

Protestants, Roman Catholics, and the Threat to American Religious Liberty in the Nineteenth Century

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In the eyes of one prominent American Christian leader, there is a religion that poses “a very public menace to the peace of society.” Foreign adherents to this faith living in America should not be able to seek citizenship because they are bound to “pledge and swear true allegiance” to a religious leader who does not even live in America. This religion teaches that those outside of its community will not go to heaven and that their leader is the voice of God who wields “absolute” and “unlimited” authority. As one of their clerics says, every adherent must render “perfect submission and obedience” to this “sovereign,” as one of their clerics puts it, “AS TO GOD HIMSELF.” Moreover, this religion categorically rejects the First Amendment’s separation of Church and State and consequently calls the “liberty of conscience” an “erroneous” and “pernicious” doctrine. Instead, this religion demands that the state “require” every person “to accept her doctrine” upon pain of punishment for disobedience. This religion will “claim” religious liberty when its adherents are in the numerical minority, as one of its prominent leaders explained. But when they become the majority, he said, “we refuse” to grant religious liberty to those outside our religion. Moreover, this religious community views public schools as “mischievous,” “Godless,” “diabolical,” and “filthy” because they stand outside of the authority of their community’s religious leaders. America’s lax immigration policies, furthermore, have opened the floodgates to more adherents of this foreign faith. In one 30-year period, adherents to this religion rose 294 percent.¹ The religion that poses such a “peril” to America is not Islam, as some today might suspect. Instead, Josiah Strong, a Congregationalist

¹ Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis*, rev. ed. (New York: Baker and Taylor, 1891), 68, 70, 66, 71-72, 75, 87.

minister and General Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance for the United States, wrote the above description about the religion of the O'Reillys, Hannitys, and Scalias: Roman Catholicism.

Twenty years ago a number of Protestant and Catholic leaders signed an ecumenical statement, *Evangelicals & Catholics Together*, in which they affirmed among other things that “Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ.”² While signers, including Prison Fellowship’s Chuck Colson, the director of the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention Richard Land, and Roman Catholic Archbishop Francis Stafford of Denver, were willing to bury the theological hatchet that had divided evangelical Protestants and Catholics for nearly five hundred years, why were equally prominent evangelical Protestant leaders in the nineteenth century, like Josiah Strong, eager to bury the theological hatchet in the back of Roman Catholics? In other words, why did Protestants perceive Roman Catholics as a threat to the welfare of the nation in general and to religious liberty in particular? This paper seeks to document and explain, not critique, why Protestants in the nineteenth century perceived Roman Catholics as a danger to the nation and a menace to religious freedom.

In *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal*, the historian William Hutchison offers a useful historical perspective for explaining why nineteenth-century Protestants considered Roman Catholicism a threat to religious liberty. According to Hutchison, the disestablishment and free exercise clauses of the First Amendment provided a guarantee of full religious freedom. This constitutional right included a promissory note of full participatory pluralism. Whereas “diversity happened to American religion in the first half of the nineteenth century,” Hutchison argues, “pluralism of the kind people now discuss did not arrive

² “Evangelicals & Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium,” *First Things* Web site, May 1994, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/01/evangelicals--catholics-together-the-christian-mission-in-the-third-millennium-2>; Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, eds., *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission* (Dallas: Word, 1995).

until the second half of the twentieth.” While he observes that a number of major and minor stages in the “quietly persistent process of redefinition,” he identifies three key, albeit somewhat overlapping, phases: pluralism as toleration, pluralism as inclusion, and pluralism as participation. In general terms, the first stage describes the period between the nation’s founding and the collapse of exclusionary Protestantism between 1920 and 1940. The period roughly between the 1920s and 1950s constitutes a second stage where the Protestant establishment welcomed the inclusion of Roman Catholics and Jews in public institutions. The final stage, which emerged in the 1960s, is that of participatory pluralism.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Protestant establishment at best tolerated religious outsiders. Worries about social stability and the moral health of the nation sometimes led mainline Protestants to exert a countervailing antipluralist or unitive impulse. Occasionally, this unitive impulse manifested itself in nativism and the persecution of religious minorities whose behavior, such as the Mormon practice of plural marriages, threatened the moral codes of public Protestantism. At other times, the desire for national unity exemplified itself in less violent attempts to exact moral conformity, such as the efforts to suppress the spread of obscene literature or restrict the consumption of alcohol. This paper will focus upon only the first phase of the history of American religious pluralism and offer a rather tentative answer to the above question. This paper will argue that nineteenth-century Protestants perceived Roman Catholicism as a danger to the nation and a peril to religious liberty on theological and political grounds. In short, nineteenth-century Protestants did not believe that Roman Catholics were Christians and, more importantly, did not think that the Roman Catholic Church was genuinely committed to the First Amendment because of official Roman Catholic teaching that rejected democracy and the Bill of Rights commitment to religious toleration and freedom of conscience. These antipathies

toward Catholics, moreover, sometimes blended easily into nativist sentiments which, in turn, resulted in physical violence against Roman Catholics. While popular Protestant attitudes toward Catholicism and Catholic attitudes toward democracy and religious liberty have changed dramatically in the past century, one should neither commit the historical fallacy of presentism by reading back into history the current ecumenical harmony between these religious communities nor overlook the role that Protestantism played in nativism.

