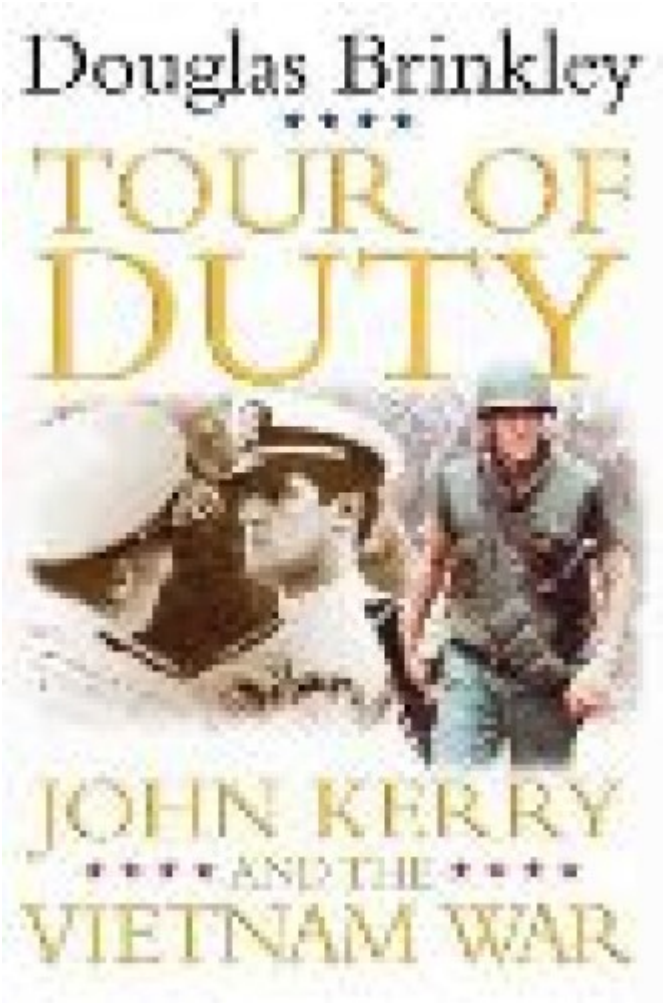
Pursuing Kerry

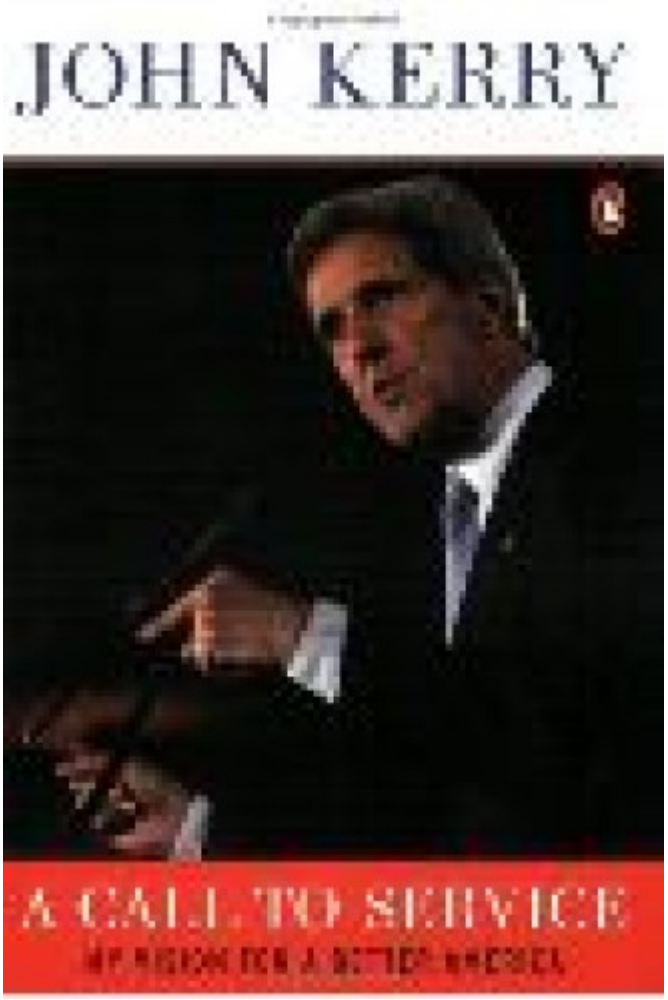
By Gary Dorrien in the August 24, 2004 issue

