

## Anti-Catholicism in America, 1620–1860

Using fears of Catholicism as a mechanism through which to explore the contours of Anglo-American understandings of freedom, *Anti-Catholicism in America, 1620–1860* reveals the ironic role that anti-Catholicism played in defining and sustaining some of the core values of American identity, values that continue to animate our religious and political discussions today. Farrelly explains how that bias helped to shape colonial and antebellum cultural understandings of God, the individual, salvation, society, government, law, national identity, and freedom. In so doing, *Anti-Catholicism in America, 1620–1860* provides contemporary observers with a framework for understanding what is at stake in the debate over the place of Muslims and other non-Christian groups in American society.

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**Anti-Catholicism in America,  
1620–1860**

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In memory of *Laurence D. Nee*

1970–2013

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## Preface

When GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney announced that he had chosen Wisconsin Congressman Paul Ryan to be his running mate, the 2012 presidential election officially became historic. Not even four years had passed since Americans sent their first African-American to the White House, and already the Democratic and Republican parties were both offering up tickets that did not include a single White Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

Journalists and a handful of evangelical leaders did their best to explore the contours of Romney's Mormon faith. Stories about a "Mormon Moment" or "The Mormon in Mitt" snagged the covers of *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines, while conservative Christians who had not hesitated to use the word "cult" in the lead-up to the Republican National Convention found themselves scrambling in the months after that convention to convince their co-religionists that Romney was a "man for whom a faith with which we don't agree manifests itself in terms of values with which we *absolutely do* agree."<sup>1</sup>

With the exception of a few, untelevised testimonies from key members of Mitt Romney's temple in Belmont, Massachusetts, the Romney campaign said very little about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Americans may have reached a point where they were willing, finally, to cast their ballots for a Mormon, but the evangelical blogosphere made it clear that many of them would be doing so with heavy hearts. Romney's people wanted to make sure those hearts did not become so heavy that voters could not carry them all the way to the polls.

Such concerns did not animate Paul Ryan and Joe Biden, both of whom were more than happy to talk about the Catholic faith they had each been



born into. Voters got a primer on the Catholic concept of “subsidiarity” from Ryan, who pointed to his Church’s preference for “local solutions” when recommending that Medicare be turned into a voucher program. Biden spoke freely of his Catholic education when explaining his support for the president’s overhaul of the country’s healthcare system, pointing specifically to the “dignity in every man and woman” that he’d learned about from the priests and nuns who had helped to form him.<sup>2</sup>

Put simply, Catholic identity was not a problem for the two men who were looking to be second-in-command at the White House in 2012. Four years later, it wasn’t a problem for Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio, Rick Santorum, or Chris Christie either, as they sought the Republican Party’s nomination for president, or for Tim Kaine, as he accepted Hillary Clinton’s request that he be her running mate. In 2004, John Kerry’s Catholicism raised no red flags in his bid to unseat George W. Bush – except, ironically, among Catholic voters themselves. Kerry lost that election in part because more than half of the Catholics who voted in 2004 cast their ballots for the evangelical incumbent from Texas, rather than the Catholic senator from Massachusetts. Those voters – some of whom took their cues from bishops such as Raymond Burke of St. Louis, Michael Sheridan of Colorado Springs, John Myers of Newark, and Charles Chaput of Denver – were put off by Kerry’s decision to part ways with his Church and vote against a national ban on late-term abortions.<sup>3</sup>

But no prominent, non-Catholic political, intellectual, cultural, or religious leader mentioned John Kerry’s faith as a reason to vote against him. It is questionable, therefore, whether anti-Catholicism really is “the last acceptable prejudice,” as some scholars and religious leaders have recently asserted.<sup>4</sup> That there is still much ignorance among non-Catholic Americans about the Church’s beliefs and practices is undeniable. And certainly, the Catholic Church has proven to be a reliable, if easy punching bag in contemporary American popular culture, ranging from Andres Serrano’s photograph, “Piss Christ” (1987), to Kevin Smith’s film, *Dogma* (1999), to Dan Brown’s novel, *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). My own experience with writing an article in 2015 for *Aeon* magazine proved to me that hostility toward the Catholic Church is still alive and well. The article was about anti-Catholicism, and several readers – possessing no sense of irony – wrote to me about the “well-beaten path” that connects Washington to Rome and is utilized by the Catholics who’ve been sent to Congress by the pope.<sup>5</sup>