Background: Protestant and Catholic Animosity

Protestant and Catholic antagonisms trace their roots back to the sixteenth century. As the Protestant Reformation spread, the Catholic Church fought hard to contain it. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the wars of religion demonstrated that Protestants and Catholics were more than willing to kill each other in the name of God. The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572, for instance, resulted in the death of an estimated 20,000 French Protestants.³ The Thirty Years' War, 1618 to 1648, ravaged Europe and resulted in the deaths of an estimated five million people, roughly twenty percent of the population, from combat and disease.⁴

In both England and colonial America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Protestants harbored deep distrust of Roman Catholics. England's wars with Catholic France threatened to restore the Pope to his supremacy over the English church, especially during the short reign of Bloody Mary and later under the reign of James II. After the Glorious Revolution of 1689, anti-Catholicism remained a patriotic and religious concern. John Locke, for instance, advocated religious toleration for dissenting Protestant churches, such as the Presbyterians, but

³ Donald Kagan, Steven Ozment, and Frank M. Turner, *The Western Heritage*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2010), 303.

⁴ Peter H. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 787.

did not extend religious freedom to atheists or Roman Catholics. In his *Letter Concerning Toleration*, he argued that it would be just as “ridiculous” to grant religious toleration to a citizen who binds him or herself to a foreign power. According to Locke, “a Mahometan” acknowledges “himself bound to yield blind obedience to the Mufti of Constantinople, who himself is entirely obedient to the Ottoman Emperor and frames the feigned oracles of that religion according to his pleasure.” To Locke, it would be absurd to grant Muslims religious toleration. Catholics, Locke suggested, likewise stood under the authority of a foreign power, the Pope, and therefore, did not deserve religious toleration.⁵ The 1689 Toleration Act fulfilled many of Locke’s ambitions for religious toleration. Roman Catholics in England, however, were not granted religious liberty. In fact, the Act explicitly required Protestant dissenters to renounce the Catholic Church:

I A. B. do sincerely promise and solemnly declare before God and the World, that I will be true and faithfull to King William and Queen Mary; and I doe solemnly professe and Declare That I doe from my Heart Abhor Detest and Renounce as Impious and Hereticall that damnable Doctrine and Position That Princes Excommunicated or Deprived by the Pope or any Authority of the See of Rome may be Seposed or Murdered by their Subjects or any other whatsoever; And I dow declare that no Forreigne Prince Person Prelate State or Potentate hath or ought to have any Power Jurisdiction Superiority Preeminence or Authoritie Ecclesiasticall or Spirituall within this Realme.⁶

While the Anglican establishment was willing to hold its nose and tolerate Presbyterians, it deemed Roman Catholicism as such a dangerous threat to the welfare of England that it considered religious toleration of Catholics a practical impossibility.

Protestants carried their longstanding antipathy toward Catholics with them into the New World. In 1641, for example, Virginia passed a law barring Roman Catholics from holding any

⁵ John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 1689, *Constitution* database, <http://www.constitution.org/jl/tolerati.htm>.

⁶ Toleration Act (1689), in *The Sacred Rights of Conscience: Selected Readings on Religious Liberty and Church-State Relations in the American Founding*, eds. Daniel L. Dreisbach and Mark David Hall (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2009), 54; John Spurr, “The Church of England, Comprehension and the Toleration Act of 1689,” *English Historical Review* 104 (1089): 927-46.

political office in the young colony.⁷ In 1647, the Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony passed a law that threatened to banish any Jesuit or priest who came within its territory and threatened to execute him if he returned.⁸ The English Catholic George Calvert, Lord Baltimore, secured a charter for Maryland in 1632. Even though he obtained the Toleration Act of 1649 in order to protect the Catholic minority from the Protestant majority, Protestants repealed the act in 1654 and banished Lord Baltimore from the colony. In 1704, Maryland's legislature enacted "An Act to prevent the Growth of Popery within this Province" in order to curb the evangelistic work of Jesuit missionaries.⁹ In 1691, Massachusetts revised its colonial charter and included a stipulation that granted "liberty of Conscience . . . in the Worship of God to all Christians [except Papists]." North Carolina had a similar law.¹⁰ In 1700, the colonial government of New York approved a law excluding Roman Catholics from religious toleration and banishing all Jesuit priests and missionaries from the colony. The next year authorities arrested Father John Ury for being a priest and for sedition. His crimes including telling slaves that God could forgive all their sins including rebellion. New York executed him for the offense.¹¹ In 1732, the colony of Georgia's charter granted "liberty of conscience allowed in the worship of God, to all persons... except papists."¹² The Anglican evangelist George Whitefield warned an audience about the dangers of the Church of Rome. If the 1746 Roman Catholic Jacobite uprising in Scotland had succeeded, he asked, "[H]ow soon would our pulpits every where have been filled with these old

⁷ Francis X. Curran, *Catholics in Colonial Law* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1963), 22.

⁸ The Laws and Liberties of Massachusetts (1647) in *The Sacred Rights of Conscience: Selected Readings on Religious Liberty and Church-State Relations in the American Founding*, eds. Daniel L. Dreisbach and Mark David Hall (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2009), 98.

⁹ Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Image, 1985), 84.

¹⁰ Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (1938; repr. New York: Rinehart, 1952), 5-9.

¹¹ John Corrigan and Lynn S. Neal, eds., *Religious Intolerance in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 58.

¹² Charter of Georgia (1732), *Avalon Law* database, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/ga01.asp.

antichristian doctrines, free-will, meriting by works, transubstantiation, purgatory, works of supererogation, passive-obedience, non-resistance, and all the other abominations of the whore of Babylon?”¹³ Colonial Protestants rejoiced that England gained control of Canada at the end of the French and Indian Wars in 1763, but they were horrified when the 1774 Quebec Act provided tax dollars to support resident Catholic churches.

Many American revolutionaries associated tyranny with the Roman Catholic Middle Ages. Protestants thought, as one commentator put it, that King George was sending “the popish serpent after them into Eden.” When Roman Catholic ecclesiastical power was married to royal power, John Adams explained, “Human nature [was] chained fast for ages in a cruel, shameful, and deplorable servitude to the Pope and his subordinate tyrants.”¹⁴ Thomas Jefferson said something similar: “In every country and in every age, the priest has been hostile to liberty. He is always in alliance with the despot, abetting his abuses in return for protection to his own.”¹⁵ Long after the American Revolution, the passage of the U.S. Constitution, which explicitly stipulated in Article 6 that no religious tests shall be required to hold office, and the Bill of Rights and its First Amendment, and the subsequent adoption of disestablishment and religious liberty clauses in the fourteen individual state’s constitutions, Protestants still maintained deep suspicions about Roman Catholics, their theology, and the dangers they perceived in Catholicism’s understanding of church-state relations.

