

FEAR OF CATHOLIC PRESIDENT EXPLAINED BY A PROTESTANT

Possibility of Papal Domination Underlying Idea in Many Minds, Although Merits of Persons of That Faith Are Not Questioned.

To the Editor of The New York Times:

Why do many American citizens view with alarm the prospect of a Roman Catholic President? Unquestionably, Roman Catholics have bled and died for this country as freely and as nobly as Protestants. Intelligent and broad-minded Protestants know that Protestant history is stained by the blood of persecution. They know, also, that even today many of their fellow-Protestants are opposed to real freedom of scientific teaching and often seek to remove the mote from the Roman Catholic eye when they have a beam in their own eye.

Is, therefore, the widespread Protestant opposition to the nomination of a Roman Catholic for President nothing but a relic of times of strife that should be forgotten, the mark of an illiberal, un-American mentality? I am inclined to doubt it. The attitude of many of our citizens toward this issue is the product of certain convictions and feelings which are worthy of serious consideration. They may be right or wrong in this attitude; but the only way to reform them, if they are in error, is to convince them by facts and logic. They are neither bigots nor fanatics.

An Underlying Thought.

It is not difficult to understand why this religious question is more of a national issue in the case of a Presidential nomination than in the case of a Gubernatorial one. The President of the United States has vastly more power than a Governor, and has vastly more influence in shaping the foreign policy of the nation. He is the representative of the whole nation. To many he is the embodiment not only of its political ideals but also of its religious ideals and principles.

Even if he had the power, no right-minded Protestant would deny the utmost freedom of religion to all citizens. Yet he has certain deep convictions about the relation of religion and churches to American institutions, American principles and their future. He feels, rightly or wrongly, that the Protestant movement in history, with all its faults, no matter how many or grievous, is the mother, not of European civilization but of American institutions and of the religion of American democracy. This conviction is tersely expressed in a current magazine article by Gino Speranza: "In this large and true sense the spirit of Puritanism is primarily the spirit of self-government. As such, it is a perpetual protest and revolt against control from without, and against privilege that is not granted by the people." So many Americans believe.

The class of Protestants I have in mind, and they are many, who cherish these convictions desire to be fair and just to Roman Catholic citizens. They are seriously and honestly perplexed as to what should be their attitude toward the proposed nomination of Governor Smith of New York. They do not question his patriotism, his character, his ability. But they have certain convictions about the Roman hierarchy and they are puzzled to know how one can be a good Roman Catholic without endorsing what they believe are ideals and principles hostile to the type of Americanism which they cherish.

They do not believe Roman Catholicism, as an ecclesiastical hierarchy, is responsible for American institutions. These came, so they believe, from the Protestant movement.

Taft Case Not Analogous.

One of THE TIMES's correspondents raised the question why there was no protest against Mr. Taft on account of his Unitarianism. That question is suggestive. The answer to it reveals the fact that the theological beliefs of a President do not alarm most Protestants who may differ from him. In the case of Governor Smith, it is not his personal religion that is, after all, the cause of alarm or fear. It is various phases of the hierarchical institution for which he stands. The Protestants I am attempting to describe fear that this foreign hierarchy and its native official representatives would capitalize Governor Smith's election. They believe, rightly or wrongly, that Rome desires all the world to recognize the United States as a Roman Catholic country. A poster in a Paris church which I saw last Summer, describing to the French people the glories of the Eucharistic Congress at Chicago, contains in bold type these words, "Rich and prosperous America acclaims triumphant Catholicism." The opposition of Rome to the Y. M. C. A. and the Methodist Church, challenging the right of these Protestant bodies to carry on their work in Italy, was deeply resented in Protestant circles and is often quoted as an evidence of the opposition of Rome, where she is strong, to the sort of freedom in which American Protestants believe.

The fact that powerful ecclesiastics in this country, whose character and ability are beyond question, whose influence in American life and thought cannot be denied, are selected by a foreign power they are ecclesiastically bound to obey is not looked upon with favor in many circles.

The Cardinal's Ring Episode.

History abounds in illustrations of the fact that seemingly trivial incidents have had big consequences. The kissing of a Cardinal's ring by the Governor of a State may be such a trivial event. It can be and has been defended as a mark of respect by a gentleman for religion and the Church of which he is a member. As

such, no one can justly take exception. But that incident started talk everywhere. And the talk led to the discussion of great historical issues involving Church and State, Americanism and Rome. To certain Americans it seems, rightly or wrongly, that the American State and the religion of American democracy are as divine and as worthy of honor as the Roman Catholic Church and its religion. Would the Cardinal kiss the ring of a Governor or President? If not, why not? That question has been asked many, many times.

It is asked because it is believed that the ring is a symbol and its kissing is a recognition of ecclesiastical claims inconsistent with American principles. It will be conceded that it is possible the Governor meant no more by the act than respect for religion. But how do ecclesiastics construe such acts? What are their historic claims for the Church and for themselves in relation to personal freedom, political self-government and the nature and authority of the State? If we are honest with facts, can we deny that this trivial act justifies such considerations? At all events, whatever we think about that, the fact is the act in question would figure in the campaign if Governor Smith is nominated. Perhaps it would be profitable for the American people to arrive, if possible, at the truth involved in these issues. But if such a controversy is made a part of a Presidential campaign, it is difficult to see how it could be carried on in an atmosphere of goodwill and tolerance. Be that as it may, they misread the convictions and feelings of multitudes of Americans who think it is possible to confine such a Presidential campaign to the discussion of economic and political issues. It simply could not be done, however deplorable or disastrous such a conflict might be.

An Issue to Be Faced.

This is not intended in any sense an argument against the nomination of Governor Smith. Perhaps the time has come to thrash out these issues in a political campaign. But it is intended as a warning to any who may cherish the delusion that once the Governor is nominated the campaign will be confined to matters purely political, with here and there a fanatical outcry which will not be heard above the din of political battle.

In short, and we may as well face the issue, before the class of intelligent and fair-minded Protestants I have in mind can be mentally at peace on these issues, they will want to know whether an American Catholic Presidential candidate endorses the claim of the Papacy to temporal power, its toleration, not its acceptance of American principles, its attitude toward American public schools and its rejection of the claims of millions of American Christians to the right of self-government in religion, as well as in politics. They believe, once more rightly or wrongly, that if one does not endorse Rome in such matters, he may be a real American according to their standard, no matter what his personal religion may be. They respect the character and applaud the patriotism of the Roman Catholics; but when it comes to the Presidency of the United States, then convictions about the Papacy as an institution compel them to pause and reflect.

I believe this to be a fairly accurate description of a state of mind that must be reckoned with in this country. I do not defend or attack it. It is a factor in American life which merits serious consideration, because it is the mental attitude of men and women who are no more intolerant bigots than are those who denounce them in the name of patriotism and religious liberty.

So, if the American people must face this issue, let us discuss it on its merits. Vituperation on either side neither makes converts nor deters the brave and honest from the path of duty as they see it.

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Grand Rapids, Mich., Dec. 20, 1926.