
INTERVIEWS AND CONVERSATIONS

Nixon Was Wrong:
Religion and the Presidency,
1960, 2008, and 2012—
An Interview with
Shaun A. Casey

Note: Gregory A. Prince, a member of Dialogue's board of editors, conducted this interview with Shaun A. Casey on April 29, 2010, in Potomac, Maryland. Casey is professor of Christian Ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. His recent book, The Making of a Catholic President: Kennedy vs. Nixon 1960 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) formed the background of this interview.

Prince: I want to start with what I thought was an amazing quote from Richard Nixon, where he says, "I can take some satisfaction from the fact that this was probably the last national election in which the religious issue will be raised at all."¹ What a prophet!

Casey: Right, right, what did he know? That was in his *Six Crises*, right?

Prince: Yes.

Casey: Well, *Six Crises* is really one of the early election books that now are coin of the realm. Everybody who's thinking they're running for president writes a book.

Prince: Before, during, and after.

Casey: That's right. So Nixon writes this; and one of these six crises is the 1960 presidential race. It really is quite remarkable how open and candid he was about that. In fact, I went through his papers—the memos from his staff. As he's writing this book, he sends a memo to his remaining private staff and says, "Gather all

the documents with respect to religion. I want to go over that with a fine-tooth comb.” What I think you see there is that Nixon hoped against hope that Kennedy would falter in his first term, Nixon would be resurrected by the Republican Party to run against him a second time, and by then the religion issue would be off the table. So I think what you hear there is less a prophecy than a desperate political wish on Nixon’s part: “Oh my goodness, the Catholic question is now gone and I can run against Kennedy on the issues and beat him on the issues because I don’t think he’s going to be a very good president.” I think that’s more of a cry for help than it is a prognostication.

Prince: When was the religion of the candidate first an issue? Was it Al Smith?

Casey: Well, I think it can go all the way back to 1800 when Thomas Jefferson ran. He was attacked as being an atheist. You see it crop up in American presidential elections from time to time.

Prince: But there, with Jefferson, you have what his religion wasn’t. When was the first time that a candidate was under attack because of the particular faith tradition that he embraced?

Casey: Well, I don’t want to argue the point. Jefferson was an Episcopalian. He was a deist—not an atheist in the classic sense. But certainly Al Smith was where somebody said, “Do not vote for this major party nominee for the presidency because he’s a Catholic. He’s a specific kind of religious person. So don’t vote for him.” The results for the 1928 election were really in the conventional wisdom moving forward. Kennedy, in 1956, wanted very desperately to be on the ticket with Adlai Stevenson as the vice president.

Prince: Let me back you up here. How big a deal was religion with Al Smith? Was it a headline issue during the campaign? Or was it more a whispering campaign?

Casey: I think it was pretty explicit. I’m in no position to judge if it was because of his Catholicism or because he was a New Yorker and the governor of an East Coast state. People argue back and forth and I’m in no position to judge, but my understanding is that there were very explicit attacks against Al Smith because of his Catholicism. It was in the public arena, but it was subterra-

nean as well. I think he faced the worst of all possible worlds there.

Prince: All right, so now move up to '56.

Casey: Eisenhower, in 1952, began to pull Catholics away from the old FDR Democratic coalition. A lot of Democrats got nervous that the great war hero, now Republican candidate, was siphoning off what had become traditional Democratic constituents.

Prince: Was he specifically wooing Catholics, or was it just his nature?

Casey: It just happened.

Prince: He was a magnet?

Casey: Yes. You know, he was a war hero. So people across a wide spectrum said, "Yes, that's my guy over against Adlai Stevenson, the egghead intellectual." So one of the questions in '56 was: How can we Democrats hold on to our base among ethnic Catholics? Kennedy saw an opportunity and put together a memo that said, "Actually, if you have a Catholic in the second slot, that will help woo Catholics back to the Democratic Party." Adlai Stevenson never really bought that argument.

Prince: Do you think Kennedy bought it, or was it a bit of naive opportunism?

Casey: It was both. I think he would take whatever worked to get him on the ticket.

Prince: You point out that Kennedy wasn't an intellectual.

Casey: That's correct. In fact, it was Ted Sorenson who stitched together the argument in the statistics that tried to show that a Catholic in the second slot in '56 would help bring Democrats back from Eisenhower. Who knows if it was really true or not? But certainly there was a heavy dose of political opportunism there where the Kennedy campaign said, "Okay, we've got an opening to make a public argument that actually being Catholic helps instead of hurts." They were willing to ride that argument as far as it would take them. And it was not a totally specious argument. They tried to demonstrate that, at the state level and congressional level, Catholic candidates kept getting elected in districts where the presidential race cut the other way. They tried to show

that people will still vote for Catholics if they're prominently displayed on tickets. It's one of those endlessly debatable arguments. But it's not completely implausible.

One of the interesting things is that, at several points along the way, Kennedy thought he had dealt with the religion issue and took the position: It's going to go away now, and it's not going to come back.

Prince: After he became the candidate?

Casey: Before and after. To their dismay, they kept getting surprised by the tenacity of anti-Catholicism. After the West Virginia primary, for instance, where Kennedy went in—into an overwhelmingly Protestant state and beat Humphrey handily—they thought, “Oh, finally it's over with!” Then they got to the general election, and suddenly they realized, out across the whole country, that it was still a very, very toxic issue for them.

Prince: And organized.