¹³ George Whitefield, “Britain’s Mercies, and Britain’s Duty, Preached . . . Sunday, August 24, 1746, and Occasioned by the Suppression of the Late Unnatural Rebellion,” quoted in Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edward to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 77.

¹⁴ Daniel Hannan, “What Drove English and American anti-Catholicism? A Fear that it Threatened Freedom,” <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/commentandblogs/2013/11/12/what-drove-english-and-american-anti-catholicism-a-fear-that-it-threatened-freedom/> (12 November 2013); John Adams, “A Dissertation on Canon and Feudal Law,” 1765, in John Diggins, *The Portable John Adams* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 211; George M. Marsden, *Religion and American Culture* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 36-39.

¹⁵ Thomas Jefferson, letter to Horatio G. Spafford, March 17, 1814, The Thomas Jefferson Papers Series 1. General Correspondence, 1651-1827. *Loc. Government* database, http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/P?mtj:13:./temp/~ammem_YQOM::

Nineteenth-Century Protestant Views of Catholic Theology

One important reason that nineteenth-century Protestants remained distrustful of Roman Catholics is the simple fact that most Protestants did not think the Roman Catholic Church was Christian. Although such a conviction might strike contemporary American Christians as unduly sectarian, fundamental theological differences had driven a wedge between Protestants and Catholics for centuries. The dividing line was quite deep and encompassed a long list of theological doctrines. The origins of these disagreements trace back to the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Reformation and Counter-Reformation in the sixteenth century. Protestant attitudes toward the papacy and the differences between Protestants and Catholics over justification illustrate just two areas where these religious traditions differed dramatically.

First, Protestants typically believed that the Pope was the Antichrist. Although such an assertion might seem jarring today, throughout Protestantism's first four hundred years of history it was a rather prevalent theological conviction. For instance, the 1646 Westminster Confession of Faith identified the institution of the papacy with the anti-Christ mentioned in the New Testament. The Westminster Confession was not some passé doctrinal treatise but instead enjoyed immense theological influence in the history of the Presbyterian church. At their ordination, for instance, ministers and elders in the nineteenth century vowed to uphold the system of doctrine contained in the confession. In its discussion of the doctrine of the church, the original version of the Westminster Confession read: "There is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ: nor can the Pope of Rome in any sense be head thereof; but is that

Antichrist, that man of sin and son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the Church against Christ, and all that is called God.”¹⁶

The Protestant identification of the institution of the Roman papacy with the Antichrist remained a prominent Protestant belief throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For example, the great eighteenth-century theologian, Jonathan Edwards, believed the Roman papacy was the Antichrist as outlined in the book of Revelation’s descriptions of the rise and fall of anti-Christian forces against the true church. In Edwards’ mind, the Antichrist and his allies were powerful and deceptive. As evidence, he pointed to what he considered the popes’ alleged miracles, their pretentious displays of worldly power, and their deceitful doctrines, such as transubstantiation and claims of infallibility. Edwards considered it the greatest blasphemy, however, that the papacy exalted himself above the church as supposed Vicar of Christ. Only the Antichrist would place “himself above all” and be worshiped “as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.”¹⁷

Identification of the Antichrist with the papacy remained a staple of Protestant theology throughout the nineteenth century. Charles Hodge, arguably the most influential Protestant theologian of nineteenth-century America, argued that the New Testament clearly taught that the papacy is the Antichrist. In his *Systematic Theology*, the Old School Princeton theologian offered a detailed explanation for why he thought the Bible taught this view of the papacy. He offered a number of reasons to support his assertion. For example, he contended that the papacy acquired its power

¹⁶*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1646, chapter 25, section 6, Ligonier Web site, <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/westminster-confession-faith/>. The proof-texts the *Confession* offers are Matthew 23:8, 9, 10, II Thessalonians 2:3, 4, 8, 9 and Revelation 13:6.

¹⁷ Jonathan Edwards, “Notes on the Apocalypse,” *Apocalyptic Writings*, ed. Stephen J. Stein, vol. 5 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 125; Stephen J. Stein, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Apocalyptic Writings*, 12-13.

mainly by fraud, ‘by the deceivableness of unrighteousness;’ by forged documents and false pretenses; by claiming that Peter was made primate over the whole Church and the vicar or plenipotentiary of Christ on earth; that he was the bishop of Rome; that his successors in that office were his successors in that primacy; and that as the vicar of Christ he was superior to all earthly potentates, not merely as the spiritual is above the temporal, but as lord of the conscience, authorized to decide what is right and what was wrong for them to do in all their relations as men and as rulers; which is a claim of absolute dominion.¹⁸

In Hodge’s estimation, if these claims, or “pretensions,” did not constitute “the power” of the Antichrist, then nothing does. In the early twentieth century, the Presbyterian Church backed away from identifying the papacy as the Antichrist when it amended the previously mentioned section of the Westminster Confession of Faith. The revised confessional statement in conservative Presbyterian denominations now reads: “There is no other head of the church but the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor can the pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof.”¹⁹

A second theological reason nineteenth-century Protestants did not think that the Roman Catholic Church was genuinely Christian stemmed from disagreements over justification. In fact, Protestant and Catholic disagreements over the meaning of justification were one of the most important theological divisions that helped to give rise to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. According to the prevailing Protestant interpretation of the Bible in the nineteenth century, like that of the sixteenth century, Protestants insisted that the Bible taught that sinners were justified by faith alone. The Westminster Confession of Faith succinctly summarized the classic Protestant understanding of the doctrine of justification:

Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth: not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ’s sake alone; nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and

¹⁸Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (1871-1873; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 3:815-16.