In Review



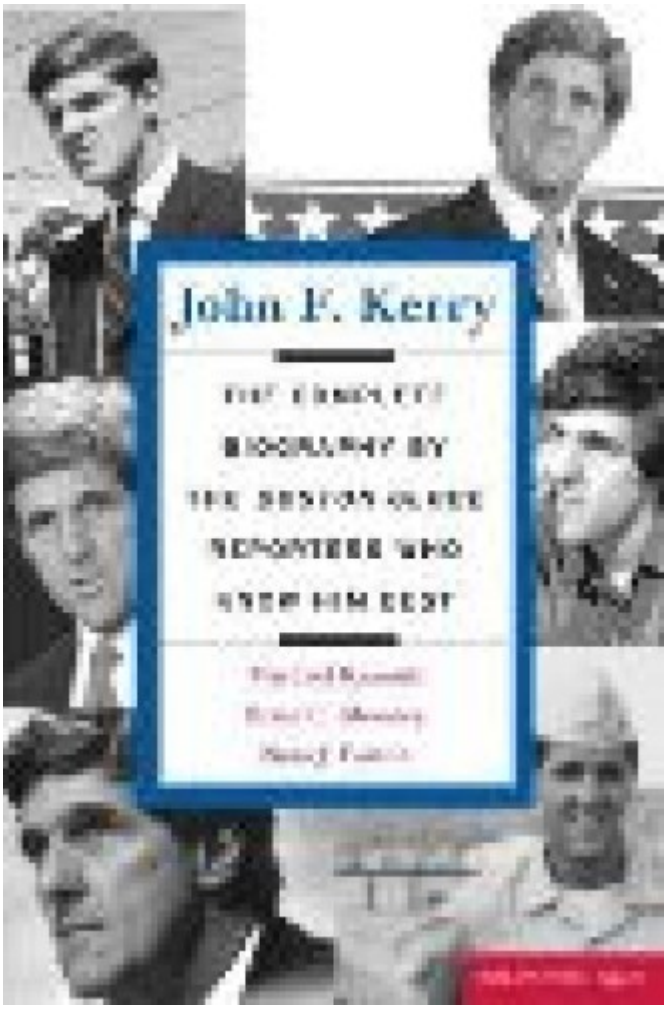
Tour of Duty: John Kerry and the Vietnam War

Douglas Brinkley
HarperCollins



A Call to Service: My Vision of a Better America

John Kerry
Viking



John F. Kerry: The Complete Biography by the Boston Globe Reporters Who Know Him Best

Michael Kranish, Brian C. Mooney and Nina J. Easton
PublicAffairs

Complaints about John Kerry's "religion problem" are of a piece with complaints about his personality. Kerry is emotionally cool and rhetorically uninspiring. He does not emote religious feeling—or much of any feeling. Political commentator Clarence Page observed that Kerry shows "an almost painful reluctance" to talk about his religion (*Newsday*, January 13). When pressed, Kerry will mention that he served as an altar boy, considered becoming a priest and wore a rosary around his neck in Vietnam, but in the next breath explain that New Englanders "tend to be more personal in our faith and not throw it at people."

The problem, if it is one, is a matter of style and partly a function of class. It does not necessarily indicate a lack of feeling or religious conviction. Kerry has an air of privileged inaccessibility because he grew up privileged and socially isolated. His reticence is not restricted to religion; it's a struggle for him to be self-revealing on any subject. Though Kerry made a national splash as a war resister, even his friends couldn't get him to talk about his war experiences.

For many years the *Boston Globe* complained that Kerry's elusiveness made him something of a mystery to the Massachusetts voters who elected him. It didn't help that Kerry had only one tough election in his Senate career—in 1996, when he was challenged by Massachusetts Governor William Weld. The *Globe* decided not to rest on its 30 years of reporting about him. Reporters Michael Kranish, Brian C. Mooney and Nina J. Easton dug into his background and career. They knew more about him than anyone else, they reasoned, but still didn't know him very well. At the same time, historian Douglas Brinkley completed a study of Kerry's experience in Vietnam that drew on Kerry's letters, journals and notebooks.

With these books, the first full biography of Kerry and the first thorough account of his war experience, we know a great deal more about Kerry. And so does Kerry. Until the *Globe* reporters investigated his background, Kerry had believed that his paternal grandmother was probably Jewish and his paternal grandfather came from an Austrian line of Kerrys. Last year he learned that both his paternal grandparents were Jewish.