Casey: And organized, which really scared them. And at that point, they snapped back to the reality that they had to address this issue directly. They couldn't give in to their wish that it was behind them. They were confronted with some real evidence that Nixon was organizing these forces but that the forces had a life of their own. And that's when they suddenly realized, starting with the Houston speech in September, that they had to get organized and they had to continue to address this issue. It hadn't gone away. On the one hand, they were surprised by the tenacity of the issue; on the other hand, they were smart enough to say, “We've got to be flexible here. We've got to be realistic. We've got to keep applying assets to this issue because it's scary how it might, in fact, come back to bite us in the end.” They were not intimidated politically by the tenacity of the issue, and they were responsive to it. That's the genius at work there politically—that they realized the threat was real.

Prince: Let's dwell for a while on why it was that Roman Catholicism was such a lightning rod. On one level that sounds like a simple question, “Why don't they like the Catholics?” But I'm not sure that it's such a simple question.

Casey: I think it's very complicated. Let me try to walk through the

different pieces of that. On the one hand, I think a lot of Americans saw the Roman Catholic Church as European. Even though there's an American branch, the head of the Church is still in Rome. Not only is he in Rome, Italy, he's in this little nation-state called the Vatican. So, there was a political tinge to the Church that wasn't true of other Christian denominations.

Prince: And that goes way back in our country's history.

Casey: That's right. So there was that sort of organic distrust of Catholicism—in the Vatican, in Europe, and that Catholics had divided loyalties. It's a nation-state as well as a church. Second, it's a hierarchical church. If you're kind of a strong democrat—little d—where you think democracy is all about people coming together and deciding their fate in freedom, you're a little dismayed by religious folk in your own midst who ultimately say, "My allegiance is to this guy sitting in Italy issuing decrees on politics and on life and faith and practices." And it's a hierarchy, it's not a democracy. The Catholic Church is not a democracy.

So there was this question, "Is the Catholic Church anti-democratic?" There's an intellectual tradition in the Catholic Church that is explicitly anti-democratic, pro-monarchy, highly authoritarian, and quite suspicious of democracy in the French-Anglo-American trajectory. So even as late as the 1870s and 1890s, the Catholic Church was cranking out documents that, on the face of them, are quite shocking to Americans. These documents were saying that democracy is not divinely sanctioned and that a monarchy and a state church are God's plan. That was Catholicism's intellectual tradition, and American Protestants were great students of that literature. They could quote chapter and verse from documents and doctrines dating from the nineteenth century—and before—that really, to American democratic ears, sounded absolutely repressive.

So history gets in the way sometimes when you get a contemporary American politician whose Church tradition is not pure going back. Now, the Protestant distrust ignored the emerging conversation among American Catholic intellectuals who were taking the position that religious freedom is actually good for the Catholic Church.

Prince: Including intellectual clergy?

Casey: Oh, absolutely. John Courtney Murray was at Ground Zero, arguing that an American form of democracy in religious freedom was of great blessing to the Catholic Church worldwide. So there was something afoot in the middle of the twentieth century intellectually, but it did not percolate to the rank-and-file among American Protestant churches. They still had this other view of the Catholic Church. So when you begin to add all that up, you sense why aversion to Romantic Catholicism was very complex but very deeply engrained in the American psyche in 1960.

Prince: And Roman Catholicism was the predominant American religion. The largest.

Casey: The largest single denomination, although only a plurality. And that was a little scary to Protestants. The fear was, "They are going to out-birth us." People saw large Catholic families, and they were terrified that America might become a Catholic majority at some point.

Prince: And if you were a conspiracy theorist, it played to your fears that this was a planned takeover.

Casey: That's right. And there were people like Protestants and Other Americans United for Separation of Church and State. One of their most popular pamphlets was something like, "What if America becomes 51 percent Catholic?" It was just this fearful thing, "All bets would be off. The Vatican will control our country and religious freedom will disappear when they become the majority religion in America." People who belonged to Protestants and Other Americans United were fairly smart, bright, literate people, ginning that fear up actively in the mid-twentieth century.

Prince: So how quickly did Nixon figure out that this was an easy handle to grab?

Casey: Nixon was in a tough position because he didn't know who he was going to be running against until the Democratic Convention was over in early June 1960. There's some internal evidence to suggest that he didn't think Kennedy was going to win. He thought, at times, that they might name Kennedy as vice president. But he thought Lyndon Johnson was going to win or Hubert Humphrey. In his brain, he couldn't see the Democrats making that big a leap.

Prince: Because of the religion issue?

Casey: I could never find a full-blown explanation for that blind spot. Robert Finch gave a speech in the spring of 1960 in which he essentially said, “I think Kennedy is way down the list. He’s not going to be our opponent.” So Nixon really didn’t have much time to think about what he was going to do against Kennedy until June of 1960. Then suddenly it’s like, “Holy cow! We’re not facing Lyndon Johnson or Hubert Humphrey; we’re facing the Catholic guy.” So I think Nixon kind of made up his religious strategy against Kennedy on the fly. I found no evidence that he devoted much thought to that topic before Kennedy actually won the nomination.

Prince: But once he made that judgment, do you think he was initially going down both sides of the street simultaneously, publicly saying, “I will never make this an issue,” and privately setting up this huge network?