¹⁹ Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 25, section 6, PCAAC Web site, <http://www.pcaac.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/WCFScriptureProofs.pdf>.

satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness, by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.²⁰

Charles Hodge offered a useful explanation of the Confession's statement on justification.

According to Hodge, justification is a single act of God's grace toward a sinner who otherwise deserves his condemnation. Justification is a forensic, or judicial act, whereby God declares a sinner righteous. The ground for this act is not the faith of the believer but the imputed righteousness of Christ. The believer appropriates this righteousness by faith alone, not by any act.²¹

The nineteenth-century Protestant interpretation of the Bible's teaching on justification stood in stark contrast to the prevailing Roman Catholic understanding. At the Council of Trent (1545-1563), the Catholic Church articulated its position on justification in unambiguous terms. At the sixth session, the Council concluded

that in adults, the beginning of the said Justification is to be derived from the prevenient grace of God, through Jesus Christ, that is to say, from His vocation, whereby, without any merits existing on their parts, they are called; that so they, who by sins were alienated from God, may be disposed through His quickening and assisting grace, to convert themselves to their own justification, by freely assenting to and co-operating with that said grace: in such sort that, while God touches the heart of man by the illumination of the Holy Ghost, neither is man himself utterly without doing anything while he receives that inspiration, forasmuch as he is also able to reject it; yet is he not able, by his own free will, without the grace of God, to move himself unto justice in His sight.²²

Whereas Protestants insisted that justification is an external and legal act whereby a sinner is declared righteous by God, the Catholic Church held that prevenient grace enables a sinner to participate in his or her own justification. In the sixteenth century, Catholics, like Protestants, did not trade in theological ambiguities. At the Council of Trent, the Catholic Church

²⁰ Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 11, section 1, PCAAC Web site, <http://www.pcaac.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/WCFScriptureProofs.pdf>.

²¹ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:117-18. On Hodge's views of Catholicism, see Paul Gutjahr, *Charles Hodge: Guardian of American Orthodoxy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 96, 106, 112, 121, 158, 194, 209-210, 230, 235-42, 250, 281-87.

²² Council of Trent, session 6, chapter 5, History Web site, <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/ct06.html>.

unapologetically condemned the Protestant interpretation of justification by faith alone when it asserted that

although it is necessary to believe that sins neither are remitted, nor ever were remitted save gratuitously by the mercy of God for Christ's sake; yet is it not to be said, that sins are forgiven, or have been forgiven, to any one who boasts of his confidence and certainty of the remission of his sins, and rests on that alone; seeing that it may exist, yea does in our day exist, amongst heretics and schismatics; and with great vehemence is this vain confidence, and one alien from all godliness, preached up in opposition to the Catholic Church.²³

The radically different interpretations of justification were just one major theological distinction dividing Protestants and Catholics. Conflicting views of the sacraments, church government, sanctification, the role of saints, and Mariology were some of the other critical beliefs upon which Protestants and Catholics found little agreement. This was why Protestants in the late nineteenth century began to use terms like “nonsectarian Christian” or “undenominational” to define those who were genuinely Christian and a legitimate part of the nation’s larger Protestant community. Catholics, in their eyes, were sectarian and not actually Christian. To be sure, some Protestants were willing to concede that Catholics could be Christians, but it was despite the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, not because of it. Charles Hodge put it this way: “That many Roman Catholics, past and present, are true Christians, is a palpable fact. It is a fact which no man can deny without committing a great sin.”²⁴ Yet the Roman Catholic Church did not help its members receive salvation in his opinion.

Protestant Misgivings about Roman Catholic Views of Church-State Relations

Interwoven with deep Protestant grievances with substantial Catholic theological beliefs were equally significant Protestant perceptions of the Roman Catholic Church’s hostility toward democracy and its understanding of church-state relations. In the eyes of nineteenth-century

²³ Council of Trent, session 6, chapter 9, History Web site, <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/ct06.html>.

²⁴ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:822.

Protestants, the Catholic Church opposed democracy, rejected the First Amendment's disestablishment of the church, and spurned religious liberty.

Josiah Strong's *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis*, first published in 1885 and revised in 1891, provides a useful window into nineteenth-century Protestant views of the Roman Catholicism's position on democracy and the First Amendment. As a prominent Congregationalist minister and Social Gospel advocate, he served as the General Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance for the United States. Much like the modern-day National Council of Churches or the National Association of Evangelicals, this organization represented dozens of Protestant denominations in the late nineteenth century. Strong, in other words, was not some whining bumpkin pastor living in Barkeyville but a well-respected and highly influential leader of nineteenth-century American Protestantism.

In *Our Country*, Strong articulated the fears as well as the hopes of Protestants in late nineteenth-century America. In the face of wide-sweeping economic, demographic, intellectual, and social changes, he argued that America could still become a model Christian republic. As the historian Gary Scott Smith notes, Strong blended the Protestant passion for morality in politics with fervent belief in America's manifest destiny and statistical data gathered from the new social sciences. *Our Country* tried to arouse Christians to evangelize people and reform society. In Strong's estimation, late nineteenth-century America had an extraordinary opportunity, especially because of its immense supply of natural resources, to play a major role in saving the world. Strong argued that Anglo-Saxons would shape the world's future since they embraced civil liberty and spiritual Christianity. Since America embodied these two ideas most fully, the nation was "divinely commissioned to be" its brothers' keeper. But this international mission could only be achieved if it overcame eight perils—immigration, Romanism, Catholic and

secular challenges to the public schools, Mormonism, intemperance, socialism, materialism, and urbanization.²⁵ While the book might not resonate very well with many Protestants today or fairly represent the actual position of American Roman Catholics in the nineteenth century (or today), in *Our Country*, Strong expressed prevailing Protestant sentiments regarding the perceived threat that Roman Catholicism to Protestant America posed, as the title of his work suggests.

