

JFK's privatized religion

By [David Heim](#)

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John F. Kennedy's famous Houston [speech](#) on church and state during the 1960 presidential campaign elicited Rick Santorum's after-the-fact [disgust](#). Though Santorum misrepresents the speech in some ways--Kennedy didn't say anything about limiting religious institutions and leaders from speaking on public issues--he is right to find the speech theologically lame.

In trying to assure Protestant voters that they had nothing to fear in voting for a Catholic as president, JFK stressed that his religious views were "his own private affair." He laid out his vision of a chief executive whose public acts would not be "limited or conditioned by any religious oath, ritual or obligation."

Not limited or conditioned by any religious obligation? In essence, Kennedy was saying that his Catholic faith did not and would not shape anything he might do or think as president.

One imagines that JFK's parish priests and catechism teachers might have heard that claim with some dismay: You mean attending mass all these years hasn't meant anything? Nothing the church says can have any influence on you? JFK's extreme privatization of religion was noted at the time by some Catholic and Protestant observers (including the *Century*, whose Protestant editors were wrestling with their own deep reservations about electing a Catholic).

Nevertheless, JFK probably correctly assessed the political challenges that faced a Catholic running for president. In the words of historian Mark Massa, Kennedy "had to 'secularize' the American presidency in order to win it."

The religious outsider in this year's race, Mitt Romney, has drawn heavily on JFK's example, trying to keep his faith off limits and suggesting that it's un-American to even raise the issue. In his 2007 [speech](#) that tackled the issue head on, Romney replicated JFK's theme of privatization while still celebrating the public benefits of religion in general--something Kennedy didn't feel the need to dwell on.

Massa's [account](#) of JFK's Houston speech in a 1997 issue of the *Journal of Church and State* remains one of the best commentaries on that historical moment and a brilliant account of JFK's role in the privatization of religion.