in which no Catholic service has ever been held.



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So that -- and to this day, unfortunately, no service has been held at the present time. But I think if I may separate that, if this were a public matter, I told Dr. Poling I'd be glad to go as an individual; but I could not go as a spokesman on that occasion.



Question: Senator Kennedy, Canon Rutenbahr of Christ Church, here in Houston. I have read this platform and the planks in it with great interest, especially in the realms of freedom, and I note that in the educational section the right of education for each person is guaranteed or offered for a guarantee. It also says that there shall be equal opportunity for employment. In another section it says there shall be equal rights to housing and recreation. All of these speak, I think, in a wonderful sense to the freedom which we want to keep here in America. Yet, on the other hand, there is in another place in the platform, I these words: "We will repeal the authorization for right-to-work laws." Now, it seems to me that in this aspect here, and I feel that these are much more important than any religious issue -- here you are abolishing an open shop; you are taking away the freedom of the individual worker, whether he wants to work and wants to belong to this union or not. Now, isn't this sort of double talk? You're guaranteeing freedom on one hand and yet you're going to take it away on the other?



Senator Kennedy: No, I don't agree with that.



Question: I think there's a dichotomy here in the platform ... --



Senator Kennedy: Well that provision has been in the platform since 1948, and I am sure there is a difference of opinion between us on that matter, and between many Democrats on that matter.



But I think that it's a decision which goes to the economic and political views. I don't think it involves a constitutional guarantee of freedom. In other words, under the provisions of the Taft-Hartley law, a State was permitted to prohibit a union shop.

But it was not permitted to guarantee a closed shop. Now, my own judgment is that uniformity in interstate commerce is valuable, and, therefore, I hold with the view that it's better to have uniform laws and not a law which is in interstate commerce, and these are all -- this is not intrastate but interstate commerce -- which permits one condition in one State and another in another. This is not a new provision. It's been in for the last three platforms.



Question: Max Dalcke, president of Gulf Coast Bible College, and pastor of First Church of God here in Houston, and I am a member, Mr. Meza, of the Houston Association of Ministers. Mr. Kennedy, you very clearly stated your position tonight in regard to the propagation of the gospel by all religious groups in other countries. I appreciated that much because we Protestants are a missionary people. However, the question I have to ask is this: If you are elected President, will you use your influence to get the Roman Catholic countries of South America and Spain to stop persecuting Protestant missionaries and to give equal rights to Protestants to propagate their faith as the United States gives to the Roman Catholics or any other group?



Senator Kennedy: I would use my influence as President of the United States to permit, to encourage the development of freedom all over the world. One of the rights which I consider to be important is the right of free speech, the right of assembly, the right of free religious practice, and I would hope that the United States and the President would stand for those rights all around the globe without regard to geography or religion or political traditions.



Question: Senator Kennedy, this is E. H. Westmoreland, pastor of the South Main Baptist Church, here in Houston. I have received today a copy of a resolution passed by the Baptist Pastors Conference of St. Louis, and they're going to confront you with this tomorrow night. I would like you to answer to the Houston crowd before you get to St. Louis.



This is the resolution:

With deep sincerity and in Christian grace, we plead with Senator John F. Kennedy, as the person presently concerned in this matter, to appeal to Cardinal Cushing, Mr. Kennedy's own hierarchical superior in Boston, to present to the Vatican Mr. Kennedy's sincere statement relative to the separation of Church and State in the United States and religious freedom as represented in the Constitution of the United States, in order that the Vatican may officially authorize such a belief for all Roman Catholics in the United States.



Senator Kennedy: May I just say that as 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 as an elected official, I do not propose also to ask Cardinal Cushing to ask the Vatican to take some action. I do not propose to interfere with their free right to do exactly what they want. There is no doubt in my mind that the viewpoints that I have expressed -- there is no doubt in my mind that the viewpoint that I have expressed tonight publicly represents the opinion of the overwhelming majority of American Catholics, and I think that what my view I have no doubt is known to Catholics around the world. I am just hopeful that by my stating it quite precisely, and I believe I state it in the tradition of the American Catholics, way back all the way to Bishop John Carroll, I feel that -- I hope this will clarify it without my having to take the rather circuitous route. This is the position I take with the American Catholic Church in the United States with which I am associated.



Question: We appreciate your forthright statement. May I say we have great admiration for you. But until we know this is the position of your church, because there will be many Catholics who will be appointed if you are elected President, we would like to know that they, too, are free to make such statements as you've been so courageous to make.