According to Strong, America's democratic form of government rests upon popular sovereignty. Strong quoted the Declaration of Independence's assertion that "governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed" as well as the Constitution's claim that the laws of the United States "shall be the supreme law of the land" to substantiate his point. By contrast, he argued that official Roman Catholic Church teaching rejects the Founding Fathers' commitment to the Lockean notion that the right to rule arises from the consent of the governed. Instead, the Catholic Church invests the Pope with supreme political sovereignty. To prove his claim, he quotes English Archbishop Henry Edward Manning, who insisted that "the right of deposing kings is inherent in the supreme sovereignty which the Popes as vice-regents of Christ, exercise over all Christian nations." He also noted that Pope Benedict XIV's 1754 papal bull *Pastoralis Regiminis* threatened to excommunicate any church member who refused to obey any "commands of the Court of Rome." The Catholic Church's rejection of democracy, in Strong's estimation, is even more explicit in Pope Boniface's 1302 papal bull *Unam Sanctam*, which affirms the authority of the Pope, as the heir of Peter and Vicar of Christ, over all human authorities, both spiritual and temporal. Consequently, *Unam Sanctam* taught temporal power

²⁵ In addition to selling 176,000 copies, the work was translated into a variety of European and Asian languages and individual chapters of the books were reprinted in newspapers and magazines or issued separately as pamphlets. Gary Scott Smith, "Strong, Josiah"; <http://www.anb.org/articles/05/05-00754.html>; American National Biography Online Feb. 2000; Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 64, 68, 105-106, 109, 127, 136, 139-40, 147-49, 155-56, 214.

resides in the hands of the state, but it is to be exercised only as the Church permits it because the spiritual is superior to the temporal. “Moreover,” the bull asserted, “we declare, say, define, and pronounce it to be altogether necessary for salvation that every human creature should be subject to the Roman Pontiff.” To clinch his argument that Rome rejects popular democracy and elevates the papacy to a place of supremacy over the state, he cited Pope Pius IX’s 1864 Syllabus of Errors, which said, “It is an error to hold that, in the case of conflicting laws between the two powers, the civil law ought to prevail.”²⁶ After the first Vatican Council in 1870 strengthened the spiritual authority of the Pope by issuing the doctrine of papal infallibility, the authoritarian nature of the Papacy seemed all the more undemocratic to American Protestants. During this period, Ultramontanism, a religious philosophy that stressed the absolute spiritual authority of the papacy over local temporal and spiritual affairs, dominated the Catholic Church. As the motto *Roma locuta est; causa finita est* (“Rome has spoken; the case is closed”) became popular among American Catholics, Protestants grew all the more wary. Strong concluded that since the Catholic Church’s official teaching asserted the supremacy of the papacy over the state, Catholicism stood at odds with America’s constitutional democracy where ultimate political authority resides in the consent of the governed.

Strong also took issue with what he perceived as the Catholic Church’s rejection of the free exercise clause of the First Amendment. The First Amendment reads: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

According to Strong, the Constitution guarantees liberty of conscience. “Nothing,” he insisted, “is dearer or more fundamental.” Yet official Roman Catholic teaching, he contended, rejects

²⁶ Strong, *Our Country*, 63-64; Marsden, *Religion and American Culture*, 134. Strong exaggerated the relevance of *Unam Sanctum* for the nineteenth-century Catholic Church. In actuality, the papal bull’s significance was limited to the debate between the Vatican and the Gallican (French) party in the church in the thirteenth century and, Catholics maintained, had no relevance for the contemporary church. *Catholic Encyclopedia Online*, s.v., “*Unam Sanctum*,” New Advent Web site, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15126a.htm> (accessed November 21, 2013).

freedom of religion as an error. He turned again to Pope Pius IX's Syllabus of Errors for evidence. The Syllabus declared it to be an error that "every man is free to embrace and profess the religion he shall believe true, guided by the light of reason." Strong also quoted Pius IX's 1864 encyclical *Quanta Cura* as additional evidence:

Contrary to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, of the Church, and of the Holy Fathers, these persons do not hesitate to assert that 'the best conditions of human society is that wherein no duty is recognized by the government of correcting by enacted penalties the violators of the Catholic Religion, except when the maintenance of the public peace requires it.' From this totally false notion of social government, they fear not to uphold that erroneous opinion most pernicious to the Catholic Church, and to the salvation of souls, which was called by our predecessor, Gregory XVI, the insanity, namely that 'liberty of conscience and of worship is the right of every man; and that this right ought, in every well-governed state, to be proclaimed and asserted by the law.'

According to Strong, Pius IX had already demonstrated his opposition to religious liberty when, for example, in 1852 he declared null and void a law in New Granada (modern-day Columbia) which granted religious toleration to all its citizens and also threatened ecclesiastical penalties to any who dared enforce the law. To Strong, the Catholic Church opposed the First Amendment's free exercise clause.²⁷

Not only did Roman Catholics reject the duty to respect liberty of conscience, Strong contended, the Catholic Church also repudiated the First Amendment's disestablishment clause. According to Strong, "None of our fundamental principles is more distinctly American than that of the *Complete Separation of Church and State*." Pius IX's Syllabus of Errors, in Strong's estimation, provided ample proof that the Catholic Church renounced what the American Constitution clearly affirmed. In Error 55, for example, Pope Pius stated it was an error to hold that the "Church ought to be separate from the State, and the State from the Church." Strong also observed that Error 24 declared it an error to believe that the "Church has not the power of

²⁷ Strong, *Our Country*, 70-71.

