

Are Catholics Christians?

In one sense, it sounds like an awfully dumb question to ask “Are Catholics Christians?” It is a matter of historical record that the Catholic Church is the world’s longest living institutional testimony to Christianity. But as the sociologist W.I. Thomas once said, “perception is reality,” and on that count, it may very well be that Catholics are not Christians.

When sociologists are asked who is a Jew, the textbook reply is, “someone who considers himself a Jew and is considered by non-Jews as a Jew.” And that is why everyone knows that Sammy Davis, Jr. was never a Jew, despite his own convictions. The same is true of Christians. When that term is invoked, it typically refers to Protestants, not Catholics, though technically Catholics are Christians. To be a Catholic, then, is to be someone whose primary identification is with Catholicism, notwithstanding nominal inclusion in the family of Christians.

The term “Religious Right” is typically employed by those who are critical of Christian conservatives, and by that they mean Protestants, not Catholics. Even those Catholics who are conservative generally don’t think of themselves as part of the “Religious Right,” and neither are they thought of that way by most conservative Protestants. So in “reality,” Protestants are the real Christians and Catholics are not. They are Catholics.

Theologically speaking, then, Catholics are Christians, but sociologically speaking, they most certainly are not. For the purpose of this analysis, it is the sociological reality that is operative.

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It is just as true to say that most anti-Catholics are

Protestants as it is to say that most Protestants are not anti-Catholic. The former is true simply because of size: almost 6 in 10 Americans are Protestants, and when the quarter of the population that is Catholic is factored in, that doesn't leave too many others to bash Catholics. The latter is true because Protestants have no monopoly on bigotry. To wit: Catholics are no more free of prejudice than their Christian brothers are.

So if we have prejudiced Catholics and prejudiced Protestants, why is it that we have so few, if any, well-known Catholics who are anti-Protestant bigots, but we have no shortage of well-known Protestants who are anti-Catholic bigots? From Jimmy Swaggart to Dave Hunt, there are not a few Protestants of notoriety who have been known to bash Catholics. But can anyone name a Catholic who is a public figure who has a track record of bashing Protestants?

Take the 1994 Evangelical-Catholic accord, formally known as *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium* (ECT). ECT was designed to have Catholics and Evangelicals put aside their doctrinal differences so that they might work together on cultural issues of joint interest. Led by the Catholic intellectual, Rev. Richard John Neuhaus, and the prominent Protestant spokesman, Chuck Colson, ECT showed great promise. But soon after the non-binding accord was signed, the grumbling began, and it came almost exclusively from Protestant circles.

The Protestant rebellion against ECT was the subject of a six part series of television programs hosted and moderated by John Ankerberg. Entitled "Evangelicals and Catholics Together," the series featured Ankerberg, D. James Kennedy, John McArthur and R.C. Sproul, all of whom are of some standing in Protestant circles. Their goal is to persuade the Evangelical signers to the accord to reconsider their position and remove their name from ECT. They have not been without some success and they show no sign of stopping.

What bothers the dissenters of ECT is that cooperation with Catholics on social issues will necessarily mean theological prostitution in the long run. Now if that were all there were to the grumbling, it would matter little in the end. But, unfortunately, the dissenters have not been able to broach their dissent without engaging in some old-time Catholic bashing along the way.

To Ankerberg, Kennedy, Sproul and McArthur, Catholicism is not merely a religion that has doctrinal differences with Protestantism, it is "a false religion." Catholics, according to McArthur, are "trapped" in a "system of superstitious and religious ritual." But not to worry, there is a solution: the dissenters boldly defend the noble cause of "sheep stealing," that is, the process of systematically seeking to proselytize Catholics, bringing them over, it is hoped, to the one true religion.

The reaction among Catholics to all this has been one big yawn, and that explains why the bashing that has taken place over this accord has come from one side, not both. Meanwhile, "sheep stealing" efforts are lavishly funded in Latin America by U.S. Christian organizations. It would be interesting to know, for example, how Christians Evangelizing Catholics would explain the absence in the Catholic community of any organized effort to "steal" Protestants. Christians Evangelizing Catholics is known for its aggressiveness in converting Catholics, and for entertaining some wild-eyed views of Catholicism. That there is no Catholic analogue of any standing says something important about both communities.