Casey: Absolutely. In fact, ironically, Nixon had a form of Catholic outreach already working for him. One of his chief speechwriters was a Catholic priest. Nixon spoke at a lot of Catholic events in the late ’50s as vice president, hoping to continue to sway Catholics into the Republican fold as his boss Dwight Eisenhower had done. So he actually had a Catholic strategy in mind; but then suddenly, he was facing a Catholic. I think what helped Nixon crystallize his strategy was the fact that people were coming to him, saying, “I can do these things for you.” I think Nixon was smart enough then to realize, “Hey, I can do this sort of subterranean, off-the-books campaign because I have people like Billy Graham, the National Association of Evangelicals, and former Congressman O. K. Armstrong, coming to me, saying, ‘We can do this work for you.’”

Prince: Getting back to that question of why the aversion to Roman Catholicism—Why did Billy Graham put his neck on the line, even though he tried to cover it up? What was the visceral problem there?

Casey: I think it was a problem but also an opportunity. It’s very seductive when the nominee for the presidency of the United States for one party comes to you and says, “Can we work together?” If Richard Nixon had won that race, Billy Graham would have been

in the inner ring in the Nixon White House in 1960. That kind of access to power is seductive to anybody. That kind of attraction is not inherent to the right or to the left.

Prince: But you talked about these outsiders coming to Nixon.

Casey: Well, that's right. Opportunity was one piece of it, but it's not the whole story. The other story is that Graham was a thoroughgoing anti-Catholic, like most white Evangelicals in the mid-'50s and early '60s. "Rome is the enemy. Rome imprisons people, intellectually and theologically. The Evangelical faith gives them freedom." They saw, I think, nominal Catholics in America as potential converts to the Evangelical movement. I think they also feared the Vatican. They feared the Pope. They feared Catholic clergy for their ability to organize. And they feared that big Catholic families would continue to grow, and would become more mainstream in America.

Prince: I want to show you a volume that demonstrates where the Mormons were on this issue.

Casey: I can't wait.

Prince: It was written in 1958 by Bruce R. McConkie, one of our Church's general officers, with the presumptuous title, *Mormon Doctrine*.²

Casey: "Church of the Devil." There you go.

Prince: Read down to definition #2.

Casey: Yes, ". . . the Roman Catholic Church, specifically." Yes, this is coin of the realm. I went through a couple of places that had great collections of anti-Catholic literature. The hard-core pieces are the books about Protestant teenage girls chained in rectory basements. That view was kind of a minority; but still, it represented the far, far frontier of anti-Catholic literature.

Prince: The 5 percent, as you broke it down by percentages in your book.

Casey: Right. McConkie's statement was common—the notion that the "whore of Babylon" in the book of Revelation is the Catholic Church. That was a standard interpretation.

Prince: So you could read McConkie's statement and not know which denomination it came from?

Casey: You could have said, “Shaun, guess where this came from?” and I could have given you twenty different guesses. So this was standard rhetoric about the Catholic Church.

Prince: In the same time-frame that we’re talking about?

Casey: 1958, absolutely. What was most astonishing to me, though, was to see the deep anti-Catholicism among liberal Protestants of the day: Methodists, Presbyterians, presidents of Princeton Seminary and Union Seminary. Great bastions of liberal Protestant theology saying things like, “I could never vote for a Catholic. The Catholic Church is anti-democratic. It’s hierarchical. It’s un-American.” It’s shocking now, from a distance of sixty years, to go back and look at that and see these leading lights on the Protestant left, mouthing—maybe not quite that it’s the church of the devil—but simply saying, “I could never vote for a Catholic because of the nature of the Catholic Church.” That’s pretty shocking, by today’s standards, to see even on the liberal Protestant left these very strong forms of anti-Catholicism.

Prince: I think it’s as important a message from your book as the political message.

Casey: Yes, absolutely. If we want to circle back to the Mormon Church today, I think there may be similar dynamics at work. You think about Mitt Romney and the construction of the LDS temple in Belmont, Massachusetts, for instance. Belmont is kind of Ground Zero for liberal Massachusetts politics, and yet I know some very progressive, liberal, secular people who said, “Not in my backyard.” So that kind of reaction has not disappeared from the American scene.

Prince: No, just has a different focal point.

Casey: Yes, that’s right.

Prince: Let’s talk about continuing trends that you describe here that I think are still germane to the current political climate. You say, “His main point was that Catholics were simply ignorant about Protestantism—and, by implication, Protestants were equally ignorant of Catholicism. The result was the Catholics were totally unprepared for ecumenical dialogue. They were not hostile to it, they were simply not ready.”³ We certainly see that unread-

ness now in attempting to set up a Mormon/non-Mormon dialogue. I see it on both sides of that gulf. Comment on that?

Casey: I think maybe one way to say it is that when different religious traditions first begin to sort of overlap, the lack of history can lead to fear, it can lead to distortion, it can lead to anxiety, even to out-and-out rejection. So with respect to Catholicism and Protestantism in the mid-'50s, you began to find some intellectual conversations in places like New York City and Boston, but not in Chicago. There was a kind of intellectual, scholar-to-scholar, informal conversation going on. Now, I talk a little bit about that in the book. These were smart, liberal-spirited people, but those first conversations were very halting. It was like one step forward, two steps back—a little dialogue, but then angry letters and angry editorials. Then another meeting where they tried to clarify what the other meant. It was like a really difficult, kind of ritualistic, diplomatic dance among partners who really don't have a lot of history together.

Prince: When did it start to get easier for the Protestant-Catholic dialogue? Post Vatican II?

Casey: When Vatican II occurred, from 1963 to 1965, liberal Protestants admitted their error.

Prince: Because they now saw the transformation in Roman Catholicism?