It is no longer “acceptable,” however (except among paranoid internet trolls), to point to Catholic identity as a threat to American democracy,

even if an implicit openness to the existence of that threat may be what has given Dan Brown's novels their entertainment value. It is highly unlikely, for instance, that any Yale professor today would ever say about Catholicism what Harold Bloom said about Mormonism in 2011. Bloom is a Sterling Professor of Humanities – the highest rank given to any faculty member at Yale. His editorial in the *New York Times*, published about a year before the 2012 presidential election, suggested that Mitt Romney was unfit to lead the United States because his church was secretive and “not even monotheistic, let alone democratic.”<sup>6</sup> Educated people who hold prestigious positions at elite universities simply don't say things like that about Catholics anymore.

But this trust in the democratic bona fides of American Catholics is a radical departure from the trajectory that American culture's understanding of Catholicism was on for most of the last four centuries. Long before the United States even was the “United States,” voters, religious leaders, and politicians viewed Catholicism as a threat to national identity, individual liberty, personal salvation, and the stability of free government. Their fears continued up through the 1960 election campaign of John F. Kennedy, who famously met with the Greater Houston Ministerial Association to assure nervous Protestant voters that “I believe in an America where the separation between church and state is absolute . . . [and] no public official either requests or accepts instructions on public policy from the pope.”<sup>7</sup>

Why American voters are, for the most part, no longer concerned about the prospect of a Catholic in the White House – even as they gobble up fictional narratives about Vatican conspiracies to hide murder, sexual hypocrisy, and historical truth – is an incredibly complex question. Without a doubt, Kennedy's election itself (if not his too-short presidency) played a role. So, too, did the decision of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) to call liberty of conscience a “right” grounded in the “dignity of the human person” nearly 175 years after the United States adopted the First Amendment to the Constitution. The political alliance that was crafted between Catholic leaders and conservative evangelical Christians in the 1970s and 1980s, as both groups worked to oppose the effects of second- and third-wave feminism and the rise of the gay rights movement, has also been important.<sup>8</sup>

But before we can understand why Catholicism is not a hurdle for ambitious politicians today, we first have to appreciate the significance of that very question. We must grapple, in other words, with the origins and meaning of what the noted twentieth-century Harvard historian

Arthur Schlesinger Sr. once called “the deepest-held bias in the history of the American people.”<sup>9</sup>

In saying this, I feel I should stipulate that I don’t think Schlesinger was correct when he characterized anti-Catholicism in this way. He was born in 1888. Even though he saw the start of the Civil Rights movement before he died, Schlesinger didn’t live in an age when video technology was able to capture the implicit racial biases we all carry within us. There were no social media sites challenging him to confront the irrefutable evidence of this racial bias and its sometimes deadly consequences. In this age of Philando Castile and Walter Scott and John Crawford and Tamir Rice – not to mention the police officers who’ve been assassinated in retaliation for their deaths – I think it’s undeniable that a bias against black people is actually the deepest-held bias in the history of the American people. *All American people.*

That being said, the history of anti-Catholicism in the United States does challenge us to confront some of the forces that animate our contemporary racial, ethnic, and religious biases, even if those biases have nothing to do with Catholicism. It does this by providing us with a window into the meaning of American identity and the values we stake a claim to when we assert that identity.

The Catholic Church represented different threats to different Americans at different points in time; and yet, over the course of the two and a half centuries that this book explores, one characteristic of the threat remained constant: Catholicism was at all times seen as antithetical to freedom. Freedom, in turn, was seen as the foundation of “American” identity – whether that identity belonged to the Puritans in the seventeenth century, the Patriots in the eighteenth century, or the Unitarians and Nativists in the nineteenth century.

