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The Enigmatic Faith of John F. Kerry

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Christianity Today recently profiled Kerry, looking at his public statements and private religious practices. The magazine had to dig deep in order to find enough material to fill out the article. On the campaign trail, Kerry routinely acknowledges his Roman Catholic identity, though his theological convictions and moral positions are often at odds with the doctrine of his church.

In his campaign manifesto, *A Call to Service: My Vision for a Better America*, Kerry asserts his Catholic identity. "I am a believing and practicing Catholic, married to another believing and practicing Catholic, and being an American Catholic at this particular moment in history has three particular implications for my own point of view as a candidate for the presidency," Kerry explained. He went on to identify these three implications as: an obligation to love God and neighbor, a commitment to equal rights and justice, and an awareness of persecution.

Nevertheless, Kerry's well-known positions on abortion, homosexuality, and a host of other issues place him directly in opposition to the official teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Kerry is resolutely pro-abortion, having voted against every single piece of pro-life legislation that reached the floor during his tenure in the Senate. Most recently, he went out of his way to return to Washington in time to vote against legislation that would protect fetal life. He has opposed a ban on partial-birth abortions, and he has the stalwart support of the nation's abortion-rights movement.

Similarly, groups promoting homosexuality have championed Kerry as the most pro-homosexual presidential candidate in recent history. Kerry has sponsored legislation that would add homosexuality as a protected class in anti-discrimination legislation, and he was one of only fourteen senators to vote against the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996. He claims to oppose same-sex marriage, but endorses civil unions with full marital rights in the law. In other words, he supports same-sex marriage so long as such unions are not called "marriages." Beyond this, he has suggested that as the nation's conscience "evolves" on this issue, same-sex marriage is likely to become a reality anyway.

There can be no question where the Roman Catholic Church stands on these issues. Kerry has openly opposed the Catholic position on these questions, citing the right of individual conscience. Father Richard John Neuhaus, a Catholic theologian close to the Vatican, counters this argument by reminding Senator Kerry that the Canon Law of the Roman Catholic Church denies the right of public officials to sin by rejecting church teaching, and forbids Holy Communion to those who "manifestly persist in grave sin."

In the October 7, 2004 edition of *The New York Times*, reporters Jodi Wilgorn and Bill Keller described the essentially secular character of John Kerry's campaign and political philosophy. The reporters pointed to a town hall forum held this week in New Hampshire, where Senator Kerry, discussing his endorsement of embryonic stem-cell

research, “never uttered the words faith, moral, religion, prayer, conscience, or God, instead conjuring Galileo and other scientists who once drew the wrath of established religion.” In other words, Kerry argued for unrestricted embryonic stem-cell research, directly countering the teaching of his own church and avoiding any reference to the moral dimension of the issue. As Wilgorn and Keller remarked, “It was a typical performance for Mr. Kerry, a Roman Catholic who attends Mass on most Sundays, but has largely avoided discussions of faith throughout a campaign in which Mr. Bush has frequently appealed to religious sensibilities and is trying to raise the Election Day turnout of the evangelical and the orthodox.”

According to the Christianity Today report, Kerry attends mass and receives Communion at the Paulist Center in Boston, which it describes as “quasi-independent of the local hierarchy.” The Paulist Center is a gathering place for liberal Roman Catholics disenchanted with the official church and its positions on political, social, theological, and moral issues. A Boston pastor who leads a church where Kerry has occasionally attended told the magazine that Kerry is someone “who belongs to the secularized elite and shares their allegiance to inclusive theology.” As Michael E. Haynes explained, Kerry sounds like Henry David Thoreau or Ralph Waldo Emerson—hardly orthodox Christians. In a fascinating article and interview published in *The American Windsurfer*, Kerry offered a fascinating glimpse at his inner life and theological convictions.

An avid windsurfer himself, Kerry told the magazine, “I am a believer in the Supreme Being, in God. I believe, without any question in this force that is so much larger and more powerful than anything human beings can conceivably define.”