Casey: Well, they saw a conversation. At Vatican II, Protestant observers were invited to come in and watch the proceedings. Then they were part of the informal conversations taking place around the formal conversations, and they realized, "Hey, we can talk to these people. They invited us in. They don't lock us out. They let us watch the sausage-making going on, in all its splendor, in all of its ugliness." The documents they wrote are amazing, because the Catholic Church then said, "We want to relate to the world in a different fashion." So it was movement on both sides. The Catholic Church opened the door and invited some of these Protestant intellectuals in and said, "You can actually help us. Sit in the corner and watch. But after the proceedings, let's have dinner and let's talk and let's have a structured conversation."

Prince: Did the Protestants then start to mine the depths of many centuries of Catholic discourse that they had been ignoring?

Casey: Well, there was irony. Let's say you taught theology at Harvard Divinity School in 1958. You would have been having your students read Aquinas and Augustine. You would have been reading the Catholic literature all that time. You just hadn't been talking to Catholics about it, and therein is the irony. But there was a tradition they could both appeal to. And they had Christian scripture that they could also talk about. There were forms of discourse—content they could talk about—and they both felt that they owned or at least shared that tradition. So there was actually some intellectual territory they could talk about.

Prince: They just hadn't been building the bridges.

Casey: That's correct. But after Vatican II, Protestants reached out to Catholic institutions, and Catholic institutions reached out to Protestant institutions. And even at the local level, Catholic priests were talking to Protestant ministers. The Catholic Church said, "Ecumenical dialogue is actually a good thing, and we're going to participate in it."

Prince: Was that part of Vatican II?

Casey: Yes. And that just exploded in the late '60s, early '70s. You just saw all kinds of association and communication going on that were not there prior to Vatican II.

Prince: How would you describe the situation now?

Casey: Oh, it's routine.

Prince: It's one community?

Casey: Oh, that kind of dialogue is routine, and there is real community among Protestant and Catholic churches. For example, I did my doctoral dissertation at Harvard Divinity School under a Roman Catholic priest. Here I come from a low-church Christian tradition—Churches of Christ—and I've got a Catholic priest who supervises my dissertation. That's sort of symbolic, I think, of the kind of give-and-take that now exists across the Protestant-Catholic divide.

Prince: Although it's not complete, because a Roman Catholic

priest still has to go to a Catholic seminary to be ordained. Is that correct?

Casey: That's correct. But when they do doctoral work, there are no restrictions. You can get your seminary degree at a Catholic institution and then go on. In fact, when I first came to Harvard Divinity School in 1979, Catholics were the largest single denominational presence among the student body, about 22 percent. Of course, there are ups and downs to that as history goes by. But by and large, Vatican II really is the great historical marker that marks a new era of ecumenical conversation between Catholics and Protestants.

Prince: After Vatican II, we had another Roman Catholic candidate for the presidency, John Kerry.

Casey: And, ironically, it was more of an issue for the Catholic Church than it was for non-Catholics. That's because of specific issues like abortion, same-sex marriage, and stem cell research—those issues where the Church is probably going to be more conservative.

It's conceivable that we could have a conservative Catholic Republican be president, and there would probably be less trouble within the Church because that person probably would be closer to the Church's teachings on some of these hot-button issues. So, it's certainly conceivable that we could have a Catholic candidate who would not be controversial in a major sense.

Prince: Certainly not to the level of Kennedy.

Casey: That's correct. It's very hard to envision that ever happening again. I look at Joe Biden. Joe Biden was a Catholic running for vice president and he caught minor guff, but mainly from the Church itself—from inside the hierarchy. Out on the stump, you never heard a whiff of controversy about the fact that he was Catholic. So, I take that to be evidence about how much things have changed since 1960.

Prince: But the way religion plays in presidential politics has morphed and, in a sense, become much more divisive.

Casey: Oh, there's no doubt. It is different.

Prince: And in a sense, I think it has become much more perverse.

Casey: I would entertain that argument. But it continues to evolve. You look at the Democratic Party. You look at Bill Clinton, for instance. Clinton was a master at reaching out to religious constituents. His staff was completely flummoxed by that. A couple of staffers got it; but by and large, it was driven by his own kind of innate religiosity and also political instinct. Michael Dukakis was thoroughly secular in his approach. Al Gore is kind of a middle figure. But certainly when Kerry ran, Kerry saw no advantage to talking about his faith. I think he came to regret that; and when he was thinking of running again, he had rethought the religion issue.

But the Republican side is where I think the difficulty is today. That is, if you want to be the Republican nominee, the way the process is structured today—particularly in the state of Iowa—you’ve got to pass muster with the hard-core Religious Right. If you are not arguably a member of the Religious Right, you’ve got some explaining to do. And you’ve got a very hard road to trek, I think, to win over the hearts and minds of those people. So your best strategy might be hoping for twelve candidates running and that the winner of the Iowa caucus will emerge with 18 percent of the vote. In that case, your religion maybe matters less.

Prince: Isn’t that what happened with McCain?

Casey: Absolutely. I think this is where Mitt Romney’s problem is. The Religious Right is fearful of a Mormon. So somebody who is not an Evangelical Christian but who, in fact, is Mormon, has a much higher threshold of skepticism to meet among those folks in the nominating process.

Prince: So let’s talk about Romney and let’s talk about Mormonism, because I’m sure that there are both some strong parallels with 1960 and also some fundamental differences, particularly in the way the candidates have handled the issue. Let’s talk first about Mormonism and why it now represents whatever it does represent to presidential politics, because Mitt Romney ran into a firestorm that George Romney never experienced. Perhaps George’s candidacy didn’t last long enough, but I don’t think that was the reason.