Massachusetts voters took it for granted that their Catholic senator with the Celtic-sounding name had an Irish background. Even Kerry's friends assumed that he was Irish on his father's side and Boston Brahmin on his mother's side. Kerry never claimed that he was Irish, and on the rare occasions that he was directly asked about it he acknowledged that his father came from Austria. But he benefited politically from the impression that he was a cross between the Irish-American Kennedys and the Yankee Brahmins, and he did not go out of his way to correct it, especially not at the St. Patrick's Day breakfasts he attended.

The Brahmin part is true. Kerry's family tree on his mother's side includes the famous Winthrop and Forbes families which stretch back to the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The wedding of Kerry's maternal grandparents, James Grant Forbes and Margaret Winthrop, was treated by New England newspapers as a royal union of legendary families.

Their daughter, Rosemary Forbes, met Richard Kerry at a sculptor's studio in Saint Briac, France. Richard was a graduate of Phillips Academy and Yale University, a student at Harvard Law School and an accomplished pilot. His father, Frederick A. Kerry, made a fortune reorganizing retail giants such as Sears, Roebuck and Company.

That much John Kerry knew. But in January 2003 the three *Boston Globe* reporters told Kerry a fuller story: that Frederick A. Kerry was the son of a Jewish Austrian beer maker named Benedict Kohn, that Frederick had married Ida Löwe from Budapest, that Frederick changed his name from Kohn to Kerry in 1900 to escape Vienna's rampant anti-Semitism, and that in 1901 Fritz and Ida Kerry were baptized as Roman Catholics. Four years later they emigrated to the United States, where Fritz Kerry made and lost three fortunes. The third loss, in shoe manufacturing, was apparently too much to bear; the *Globe* reporters showed Kerry that his grandfather had made front-page headlines by shooting himself in the washroom of the Copley Plaza Hotel in Boston.

The disclosures about his Jewish background were amazing to Kerry: "This is incredible stuff. I think it is more than interesting; it is a revelation." He declared that the news about his Jewish background did not diminish his strong identification with the Catholic faith. Kerry allowed that the *Globe* investigation offered a "new personal lesson about diversity and the American mosaic." More personally, it was also a reminder "of how so much of America's history is buried."

In a new way Kerry learned and was reminded that he had never belonged anywhere. The only place that had ever felt like home to him was the boarding school milieu of privilege and wealth, but Kerry didn't quite belong to that world either. His family had access and connections to the ruling class, but was not very wealthy, living on Richard Kerry's government salary. An aunt had paid his boarding school tuition; years later, between his marriages, Kerry struggled to make ends meet; now he realized that his grandfather and father had buried the family's ethnic identity.

His father, Richard, had trained as an army pilot, but came down with tuberculosis and was sent to an army clinic in Denver. That's where John Kerry was born in 1943. Richard and Rosemary Kerry considered the Bay State their home—he had grown up in Brookline—so they returned to the state after John was born, bought a large farmhouse in Millis, and lived off inheritance money for several years.

Richard Kerry sorely regretted that he missed his chance to fight in the war. Seeking another opportunity to serve his country, in 1950 he joined the Office of the General Counsel for the Navy, moved his family to Washington, D.C., hooked on with the State Department the following year, and quickly ascended the career ladder. In 1954 Richard became U.S. attorney for Berlin, moved the family to Germany, and started sending John to boarding schools. The first was the Institut Montana Zugerberg in Switzerland; the second was the Fessenden School in Newton, Massachusetts; the third was St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire.

Kerry was lonely at all of them, especially in Switzerland, but he adapted to the elite milieu of his classmates and excelled in academics and athletics. At St. Paul's, where he played hockey and soccer, he formed a close friendship with Richard Pershing, an ebullient personality and grandson of the famous World War I General John Pershing.

Kerry later recalled: "I was always moving on and saying goodbye. It kind of had an effect on you, it steeled you, there wasn't a lot of permanence and roots. For kids, not the greatest thing. I certainly didn't want that for my kids." Elsewhere he recalled that his parents were loving, caring and supportive, but emotionally and geographically distant.

In 2001 Kerry admitted that he "felt a pang" at realizing that political friends like J. Joseph Moakley and William M. Bulger drew emotional strength from their longstanding ties to South Boston: "One of my regrets is that I didn't share that kind of neighborhood. I didn't know that. My dad was in the foreign service. We moved around a lot."