availing herself of force, or any direct or indirect temporal power.”²⁸ Strong listed a number of other ways in which the official teaching of Roman Catholicism contradicted deeply cherished American values, principles, and practices, including the doctrine of papal infallibility, Catholic opposition to public education, and aversion to the freedom of the press and freedom of speech. Strong dismissed the Americanist movement within Catholicism that sought to harmonize (among other things) Catholic teaching with the principles of republicanism as unrepresentative of genuine Catholicism. In his eyes, it was a self-evident truth that “there is an irreconcilable difference between papal principles and the fundamental principles of our free institutions.” Lest anyone miss his larger point, Strong concluded his analysis of the peril that Catholicism posed to America and religious liberty by quoting General Marquis de Lafayette, the American Revolutionary War hero: “Lafayette, born a Romanist, and knowing well the nature of Romanism and its antipathy to liberty, said: ‘If the liberties of the American people are ever destroyed, they will fall by the hands of the Romish clergy.’”²⁹

Protestant Nativism

As a nation of immigrants, a good deal of the United States’ political history pivots around the earliest dominant group, White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs), preserving its dominance of American culture over more recent immigrants, not to mention Native Americans and African Americans. Throughout the nineteenth century, Protestants enjoyed not only a numerical superiority over the Catholic Church but also controlled the key culture-shaping institutions, such as public schools and higher education. Consequently, immigrant Catholics, who were also divided ethnically, faced religious prejudice that was further compounded by ethnic and class antagonisms. As more Catholics immigrated to America, Protestant nativism, the sociopolitical

²⁸ Strong, *Our Country*, 74.

²⁹ Strong, *Our Country*, 77, 91.

policy of favoring native Americans over recent immigrants, grew. During the colonial period, the Catholic population in America was rather modest, but that changed dramatically in the nineteenth century. Between 1790 and 1830, the Catholic population grew an estimated 1000 percent to about three hundred thousand. Between 1830 and 1860, it grew another estimated 1000 percent to three million. Their deep loyalty to their new country notwithstanding, Catholics faced immense prejudice from the Protestant majority, many of whom were descendants of English and Scotch-Irish immigrants who had brought their animosity toward Irish Catholics with them to their new home. The pace of immigration grew after the Civil War. In just twenty years, 1880 and 1900, two and a half million Catholics immigrated. Between 1850 and 1900, a total of five million Catholics made their way to America.³⁰

Immigrants, especially Roman Catholics, threatened Protestant cultural pre-eminence throughout the century. According to the historian Robert T. Handy, most Protestant leaders opposed mob action against Catholics. In their efforts, however, to control those who did not share their Protestant vision for America, Protestant leaders helped to create an environment in which violence against Catholics occurred.³¹ While the Protestant majority often tolerated the Catholic minority in the nineteenth century, their longstanding theological and political antipathy toward Catholicism blended quite easily into nativism, which, in turn, frequently manifested itself in violence. Two examples of nativist violence illustrate the fact that Protestants did not always tolerate Catholics, especially when Protestant hopes for America seemed in jeopardy.

As the region's Catholic population grew in the early nineteenth century, Protestant antagonism increased proportionally. In 1834, a Protestant mob burned down the Ursuline Convent School in Charlestown, Massachusetts. Popular Protestant books propagated rumors

³⁰ Marsden, *Religion and American Culture*, 73; Handy, *A Christian America*, 65; Edwin Scott Gaustad and Philip L. Barlow, *New Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 158.

³¹ Handy, *Christian America*, 52, 64-66, 90-94.

that the Catholic nuns and priests were sexual predators who abused church members. One of the most sensational accounts was Rebecca Reed's *Six Months in a Convent*. Reed, a young Protestant woman from Boston, recounted her alleged imprisonment and abuse at the nearby Ursuline Convent before her "escape." Although not published until 1835, her manuscript was apparently circulating around Boston's Protestant community. Catholics had established the Ursuline School in 1818. Protestants established a rival Charlestown Female Seminary in 1831. By the early 1830s, Protestant anti-Catholic sentiment had reached a fevered pitch. The General Association of the Congregational Church of Massachusetts adopted resolutions encouraging ministers to preserve the "country from the degrading influence of Popery" and to "give the subject of Popery in all its bearings, a serious and prayerful consideration." Reverend Lyman Beecher, the pastor of the prominent Park Street Church, preached a series of sermons against Catholicism and urged other clerics to do the same. Posters warning people of popish plots began to appear in Charlestown and Boston. When Reed published her tell-all book, anti-Catholic sentiment was already at a fevered pitch and she seemed to confirm the worst of Protestant fears. After Elizabeth Harrison, a nun who taught music at the Ursuline Convent, had a nervous breakdown, left the convent, and found refuge in the home of a Protestant neighbor, the Bishop visited her and granted her request to be allowed to return to the Convent. Local newspapers reported that she had been forced to return. Like Reed's biography, this event seemed to bolster Protestant fears about the unscrupulous happenings at the Ursuline School. Beecher followed up this event with another fiery sermon against Catholicism as did other Protestant ministers in the city. A few days later, a mob, carrying banners and shouting "No Popery," appeared outside the convent and burned it to the ground. A year later, Beecher published *A Plea for the West* in

which he suggested that the Pope planned to undermine America's democracy by establishing priests as a new kind of aristocracy to "throw down our free institutions."³²