Casey: I think it’s a completely different political atmosphere.

1968 and 2008 represent two radically different political environments.

Prince: In the 1960s, you still had a McKay brand of Mormonism. McKay was a revered American figure.

Casey: That's right.

Prince: We don't have that now in Mormondom.

Casey: No.

Prince: Mormonism, I think, was riding a wave of good will through the '60s. Sometime later, the wave crashed.

Casey: I think that's a plausible interpretation. The political ramifications of that dynamic are palpable for somebody like Mitt Romney today. He faces a gauntlet his father never faced.

Prince: So what is it about Mormonism that pushes that button now?

Casey: Well, let me throw in a couple possibilities.

I think, within the conservative, Evangelical worldview, Mormonism is viewed as an esoteric religion. It looks secretive.

Prince: As in cult?

Casey: Some people use that word, but some Evangelicals would be several degrees away from that kind of thinking. They know Mormons. They see Mormons in society doing well. We're not used to thinking of cult members getting elected governor of Massachusetts or running big corporations or being deans of business schools at Harvard. So the utility of the "cult" label only goes so far. There's countervailing evidence to say that "cult" doesn't quite catch what these people are.

Prince: But there's still something sinister.

Casey: Well, it's not sinister. It's esoteric. It's secret. I think centrist and center-right Americans are susceptible to the fear factor about what they perceive to be closed, secret or secretive, or esoteric groups. It's "You know, I'm just not sure if I trust those people." It's almost the same way they distrusted the Catholic Church. It's not exactly the same, but it's similar.

Prince: There are secretive elements in both?

Casey: Exactly.

Prince: And a strong hierarchical structure in both?

Casey: And what's different is that Mormons have the Book of Mormon. In the Evangelical Church, we don't have that. In fact, we think that's wrong. You really just need the New Testament. If you add anything to that, that's theologically wrong.

Prince: Catholics have the Apocrypha, and we can deal with that.

Casey: Exactly. But we do share the New Testament, so at least there is some distant connection there, where we still talk Bible. Mormons have the Bible, too; but the Book of Mormon thing is a real barrier, I think, for a lot of American conservative Christians, because that looks like adding on. So you add all of that up and it's just this sense of—well, it's like I explained it to a friend: You can walk into Barnes & Noble today, and you can walk into the religion section. Let's say I'm a conservative Southern Baptist. I want to learn about Catholics. I can go to the religion section and buy a book that says *Catholicism for Dummies* that will walk me through. If I want to, it's there. I can learn it. As far as I know, in that same religion section there isn't a *Mormonism for Dummies* that does it all.

Prince: Actually, there is just such a title, and Jana Riess, one of the authors, is on the *Dialogue* board with me. It's a good book.⁴

Casey: Oh, this is hysterical. Well, this is helpful, because I think most conservative Evangelical Christians think it doesn't exist. Or if it does, it's not the whole story.

Prince: It doesn't resolve all the boundary issues.

Casey: Right. So, as you know, the Evangelical world is teeming with anti-Mormon polemics. The internet is teeming with it—you know, people like Jon Krakauer and his “Mormons are cultists who commit murders” approach.⁵ From top to bottom in our culture, you do have an anti-Mormon message.

Prince: How much of it is substantive, and how much of it is just opportunism?

Casey: It's all of the above. There's no doubt.

Prince: Krakauer knows how to write books that sell.

Casey: Exactly.

Prince: And he's got a nose that will lead him to a saleable story.

Casey: Absolutely. He is a marketer. He's a writer. I see that. I totally see that. So I think you add those things up. You add up the fear, the suspicion, you have the polemic, and you have the "lack of transparency," although that may be too strong a term. But I think most Americans look at the Mormon Church and they don't see a kind of accessibility.

Prince: It's not too strong a term, because we have these things called temples. The door's locked to you.

Casey: Exactly, you may let me in, you may give me a tour—

Prince: —but only before it opens.

Casey: Yes. And I think most Americans of kind of a nominal Christian orientation look at that, and they say, "I don't get a warm, fuzzy feeling from that. That makes me suspicious when I see that." So, if you're running for president as a Mormon, that's a pretty formidable set of cultural and institutional forces.

Prince: Plus, there is still some historical baggage.

Casey: That's true too.

Prince: When I say "Mormon," you say "polygamy."

Casey: That's right.

Prince: Poll after poll, it's the strongest association with the word "Mormon."

Casey: And then when you get these Mormon offshoot groups that are in the headlines, when west Texas sheriffs go out and round them up, people just say, "Oh, yes, that's what you Mormons do." So you talk about a tough hill to climb politically!

Prince: My grandfather was the county sheriff in southern Utah from 1936 to 1954. He was on the Utah side in the 1953 raid on the polygamists. The Feds and the Arizona police came up from the south. He didn't want to have anything to do with it, but he was the law in Washington County, so there he was. A few years ago, my cousin, who still lives in St. George, Utah, got a call from the county office. They said, "Bob, we found a box here and it's got 3x5 cards that were your grandfather's arrest records. We have no use for them. If you don't want them, we'll throw them away." Bob took them, of course. One of them is priceless. The man my grandfather arrested was Edson Jessop, one of the prominent po-

lygamists in Short Creek. The arrest record, in my grandfather's handwriting, said: "Charged [with] illegal cohabiting with more than one person of the opposite SECT."