At Yale, Kerry played soccer, learned to fly, and made it into the secret society Skull and Bones. His studious Yale record presents a marked contrast to that of George W. Bush. He was widely viewed at the time as a future president; some of his friends played a kazoo version of "Hail to the Chief" whenever he appeared. Kerry had a few detractors at Yale who found him overly serious and mindful of his image, but for the most part he was genuinely respected.

Kerry's undergraduate years coincided with the early period of America's intervention in Vietnam. Richard Kerry, a staunch critic of the Vietnam war, later recalled that for three years his son was "gung-ho" for the war. John F. Kerry was a Kennedy-style liberal on social justice, racial integration, patriotic feeling and duty to country. President Kennedy's call to "ask what you can do for your country" rang

loudly for Kerry and his friends Richard Pershing (who made it into the military despite terrible eyesight), Fred Smith (who later founded Federal Express) and David Thorne (whose twin sister Kerry later married). He and Thorne joined the navy, Pershing got into the 101st Airborne Division, and Smith served with the marines.

After 16 months of training—the last nine on the *USS Gridley*, a guided-missile frigate—Kerry headed for the Gulf of Tonkin in February 1968. On February 26, while departing from Pearl Harbor, Kerry was doing watch duty on the bridge of the *Gridley* when an officer asked if he had a friend named Pershing. Kerry's cherished friend had been killed in the Tet offensive. In a moment, the war that Kerry enlisted for no longer existed. He wrote home to his parents: "I am empty, bitter, angry and desperately lost. . . . With the loss of Persh something has gone out of me."

His first tour of Pacific duty lasted five months, and frustrated him greatly. As an ensign Kerry managed the *Gridley's* deck work, overseeing the seamen, working the line and anchor, and maintaining the ship's appearance. For his second tour he was determined to find something less tedious. Securing an assignment with a Swift boat, he got far more adventure than he sought. Kerry took his Swift boat training in September 1968 just as Admiral Elmo Zumwalt Jr. took command of naval forces in Vietnam and fulfilled his promise to get the navy deeper into the war.

The high-speed Swift boats had loud engines, and Zumwalt sent them into the Mekong Delta to draw enemy fire. Kerry led scores of dangerous raids along the delta's rivers and canals, drawing enemy fire that allowed him to pinpoint the location of Vietcong fighters.

Kerry's patrician air stuck out dramatically. Some soldiers were put off by his Kennedyesque ambitions; nearly all of them respected his bravery and leadership. Some of them later recalled that he seemed fearless. Working the same web of rivers and canals that the French navy had found impenetrable, Kerry aggressively probed for Vietcong fighters, sparked firefights with the enemy, and roared away with guns blazing, never losing a crewmate. He was awarded three Purple Hearts for war wounds, won the Bronze Star for saving a drowning soldier under fire, and won the Silver Star for beaching his boat during an ambush and killing a Vietcong sniper.

His remarkable letters, notebooks and journals, which are skillfully presented in Brinkley's excellent book, show Kerry's immense inner struggle to serve his country in a war that he increasingly rejected. In an anguished letter to Julia Thorne during

his first tour he wrote: “I do feel strong and despite emptiness and waste, I still have hope and confidence. There is a beast in me that keeps pushing me on saying Johnny you can’t let go because of this—Johnny you find some sense from this—Johnny you are too strong to stop now—something keeps me going harder than before. Judy, if I do nothing else in my life I will never stop trying to bring people to the conviction of how wasteful and asinine is a human expenditure of this kind.”

A journal entry during his second tour questioned the politics of fighting in someone else’s civil war: “I asked how, if our job was ostensibly interdiction of the movement of supplies, they could justify offensive actions such as we had been sent on—attempts to draw the enemy into ambush and then destroy his ambush capability. He said that the purpose was to show the American flag—an answer that seemed very strange to me when I considered that it was the Vietnamese flag that we were supposed to be fighting for. Why didn’t we show their flag, or better yet let them run up the rivers and show their own flag?”

In the middle of a firefight during which, as usual, Kerry couldn’t see who he was shooting at, he briefly checked out: “I thought about what was happening in New York at that very moment, and if people really felt that I was doing something worthwhile while they went down to Schraftt’s and had another ice cream sundae or while some fat little old man who made another million in the past months off defense contracts was charging another $100 call girl to his expense account.” Sometimes he checked out in a second-person voice: “You wish that you could be transformed into that itinerant nothingness that lets you watch the world pass by with all its gross trimmings but which demands nothing of you.”