Any understanding of anti-Catholicism, then, requires us to interrogate the meaning of American freedom and, by extension, the promise of American identity. The history of anti-Catholicism asks us to consider why, as a culture, we have sometimes built fences around the promise of American identity, thereby excluding some people from that promise even as we have clung to the idea that the freedom at the core of American identity is a universally “human” right, available to everyone.

The history of anti-Catholicism asks us to take fear seriously – to consider what anxieties people were actually expressing when they fretted about “popish plots” and “Romish conspiracies” and to explore how those anxieties were finally alleviated or eliminated, creating the conditions that allowed people to abandon their bigotry. If the history

of anti-Catholicism teaches us anything, it is that bigotry can be highly complex. There is a real, if perverse logic that sustains it. And appreciating the complexity of that logic is an important first step toward eliminating the fear that fuels it.

This book is organized into two parts. The first three chapters deal with anti-Catholicism in British colonial America – or what became the United States in 1783, at the close of the American Revolution. The second three chapters consider anti-Catholicism in the new republic, before the Civil War.

It's impossible to understand the history of anti-Catholicism without an understanding of what it was that Protestants feared about the Church of Rome. To understand the early history of anti-Catholicism in the United States specifically, one needs to know what British Protestants feared, since anti-Catholicism in America was initially a British import. To understand what British Protestants feared about Catholicism, then, one needs to know who, exactly, these people were – what they believed, why they believed it, and how they differed from one another on important theological points.

Chapter 1, therefore – subtitled “Anti-Catholicism in Old England and New” – provides readers with the English political and religious context that influenced the settlement and development of colonial New England. It takes readers through a brief history of the Protestant Reformation, exploring the theological stakes behind the Catholic Church's “corruption” and how and why Protestant theologians responded to that corruption the way they did.

The chapter informs readers that of all the Protestant responses to the corruption of the sixteenth-century Catholic Church, the two that had the greatest influence on the early history of America were the Calvinist response and the Anglican response. The chapter explores what made these two Protestant theologies different from one another, how the adherents of one theology viewed the adherents of the other, and when and why anti-Catholicism became a bridge between the two, uniting Calvinists and Anglicans in the Old World and the New under the aegis of a single “Protestant” and “English” identity.

Chapter 2 continues with the connections between England and its colonies in North America. Subtitled “Anti-Catholicism and Colonial Catholics in the Seventeenth Century,” the chapter considers the limits of anti-Catholicism, even in the English-speaking world, and explores the reality that Catholicism did not disappear from the English landscape

after the Catholic Church was outlawed in England. Indeed, there was a small, but wealthy group of people in England who remained committed to their Catholic faith, and these families formed the foundation of the Catholic community in British North America.

That community was small and concentrated – mostly in Maryland, though there were Catholics living in New York and Pennsylvania, as well. All three colonies extended religious toleration to Catholics in the seventeenth century, and the chapter explores the contours of that toleration in Maryland, where it had the greatest impact on Catholic lives. The chapter informs readers from the get-go that this toleration was short-lived; in the 1690s, the connection between “Protestant” and “English” identity spoken about in Chapter 1 ensured that the era of religious toleration for most British colonial Catholics came to an end. Nevertheless, the experience of toleration (and its loss) reverberated into the eighteenth century, having an impact on the kind of Catholic identity that developed in the new United States.

Chapter 3 is subtitled “Anti-Catholicism and the American Revolution.” It is here that readers begin to move beyond England and into a more thoroughly “American” context. Fears of Catholicism animated much of the rhetoric leading up to the American Revolution. The chapter explores these fears, explaining that they were grounded in a distinctly Protestant understanding of freedom and the sense, then, that Catholics could not grasp or accept this understanding of freedom because they were Catholic.

The chapter examines how the Catholic Church’s approach to freedom *was* different from the Protestant approach – but notes that the experiences Catholics had in British colonial America made their understanding of freedom different from the one advocated by the leadership of their Church. American Catholics, in fact, had an approach to freedom that was more like that of their Protestant countrymen than many of the Patriots were willing to allow, at least at first. Among the experiences that shaped American Catholics’ understanding of freedom in the decades leading up to the American Revolution, the experience of being legally, politically, and culturally marginalized was, ironically, the most salient.

