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Reflections on Contemporary Anti-Catholicism

Gerald P. Fogarty, S.J.

Anti-Catholicism continues to exist in the United States, but it no longer takes the violent, and therefore more obvious, forms of the past. Aside from Chick publications and attacks from fundamentalists, anti-Catholicism in America today is far more subtle and perhaps even more insidious in a culture where religion is too often merely a matter of private opinion. Although some forms of anti-Catholicism show continuity with the past, in many ways contemporary American culture bears a greater resemblance to the European Enlightenment blended with American individualism than to the Protestantism that shaped the early years of the nation and that, in turn, created so many aspects of American Catholicism. In this culture, individual reason alone is the sole criterion for understanding human existence.

In the English-speaking colonies, Catholics were a small minority, clustered for the most part in Maryland and southern Pennsylvania. Maryland Catholics were English and virtually personified the quiet, unobtrusive piety that enabled Catholics in England to survive. In Maryland religion was centered on the family, especially after 1704 when Catholics became subject to penal laws that prohibited public worship. At the time of the American Revolution, Catholics accounted for slightly more than one percent of the population, but Catholic bloodshed in the fight for independence was far out of proportion to their numbers, as John Carroll, the first American bishop, reminded a Protestant critic. He and other Catholic leaders recalled that patriotism for George Washington when they congratulated him on his election to the presidency.[1] Catholics at the time were too small of a minority to constitute a threat to the American vision of a Protestant nation. Their leaders, moreover, occupied the same social status as the Protestant founding fathers. Despite suspicion of their allegiance to a Roman pope, they had gained acceptance in American society.

1. John Carroll to John Fenno, 10 June 1789, in Thomas O. Hanley, ed., *The John Carroll Papers,* 3 vols. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 1:366; Carroll et al. to George Washington, ibid., 1:410–11.

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The attitude toward Catholics changed with the influx of immigrants. By the census of 1850, the Catholic Church was the largest single denomination in America and constituted more than 12 percent of the population. Antebellum violence against Catholics took place mainly in the North, where most of the immigrants had settled. In 1834 the Ursuline convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts, was burned. In 1844 violence broke out in Philadelphia, leaving several churches in ashes. New York did not suffer the same fate only because its bishop, John Hughes, took a militant stand and armed his parishioners to defend their churches. Much of the northern problem centered on the Protestant character of the public schools. Hughes and Bishop Francis Kenrick of Philadelphia sought to remove reading material offensive to Catholic students from the curricula, gain a share of the common fund for Catholics, and have Catholic teachers appointed in areas where Catholics were numerous.[2] Failing in these objectives, they embarked on the ambitious project of creating a vast parochial school system that spread through the northeast, Midwest, and West. Out of self-defense, they created a Catholic ghetto.

The situation in the South was different. First of all, immigrants had not settled there in great numbers. The Know-Nothing campaign in the 1850s that ravaged the North, for example, had little effect in the South. The ecclesiastical style of priests in the South was one of accommodation to the culture in an effort to prove that Catholics were Christians. John England, the first bishop of Charleston, preached in Protestant churches. In the postbellum years Bishop James Gibbons did the same in North Carolina and Virginia until becoming archbishop of Baltimore. While southern bishops established parochial schools in major cities, they were not as eager to follow the example of their northern counterparts.[3]

The postbellum years also witnessed a decline in the more virulent forms of anti-Catholicism. Although the American Protective Association (APA) sought to prevent Catholics from holding elective office or even jobs, most of the antipathy for Catholicism was directed not so much toward individual Catholics as toward bishops seeking to gain funding for parochial schools. The educational ghetto created by the bishops in the northeast in the antebellum period, however, was beginning to bear fruit in an unanticipated way. Whereas Hughes and others had complained of the Protestant nature of public schools, Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul complained in 1890 that the public schools excluded Christianity, although this may have been a phenomenon limited to the upper Midwest.[4] In short, the Catholic response to anti-Catholicism in the nineteenth century was helping to create a secular, nonreligious environment, at least with regard to public education.