Nativist violence was not limited to antebellum America. In 1870 and 1871, riots broke out during the annual Orange Day Parade in New York City. Protestants, celebrating the 1690 victory of the Protestant William III, king of England and prince of Orange, over King James II, were harassed by an Irish Catholic mob. Police intervened and killed eight people. The historian Michael A. Gordon contends that the riots stemmed from "contending visions of the nation's past, present and future." According to Gordon, "Irish workers and many middle class-Irish allies believed the Orangemen symbolized the oppression they had known in Ireland and that Orange principles would help subvert republicanism and 'Anglo-Saxonize' America at the same time that industrialization was causing class lines to harden." On the other hand, supporters of the Orangemen, "believing it was the Irish Catholics who threatened republicanism, attempted to reassert the values they believed should govern social relations as immigrants like the Irish challenged their class authority." The following year, New York Governor John T. Hoffman ordered the city's police force as well as the National Guard to protect the Protestant marchers. Harassment turned violent and the National Guard fired into the Irish-Catholic counter-demonstration, killing 61 Catholics and injuring more than 150.³³

These are just two incidents out of a number of examples of Protestant anti-Catholic violence. There were plenty of others, including Protestants burning down two Catholic churches in Philadelphia in 1844 and an 1855 Election Day riot in Louisville, Kentucky, that left a number

³² Corrigan and Neal, *Religious Intolerance*, 61-62; Billington, *Protestant Crusade*, 68-76; Lyman Beecher, *A Plea for the West* (Cincinnati: Truman and Smith, 1835), 59.

³³ *Encyclopedia of New York City*, 2nd ed. s.v. "Orange Riots"; Corrigan and Neal, *Religious Intolerance*, 63; Michael A. Gordon, *The Orange Riots: Irish Political Violence in New York City, 1870 and 1871* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 5.

of German and Irish Catholics dead.³⁴ In addition to instigating violence, Protestants established anti-Catholic societies, such as the American Protection Association to combat the “superstition” and “spiritual darkness” of “Romanism,” and newspapers, such as the *American Protestant Vindicator*, which sought to “warn our Protestant friends” about the “abomination” of “insidious Jesuitical workings,” and the American or Know-Nothing Party of the 1840s and 1850s, which required members to pledge to “vote only for native-born American citizens” and to support “the exclusion of all foreigners and Roman Catholics in particular.” In the 1856 presidential election, the American Party won twenty-five percent of the popular vote.³⁵

Hostility toward Catholics spilled over into the early twentieth century. The Second Ku Klux Klan in the early twentieth century targeted not only African Americans and Jews but also Roman Catholics. According to one Exalted Cyclops, “The Klan is here, and it will remain until the last son of a Protestant surrenders his manhood, and is content to see America, Catholized [*sic*], mongrelized, and circumcised.”³⁶ The historian Nancy K. McLean observes that the “crux of the problem, so Klansmen said, was the authority of the pope over laity. [Imperial Wizard Hiram Wesley] Evans charged that Catholicism was imbued with ‘the monarchical idea of the

³⁴ Billington, *The Protestant Crusade*, 220-37; Jill Y. Crainshaw, “Nativism.” in *Encyclopedia of Religious Controversies in the United States*, 2d ed., eds. Bill J. Leonard and Jill Y. Crainshaw. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2012. E-books Online, <http://ebooks.abc-clio.com/reader.aspx?isbn=9781598848687&id=A3500C-4930>. One important reason that the American Party gathered such a high percentage of the popular vote is the fact that the Whig Party had collapsed and the Republican Party had not formed. Moreover, in a number of southern states, the American Party was the only other party besides the Democrats to appear on the ballot. Consequently, nativists formed a working alliance with former Whigs (and future Republicans) to present an alternative to the Democratic Party.

³⁵ Billington, *Protestant Crusade*, 92-93, 244-45, 384, 430; Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 226-60.

³⁶ Exalted Cyclops of the Order, “Principles and Purposes of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan,” *Papers Read at the Meeting of the Grand Dragons, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, at Their First Meeting Held at Asheville, North Carolina, July 1923, Anti-Movements in America*, ed. Gerald N. Grob (New York: Arno, 1977), 125, quoted in Kelly J. Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK’s Appeal to Protestant America, 1915-1930* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 44.

individual as subject instead of citizen' in contrast with the republican idea, which exalts the individual, clothing him or her with all the attributes of sovereignty."³⁷

Protestant nativism, albeit much less violent, also manifested itself during Alfred E. Smith's 1928 presidential campaign. Smith, a Catholic and the Democratic Governor of New York, faced serious political opposition not only because he favored repealing the Eighteenth Amendment but also because of his faith. In an open letter to Smith, published in the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Charles M. Marshall, a New York attorney and Episcopalian, expressed Protestants' grave misgivings about seeing a Roman Catholic in the White House. Marshall pointed to Pope Leo XIII's 1885 encyclical *Immortale Dei* and Pius IX's 1864 Syllabus of Errors to substantiate his claim that the teaching of the church "inevitably makes the Roman Catholic Church at times sovereign and paramount over the state." He then asked Smith if he accepted the teaching of his church.³⁸ Smith published a long reply in the next month's issue in which he outlined his personal commitment to the church and the compatibility of his church's teaching with democratic principles. "I recognize no power in the institutions of my Church," Smith concluded, "to interfere with the operations of the Constitution of the United States or the enforcement of the law of the land."³⁹ Despite Smith's eloquent reply, the Protestant community still entertained suspicions. The Baptist *Watchman-Examiner*, for instance, asked, "Has Roman Catholicism, which has always exerted a stranglehold on the governments that it has dominated,

³⁷ Nancy K. MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 96; Justin Nordstrom, "Nativism From the New Republic to the Cold War," *The Cambridge History of Religions in America*, 1st ed. Vol. II. (Cambridge: 2012). Cambridge Histories Web site, 14 November 2013. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521871099>. Determining the exact number of Catholics lynched by the KKK is impossible; *Historical Statistics of the United States* provides data on the lynching of race victims. Between 1882 and 1914, 3943 people were lynched. Of the 3943, 1216 of the victims were white. Between 1915 and 1930, 575 people were lynched. Of this figure, 52 were white. It is impossible, however, to determine the exact number of victims, either white or African American, who were Roman Catholic or lynched specifically because of their religion. *Historical Statistics of the United States: Earliest Times to the Present*, 5 vols. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 5:251.

