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Tales From the Goofie Left: Kathleen Kennedy Townsend

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Distinctly Catholic

The Democratic Party is in danger of being consumed by its own 'goofie left' wing and the phenomenon is now too common to ignore. There are different aspects to the phenomenon, some focus specifically on what caused the anti-Dem tsunami last month in the midterms and others simply re-hash old, very old orthodoxies that have long since needed to be retired. Today, let's look at an example of this last goofie left habit, the re-hash of an old orthodoxy for no good purpose. Exhibit A is Kathleen Kennedy Townsend's article in yesterday's Outlook section, 'What Palin gets wrong about JFK.'

Townsend seeks to defend her uncle's famous 1960 speech in front of the Houston Ministerial Association in which he set out his beliefs about the relationship of church and state. Palin, in her new book, criticizes the JFK speech, joining a long line of critics of JFK's speech including, among others, Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput and me, and he and I do not usually agree on anything, although mine and the archbishop's grounds for criticism were different from Palin's.

Townsend thinks Palin wants a 'religious test' of the kind prohibited by the Constitution because she denies the distinction JFK made between 'private' religion and 'public' duties. Townsend writes, '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.' That's funny. I had thought JFK's principal concern in the autumn of 1960 was winning the election and he knew that the once 'Solid South' had split in half the last time a Catholic ran for the presidency in 1928. And, the prospect of 'religious warfare' in American politics of the kind the Constitution was designed to prevent, then as now, was not 'ill-disguised.' It is non-existent. In America, religious 'warfare' happens within

denominations not between them and the fear of sectarianism that motivated the Founders is today a groundless fear in the United States. Townsend is just using a scare tactic.

More importantly, candidates like Kennedy can't have it both ways. Townsend notes, proudly, that JFK supported civil rights legislation and quotes him as saying of the civil rights issue, "We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the Scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution." So, which is it Ms. Townsend? It is okay to invoke morals and values "which are presumably rooted in some kind of religious education" so long as you are pursuing progressive policies, but it is wrong of Palin to do so? And, does not the civil rights issue show decisively that religion is not a "private" concern? I think there is nearly unanimous agreement among Catholic scholars left and right that JFK's Houston speech was a fine speech for a Protestant to give, but that it betrayed a view of private religion that is inconsistent with Catholic beliefs about the relationship of religion and society, and of faith and reason. Townsend's concern about church and state separation is a shibboleth, as it was for her uncle.

It is true that Palin is no JFK and it is also true that she is no Chaput. Her criticism of JFK's speech is vague and imprecise. She certainly is not criticizing him for the essentially Protestant views about the private nature of religious conscience that he espoused in Houston. Palin criticizes him for not backing state support of religious schools, and Townsend says his stance was "courageous," because "he wisely thought that the use of public dollars in places where nuns explicitly proselytized would be unconstitutional." First, I would not use the verb "proselytize" to describe what nuns did in Catholic schools circa 1960. I suspect "catechize" is closer to the mark and I wish there had been more of it in the Kennedy household. And, not incidentally, JFK was much more open to government aid to religious schools when he was a congressman than he would be when he was a presidential candidate.

Townsend also attacks Palin's comment that "morality itself cannot be sustained without the support of religious beliefs," which is, in the event, little more than a restatement of what George Washington said in his farewell address. I prefer President Eisenhower's more pithy comment that "Our government makes no sense, unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith" and I don't care what it is." Eisenhower's remark seems to perfectly capture the sense of civic, non-sectarian religion that animated America before the 1960s. Kennedy did not denounce that religion, he tried to show how his Catholicism was linked with it. And, poor Townsend doesn't even recognize that the problem with Palin's comment is not that she offends non-believers, it is that she reduces Christianity to a prop for Americanism.

When told that an author intended to write a book about John F. Kennedy's religion and how it affected him, one of his sisters famously said, "That is going to be a short book." Yet, here we are fifty years later, still debating the Houston speech. The ideas are important, and they deserve consideration. Sadly, neither Sarah Palin nor Kathleen Kennedy Townsend seem up to the task. I will leave it to my conservative Catholic friends to cal out Palin on this, but those of us on the left have to call out Townsend's goofie, simplistic and facile understanding of the weighty issues involved.

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