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Sarah Palin is wrong about John F. Kennedy, religion and politics

By Kathleen Kennedy Townsend

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Sarah Palin has found a new opponent to debate: John F. Kennedy.

In her new book, "America by Heart," Palin objects to my uncle's famous 1960 speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, in which he challenged the ministers - and the country - to judge him, a Catholic presidential candidate, by his views rather than his faith. "Contrary to common newspaper usage, I am not the Catholic candidate for president," Kennedy said. "I am the Democratic Party's candidate for president who happens also to be a Catholic."

Palin writes that when she was growing up, she was taught that Kennedy's speech had "succeeded in the best possible way: It reconciled public service and religion without compromising either." Now, however, she says she has revisited the speech and changed her mind. She finds it "defensive . . . in tone and content" and is upset that Kennedy, rather than presenting a reconciliation of his private faith and his public role, had instead offered an "unequivocal divorce of the two." Palin's argument seems to challenge a great American tradition, enshrined in the Constitution, stipulating that there be no religious test for public office. A careful reading of her book leads me to conclude that Palin wishes for precisely such a test. And she seems to think that she, and those who think like her, are qualified to judge who would pass and who would not.

If there is no religious test, then there is no need for a candidate's religious affiliation to be "reconciled." My uncle urged that religion be private, removed from politics, because he feared that making faith an arena for public contention would lead American politics into ill-disguised religious warfare, with candidates tempted to use faith to manipulate voters and demean their opponents.

Kennedy cited Thomas Jefferson to argue that, as part of the American tradition, it was essential to keep any semblance of a religious test out of the political realm. Best to judge candidates on their public records, their positions on war and peace, jobs, poverty, and health care. No one, Kennedy pointed out, asked those who died at the Alamo which church they belonged to.

But Palin insists on evaluating and acting as an authority on candidates' faith. She faults Kennedy for not "telling the country how his faith had enriched him." With that line, she proceeds down a path fraught with danger - precisely the path my uncle warned against when he said that a president's religious views should be "neither imposed by him upon the nation or imposed by the nation upon him as a condition to holding that office."

After all, a candidate's faith will matter most to those who believe that they have the right to serve as arbiters of that faith. Is it worthy? Is it deep? Is it reflected in a certain ideology?

Palin further criticizes Kennedy because, "rather than spelling out how faith groups had provided life-changing services and education to millions of Americans, he repeatedly objected to any government assistance to religious schools." She does not seem to appreciate that Kennedy was courageous in arguing that government funds should not be used in parochial schools, despite the temptation to please his constituents. Many Catholics would have liked the money. But he wisely thought that the use of public dollars in places where nuns explicitly proselytized would be unconstitutional. Tax money should not be used to persuade someone to join a religion.

As a contrast to Kennedy's speech, Palin cites former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney's remarks during the 2008 Republican primary campaign, in which he spoke publicly of "how my own faith would inform my presidency, if I were elected." After paying lip service to the separation of church and state, Romney condemned unnamed enemies "intent on establishing a new religion in America - the religion of secularism."

"There is one fundamental question about which I am often asked," Romney said. "What do I believe about Jesus Christ?" Romney, of course, is a Mormon. He answered the question, proclaiming that "Jesus Christ is the son of God."

Palin praises Romney for delivering a "thoughtful speech that eloquently and correctly described the role of faith in American public life." But if there should be no religious test in politics, then why should a candidate feel compelled to respond to misplaced questions about his belief in Jesus?

When George Romney, Mitt Romney's father, was a presidential candidate in 1968, he felt no such compulsion. Respect for the Constitution and the founders' belief in the separation of church and state suggests that those kinds of questions should not play a role in political campaigns.

Palin contends that Kennedy sought to "run away from religion." The truth is that my uncle knew quite well that what made America so special was its revolutionary assertion of freedom of religion. No nation on Earth had ever framed in law that faith should be of no interest to government officials. For centuries, European authorities had murdered and tortured those whose religious beliefs differed from their own.

To demand that citizens display their religious beliefs attacks the very foundation of our nation and undermines the precise reason that America is exceptional.

Palin's book makes clear just how dangerous her proposed path can be. Not only does she want people to reveal their beliefs, but she wants to sit in judgment of them if their views don't match her own. For instance, she criticizes Rep. Nancy Pelosi (Calif.), a Democrat and a faithful Catholic, for "talking the (God) talk but not walking the walk."

Who is Palin to say what God's "walk" is? Who anointed her our grand inquisitor?

This is a woman who also praises Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural, even though Lincoln explicitly declared, "But let us judge not that we not be judged." The problem for those setting up a free-floating tribunal to evaluate faith is that, contrary to Lincoln, they are installing themselves as judges who can look into others' souls and assess their worthiness. Kennedy did not and would not do that, but not because he was indifferent to faith. In fact, unlike Romney or Palin, in fealty to both his faith and the Constitution, he promised on that day in Houston that he would resign if his religion ever interfered with his duty as president.

My uncle was a man who had his faith tested. His brother and brother-in-law were killed in World War II, and his sister died in a plane crash soon after the war. He suffered from painful injuries inflicted during his Navy service when his PT boat was cut in two by a Japanese destroyer. His God did not make life easy but did require a commitment to justice. America's first and only Catholic president referred to God three times in [his inaugural address](#) and invoked the Bible's command to care for poor and the sick. Later in his presidency, [he said, unequivocally, about civil rights](#): "We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the Scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution." Faith runs as a deep current through my family. Faith inspired my uncles' and my father's dedication to justice. My father, Robert F. Kennedy, on returning from apartheid-era South Africa in 1966, wrote a magazine article titled "Suppose God Is Black." And my uncle Teddy fought for health care for all Americans, even if in her book Palin presumes to judge that he took positions "directly at odds with his Catholic faith."

Teddy Kennedy believed that his stands were at one with his faith. He did disagree with the Roman Catholic hierarchy at times. But as we have seen, the hierarchy's positions can change, and in our church, we have an obligation to help bring about those changes. That may not be Palin's theology, but the glory of America is its support for those who would disagree - even on the most difficult and personal matters, such as religion.

John F. Kennedy knew that tearing down the wall separating church and state would tempt us toward self-righteousness and contempt for others. That is one reason he delivered his Houston speech.

Palin, for her part, argues that "morality itself cannot be sustained without the support of religious beliefs." That statement amounts to a wholesale attack on countless Americans, and no study or reasonable argument I have seen or heard would support such a blanket condemnation. For a person who claims to admire Lincoln, Palin curiously ignores his injunction that Americans, even those engaged in a Civil War, show "malice toward none, with charity for all."

Palin fails to understand the genius of our nation. The United States is one of the most vibrant religious countries on Earth precisely because of its religious freedom. When power and faith are entwined, faith loses. Power tends to obfuscate, corrupt and focus on temporal rather than eternal purposes.

Somehow Palin misses this. Perhaps she didn't read the full Houston speech; she certainly doesn't know it by heart. Or she may be appealing to a religious right that really seeks secular power. I don't know.

I am certain, however, that no American political leader should cavalierly - or out of political calculation - dismiss the hard-won ideal of religious freedom that is among our country's greatest gifts to the world. As John F. Kennedy said in Houston, that is the "kind of America I believe in."

Kathleen Kennedy Townsend is a former lieutenant governor of Maryland and the author of ["Failing America's Faithful: How Today's Churches Are Mixing God With Politics and Losing Their Way."](#) She will be online on Monday, Dec. 6 at 11 a.m. EST to chat. [Submit your questions](#) before or during the discussion.

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