³⁸ Charles Marshall, "An Open Letter to the Honorable Alfred E. Smith," *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1927, 542.

³⁹ Alfred E. Smith, "Catholic and Patriot: Governor Smith Replies," *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1927, 728.

really reformed?”⁴⁰ The liberal Protestant *Christian Century* rejected the charge that Protestants’ distrust about Smith’s Catholicism were “bigoted” or “un-American.” Smith, one editorial insisted, “has not been courageous. He has not been candid. And he has done nothing to bring the issue into the open. He has attempted to drive the issue back under ground by browbeating those who hold it as an issue.”⁴¹

The New England *Congregationalist* reprinted a letter by Cardinal Giuseppe Gamba, the Archbishop of Turin, in which he warned church leaders of the threat he thought the Y.M.C.A. posed to Catholic youth as evidence of what the periodical thought could happen if Catholics amassed more political power. The article sparked a wave of protest, most of which accused the *Congregationalist* of fanning the flames of nativism. The *Congregationalist* grew defiant in response: “In Protestant countries Roman Catholics enjoy equal religious rights because Protestant principles have accomplished this end. But is it only in Protestant countries that the principle of tolerance is to find constitutional expression and public practice?”⁴² While historians would later argue that religion did not play a decisive role in Smith’s defeat, many Protestants at the time certainly did not see Smith’s faith as unimportant during the campaign in 1927 and 1928.

Conclusion

A great deal has changed in the American religious landscape over the past two generations. Protestants no longer dominate public culture in the way they did a century ago nor do they harbor such grave misgivings about Catholicism’s alleged threat to America and religious liberty. Several developments help to explain this dramatic reversal. Protestantism

⁴⁰ “Governor Smith as a Candidate,” *Watchman-Examiner*, 19 May 1927, 616.

⁴¹ “Browbeating the Protestants,” *Christian Century*, 11 October 1928, 1218.

⁴² “Roman Catholicism and Religious Liberty: A Startling Example of Intolerance,” *Congregationalist*, 14 April 1928, 462-63, 474; “Religious tolerance—Another Editor’s View,” *Congregationalist*, 26 April 1928, 518.

experienced what the historian Robert T. Handy describes as a “second disestablishment.”

Between the 1920s and 1940s, Protestantism gradually lost its place of dominance over American culture. During this time period, Protestant toleration gave way to what the historian William Hutchison terms an attitude of religious inclusion, and then in the 1960s, a full participatory pluralism emerged. In the aftermath of World War II, a restructuring of American religion occurred. Old-time denominational differences gave way to a new division, pinning ideological conservatives against ideological liberals. The ideological divide, moreover, cuts across denominational lines.⁴³

At the same time, major internal changes within both Protestantism and Catholicism were taking place. Longstanding ethnic antagonisms, at least in some places, have faded away. Theological sectarianism decreased in popularity among Protestantism over the past generation. Developments within the Catholic Church have been even more dramatic over the past century. Ultramontanism has significantly waned and the Catholic Church has made its peace with popular democracy and religious liberty, and in fact, has come to be one of its greatest champions in certain places. John F. Kennedy’s election to the presidency in 1960 symbolized the vitality of a more inclusive public attitude toward religion. With nativist sentiments still quietly lingering over his campaign, Kennedy directly answered questions about his Catholic faith in a speech before Greater Houston Baptist Association. The address not only signaled that dramatic changes had taken place within the Catholic Church’s attitude toward the First Amendment’s disestablishment clause but also toward religious liberty.

As he explained, “I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute, where no Catholic prelate would tell the president (should he be Catholic) how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote; where no

⁴³ Robert T. Handy, *Undermined Establishment: Church-State Relations in America, 1880-1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference; and where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the president who might appoint him or the people who might elect him.”⁴⁴

Moreover, Vatican II precipitated a remarkable reexamination of the church’s theology and relationships with other Christian bodies. In 1965, Pope Paul VI explicitly affirmed the value of religious freedom in *Dignitatis Humanae*. Moreover, Catholics, like Protestants, are simply less sectarian today. Consequently, Protestants and Catholics, like those who penned the statement *Evangelicals & Catholics Together*, have come to recognize that the two communities share a good deal theologically in common, such as the Nicene Creed. The liberal-conservative ideological divide, moreover, means that conservative Protestants and conservative Catholics often hold more similar positions on contemporary ethical controversies, such as abortion, than they do with those in their own denominations. The same is true, of course, of the ideological left.

Two hundred years ago, it would have been unfathomable to most Protestants to imagine that an Irish Catholic could be elected president. In the eyes of many Protestants, the O’Reillys, Hannitys, and Scalias, like most other ethnic Catholics, simply could not be assimilated into American culture for the reasons surveyed above. But changes internal to these religious traditions as well as in American culture at large proved such certainties wrong. In his 1960 speech on religion, Kennedy embraced the First Amendment’s commitment to religious liberty:

I believe in an America where religious intolerance will someday end; where all men and all churches are treated as equal; where every man has the same right to attend or not attend the church of his choice; where there is no Catholic vote, no anti-Catholic vote, no bloc voting of any kind; and where Catholics, Protestants and Jews, at both the lay and pastoral level, will refrain from those attitudes of disdain and division which have so often marred their works in the past, and promote instead the American ideal of brotherhood.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ John F. Kennedy, “Speech on Religion, (1960), NPR Web site, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16920600>.

⁴⁵ Kennedy, “Speech on Religion.”

If history is any guide to the future, then contemporary anxieties about certain ethnic groups or religions, most obviously those about Islam, might suggest that one exercise caution when declaring who can and cannot be true Americans who embrace democracy and respect religious liberty.