Kerry’s third Purple Heart was his ticket home, six months before his second tour was scheduled to end; he did not apply for a waiver to stay. He had seen enough of a war that disgusted him, as he made clear in his dramatic testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in April 1971: “How do you ask a man to be the last man to die in Vietnam? How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?”

Kerry made a name for himself as a war protester. The Nixon administration tried repeatedly to dig up dirt on him, but failed. Others protested that Kerry impugned his country by claiming that American soldiers committed war crimes in Vietnam. Kerry replied that “it is really only with the utmost consideration that we pose this question.”

When pressed on what he had personally seen or done, Kerry explained that he had not seen or committed atrocities. But like many others, he had attacked Vietnamese in free-fire zones, employed harassment and interdiction fire, and torched the houses of noncombatants during search-and-destroy missions. These actions were contrary to the Hague and Geneva conventions, he emphasized.

Kerry had no interest in indicting large numbers of American soldiers, including himself, for war crimes; on the other hand he could not pretend that war crimes were not committed as a matter of policy. That contention stirred intense resentments against him that are still smoldering. Others who supported his politics judged that he was overly self-regarding and opportunistic.

Throughout his career Kerry has been dogged by the latter charge. During his peace movement days, the *Doonesbury* cartoon strip tagged him as a self-promoting self-admirer who soaked up adulation and enjoyed his own eloquence. Resentments about his fame, class status, and politics caused him to resign from Vietnam Veterans Against the War. In 1972 he took a pounding as a carpetbagger in an unsuccessful run for Congress. Kerry's marriage to Thorne caused more murmuring about ambition because of her wealth and New England heritage. In the 1970s he drew on his wife's money to go to law school and then to build a career as a prosecutor and trial lawyer.

In 1980 Thorne fell into depression and the marriage disintegrated. Thorne and Kerry maintained appearances during his 1982 campaign for lieutenant governor of Massachusetts, but she dissolved the marriage all but formally, explaining that she needed to be on her own.

Two years later, Kerry was elected to the U.S. Senate. Politically, he was known for his energetic commitment to the Nuclear Freeze Movement and his opposition to the Reagan administration's policies in Central America; personally, the image of opportunism clung to him. Kerry admitted to a reporter that he was probably brash during his war protester days, but that was long past: "Why do people dwell on that so?" He told another reporter that "the perception of me as a showboat has persisted by virtue of the strong image people have of 1971 and 1972, which has proven indelible." Kerry's mother rallied to his defense, insisting that "he's a very warm, caring person"—but even she added, "despite possibly an outer appearance of being self-centered and ambitious."

Kerry's early years in the Senate were difficult. His estranged wife was depressed and sometimes suicidal; the couple struggled to be good parents to their two daughters; and he was broke. His friends had to provide places for him to sleep.

As senator, Kerry opposed the gulf war in 1991, attended the UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and supported the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1993. It was at the Earth Summit that he became friends with Teresa Heinz, the widow of Pennsylvania Senator H. John Heinz III and heir to the Heinz family fortune. Kerry and Heinz began dating in 1994 and were married in May 1995. By all accounts his marriage to Heinz, an outgoing philanthropist and environmentalist, has made him more joyful and at ease. It also put the Heinz fortune at the service of Kerry's presidential ambitions.

Kerry's marriage to Heinz and his request for a church annulment of his first marriage forced him to be more forthcoming about his religious views. In a 2003 interview he stressed that he and Heinz attend mass regularly and believe in the separation of church and state. "I believe in not wearing [faith] on my sleeve," he asserted. "I have my obvious, clear differences with respect to some of the *liturgy*; there are other parts that are quite stirring and meaningful." What aspects of the liturgy were objectionable—the Kyrie? The Nicene Creed? He did not explain. He did explain that he opposed the church's requirement of clerical celibacy.

When he asked the Catholic Church to annul his first marriage, Julia Thorne responded to a query from the church by saying: "I regard your ecclesiastical investigation as hypocritical, antifamily and dishonest. I cannot look my children in the eyes or stand before them with integrity and know in my heart that I have contributed in any way to a process that invalidates and nullifies the union from which they were created." But Thorne did not contest the annulment proceeding; later she explained that though she didn't recognize its validity she wished the best for Kerry.