Senator Kennedy: Well let me say that anyone that I would appoint to any office as a Senator or as a President, united, I hope, I hold the same view of the necessity of their living up to not only the letter of the Constitution but the spirit. If I may say so, I am a Catholic. I've stated my view very clearly. I don't find any difficulty in stating that view. In my judgment, it is the view of American Catholics from one end of the country to the other.



Because as long as I can state it in a way which is, I hope, is satisfactory to you, why do you possibly doubt that I represent a viewpoint which is hostile to the Catholic Church in the United States. I believe I'm stating the viewpoint that Catholics in this country hold toward the happy relationship which exists between Church and State.



Question: Let me ask you then, sir: Do you state it with the approval of the Vatican?



Senator Kennedy: I don't have to have approval in that sense. I've not submitted -- I have not submitted my statement before I read it to the Vatican. I did not submit it to Cardinal Cushing. But my judgment is that Cardinal Cushing, which is the Cardinal from the diocese of which I am a member, would approve of this statement, in the same way that he approved of the 1948 statement of the Bishop. In my judgment, and I am not a student of theology, I am stating what I believe to be the position of my personal position and also the position of the great majority of Catholics across the United States. I hope that other countries may some day enjoy the same happy relationship of a separation between Church and State, whether they are in Catholic countries or non-Catholic countries. It seems to me that I am the one that is running for the office of the Presidency and not Cardinal Cushing and not anyone else.

Westmoreland: We would like very much for the Cardinal to make the same statement.



Question: Senator Kennedy, I am K. O. White, pastor of Houston's Downtown First Baptist Church and former pastor of Metropolitan Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. Let me return for a moment to the matter of the Chaplain's Chapel because there will be some questions raised, I am sure, and we would like to have just a little further statement from you. Today I had a telephone conversation with Dr. Poling and received this telegram from him. I'm sure you would like to clear this matter up. Let me read briefly from his telegram:

The 'Memorandum on Religion as an Election Issue' prepared by Senator Kennedy's associates has a section on the Poling incident. This section contains serious factual errors. I believe the Senator will wish to correct the errors or that he would wish to withdraw that section. The original draft of the program on the interfaith dinner held in the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel, on December 15, 1947, identified Mr. Kennedy, then Congressman from Massachusetts, as Honorable John F. Kennedy, Congressman from Massachusetts.



Mr. Kennedy was never invited as an official representative of a religious organization nor indeed as the spokesman for the Catholic faith. No speaker on that occasion, Catholic, Jew, or Protestant, was identified by his faith. When two days before the dinner occasion Mr. Kennedy cancelled his engagement, he expressed his regret and grief and stated that since his Eminence, the Cardinal, requested him not to come, he as a loyal son of the church had no other alternative. Therefore, it was necessary to destroy this first program and to reprint it.



Senator Kennedy: Now I will state again that the words I used are a quotation from the -- from the Reverend Poling's book, "Spokesman for the Catholic Faith," a book which was produced about a year ago which first discussed this incident. Secondly, my memory of the incident is quite clear. In fact, it's as good as Rev. Poling's because when the matter was first discussed Reverend Poling stated that the incident took place in 1950, and it's only in the last two months that it has come forward that the incident took place in 1947. Thirdly, I never discussed the matter with Cardinal Dougherty in my life. I've never spoken to the Cardinal. I first learned of it through Mr. Reardon, who was my administrative assistant, who knew a Mr. Doyle who worked for the National Catholic Welfare Conference, who stated that there was a good deal of concern among many of the church people in Philadelphia, because of the location of the chapel and because no service would ever be held in it because it was located in the basement of another church. It was an entirely different situation than the one that I had confronted when I first happily accepted it. Now there were three speakers. Kennedy was one of them; Taft was the second; Senator Lehman was the third. I don't think I've misstated that one was supposed to speak for the Catholic faith, as a spokesman in Mr. Poling's words, one for the Protestant faith, and one and one for the Jewish faith. Now all I can I can say to you, sir, is this chapel -- I was glad to accept the invitation. I did not clear the invitation with anyone. It was only when I was informed that I was speaking, and I was invited obviously as a serviceman because I came from a prominent Catholic family, that I was informed that I was there really in a sense without any credentials. The chapel, as I have said, has never had a Catholic service. It is not an interfaith chapel. And therefore, for me to participate as a spokesman in that sense for the Catholic faith I think would have given an erroneous impression. Now, I've been there 14 years. This took place in 1947. I had been in politics probably two months and was relatively inexperienced. I should have inquired before getting into the incident. Is this the best that can be done after 14 years? Is this the only incident that can be shown? And this was a private dinner. This was not a public dinner. This was a private dinner. This did not involve my responsibilities as a public official. My judgment was bad only in accepting it without having all the facts, which I wouldn't have done at a later date. But I do want to say that I've been there for 14 years. I have voted on hundreds of matters, probably thousands of matters, which involve all kinds of public questions, some of which border on the relationship between Church and State. And quite obviously that record must be reasonably good or we wouldn't keep hearing about the Poling incident. In addition, I don't mean to be disrespectful to the Reverend Poling. I have high regard for his son. I have high regard for Dr. Poling. I don't like to be in a debate with him about it. But I must say, even looking back, I think it was imprudent of me to accept it without more information, but I don't really feel that it demonstrates unfitness to hold public office.



