

Panelists assess ‘Kennedy moment’ and its impact

NEW YORK – Then-Sen. John F. Kennedy’s eloquent defense of the separation of church and state in a 1960 address successfully deflected suspicion that his presidency would be governed by his Catholic religion.

But by using ambiguous language, the speech also isolated his personal beliefs from potential public policy positions in a way that is not possible for contemporary candidates, concluded panelists at a Jan. 16 discussion of “Religion and the Race for the Presidency: The Kennedy Moment.”

The event, attended by 400 people, was held at Jesuit-run Fordham University in New York.

The so-called “Kennedy moment” was an 11-minute speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association Sept. 12, 1960. In it, Kennedy said, “Whatever issue may come before me as president ... 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 pressure or dictates.”

Shaun Casey, associate professor of Christian ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, said the speech was “reluctantly given in response to the anti-Catholic message of the Nixon campaign,” whose advisers included the Rev. Norman Vincent Peale. Then-Vice President Richard M. Nixon was Kennedy’s Republican opponent in the 1960 presidential race.

In the speech, Kennedy said, “Contrary to common newspaper usage, I am not the Catholic candidate for president. I am the Democratic Party’s candidate for president who happens also to be Catholic.” He also said he would resign the presidency if the office required him “to either violate my conscience or violate the national interest.”

Casey said the speech was vetted by three Catholic theologians and targeted to undecided voters, thought to be 23 percent of the electorate at that time. The

resignation clause was intended to show Catholics the seriousness of his faith, he said.

Casey outlined what he called the “pan-Protestant argument Kennedy was facing.” He said that argument concluded that Kennedy could not be trusted because the Catholic hierarchy rejected the separation of church and state, required obedience and did not allow for personal conscience.

William Galston, director of the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy at the University of Maryland, said Kennedy’s speech “could have been given by a nonbeliever – and I suggest that it was.”

“There is no indication that Kennedy thought that the church had any role,” Galston said. “He speaks of conscience ... and God appears only once, in a quote from the presidential oath.”

Galston said Kennedy “advocated a triple separation: church and state, religion and politics, and democracy and God.”

Father J. Bryan Hehir, a priest of the Archdiocese of Boston and professor of religion and public life at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass., said Kennedy was “confronting a momentous problem,” which accounted for the combination of strong words and an ambiguous message.

Kennedy tried to build two firewalls in the speech and breach them with one statement, he said. “The first firewall is the absolutist position on the separation of church and state and the second, more ambiguous one, is that a president’s religion should be private,” he said. “He was either claiming his right to make his own religious choices or saying that religion is inherently a private matter.”

The breach statement was Kennedy’s promise “to resign if it came to a crisis,” Father Hehir said.

Robert George, a professor of jurisprudence and director of the James Madison program in American ideals and institutions at Princeton University in New Jersey, said the separation of church and state has many interpretations.

“On one reading,” he said, “almost everyone agrees there should be no established church and that the state cannot dictate ecclesiastical appointments.” Nonetheless, he said, there is a profound difference of opinion beyond that.

Casey said, “Separation of church and state ... is a contested metaphor for a continuum that spans from those who say that it is a myth that was never intended by the founders, to those who say that it is so distinct that religion and politics cannot be spoken of together.”

The panelists agreed that voters today expect candidates to articulate the connections between their personal convictions and their public policy positions.

“Politicians have an obligation to explain the basis for the positions they adopt, regardless of whether religion is in the picture,” George said.

The panelists weighed whether atheists or people of no religious faith could be viable candidates for the presidency. Galston said a Gallup Poll found that 51 percent of respondents said a successful candidate would have to be a believer and 50 percent said they would not vote for a candidate who was an atheist or a Mormon.

“There is, in fact, a religious test for the presidency,” he said.

The discussion was sponsored by the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture and was moderated by Peter Quinn, a novelist, essayist and chronicler of Irish America, who was a speechwriter for former New York Govs. Hugh Carey and Mario Cuomo.