Casey: Oh, that is priceless! That is just unbelievable.

Prince: That's part of the problem—that we have a long history of not engaging with other faith traditions.

Casey: Exactly. So if you're Mitt Romney, on the one hand, you try to find a way not to go right through the middle of that. But he's got this problem in his own political party, the way the party is established. Those folks want red meat; they want red Christian meat, and they are just very suspicious.

Prince: Not long after Mitt bowed out of the race, I was talking to his nephew. He said Mitt made two strategic errors, in both instances accepting at face value what his advisors told him. One was that his advisors told him to move to the right to get the nomination. He made that move and it caused him tremendous grief. Ironically, the man who got the nomination, John McCain, stayed toward the center. The other was that he ignored his religion as an issue, because his advisors told him it would go away. Instead, it crushed him.

Casey: I understand why that advice would be attractive to hear, because you want to believe it. I think Kennedy wanted to believe that, after the West Virginia primary was over, he had put the religion issue behind him.

The parallels between Romney's and Kennedy's attempts to get the religious questions out of the way are pretty clear, as you can see by comparing their Houston speeches. Kennedy's Houston speech was a speech of fear and desperation. He had just discovered the scope of the Nixon operation, and he felt like, "Oh my God, I've got to address this directly or I'm going to lose control!" When Mitt gave his,⁶ the Iowa caucuses were just around the corner. It really reeked of: "I've been reading the tea leaves, I've been watching the polls, and I may not win Iowa. I've got to do something, and this is my attempt to sort of throw the long pass and move my standing in the polls." I saw his strategy, and it's what I call a three-handed sermon. "On the one hand this, on the other hand that, on the other-other hand this." You know, when

you start counting more than two hands, the audience gets confused.

Okay. So, on the one hand, I think Mitt went through a phase where he tried to tell Evangelicals, “I’m really one of you.” In this speech he says, in essence, “I’ll tell you who I think Jesus Christ is. But I’m going to stop about three minutes, three seconds into that, and then say I’m not going to go any further because it’s really not appropriate.” He says, “Jesus is Savior and Lord, but we may disagree about what else is really going on there.”

Then he says, “I believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of mankind. My church’s beliefs about Christ may not be all the same as those of other faiths. Each religion has its own unique doctrines and history.” Now that’s the other hand, where he says, “You know, I really am Mormon.”

And then the other-other hand is, “This is kind of all private anyway. I’m like Kennedy, I’m not the Mormon candidate; I’m the Republican candidate who is also a Mormon. So, at one level, I’m one of you, and at another level I’m really not one of you; but it’s all private anyway and shouldn’t count.”

Somewhere between those three hands, I’m dizzy. I’m not really sure what he’s trying to communicate to me. Now a lot of the speech, I think, is laudable. He, in essence, says there’s overlap between the religions. “If you look at the values that my faith produces, to me they are religious toleration, religious freedom, hard work—American values.” He launches into values language, and that’s fine. I think that’s plausible. But I think for the sensitive, Religious Right ears in Iowa, this speech came off as incoherent. It did not ring the bell they were hoping he was going to ring. And the truth is, he can’t go there. He can’t plausibly say, “I’m one of you.” I think it’s a mistake to try and do that.

Prince: So they would never buy it no matter how he couched it.

Casey: That’s exactly right. He could say, “You know, I got baptized at the Church of the Nazarene three counties over last week, and I’m now a Nazarene and no longer a Mormon.” But no one from that cohort is going to buy that message.

Prince: He may win over liberal Protestants, but he is not going to win over the Evangelicals.

Casey: And that's not going to help him get the nomination in the Republican Party.

Prince: That's right. Now go back to Kennedy's speech. Let me lay it out simplistically and then you can react to it. It seems to me that the main thing Kennedy had to convince people of was, "The Vatican will not control me. You don't need to be afraid."

Casey: That's right.

Prince: I think voters were less worried that Salt Lake would control Mitt, but I think that *he* thought control was the major concern.

Casey: And that's a misdiagnosis on his part, if that's what he thought.

Prince: To me, the real issue he had to address was that Mormons are not weird, and I don't think he got to first base on that one.

Casey: No, not at all. I totally agree with that.

Prince: And Kennedy never had to fight that battle. People may have distrusted Roman Catholicism, but they certainly didn't think it was weird.

Casey: Right, and what Kennedy was able to say was, "I actually disagree with my church. I'm not going to appoint an ambassador to the Vatican. I'm not going to give federal funds to Catholic schools, and I'm not going to ban federal funds on birth control in foreign aid." So he was able to give very specific policy declarations that separated him from his own church. Mitt's not in a position to do that. First of all, as far as I know, the Mormon Church does not have official political positions on a thousand public policy issues.

Prince: Correct.

Casey: So there's nothing for him to push back against on that front to demonstrate his distance from them. But again, I don't think the fear is, "You've got to watch out for that inner cabal in Salt Lake because they're going to pull the strings on Mitt if he gets in the White House." I've never picked up that kind of vibe.

Prince: There's distrust, I think, because of the secrecy, but I don't think it rises to the level of fear.

Casey: That's correct. You know, one of the things I think Romney could do is to say to these folks that he needs to persuade, "Look,

I'm pro-life." Explain that. "I'm for free enterprise." Explain that. "I'm for small government." Explain that. I don't know where he is on same-sex issues or where he is on stem cells; but plausibly, he could take a stand that would be palatable to those folks. He needs to say, "Look, name any public policy issue and I will show you that, as a Mormon, I'm with you. I'm not against you."

