

Getting religion: Where Democrats have failed

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The Democrats have a religion problem, and it is not just that presidential candidate John Kerry has run afoul of the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church because of his support of abortion rights and gay civil unions. According to a recent *Time* magazine poll, 59 percent of those who consider themselves “very religious” support President Bush, while only 35 percent of them support Kerry. Conversely, of those who are not religious, 69 percent favor Kerry, compared to 22 percent who support Bush.

Democrats are in danger of becoming the party of the nonreligious. In a country where religion is part of the mainstream, this is clearly a political liability. The deeper problem is that Democrats have failed to articulate how many of their trademark concerns can be rooted in religious convictions.

Providing a safety net for the poor, health insurance to the uninsured, a living wage to workers, protection for the environment—these are not inherently secular concerns. But the Democrats often seem intent on presenting them that way. Candidates and party operatives appear skittish about religion.

Consider the recent treatment of Mara Vanderslice, who was hired by the Kerry campaign as its director of religious outreach. Her pedigree made her ideal for the job. She grew up a Unitarian, then studied at Quaker-affiliated Earlham College in Indiana where she was converted to Christianity through an evangelical Bible study group. She is now active in the United Church of Christ.

Last month a right-wing Catholic organization took it upon itself to attack Vanderslice’s social activism. In an op-ed piece, it claimed she is better suited to work for Fidel Castro than John Kerry.

Rather than defend Vanderslice’s activities and her role in the campaign, the Kerry camp has reportedly backed away from her and even limited her access to the

press—as if religion is too perilous a topic to touch. It has taken the advice of Robert Drinan, Catholic priest, professor at Georgetown University and a former congressman, who said Democrats should “steer clear of talking about religion.” This is a tactical and substantive mistake. It leaves the mistaken impression that the Republicans have a monopoly on religion.

Democrats should remember that their only successful presidential candidates in the past 30 years have been Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton—people who spoke easily and naturally about their faith, and whose faith informed their political convictions.

By some accounts, Kerry takes his Catholic faith seriously. He and his wife regularly attend mass. He should be willing to talk about what the faith means to him.