
Religion and politics: Revising Kennedy doctrine

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When John F. Kennedy, a Catholic, ran for president in 1960, he addressed the American public's fear that he would take his orders from the pope: "I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute--where no Catholic prelate would tell the president [should he be Catholic] how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote."

During the 2004 presidential debates, Sen. John Kerry, who sought to become the second Catholic president, reaffirmed the Kennedy doctrine. Kerry stated that he did not contest the Catholic teaching that abortion is wrong, but he did not wish to impose an article of his faith on the public.

In at least a limited degree, the Kennedy doctrine should make sense to every rational person. Few would want a Catholic president to criminalize birth control. Nor would we want a Baptist president to reintroduce Prohibition. In a pluralistic democracy like the United States, religion is not the final measure for determining moral standards.

The Kennedy doctrine, however, can be revised in two meaningful ways. First, whereas the Kennedy doctrine has been interpreted to mean a complete and rigid dichotomy, such that no religious framework should help guide a politician's thinking, politicians can and do make cases by employing both reason and faith. When a politician finds compelling arguments in favor of an issue, he can emphasize that faith and religious values reinforce his decision.

During the final presidential debate and in an address on faith and values in Ft. Lauderdale, less than two weeks before Election Day, Kerry revised the Kennedy doctrine in this way, suggesting, for example, that his views on poverty and the environment stem also from his faith.

The link between faith and reason is integral to Catholicism. The Catholic Church elevates not only Scripture but also reason and tradition. One of the encyclicals written by Pope John Paul II is entitled "Faith and Reason."

Drawing on the rhetoric of faith is also politically wise. In many ways the Democratic Party has suffered in recent years by being labeled as out of touch with the religious values of the country.

Though Kerry made modest gestures toward revising the Kennedy doctrine, faith was not a common or passionate theme in his campaign. Ideally, Democrats would state that they advocate universal health insurance, equitable taxes, environmental stewardship, and similar policies not simply because they are sound, but because they are morally just and the alternatives are morally wrong. Only by fully engaging the language of faith and morals will Democrats once again connect with a majority of American voters.

Admittedly, not all issues can be resolved with both reason and faith, and not all people agree on when reason and faith overlap. When it comes to a contested issue such as abortion, many Catholic politicians return to the strict separation of church and state.

But the employment of the Kennedy doctrine in this context need not preclude a Catholic politician from working to reduce the conditions under which abortions occur. This is the second way in which the Kennedy doctrine can be revised. Although it would be unwise for a Catholic politician to impose his faith on others, he would be negligent in not seeking, through non-coercive means, to address issues of grave moral concern. Kerry might have said forcefully and repeatedly that if elected, he would seek ways to make abortion as rare as possible.

According to a study by the Alan Guttmacher Institute, more than half of the abortions in the United States involve poor women. Health insurance is an important part of that picture, as are employment prospects and support for women and children. Addressing these challenges might help reduce the number of abortions in this country.

Catholic politicians who are personally opposed to abortion could also use the bully pulpit. Few have argued that smoking should be illegal, but many support the public campaign against smoking. Speaking of the value of all life and of the links between human dignity and moral responsibility can have positive effects. Such efforts would not involve the imposition of one view over another; instead, creative strategies would represent the virtues of encouragement, persuasion, and leadership. No less important, they would reach out across one of the most emotional divides in American history.

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