Prince: On same-sex issues the Mormon Church later handed him, on a golden platter, what he wanted, Proposition 8.

Casey: Yes, that's right.

Prince: That creates a problem for other constituencies, but with the Evangelicals that should have been his gold ticket. But that was after the fact, after he was out of the race.

Casey: Right. In theory he's going to be running against Barack Obama. Okay, assuming Obama is renominated, Mitt has a very hard target there to say, "I'm not that guy, and let me show you that in some specific public policies that are shaped by my values and shaped by my faith, I'm with you. You're closer to me politically than you are to the current president of the United States."

Prince: Yes, that's if he can get the nomination. Along the way, he has to compare himself to people who aren't such hard targets.

Casey: That's correct. But he also has a burden if he is the front runner, as polls suggest at this point. Certain issues come with that identity, because he then becomes the primary target of all the other band of thousands that are going to run. But I do think it would be wise for him to make some kind of stab at the religion issue; and from that point forward, he can say, "You know, that's really old news. I've dealt with it. Go back and read the transcript. Next question."

Prince: Yes, because neither his campaign organization nor he as an individual confronted the religion issue directly, while both Kennedy and his organization did so repeatedly, forcefully, and clearly.

Casey: Right. Now, at times I think Kennedy had to be dragged kicking and screaming to that confrontation, but he was smart enough to know the downside of ignoring it, which was way too large.

Prince: Yes, at no point did they come up with the conclusion that the religion thing would just go away, so they didn't need to address it.

Casey: That's right. And I think that's what, at this point, separates Kennedy from Mitt Romney politically. If Romney is still, in his mind, thinking that the religion issue is history or that he has already dealt with it, I think he's made a huge mistake. And it could also be the case that he could win the nomination and then, as Kennedy did, think, "I've put this behind me, because I've dealt with the conservatives in my party." But he's still going to need centrist Evangelicals in the general election that turn out for him in healthy, healthy volume to win.

Prince: An interesting comparison of Kennedy and Romney is that Kennedy's concern was the Republicans, and Romney's also is the Republicans. I don't think, for the Democrats, that Mormonism is nearly as big a deal. I don't think they care.

Casey: No, and there's Harry Reid in the story.

Prince: Which is what Romney should have done.

Casey: Absolutely.

Prince: Rather than saying nasty things about Harry, Mitt should have said, "If you think Mormons are all tarred with this brush, look at my good friend Harry Reid."

Casey: Yes, and look at the Udalls. There are a lot of examples he could have pointed to and said, "Look, no one is dragging these guys down with these kinds of accusations. Look around. Look at your history." The other thing I think he should do is what Kennedy did, which was to go around to anti-Catholic leaders, meet with them one-on-one, and say, "Help me understand this. I don't get it." I think Romney needs to start engaging Evangelical intellectuals in the same manner.

Prince: Has he at all?

Casey: I don't know. There's Richard Mouw at Fuller Seminary, but I don't know if Mouw and Romney have ever met. If I'm advising Romney, I'm saying, "You need to go see Rich Mouw. You need to ask him, 'Whom should I go see?'" And that gets out. You don't issue press releases on that, but the Evangelical networks

are very active in terms of chatter and communication. I think he needs to make friends and alliances in peace to the extent he can with those folks. However, I've never sensed that Romney is comfortable with some of the Religious Right leaders. I could be dead wrong on that, but I don't sense that there's much traffic there, not much conversation.

Prince: I'm not sure how comfortable Romney is with his *own* religion in terms of having to deal with the public. I don't know that he's comfortable in his own skin.

Casey: That's interesting.

Prince: I don't think he disbelieves privately where he is in his own faith, but I don't think he's comfortable wearing that skin publicly. I think if he were, he would be willing and capable of having that dialogue with a Helen Whitney, or a Richard Mouw, or whomever.

Casey: Right.

Prince: I think his advisors who are not LDS gave him that message in good faith. My hunch is that he embraced it, in part, because of his own fear. He didn't want to have to fight that battle, and they gave him the out. Just supposition.

Casey: I think that's very plausible. It's hard to go in to a prominent politician and say, "Excuse me, Governor," or, "Excuse me, Senator, but I think you're wrong. In fact, you may be fatally wrong on this point." That takes a certain amount of chutzpah and gump-tion on the part of a staffer to look a leader—their boss—in the eye and say, "Are you sure you want to go with that? Because here is an alternate case that says you need to do the opposite. You need to actually confront it." In fact, I think he made a mistake in the Texas A & M speech, where he said, "There's one fundamental question about which I often am asked, What do I believe about Jesus Christ?" Boy, you start going down that road and you are establishing a religious test for yourself, particularly on this one, when he cannot give the answer that right-wing Christians are looking for.

Prince: How should he have addressed that issue?

Casey: I don't know that he should have. I think he should have said, "You know, I believe; I am a strong God-fearing person," and

just leave it at that. I think—and frankly, this is where I feel the most pain for him as I read this speech—I think it’s lamentable that any politician has to say, “Let me go over my catechism with you here in public and tell you the nitty-gritty details of what I believe. Then, you, too, can decide what to make of that.”

Prince: And Kennedy avoided that.

Casey: Yes, Kennedy said, “I’m not a theologian. I’m not a priest.”

Prince: Neither is Mitt.