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Not only are there no Catholic public figures who are known to bash Protestants, there are no Catholic publishing houses that bash Protestants either. To be sure, there are plenty of Catholic publishers who print books that defend Catholicism

from its Protestant detractors. But I know of none that publishes what could fairly be called anti-Protestant books. Protestants, however, cannot say the same as there are Protestant publishing houses that bash Catholics.

If the only anti-Catholic material being published by Protestants was the junk that Chick Publications has to offer (little cartoon type book- lets), it may not matter too much. But when one of the largest Christian publishers in the nation regularly releases anti-Catholic books, it matters greatly. Harvest House boasts that it is one of the five or six largest Christian publishing houses in the country, and among its bestsellers are volumes like *The Gospel According to Harvest House: Six Hundred and Sixty-Six Ways to Bash the Church*. The reader can guess what Church they mean.

What makes this all the more disconcerting is the legitimacy that Harvest House has gained from respectable Protestant publishers. Harvest House is a member in good standing in the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association, an organization that has no policy on publishing anti-Catholic books. As I said before, there is no shortage of Catholics who are bigots in this country, but for the life of me I cannot envision any anti-Protestant books being released by a big Catholic publishing house, much less one that would earn inclusion in respectable Catholic quarters. Once again, it seems Protestants have a monopoly on this kind of bigotry.

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There are Catholic pro-life groups and there are Protestant pro-life groups, and there are Christian pro- life groups that say they welcome both Protestants and Catholics. I don't know of one Christian pro-life organization that doesn't welcome all Protestants but there is at least one pro-life company, LifeLine (see p.l) that doesn't welcome Catholics, not, at least, if it's discovered that they're "too Catholic."

I think I know the real reason why Karl Keating's Catholic Answers was denied participation in LifeLine's program. Keating's organization, and his influential publication, *This Rock*, specializes in educating Catholics about their faith, and it is his special mission to educate Catholics about the myths that some Protestants have spread about Catholicism. LifeLine says that Catholic Answers was denied participation in its program because of the "threats and demands" made by Keating's organization. When pressed by the Catholic League to identify the nature of those threats, LifeLine failed to answer. Having spoken to Karl Keating, and to the person at LifeLine that worked with Keating, it is clear that the only "threat" that took place was the threat that Keating's work posed to LifeLine's work. A full audit of how LifeLine spends its money might reveal the real reasons for their discomfort with Keating.

This is not the only instance where Catholics have been made to feel unworthy by Protestants in the pro-life camp. Complaints from around the country have reached this office about the tendency on the part of some Protestants to question the Catholic commitment to the pro-life cause, resulting, in some cases, of attempts to commandeer the pro-life movement away from Catholics. Yet the irony is that it was the Catholic bishops who first led the pro-life cause. (Much the same could be said about the school voucher issue, only worse. There was a time when Catholics not only led the movement for vouchers, they did so while being resisted by Protestants, many of whom have now joined the campaign for vouchers.)

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It is not likely that a Catholic campus would embarrass itself by hosting a Catholic who is well-known for his Protestant bashing. This is one area where supply and demand are equal: there are no such figures in the first place and there is no such demand. But as we saw with Regent University, and with the sponsoring Rutherford Institute, the same does not hold

for Protestants (see pg. 6).

Regent University, after some stumbling, got the picture and did the honorable thing by denouncing the appearance of Ian Paisley on campus. But Rutherford, long-time foe of the ACLU's, all of a sudden became more civil libertarian than the ACLU.

All Rutherford had to do was make a statement similar to that of Regent's and move on. But no, Rutherford tried to take the high road and instead got lost in doing so. It fell back on legalisms, always the mark of those who can't win on moral grounds. And even there, Rutherford lost.

As I said in my statement to Rutherford, no one has a right to speak at any private institution; it is always a privilege to do so. Censorship occurs when government stops speech before it is uttered, not when a private university says no to an Ian Paisley, a Mark Fuhrman or a Louis Farrakhan or anyone else. "Let's face it," I wrote, "you are trying to hide behind a First Amendment that doesn't give you protection." Even worse, I added, "Not one word of condemnation of Ian Paisley can you utter."

What was particularly galling about the Rutherford response was the way it tried to pretend how open-minded it was about Catholics. "Let me remind you," I was told, Rutherford defends many Catholics, as evidenced in the defense of Catholics arrested for picketing an abortion clinic.