Nevertheless, Kerry’s comments raise more questions than answers when it comes to the substance of his theological convictions. Take this comment, for example: “I think the more we learn about the universe, the more we learn about black holes and the expansion of the universe and the more we learn about what we don’t know about: our beginnings and—not just of us, but the universe itself, the more I find that people believe in this Supreme Being.” We find God in a black hole?

Kerry went on to explain, “I’m a Catholic, and I practice, but at the same time I have an open-mindedness to many other expressions of spirituality that come through different religions. I’m very respectful and am interested—I find them intriguing.”

Kerry told of visiting Jerusalem some years ago, and being “absolutely fascinated by the 32 or so different branches of Catholicism that were there.” He expressed an interest in understanding the differences between religions “in order to really better understand the politics that grow out of them,” asserting that religion is often a source of political conflict, usually traceable to a “fundamentalism of one entity or another.” Nevertheless, Kerry’s religious musings and investigations have led him far from orthodox Christianity. “I’ve spent some time reading and thinking about it and trying to study it and I’ve arrived at not so much a sense of the differences but a sense of the similarities in so many ways; the value system roots and the linkages between the Torah, the Koran and the Bible and the fundamental story that runs through all of this, that connects us—and really connects all of us.”

Returning to Emerson and Thoreau, Kerry the windsurfer revealed an openness to the worship of nature. As he told the magazine, “I’ve also always been fascinated by the Transcendentalists and Pantheists and others who found these great connections just in nature, in trees, the ponds, the ripples of the wind on the pond, the great feast of nature itself. I think it’s all an expression that grows out of this profound respect people have for those forces that human beings struggle to define and to explain. It’s all a matter of spirituality.” Kerry was willing to press the envelope even farther, arguing that “even atheists and agnostics wind up with some kind of spirituality, maybe begrudgingly acknowledging it here and there, but it’s there.”

What do we make of all this? In the first place, we should understand John Kerry to be a liberal member of the cultural elite whose worldview has been overwhelmingly shaped by secular influences and the preoccupations of the academic elite. Beyond this, Kerry the politician has aligned himself with the left wing of the Democratic Party, taking positions on social issues that have uniformly pleased abortion activists and the homosexual movement, while never apologizing or even explaining for such a blatant violation of Catholic teaching. While he claims Catholic identity on the one hand, he subverts and rejects Catholic moral teaching with the other. He is what conservative Catholics call a “cafeteria Catholic,” identifying with Catholic moral teaching on selected issues of economic and political impact, but aligning himself with the forces that require absolute allegiance—the abortion-rights and gay-rights movements, for example—in order for a candidate

to receive the Democratic Party's nomination for president.

James Carroll, a liberal Boston Globe columnist who, as a Catholic, has called for the Church to abandon its central theological structure, champions Kerry's mutation of Catholicism. According to Carroll, Kerry is not a "renegade Catholic," but one among other liberal Catholics who "understand that moral theology is not a fixed set of answers given once and for all . . . but an ongoing quest for truths that remain allusive." As Carroll further argued, "In the area of sexuality, for example, for which so many hot-button issues arise, it is clear that the human race is undergoing a massive cultural mutation, posing excruciating problems that human beings have never faced before."

In other words, John Kerry is a Catholic who picks and chooses which Catholic doctrines he will accept and which he will reject, and who aligns himself with a worldview that understands morality to be relative to the "massive cultural mutation" that now marks postmodern culture.

The portrait that emerges from a look at John Kerry's statements about faith reveals a man driven by an overwhelmingly secular worldview. He, like so many others in his generation, has formed his own "do it yourself" form of religion, picking and choosing among doctrines and accepting alternative worldviews directly at odds with his "self-identified faith," without any sense of cognitive dissonance. The very fact that his most revealing statements about his faith have come in an interview with a magazine called *The American Windsurfer* tells us a great deal in itself. When he cites the Transcendentalists and Pantheists as sources of inspiration, he tells us more than he probably intends. When it comes to orthodox Christianity, there is no wind in Senator Kerry's sail.

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