In Chapter 4, readers get a bit of a break from anti-Catholicism – but not from religious disagreements. Subtitled “Anti-Catholicism and the New Republic,” the chapter considers the surprising *lack* of anti-Catholicism in the early decades of America’s existence as a free and

independent nation. It also considers the impact that the absence of religious animosity had on the Catholic Church in the United States.

America's first generation of independent citizens seemed to take the commitments they made in the Declaration of Independence pretty seriously (at least when it came to religion); they understood that Catholics, too, had "unalienable rights." The chapter examines the theory of government that animated the American Founding and explains why a collective commitment to religious liberty naturally evolved out of that theory. It also looks at how Catholics in America responded to the environment created by this commitment to religious liberty: they reacted by turning inward and disagreeing with each other. Because they didn't need to fight Protestants anymore for basic civil rights, Catholics (who shared their Protestant neighbors' fiercely republican approach to freedom) were able to fight with one another as they worked to grow and expand their Church's presence on the American landscape.

Chapters 5 and 6, then, are complements to one another; they each tell the story of anti-Catholicism's resurrection in America at a time when thousands – indeed, millions – of Catholic immigrants started pouring into the country from Germany and Ireland. Chapter 5 is subtitled "Anti-Catholicism in the Age of Immigration," and it examines the demographic and cultural changes that provoked the anxiety that led to the re-emergence of anti-Catholicism in the mid-nineteenth century. The immigrants who came to the United States in the thirty-year period between 1820 and 1850 were radically different from the ones who'd come before that time; the chapter explores what made these immigrants different, and it explains why these differences made many native-born Americans uncomfortable.

The chapter notes that immigrants were not the only forces of anxiety-inducing change in the mid-nineteenth century. Traditional Protestant theologies were also losing their grip on America's collective soul. Many people still considered themselves to be deeply religious, but a growing number of them were turning their backs on the arbitrary and immovable God found in orthodox Calvinism – the theology that had dominated New England and served as an intellectual foundation for the United States for nearly 200 years by that point. In this environment of "softening" religious commitment, traditional Protestants leaders determined that the country was morally vulnerable – and they believed that this vulnerability heightened the threat represented by Catholic immigration.

Chapter 6 is subtitled "Anti-Catholicism and American Politics." It looks more specifically at what Americans feared in the nineteenth century

and why those fears led them to join societies (the American Home Missionary Society), form political parties (the Native American or “Know Nothing” Party), and even fight in a war (the Mexican War) in order to contain or eliminate Catholicism’s influence on the United States.

Some Americans feared that the uptick in Catholic immigration was part of a papal plot to destroy the United States and the freedom that it represented. To this way of thinking, immigrants were an army of soldiers with two powerful weapons: their slavish habits and their ability to vote. The fear was that Catholic citizens would do as their priests told them to do and elect leaders who would work to eliminate freedom.

Other Americans had more specific and slightly less paranoid concerns – though their concerns, ultimately, brought them to the same place. They worried that the failure of the Catholic Church to loudly condemn the institution of slavery meant that Catholic voters could not be relied upon to fight slavery at the polls. These abolitionists worked, therefore, to deny Catholics the ability to vote.

In the end, the effort to turn anti-Catholicism into a solid and legitimate political movement failed. Chapter 6 informs readers that the Know Nothing Party was undermined by regional differences, the outbreak of the Civil War, and the voting power of immigrants themselves.

Anti-Catholicism continued to be culturally powerful after the Civil War, however – and it manifested, politically, in some surprising ways. Much of our modern-day understanding of Church–State separation, for instance, is indebted to late-nineteenth-century fears of Catholic influence on American children. But fears of Catholicism in the twentieth century never had the rhetorical, political, or foundational power that they had in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Americans may have refused to send Al Smith to the White House when he became the first Catholic to seek the presidency in 1928 – but New Yorkers sent him to the governor’s mansion in Albany four times.

## NOTES

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