

IS BUSH CATHOLIC?

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In 1998, African American author Toni Morrison stunned a lot of people when she declared that Bill Clinton was “our first black president.” What she meant was that many African Americans saw in President Clinton characteristics that were generally associated with being black. Though it is too early to say, there is enough reason already to wonder whether President Bush is our second Catholic president.

George W. Bush was raised Episcopalian and turned Methodist. But his Protestant roots are not as much on display these days as is his identification with Catholicism. There is no doubt that since he became president, Bush has taken up several Catholic causes and met with scores of Catholic leaders. So much so that it has angered both Evangelical Protestants (who say he is ignoring them) and left-wing Catholics (*Commonweal* is furious with the inroads he’s making with Catholics).

What’s this all about? Winning, of course. Catholics hold the key to the White House: Protestants vote Republican, Jews vote Democrat and Catholics.... It’s anyone’s guess. Which is why it makes sense for Bush to court Catholics.

But this doesn’t adequately explain Bush’s attraction to Catholics. Nor does it explain the growing attraction that Catholics have for him. After all, everyone knows that Catholics are the swing vote. Yet there is no public office holder who is working harder to please Catholics than Bush. There is something else going on here beyond the prospects of winning.

Let’s backtrack. During the run for the Republican nomination, George W. Bush spoke at Bob Jones University and immediately incurred the wrath of many Catholics. Including me. The school

has a history stained with anti-Catholicism. Indeed, while the school has since abandoned its racist policies, nothing has changed regarding its anti-Catholicism. The pope is still the "Anti-Christ," the Church is still the "Whore of Babylon" and Catholicism is still a "satanic cult."

Bush got beaten up pretty badly for his appearance at Bob Jones. When he released his apology to Catholics, I appeared on the "Today" show to discuss the issue with Matt Lauer. Having no reason to doubt Bush's sincerity, I had no problem saying the controversy was over. Catholics, I said, understand what repentance and forgiveness are all about. So when Senator John McCain sought to exploit this issue, I quickly condemned him for doing so.

The night Bush gave his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention, I had an opportunity to be there in a special skybox. I declined the invitation. While I have no problem meeting with any politician for policy reasons, or to join him at some honorary event, I put the brakes on when the occasion has the appearance of an endorsement.

It should be noted that when Clinton was in office, and the White House asked me to attend a meeting on religion and public policy that the president was holding, I gladly went. But I would not have attended a fundraiser for Clinton and I would never attend one for Bush.

That's partly because I'm an independent. I began as a Democrat, then quit and became a Republican, then quit and became an independent; I have no plans to return to either party. But it's also because I don't want Republicans or Democrats thinking that they've got the Catholic League in their pocket. Look what happened to the Christian Coalition—they became the Protestant arm of the Republican Party and now they're toast.

Back to Bush. Being that I'm an Irish Catholic, it made sense

for the Bush administration to invite me to a St. Patrick's Day reception in the White House. I couldn't make it for personal reasons but wouldn't have gone if I could have. The White House made the foolish mistake of inviting the biggest Catholic basher in the world, Ian Paisley, to the event. I quickly blasted Bush for allowing this to happen.

My ups and downs with Bush continued recently when I was asked to fly on Air Force One with the president to South Bend, Indiana. Bush wanted some prominent Catholics to be there with him when he gave the commencement address at the University of Notre Dame. I happily accepted. His speech was a knockout. By the way, so is that plane.

So is Bush Catholic? His Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives is modeled after Catholic Charities. The speech he gave when he dedicated the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington was profoundly Catholic. His attempt to embrace all Catholics, whether their issue is pro-life or social justice, is evident and on going. Ditto his commitment to Hispanics, a Catholic group too often ignored.

As I said, there is something else going on here beyond vote getting. Bush is focused on matters Catholic in a way that John F. Kennedy never was. That may not make him a Catholic, but it sure looks like he's coming our way.