

Kerry belatedly speaks of faith: Joins other Democrats in describing impact on political visions

by [John Dart](#) in the [October 17, 2006](#) issue

John Kerry, reticent about his religious beliefs during his losing 2004 presidential campaign against George W. Bush, poured out his testimony last month—not to fellow Catholics but to an evangelical audience in Malibu, California.

The Massachusetts senator said he prayed hard while serving in the Vietnam War, but struggled then and later with the problem of evil. “For 12 years I wandered in the wilderness, went through a divorce,” he said in a September 18 lecture at Pepperdine University, an ocean-view campus with a Churches of Christ heritage.

“Then, suddenly and movingly, I had a revelation about the connection between the work I was doing as a public servant and my formative teachings,” Kerry said. “The long and short of it is today we [Catholics] are far more Bible-focused and knowledgeable based on several clear principles, chief among them the centrality of Jesus.”

In 2004, a handful of Catholic bishops suggested that Kerry shouldn’t receive communion because his support of abortion rights was at odds with church teaching. Although he attended mass and fielded questions about Catholic teachings during the campaign, Kerry rarely talked to mainline or evangelical Protestant groups—limiting his church-related appearances to black Protestant congregations.

With his recent speech, Kerry joined other prominent Democrats who have articulated how their religious beliefs relate to their political visions.

Bob Casey, trying to unseat Senator Rick Santorum in Pennsylvania, told a Catholic University crowd on September 15 that government should reflect the Catholic principle of “affirming the dignity of every human being.” In June, Senator Barack Obama (D., Ill.) told a rapt audience of having “knelt at the foot of the cross” and

having felt a calling straight from God.

In his 3,650-word speech, Kerry said he had “learned that if I didn’t fill in the picture” of his faith “myself, others would draw the caricature for me.”

One of his favorite Bible passages, he said, is Mark 10:35-45, in which “James and John are trying to become the first political appointees in the New Testament . . . [with] special favors for their proximity to power.” Jesus’ words in Mark, “The Son of man came not to be served but to serve,” had a profound effect on him, Kerry said, along with Matthew 25:34.

Kerry cited ways that Americans can serve, such as supporting the ONE campaign to combat global poverty, or speaking up against genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan and for environmental concerns. Opposing sides in abortion debates should “unite and accept the responsibility of making abortion rare by focusing on prevention and supporting pregnant women and new parents,” he said, while also recommending tax credits for adoptive parents.

Noting that the number of abortions declined during the Clinton presidency, Kerry said, “Unfortunately, the economic policies of these last six years increase the pressure on women with unplanned pregnancies to seek abortions.” He also criticized Bush, contending that a nation risks losing moral authority “when an administration lobbies for torture.”

Among Democrats who advised the 2004 Kerry campaign, Shaun Casey, a social ethicist at Wesley Theological Seminary, said, “I think he has done a lot of listening in evangelical and Catholic circles after the election, and I think this speech is the fruit of having listened to some of those voices,” Casey said. “It would have been great had he done this earlier.”

Some Republicans, meanwhile, told Religion News Service that they see Kerry’s testimony as flawed.

Republican National Committee spokesperson Josh Holmes said Kerry’s concern to reduce the number of abortions rings hollow as long as he supports so-called partial-birth abortion. Also, he said Kerry’s “unclear” stance on traditional marriage further underlines a disconnect between him and religious voters.

“John Kerry would like to make himself anew in his characterizing of his own religious beliefs, but that’s just not the issue,” Holmes said. “The issue is how his

decisions and voting records represent what it is that he stands for.”