

**Richard M. Steiner Oral History Interview—JFK #1, 2/11/1966**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Richard Morrow Steiner  
**Interviewer:** Charles T. Morrissey  
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**Biographical Note**

Steiner, Richard M.; Minister at the First Unitarian Church in Portland, Oregon (1934-1965). This interview focuses on Steiner's original apprehensions about having a Catholic president in the White House, his initial impressions of John F. Kennedy (JFK), and his eventual endorsement and admiration for JFK, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

RICHARD M. STEINER

February 11, 1966  
Portland Hilton, Portland, Oregon

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEINER: Edith Green invited Harold Glen Brown, minister of the First Christian Church, my associate minister, Fred Lewis, and I to a breakfast on the morning of May 20th, 1960. This was the morning of the primary. We, of course, accepted the invitation though Mrs. Green knew that I was, in a sense, not very sympathetic to President, then John F. Kennedy's candidacy because of his Catholicism. One must remember that this was in the days before Pope John, who really changed the image of the Catholic Church. And I think, of course, that President Kennedy helped to change the image of the Roman Catholic Church.

The breakfast was called for about 9 or 9:15 at the Sheraton Hotel. We were ushered into a private dining room on the second floor, and we waited there for a very few minutes when Mr. Kennedy came in looking exceedingly tired and, I thought, abstracted in the sense that he really wasn't all there. He must have been bone weary. He was on his way; he was leaving then for Idaho for another primary, I assumed, not waiting in Portland for the results. He asked us to question him. He ate very little. I suspected he had breakfast in his room.

He asked us to ask him any questions that we thought we'd like to ask him, but I felt a touch of resentment in him that

the religious issue should be raised again. But he answered our questions disarmingly and well-phrased with certain sentiments regarding the separation of church and state, placing the Constitution above any religious convictions which he might have. We, of course, were having our breakfast, and he hardly ate at all.

I had anticipated seeing him as urbane, and rested, but, as I said before, he was obviously much worn, and I thought to myself, "Why does the man put himself through this kind of performance to be President of the United State? It's all wrong." My most vivid recollection of him was of a man utterly weary and fatigued, and an attitude of why must I go through this song and dance again to please Mrs. Green -- because I think she was extremely anxious for our support. Harold Glen Brown was her minister, but she was always very friendly to me, and when I questioned him on the subject, of course, of how he could separate his religion from the demands of his office, he was, I thought, quite open. When he said that he would not let his religion stand in the way of his constitutional prerogatives anything that had to do, for example, if we wanted to get any national birth control legislation, or export birth control to the foreign countries would he stand in the way.

And as I said before, I was a little unhappy about his attitude that he would let the Constitution stand in front of his religion because I as a clergyman would expect loyalty to religious convictions to take precedence over political considerations, and I used the phrase political considerations in the very best sense of the word. But he spoke of Mr. Nixon's pacifism, his Quakerism, I should say, rather than his pacifism. He was sure that Nixon would not let his membership in the Society of Friends stand in his way. But I had always felt that Nixon was a pretty poor Quaker, and I had always felt that John F. Kennedy was a very good Catholic.

MORRISSEY: Did you put this point to Senator Kennedy about your feeling that political consideration should not override religious convictions?

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STEINER: No, I didn't put it to him that way. I was trying.... The man was so tired, I felt desperately sorry for him. It wasn't until he made the statement to the Ministerial Association in Houston, Texas, which I thought was an excellent and well-reasoned statement, that I began to come over to his side. This, of course, was before the Convention, before he had been nominated when we met him there. I was convinced then of his absolute sincerity, and I wrote and told Mrs. Green that I would, that I had taken away my... [Interruption]

Well, as I was saying, his statement to us was, of course, later amplified at Houston, Texas, before the Ministerial Association of that city, a statement which convinced me of his complete sincerity and then of course, the TV debates with Nixon really clinched it. And that's at that time that I wrote to Mrs. Green altering my position. That's about it. If you have any questions you'd like to ask, I'd be happy to answer them.

MORRISSEY: From a political viewpoint why do you suppose this breakfast was put off until the morning of the primary in Oregon?

STEINER: I haven't the slightest idea. I think it was with considerable self-confidence that he would receive the nomination. I had been interviewed before, and alone, a year before the primary here by Mrs. Green and, I think Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] and, I think, O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] -- but I'm not sure of the second man -- who wanted my support for his candidacy. This took place in my study, and I declined to give it because I had real anxieties about a Roman Catholic in the White House, anxieties which the events of history have proven to be groundless, and I'm very happy to say so.

