

1960 to 2008: The Continuities and Disparities Between Obama and Kennedy

A Conversation with Shaun Casey

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OWENS: Your recent book is about the 1960 election. Could explain the final stages of the campaign, with a Catholic candidate against a candidate who was born a Quaker and the political context surrounding that?

CASEY: September of 1960 was the most dramatic moment in terms of the religion issue. Kennedy had a group of pollsters who came to him and people were against him because he was Catholic and would never come back. Told they would not be able to convince them in the last two months, Kennedy's team found that 23% of the electorate was undecided. The perception among these individuals was that Kennedy was a victim of anti-Catholic bigotry. So the campaign changed its strategy and began to address religion directly. They made the Houston speech and circulated films of it across the country. The Kennedy strategy shifted as of Labor Day to really begin addressing undecided voters. They were actually able then to persuade the majority of those undecided voters to support Kennedy and that, I think, is why they won.

Nixon, in the meantime, had an operative in the field who was clandestinely organizing Protestants to preach anti-Catholic sermons and print tracks. Millions of these little 24 page pamphlets were distributed in the final months of the campaign. Working with people like Billy Graham, Norman Vincent Peale, the National Association of Evangelicals, other Protestants, and Americans United Against Separation of Church and State, they targeted the anti-Catholic angle, but did it at the grassroots level.

OWENS: How did the Kennedy campaign paint Nixon?
Did they speak of his religious roots at all and in what way?
How did the fact that religion became a positive force for some voters turn this around?

CASEY: Kennedy's campaign never talked about Nixon's religion as far as I can find in my research. John Kennedy was very clear to say that he thought the anti-Catholic static was not coming from Richard Nixon. There were surrogates and people lower in the Kennedy campaign who accused the Republican National Committee and others of being anti-Catholic, but they were very hesitant to point the finger. Kennedy had an informant who told them what Nixon was doing, but problems would have arisen if they disclosed this source and knowledge. At the staff level, they were getting a huge amount of mail. People wanted answers about the "Catholic issue" and said they received pamphlets from their neighbors and information from other venues.

Kennedy's team answered hundreds of letters a day regarding that confusion. They had a robust staff and they had a set piece literature which they mailed to anybody who asked a religion question. That's the major way at the campaign level that they tried to address the issue.

OWENS: How did the Kennedy campaign work with non-Catholic religious communities? Or did they?

CASEY: They hired James Wine, a former staffer for the National Council of Churches. He became their liaison and held meetings major Protestant groups. He massaged egos of opinion leaders and spoke in religious gatherings. He was very adept, did a great job, and was rewarded with an ambassadorship after the election.

OWENS: As a senior advisor to the Obama campaign in 2008, what were the lessons from 1960 campaign that you and your team employed in the contemporary situation?

CASEY: There were a number of things we did. We were not afraid to go into constituencies and talk with them, even though the balance in the room may have tilted the other way. I did a lot of Evangelical outreach and Obama himself was not afraid to meet with religious leaders who probably were going to vote against him. Kennedy did a listening tour of major Protestant and anti-Catholic leaders, and he had no fear. Likewise, Senator Obama had no fear and his staff tried very hard to go into places that Democrats had feared to tread in the past. We felt we had a great candidate and that we could bring his message into a lot of fairly unlikely places.

OWENS: How skillfully do you think Obama answered personal religious questions?

CASEY: He was amazing. The calm, self-possessed person we see in public is the one I saw in private meetings. He took no offense and fielded some questions that I personally would have been uncomfortable fielding. Yet he did it with such grace and respect that he won a lot of respect from his questioners, even though he may not have persuaded them to vote for him at the end of the day. I talked to a number of leaders who met with him, and who didn't vote for him, but they came away with a respect that they didn't have before they met him.

OWENS: How did the campaign, in your estimation, do with Muslim American voters?

CASEY: We struggled. There is no manual to explain how a major political party reaches out to this growing demographic. On the one hand, we knew fairly well that most Muslim voters were going to entertain voting for Obama, just given what had happened in the Bush administration. I think we struggled because there's still so much polarization and stereotyping of Muslim Americans in this country. I hope that if we have eight years of an Obama presidency, that will get easier. Things will become better and there will

be more Muslim Americans willing and happy to engage in the conversation with this administration.