Casey: Exactly. And Obama has tried to do that sometimes. He said, “Look, I’m not a theologian, I’m not a preacher. So I’m in over my head when we start talking about finer, granular details of Christian theology.” I think it’s a slippery slope when politicians volunteer to start going down that road about what they believe and how that might be different from what you believe, because that implies that something is at stake electorally about the quality or lack of quality in their religious belief.

Prince: And Romney is not a Teflon candidate, in the sense that if he cozies up to these guys and says these things, people are going to remember it when he moves to the next constituency. That’s where his trouble really starts, although he never got that far in 2008.

Casey: That’s right. I see several scenarios if there are lots of people running. Jump in, in Iowa, and you might win with 18 percent of the vote, and you just don’t address that issue directly. The other would be just to skip it and say, “I’m going to start in New Hampshire. I’m not going to burn millions of dollars in Iowa, where I’m not going to get much traction anyway. But let me camp out in New Hampshire where, in theory, I’ve got some resonance and I’ve got a high name recognition.”

Prince: He has a home in New Hampshire.

Casey: Yes, so I can certainly see the wisdom of saying, “Iowa is going to be a train wreck, but I can win New Hampshire and win convincingly and go from there.” If I were he, I would think about the listening tour. I would think about making a speech to say, “Okay, look, I’m going to say this one time,” and make it short, make it sweet, and not drill down about what I think about Jesus Christ versus anybody else, but simply say, “Here are my values. Here is

my faith.” The other piece of this—and he can’t do this by himself—is try to mainstream Mormonism. You know, there certainly is a narrative to be played up there, to say, “Mormons run multi-national corporations. We govern states.” He can’t say it in so many words, but he has to convince voters that Mormons are not weird.

I would think that there are plenty of prominent Mormons in this country for whom helping Mormonism become more mainstream is a benefit to everybody, and not just to Mitt Romney, the candidate who happens to be Mormon.

Prince: There is a small but growing strain within Mormonism that wants to do that. We are beginning to get it.

Casey: Oh, I have no doubt, I have no trouble believing that. And I think that’s a win for everybody. I really do. But that’s a long-term project. That’s going to occupy the Church for decades to come. You can’t just flip a switch and run an ad campaign and suddenly transform the perception. That’s a long-term project, but the building blocks are there. You do have Mormons who are successful in public life. You do have Mormons who are successful in business. You have Mormon congregations salted through the entire population.

Prince: And I think that Harry Reid’s presence in the Senate is no small victory.

Casey: Oh, I think it’s huge!

Prince: And that will have a residual beneficial effect.

Casey: Absolutely. There the plausible argument is, “Look, we’ve got leaders in both political parties.” I noticed a news item the other day that Harry cancelled some kind of speaking engagement in Las Vegas.

Prince: Yes, because Mormons threatened to demonstrate in front of the church.

Casey: That’s right. Well, it was very interesting to see that Orrin Hatch and other Republicans—political types—said: “This is not right. He is an honorable man. Now I may disagree with him politically but he is a real Mormon. He’s a devout Mormon. He’s an honorable man, and this is not what Mormonism’s about.” What

really impressed me was to see the Republican, Mormon voices that spoke up and said, "This is not a good thing."

Prince: Yes. We've got some housecleaning to do.

Casey: Yes.

Prince: You talk about a decades-long process. It may be that there is not a viable Mormon presidential candidate until that decades-long process has run its course. I said at your presentation at the Newseum, "Is Mitt Romney our Al Smith?" He may be.

Casey: He may be.

Prince: It may take one or two or more generations before this becomes enough of a non-issue that there is a possibility of a Mormon being elected. I don't think there's a chance in the world right now that Romney could be elected.

Casey: It's hard to see. It's really hard to see. And that's got to be galling and infuriating to Mitt Romney. He could win the nomination and then lose the election, and then he does literally become the Al Smith. People might then say, "We're not going to do Mormon again, because look what happens when you do a Mormon candidate." I think it would be absolutely tragic if that's the lesson that gets generated. There are going to be Mormon politicians post-Mitt Romney, and I think that's where the hope is—that at some point it becomes second nature. We want people to wonder: "Why would it be a problem to be a Mormon running for national office?"

Prince: Since Utah is always going to have Mormon senators, it's likely that we will see other presidential candidates who are Mormons.

Casey: Mitt Romney was governor of Massachusetts, and that's an added advantage he carries—that he is not a Utah political product.

Prince: He could have stayed there after the Olympics, and he was weighing that. "Do I run for governor of Utah or Massachusetts?" He made the right call.

Casey: Oh, he made the right call. Absolutely. I think to get a Mormon from somewhere other than the West is potentially a huge political advantage. But I don't envy him. I think he is in a tough

political position. He's actually got a more plausible national narrative than he does in his own party. I think he can run as a businessman. I think he can run as a centrist, a fixer-upper kind of politician. I just don't know that that's going to win you the nomination in the Republican Party of 2012, where it seems to be a race to the bottom about who can be the most obnoxious and the most anti-Obama.

Prince: There's a sequel to this. Whether or not Mitt becomes president, there's a book there.

Notes

1. Richard M. Nixon, *Six Crises* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962), 421.
2. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 129.
3. Shaun A. Casey, *The Making of a Catholic President: Kennedy vs. Nixon 1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 41.
4. Jana Riess and Christopher Kimball Bigelow, *Mormonism for Dummies* (New York: Wiley Publishers, 2005).
5. Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).
6. For the complete text of Romney's speech, see <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16969460> (accessed May 5, 2011).