

Living with Bob Jones: Letter from Greenville

by [James Guth](#) in the [March 22, 2000](#) issue

The furor over George W. Bush's campaign speech at Bob Jones University is full of ironies. Candidates have visited the campus in search of Republican votes ever since 1980 with no discernible repercussions—until now. In addition, John McCain's criticism of Bush's failure to attack the university's now-famous policy against interracial dating and its hostility toward Catholicism came only after his own staff failed to arrange an appearance there. (Instead, McCain attended services at a BJU stronghold, Hampton Park Baptist Church, albeit without having a chance to offer his own views on courting practices or the pope.) More disturbingly, the episode revealed America's doyens of tolerance and inclusion exhibiting precious little of either.

Adherents of BJU's version of separatist fundamentalism have always been a little paranoid, but even they were surprised by the terms of reproach that descended after McCain's attack. Consider the descriptions of the institution's inhabitants by various *New York Times* columnists: they were "racists, homophobes, pope-haters, anti-Semites," who held "disgusting" and "perverse" views. The terms "racist" and "anti-Catholic" quickly became obligatory modifiers for "Bob Jones University."

The school does prohibit interracial dating—or it did until a few weeks ago, when university president Bob Jones III rescinded the policy. It also rejects the Catholic Church (and almost all Protestant churches, for that matter), sometimes in less than civil language. And it holds all sorts of religious and political views long out of fashion. But many other inconvenient facts were ignored in the rush to portray BJU as a sort of Aryan Nations-South—facts that would give a somewhat more complicated picture of the school.

Several columnists who linked the university to the struggle over the Confederate flag in South Carolina failed to note that Bob Jones III has forcefully urged the flag's removal from the state capitol. Nor did many report that the president of the student

body has a biracial heritage, or that Alan Keyes—a black Catholic with an Indian spouse—received more enthusiastic applause at BJU than Bush did, even after taking exception to university policy and doctrine. Though its rule against interracial dating was based on an unusual and unconvincing biblical interpretation, BJU does not preach the superiority of the white race—in a state where some people do. Also, virtually nothing was said about BJU’s extensive collection of religious art, much of it by Catholics; its fine Shakespearean productions; radio station WMUU’s repertoire of classical music; or the work of BJU nursing students at the local Catholic hospital.

Unlike the national media, most Greenvillians have learned to live with BJU without resort to demonology. One of the reasons is that locals can see the varied aspects of the school. For its part, the university has lowered both physical and social barriers between itself and the city in recent years. Bob Jones III has sought a modest rapprochement with local critics, usually forgoing the histrionic expressions of the fundamentalist faith that regularly emanated from both his late father and grandfather (“the Founder,” who being dead, yet speaketh on WMUU).

All this effort has had some impact. Once the butt of a thousand jokes, BJU has won grudging respect from its neighbors, even those who mock the simplistic dualism of its religious world, its staunch social traditionalism and its strict parietal rules. The university’s graduates are widely admired as disciplined, hard-working and caring people; the teaching, nursing and other helping professions have been greatly enriched by their presence. BJU activists have also played a vital role in the local Republican Party since the 1960s. If at first they were often narrow-minded ideologues, some have matured into thoughtful public servants, including members of the city and county councils, state legislatures and the U.S. Congress.

These facts may explain the community’s reaction to the national criticism of BJU, as gauged by dozens of letters, op-ed pieces and editorials in the *Greenville News*. Republican Mayor Knox White, a McCain supporter and the epitome of a country-club Republican, wrote praising the university’s help on a long list of civic projects that have revitalized the city. An adoption counselor extolled the willingness of BJU couples to take hard-to-place minority and special-needs children. Editor Beth Padgett observed that BJU “helps feed the hungry, care for the homeless, comfort the sick and take care of the elderly.”

It is difficult to categorically condemn an institution that follows through so faithfully on its Matthew 25 responsibility to care for ‘the least of these.’” Padgett summed up

the sense of the city: “Many of us in this community, even those who’ve crossed swords on occasion with BJU, realize how fundamentally unfair this blitzkrieg is.” And Walter Ezell, a businessman and Democratic activist who has clashed with BJU on gay rights, called on liberals and moderates to abandon “intemperate verbiage” and “face up to the challenge” of “tolerating the intolerant.”

What the whole episode portends for BJU is unclear. One might hope that the criticism pushes BJU to become a more open institution, more like Wheaton or Calvin. It seems more likely, however, that the political onslaught will halt its small, tentative steps in that direction, especially given the certain resistance to any such move from the vast fundamentalist network undergirding the institution. Whatever happens to BJU, the whole episode raises a fundamental question: Can those who advance the principle of religious pluralism tolerate—and try to understand—those who reject such pluralism on principle?