OWENS: Philip Jenkins famously called anti-Catholicism the last acceptable American prejudice. Yet, if you look at the Supreme Court, where six of nine Justices are Catholic and the fact that six of the major candidates in the recent election were Catholic, it seems hard to entertain that notion. What do you see as the status of anti-Catholicism today, compared to your understanding of the way it was 40 years ago?

CASEY: It's more subtle and covert today. It's rare that you'll hear somebody in the national media uttering a slur against another person simply because of his or her Catholicism, something that's similar to racism today as well. It's rare that you hear whites on national media repeating ethnic slurs towards African Americans. It's still alive, and I think more subtle, more sophisticated, and, in some ways, more insidious. But, as you alluded to, there is tangible evidence today that that's not an insurmountable political stumbling block to being a viable candidate in either party. To that extent, there's wonderful evidence that it's no longer the obstacle that it was in 1960 when John Kennedy ran.

Yet it's still hard to have a conversation. There are Catholic intellectuals today who do a good job of shining light on the topic. I don't sense among Protestant intellectuals a commensurate interest in talking about the subject, which is interesting. Something may still be afoot on that side. We have a ways to go and it's hard to root out that more covert form of bigotry.

OWENS: What was different between the most recent Presidential nominee who was Catholic, John Kerry in 2004, and the Obama campaign in 2008 whose Vice Presidential candidate was Catholic? Can you say a word about any shifts in the political and religious contexts between 2004 and 2008 that might help us look forward?

CASEY: I have a friend who says that many Democrats went looking for God in the exit polls in 2004, and that was because the national campaign did so poorly on the Democratic side in that election. There was a general realization among the leaders in the Democratic Party that they had to do better. Senator Kerry himself spent a lot of energy trying to understand religion in America after that election. Howard Dean, Chairman of the Democratic National Committee, did the same. The good news is what changed in four years: John Edwards, Hillary Clinton, and Barack Obama all had robust religious outreach in the primary campaign. They recognized that they needed to do a better job reaching out to these voters, and I think that's going to become a permanent fixture in the Democratic side. It's going to be pluralistic and richly textured because that's how American religious life is.

The biggest change is that Democrats are actually applying institutional resources to reach out to Catholics. How do you reach out to Evangelicals, to Jews and to Muslims? The fact that politicians are no longer pretending as if religion isn't alive and well in our country, and are reaching out to these Americans is good for the country. It's going to be worth watching. In 2012, certainly the Republican slate will be deeply involved in religious

outreach and I thoroughly expect the Obama administration to do the same when they run for re-election.

OWENS: Forty years ago, it seemed that the conventional wisdom was that no Catholic could be elected President of the United States. Forty years later, conventional wisdom was that an African American man could not be elected President of the United States. Looking forward to 2048, what's next? In terms of dropping barriers to entry, we have some obvious entries here with Hillary Clinton, but is Obama an exception or is he a step from whom we'll see dividends continue to pay off for other non-white, non-male candidates?

CASEY: We haven't had another Catholic President since John Kennedy. I sense the barrier has been erased, but another Catholic has not won that seat. I want to believe that we have arrived at a new day in American politics where it's conceivable that a woman will become the President before 2048 and that we might even have a non-Christian or person who's not from a majority religion person become president. It's hard to imagine a secularist, a purely secular person. The hardest one to imagine may be a purely secular person becoming president, but who knows? That part of the electorate may grow such that by the middle of the century, it's not as implausible as it seems now.

I do think something has changed in our country. States like Texas, for instance, are on the verge of becoming majority/minority. California may be there already, I'm not sure. That texturing is going to continue, and we're going to see, at the state level, more diversity of elected officials. Inevitably, we're going to see some really interesting people running for national office. Republican Bobby Jindal will be a viable national candidate. So this trend will only become richer and more complicated in the future. Anybody who predicts that it will only be white males from here on out is not paying attention to those political dynamics. It bodes well and will not be a boring era for Presidential politics.

OWENS: It would be a special American story to have a person of Indian descent convert to Catholicism and then become the next Catholic President in fifty or so years. That would be a very American story.

CASEY: It would. Interestingly enough, Obama is a convert. Not from Islam, as some people argue, but he's really a convert from an un-churched background, as he would call it. That is increasingly becoming a normal American experience, as some of the Pew research has shown. Forty percent of Americans have changed religions. It's going to be an interesting vector to watch in our politics.

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