Question: The reason for our concern is the fact that your church has stated that it has the privilege and the right and the responsibility to direct its members in various areas of life, including the political realm. We believe that history and observation indicate that it has done so. And we raise the question because we would like to know, if you are elected President and your church elects to use that privilege and obligation, what your response will be under those circumstances.



Senator Kennedy: If my church attempted to influence me in a way which was improper or which affected adversely my responsibilities as a public servant, sworn to uphold the Constitution, then I would reply to them that this was an improper action on their part, that it was one to which I could not subscribe, that I was opposed to it, and that it would be an unfortunate breach of -- an interference, with the American political system. I'm confident that there would be no such interference. We've had two Chief Justices of the Supreme Court who were Catholics. We've had three Prime Ministers of Canada in this century. I've already mentioned Mr. De Gaulle and Mr. Adenauer. My judgment is that an American who is a Catholic, who is as sensitive as a Catholic must be who seeks this high office, has exposed to the pressures which whirl around us, that he will be extremely diligent in his protection of the constitutional separation.



White: We would be most happy to have such a statement from the Vatican.



Mr. Meza. Because of the brief -- briefness of the time, let's cut out the applause.



Question: Senator Kenney: B. E. Howard, minister of the Church of Christ. First of all I should like to quote some authoritative quotations from Catholic sources and then propose a question. "So that a false statement knowingly made to one who has not a right to the truth will not be a lie" (*Catholic*



Encyclopedia, volume 10, page 696). Quoting: "However, we are also under an obligation to keep secrets faithfully and sometimes the easiest way of fulfilling that duty is to say what is false or tell a lie" (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, volume 10, page 195). "When mental reservation is permissible, it is lawful to corroborate one's utterances by an oath if there be an adequate cause" (Article on perjury, *Catholic Encyclopedia*, volume 11, page 696).

"The truth we proclaim under oath is relative and not absolute" (*Explanation of Catholic Morals*, page 130). Just recently from the Vatican in Rome this news release was given from the official Vatican newspaper -- and I am quoting that of May 19, 1960, Tuesday -- stated that the Roman Catholic hierarchy had the right and duty to intervene in the political field to guide its flock. The newspaper rejected what is termed (quoting) "the absurd split of conscience between the believer and the citizen." However, *Observatore Romano* made it clear that its stern pronouncement was valid for Roman Catholic laymen everywhere. It deplored the great confusion of ideas that is spreading especially between Catholic doctrine and social and political activities and between the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the lay faithful in the civil field. Pope John XXIII recently gave this statement according to the *St. Louis Review*, dated December 12th, 1958 (quoting): "Catholics may unite their strength toward the common aid and the Catholic hierarchy have the right and duty of guiding them" --

From the floor: (objection...due to time)



Question: Question, sir: Do you subscribe to the doctrine of mental reservation which I have quoted from the Catholic authorities? Do you submit to the authority of the present Pope which I have quoted from in these quotations?



Senator Kennedy: Well, let me say in the first place I've not read the *Catholic Encyclopedia* and I don't know all the quotation which you're giving me. I don't agree with the statement. I find no difficulty in saying so. But I do think probably I could get a -- make a better comment if I had the entire quotation before me. But in any case I have not read it before. If the quotation is meant to imply that when you take an oath you don't mean it or that it's proper for you to make oaths and then break them, that it is proper for you to lie, if that is what this states, and I don't know whether that is what it states unless I read it all in context, then, of course, I would not agree with it. Secondly, on the question of the *Observatore Romano* article, once again I don't have that in full. I read the statement of last December which was directed to a situation in Sicily where some of the Catholics were active in the Communist Party. But I'm not familiar with the one of May 1960 that you mentioned. In any case the *Observatore Romano* has no standing, as far as binding me. Thirdly, this quotation of Pope John of 1958, I didn't catch all of that, and if you'll read that again I will tell you whether that -- I feel whether I support that or not.



