

BIGOTRY AND BIOGRAPHY

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George W. Bush set off a firestorm when he decided to kick off his South Carolina campaign by going to Bob Jones University. It is a school that to this day regards Catholicism as “a satanic counterfeit” and the “Mother of Harlots.” If you are in doubt, check out their website.

Why Bob Jones University hates our religion is the subject of another day. What I’m interested in addressing is the issue of bigotry and biography. To express it differently, I’m interested in assessing the extent to which a person’s biography should matter is addressing bigotry.

I was told on TV that I shouldn’t criticize Bob Jones University for its anti-Catholicism because there are some really good guys who have graduated from there. Why this matters, I do not know. Nor do I wish to dispute it. So what?

Others have told me that I shouldn’t criticize Bob Jones University because the Baptists who work there really believe what they’re saying. Why this matters, I do not know. Nor do I wish to dispute it. So what?

My point is really not that heady: it is entirely possible for bigots to be good guys and deeply sincere in their bigotry. That “conceded” I am at a loss to explain why this should matter.

It is said that many in the Mafia are good family men. Someone once said that Hitler liked children. Chapters of the KKK demonstrate their concern for the environment when they “Adopt a Highway.” To take a current example, Atlanta Braves pitcher John Rocker has made some mighty bigoted comments, yet it is known that he is friends with several minority teammates.

A person's biography, then, may tell us little about his bigotry. To put it another way, there is nothing inherently contradictory about a person being at once a good guy and a bigot.

Here's another variation on this theme. We complain that so-and-so offended us and then we are told that so-and-so is a Catholic. Why this matters, I do not know. Nor do I wish to dispute it. So what?

Just as being a sincere Protestant bigot doesn't give him a pass to be a bigot, a Catholic bigot doesn't get a pass for being a bigot. What matters in the end is not biography, but bigotry. Not even motive matters all that much: all of us have offended family and friends unintentionally, yet the hurt we cause certainly counts to the person whom we've offended.

We at the Catholic League make decisions every day on what case to take and what case not to take. Sometimes we make mistakes. It's all a matter of discernment in the end, but one thing we can never do is ignore anti-Catholicism because the offender is a notary public or a walking citadel of citizenship. He can still offend.

Another comment we often get is that someone whom we've targeted as an offender is well-educated. Why this matters I do not know. Nor do I wish to dispute it. So what?

If you haven't met a well-educated bigot then you haven't worked in higher education. I spent 16 years teaching college and 4 years teaching elementary school, and believe me, some of the biggest anti-Catholic bigots I've ever met have Ph.D.'s.

As a corollary, we are frequently told that education is the cure to bigotry. That's too broad. Moral education will help but that's all but dead, if not illegal. Practically every person who advised that monster Pol Pot from Cambodia had a Ph.D. from the Sorbonne. Hitler, Stalin and Mao also enjoyed

wide support from the intellectual class and in some cases still do.

Our way at the Catholic League is not to get too hung up on the biography of the bigot, rather our strategy is to take the offender head on. We don't approve of mind-control techniques like baseball threw at John Rocker (he was forced to undergo "sensitivity training"). What we approve of is accountability and getting the offender to stop. Call it old-fashioned but it works.

It is said that bigotry can't be stopped unless the bigot changes his heart. Theoretically that may be true. But what if he changes his behavior but not his heart? Doesn't that count? In short, what's wrong with fear? Fear of being stigmatized has made many a miscreant change his ways, even if deep down he's still the same old louse.

Anti-Catholicism has got to stop. Ditto for anti-Semitism and all other forms of bigotry. And for this to happen we have no choice but to confront the bigots in our midst. Whether they are good guys or sincere guys or educated guys doesn't matter. Nor does it matter that when they change their outward behavior they don't change their stripes inside. What matters is that they knock it off.