My reply was as follows: "Here's another reality check for you: you tout your defense of Catholics engaged in pro-life work as proof that you are not anti-Catholic. But you know as well as I do that such action is taken out commitment to your pro-life stance (a commendable one, I might add) and not because you are pro-Catholic. And I hasten to add that there is nothing wrong with Rutherford not being pro-Catholic (that is not your mission), but, alas, there is something wrong

with Rutherford when it sanctions anti-Catholicism.”

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I can't imagine a Catholic, unprovoked, going up to a Protestant at a Catholic function and asking him whether he believes in Jesus. Perhaps there are such people, but I've never met them. But that is exactly what happened to Catholic League staffers at this year's Christian Coalition conference in Washington. We were also asked-not by the same person-whether we were Americans or Catholics. In addition, more than one of the attenders asked us to explain, in a hostile way, why Catholics needed a civil rights organization in the first place.

Ralph Reed and Pat Robertson, the executive director and president of the Christian Coalition, respectively, are no more to blame for this bigotry than I am for the bigoted behavior of some Catholic League member. Indeed, Robertson has signed the Evangelical-Catholic accord and is comfortable with keeping his distance from the dissenters. And Reed has made a determined effort to reach out to Catholics. So if Reed and Robertson aren't to blame, why mention this at all?

During the civil rights movement of the 1960s, it was common for well-meaning whites to ask blacks how they could help. Malcolm X had the best advice of all when he said that whites should go back into their own communities and clean up the bigotry that exists. Much the same needs to be said to Reed and Robertson: their new auxiliary, the Catholic Alliance, should rethink its emphasis on protecting Catholics from bigotry and instead focus on cleaning up the anti-Catholicism that exists in the Protestant community.

When plans were being made to launch the Catholic Alliance within the Christian Coalition, its goal was political mobilization. But that's risky business as the Catholic hierarchy takes no position on most of the issues the

Christian Coalition wants to address. It is one thing for Evangelicals to say that the line item veto, tax cuts and gun control are positions that merit a specific Christian response, quite another for lay Catholics to slap the Catholic label on these issues and offer what is in essence nothing but the Republican response.

Even more difficult is dealing with all those issues (capital punishment, immigration, the U.N., social welfare programs) where the Catholic Church, either through the bishops or through the Vatican, has taken a stand that is in direct opposition to the one favored by the Christian Coalition's Catholic Alliance. The fact is that the Catholic Church is liberal on some issues and conservative on others. Not to realize this is to make a big mistake.

Even trickier for the Catholic Alliance is its new-found goal of combating anti-Catholic bigotry. It's tricky for the reason I said earlier, namely, that most anti-Catholic bigots are-for no other reason than because of supply-more likely to be Protestant than anything else. So when Protestants bash Catholics, that puts the Catholic Alliance in the uncomfortable position of fighting Protestants who are anti-Catholic bigots. For this reason alone, I wouldn't dream of forming an auxiliary within the Catholic League called the Protestant League. Besides, who am I to defend Protestants from bigots?

The proof that the Catholic Alliance has reached too far came with-in a few weeks of its launching. To my knowledge, the first public statement that the group made was to join with the Catholic League (at our invitation) in condemning anti-Catholic bigotry on the campus of the person who is president and founder of the Christian Coalition and president and chancellor of the university where the incident took place, namely on the campus of Pat Robertson's Regent University. Talk about awkward.

It would also be advisable for the Catholic Alliance to stay away from the affairs of the Catholic Church. I say this because the Alliance's parent, the Christian Coalition, has had a tendency to stick its nose in where it doesn't belong. For example, when an allegedly controversial Catholic funeral was said in Seattle this past summer for a state senator who died of AIDS, the state chapter of the Christian Coalition in Washington publicly criticized the priest for presiding over the service.

It is important to note that this action was defended by the national office of the Christian Coalition, so we are not speaking here about some trigger-happy operative in the state of Washington. When the national office asked for my advice about this matter at the time, I replied by saying "I think it would be ill-advised for the Christian Coalition to pursue this matter." They didn't listen and continued to press the issue. Now if this is an indication of the way the Catholic Alliance is going to behave, we will all be in for some fireworks.

It could also be questioned why a Catholic Alliance is necessary in an organization called the Christian Coalition. Why is there no Lutheran Alliance or Methodist one? But then again, maybe that's because Catholics aren't Christians.