Kerry's campaign book, *A Call to Service*, takes a pass at each of his ostensible problems. On his reputed aloofness, he says that only Washington insiders find him that way, not the "colleagues, friends, and constituents I have spent time with when I'm away from Washington." Acknowledging his undeniably privileged background, he emphasizes that he comes from "a background built on a foundation of duty and service, which my family considered a responsibility." On his regular-guy status, he boasts of his Harley-Davidson motorcycle and reports that he loves to ski and skate

and still fantasizes about launching a professional hockey league for seniors.

On religion Kerry offers a credible statement of personal and public faith. “I am a believing and practicing Catholic, married to another believing and practicing Catholic.” To Kerry, being Catholic has three important socioethical implications. The first, which follows from the commandment to love God with all one’s heart and mind, is that there are absolute standards of right and wrong: “They may not always be that clear, but they exist, and it is our duty to honor them as best we can.”

The second, which follows from the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves, is the moral duty to pursue equal rights and social justice. This imperative “is not simply a matter of political fashion or economic and social theory but a direct command from God,” Kerry says. “From this perspective ‘Christian’ bigotry and intolerance are nothing less than a direct affront to God’s law and a rejection of God’s love.”

The third imperative is to protect minorities, including religious minorities. Kerry observes that American Catholics are distinctive within Catholicism for having long supported and benefited from the principle of the separation of church and state. The first Catholic president, John F. Kennedy, did much to eliminate the issue of religious affiliation in American politics, and Kerry thinks the U.S. must not retreat from that achievement. Later in the book Kerry calls for “full citizenship rights” for gay and lesbian Americans, remarking that “as a Christian, I believe that this and every other form of discrimination is opposed to the spirit of the Bible.” In 1996 he was one of only 14 senators to vote against the Defense of Marriage Act, which Kerry called “fundamentally ugly, fundamentally political, and fundamentally flawed.”

These statements plainly express a progressive Christian perspective. They make a credible claim to summarize what Kerry believes religiously and acts upon.

Many progressive Christians remain skittish about Kerry because he supported the war against Iraq. They suspect he suffered an attack of opportunism—finding it easier to imagine Kerry cal- culating he couldn’t run for president if he opposed the war than to believe Kerry thought the war was right.

Kerry’s position on the war, I believe, was terribly wrong, but that does not erase his longtime advocacy of international cooperation, collective security, and peacemaking. Whatever the truth may be about his decision to support the war, he

speaks straight out of the social gospel tradition when he speaks about the role of religion in his life or his commitment to social justice.

Because of his pro-choice stance on abortion, a few Catholic bishops have declared that Kerry should not present himself for communion at any Catholic church in their diocese. James P. Gannon, former editor of the *Des Moines Register*, has argued that Kerry has no right to call himself a Catholic (*USA Today*, June 2). In the context of these challenges, Kerry laid out his religious commitments on March 28 by speaking at an African-American Baptist church in St. Louis (a city whose archbishop had said Kerry was not welcome at communion): “We see too many people hungry in a country where food is abundant, and too many working parents and their sons and daughters who are sleeping in shelters, when a living wage ought to provide them with a place to live. The scriptures say, ‘What does it profit my brother if someone says he has faith, but does not have works?’”

This declaration was an echo of a campaign appearance that Kerry made at a Roxbury, Massachusetts, Baptist church in 1996, when he confided that he found it very difficult to “sit next to someone who says they’re born again, but votes against child care, votes to cut 12- to 18-year-old kids off Medicaid.”

Conservative Catholics’ refusal to recognize Kerry’s Catholicism runs up against two empirical problems. The first is that American Catholics are as deeply divided about the politics of abortion as the general public. The second is that Kerry is closer than are most Republican Catholics to Catholic positions on capital punishment, economic and social welfare policy, and just war. Should they be read out of the Catholic community too?

The would-be excommunicators need to grapple with the fact that Catholic teaching cuts across the ideologies of American politics, and that Kerry represents a credible and hardly novel way of living the Catholic faith. His Catholicism plays exactly the role in his life that he claims: it is a “bedrock of values” for him that provides a “sureness about who I am.”

Two different claims are getting lumped together in the surge of commentary on Kerry’s religion problem. One is that he doesn’t seem religious; the other is that he is a liberal Christian. The former is a real problem for Kerry and the Democrats. According to a recent *Time* magazine survey, only 7 percent of Americans believe that he is a person of strong religious faith. Kerry cannot win the presidency if he does not change that perception. Kerry has to let Americans see that he has a

religious center, that his faith is important to him, and that Bush is not the only person of faith in the election. This prescription cuts against his nature, but so was his decision to talk about his Vietnam experience.