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Question: Pope John XXIII only recently stated according to the *St. Louis Review*, date of December 12th, 1958 (quoting), "Catholics must unite their strength toward the common aid and the Catholic hierarchy has the right and duty of guiding them." Do you subscribe to that?



Senator Kennedy: Well, now, what I -- I couldn't describe -- guiding them in what area? If you're talking about in the area of faith and morals, in the constructions of the church, I would think any Baptist minister or Congregational minister has the right and duty to try to guide his flock. If you mean that by that statement that the Pope or anyone else could bind me in the fulfillment, by a statement, in the fulfillment of my public duties, I say no. If that statement is intended to mean, and it's very difficult to comment on a sentence taken out of an article which I have not read, but if that is intended to imply that the hierarchy has some obligation or has an obligation to attempt to guide the members of the Catholic Church, then that may be proper. But it all depends on the previous language of what you mean by "guide." If you mean direct or instruct on matters dealing with the organization of the faith, the details of the faith, then, of course, they have that obligation. If you mean that by that -- under that he could guide me or anyone could guide or direct me in fulfilling my public duty, then I do not agree.



Comment: Thank you, sir. Then you do not agree with the Pope in that statement?



Senator Kennedy: You see, that is why I was -- wanted to be careful, because that statement, it seems to me, is taken out of context that you just made to me. I could not tell you what the Pope meant unless I had the entire article. I would be glad to state to you that no one can direct me in the fulfillment of my duties as a public official under the United States Constitution. That I am directed to do to the people of the United States, sworn to do, to an oath to God. Now that is my flat statement. I would not want to go into details on a sentence that you read to me which I may not understand completely.



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Comment: I understand you didn't explain anything.



Mr. Meza: Gentlemen we have time -- we have time for one more question, if it can be handled briefly.



Question: Senator Kennedy, I'm Robert McLaren, from Westminster Presbyterian Church, here in Houston. You have been quite clear, and I think laudably so, on this matter of the separation of Church and State, and you have answered very graciously the many questions that have come up around it. There is one question, however, which seems to me quite relevant. And this relates to your statement that if you found by some remote possibility a real conflict between your oath of office as President, that you would resign that office if it were in real conflict with your church.

Senator Kennedy: No, I said with my conscience.



Question: With your conscience. In the syllabus of errors of Pope Leo IX, which the *Catholic Encyclopedia* states is still binding, although it's from a different century, is still binding upon all Catholics, there are three very specific things which are denounced, including the separation of State and Church, the freedom of religions other than Catholic to propagate themselves, and the freedom of conscience. Do you still feel, these being binding upon you, that you hold your oath of office above your allegiance to the Pope on these issues?



Senator Kennedy: Well, let's go through the issues because I don't think there's a conflict on these three issues. The first issue, as I understand it, was on the relationship between the Catholics and the state and other faiths. Was that the --



McLaren: No, the separation of Church and State, he explicitly considers in error.



Senator Kennedy: I support that, and in my judgment the American Bishops statement of 1948 clearly supported it. That, in my judgment, is the view held by Catholics in this country. They support the constitutional separation of Church and State and they are not in error in that regard.

McLaren: The second was the right of religions other than Roman Catholic to propagate themselves.

Senator Kennedy: I think that they should be permitted to propagate themselves, any faith, without any limitation by the power of the State, or encouragement by the power of the State. What's the third one?

McLaren: The third was the freedom of conscience in matters of religion, and this also in point 46, I believe it is, extends to the freedom of the mind in the realms of science. This is part --



Senator Kennedy: Yes, well, I believe in freedom of conscience. Let me just -- I guess our time is coming to an end, but I believe in it. Let me say, finally, that I am delighted to come here today.



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I don't want anyone to think because they interrogate me on this very important question, that I regard that as unfair questions or unreasonable or somebody who is concerned about the matter is prejudiced or bigoted. I think this fight for religious freedom 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 objection would be -- my only limit to that would be that if somebody said regardless of Senator Kennedy's position, regardless of how much evidence he's given that what he says he means, I still wouldn't vote for him because he is a member of that church. I would consider that unreasonable. What I consider to be reasonable, and an exercise of free will and free choice, is to ask the candidate to state his views as broadly as possible, investigate his record to see what whether he states he believes and then to make an independent rational judgment, as to whether he could be entrusted with this highly important position. So I want you to know that I'm grateful to you for inviting me tonight. I'm sure that I have made no converts to my church. But I do hope -- 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. Thank you.