MORRISSEY: Had you or any of the other two ministers present for this breakfast spoken out publicly about the issue of a Catholic candidate?

STEINER: Yes, I had done so a year before, and this was as a result of this sermon which I think got some publicity in Portland that I was called upon by

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Sorensen and Mrs. Green and, I think, O'Brien. And they were trying to persuade me to alter my position, and I declined at that time to be persuaded. But, of course, I grew to admire President Kennedy greatly, and my views of the Roman Catholic Church have been greatly modified. The fact of the matter is that at the time of Kennedy's death, the church was packed, and I said at the beginning of my sermon in to him that if anyone had said that I would be personally grieved at the death of someone of what I long considered an alien faith, I would have to say that I felt a great sense of personal loss as I think did most people in this country..

MORRISSEY: After this breakfast meeting did the Senator correspond with you?

STEINER: No, I don't think I've ever had any direct communication with him. He was very cordial but tired. I felt so sorry for him. I don't know why men do subject themselves to this sort of thing.

MORRISSEY: Was it your impression that he was a serious student of this topic of church-state relations, or do you feel that he was primed?

STEINER: I don't know whether he was a serious student of it or not. I really can't answer that question. I got nothing from our conversation that would seem to me to have come from any of the hierarchy as to what independence he might show as President of the United States. This was the great fear, and I think that it proved to be a groundless fear, but it was a fear that was endemic among Protestants that a Roman Catholic in the White House would have the Pope sitting there and giving orders. But my view was not as extreme as that.

I preached a year before on why I would be opposed to a Catholic in the White House, but I didn't make any adjudication as to the Pope's influence upon the President of the United States. But I think that there were a good many social issues in the United States that the Roman Catholic Church was pretty adamant about, particularly birth control, that made me feel

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that it would be unwise for a man in the policy-making position such as the President of the United States to be beholden to the views of his church. But on the other hand, I would expect that any individual who had a deep religious faith to live by it. I always respected John F. Kennedy, but I had apprehensions.

MORRISSEY: I'd like to delve into one point a little more thoroughly. What was the difference between his presentation to your group that caused you to swing over?

STEINGER: Well, in the first place, he was very tired, and I knew that he was itching to get away -- he was going to Boise -- and we didn't press him, and it was not a full statement; it was not a written statement. It was not a statement that went in.... As I remember, the Houston statement went into an analysis of how it was possible for him to be a good Roman Catholic and yet be a good American citizen at the same time, and who could place the interests of his country above the interests of his church without being disloyal to his church. I don't think.... I would doubt very much if he would in conscience have gone as far as President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] has gone in terms of public discussion of the birth control issue. But I think that there were so many other issues involved in his election, and these became very minor warts on the body politic.

MORRISSEY: Did you announce your support for him in the campaign against Nixon?

STEINER: Yes, I did.

MORRISSEY: Did this persuade some others in Portland that had doubts about the religious issue?

STEINER: I don't know. I haven't any idea. To say that I don't have any political influence is to be properly modest. I don't think I swayed a lot of votes by saying I had decided to vote for Kennedy.

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MORRISSEY: I was wondering if many members of your church ever commented either shortly afterwards as to why they voted as they did in regard to the religious issue?



STEINER: No. Of course, you know, our church is one of complete, absolute freedom, and I'm always surprised when people ask me for my political views and seem to take them seriously. I have a church that's... I don't know why we're wasting tape on this particular remark, but we had a meeting the other night, a large congregational meeting because our church burned down, and we were beginning a campaign to raise money for it. And the toastmaster, one of the members of the church -- and I think this is probably apocryphal -- said that our church was one in which the Republicans support it, the Democrats run it, and the LRY enjoy it -- that's our Liberal Religious Youth. We do have in our church a wide spectrum of political views, but I've been here now for over thirty years, and I've survived as a Democrat. So I don't run down any political influence I might have. I know that that sermon, much to my regret, that I preached a year before his candidacy was widely circulated in the state. Hundreds and hundreds of copies were made of it. So that I felt duty-bound to make public my changed point of view.

MORRISSEY: I think that just about covers my questions.

STEINER: I think it does, too, unless I can think of something else, but I don't think I can.

MORRISSEY: Well, thank you very much.

STEINER: You're very welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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