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2. Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade: 1800–1860* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964), 53–84, 142–65, 220–37.

3. For a case study of Virginia, see my *Commonwealth Catholicism: A History of the Catholic Church in Virginia* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 117–27, 132–34, 213–51.

4. Gerald P. Fogarty, S.J., *The Vatican and the American Hierarchy from 1870 to 1965* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann Verlag, 1982; reprint, Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1985), 65–69.

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By the twentieth century anti-Catholicism had by no means died out. Its principal expressions continued to focus on education. In 1924 the Oregon state legislature, dominated by Freemasons, passed a bill to take effect in 1926 that would prohibit all but public education. Branding private schools as "unpatriotic," the proponents of the bill adopted the slogan "One flag, one school, one language!" Walter Pierce, a Democrat, won election as governor by using the issue to court the support of the Ku Klux Klan. The Supreme Court, however, declared the law unconstitutional on the grounds of parents' right to choose the form of education for their children.[5] In other words, the Court recognized the value of pluralism in education and thwarted the state's efforts to establish a monopoly. In some ways, what Oregon attempted to do was what had happened in nineteenth-century Germany, France, and Italy, where the national government sought to end Catholic education; this would reoccur in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.

On the political level, during the 1920s the Ku Klux Klan also tried to undermine Catholic influence on the grounds that because the Catholic Church accepted the leadership of the pope, Catholicism was incompatible with being truly American. The Klan seemed to have great power, and Congress even recessed so that its members could attend the Klan parade down Pennsylvania Avenue in 1925. But Catholic leaders may have exacerbated the situation. In 1926 Cardinal George Mundelein of Chicago arranged to hold an International Eucharistic Congress in his see city, the first ever in the United States. A special train conveyed European cardinals from New York to Chicago and stopped at various places to allow people unable to go to Chicago to catch a glimpse of so many princes of the Church. There were ten cardinals on the train, with Cardinal Dennis Dougherty of Philadelphia traveling in the private car provided by the president of the Pennsylvania Railroad and Cardinal William H. O'Connell of Boston arriving on a private yacht with five hundred pilgrims. This display of Catholic pomp and power, however, may well have increased the fears of Protestant America and contributed to the defeat of Al Smith in 1928.

Although the causes of Smith's defeat continue to be argued by historians, Catholics, in fact, saw themselves as second-class citizens, even though James Gillis, C.S.P., proclaimed in an editorial in the *Catholic World,* "We shall not wither up and blow away."[6] The accommodation that southern Catholics, at least in Virginia, had made to the regional Protestant culture was now under strain. In 1920, for example, the Diocese of Richmond rejected the formation of a Catholic Laymen's Association, already existing in Georgia and Michigan, to counter convent inspection bills. Virginia Catholics at the time were protected by Protestant legislators who had prevented such bills from reaching the floor for full debate. In 1929, however, the diocese founded a Catholic Laymen's League to safeguard Catholic rights.[7]

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5. *Pierce v. Society of Sisters,* 268 U.S. 510 (1925), 534.

6. Quoted in James Hennesey, *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 253

7. Fogarty, *Commonwealth Catholicism,* 350, 407–10.

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As Carroll and other Catholic leaders had written to Washington in 1789, Catholics had shed their blood for their country. Such patriotism continued to be a hallmark of American Catholicism until the Vietnam War. Still, there continued to be strains between Catholics and American society. In 1948 the Supreme Court issued its McCullum decision prohibiting religious education in public schools during school hours. It based its ruling on the Jeffersonian metaphor of a "wall of separation" between church and state. Several Protestant leaders issued a protest that such an argument meant "freedom from religion" rather than "freedom of religion" and hastened the nation's course toward secularism.

The Protestant statement coincided with the thought of John Courtney Murray, S.J., a theologian at Woodstock College in Maryland, who, beginning in 1942, was concerned for the growth of secularism and called for cooperation between Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and even secularists to shape public policy. To make religion merely a private matter, he argued, was idiocy, as he played on the Greek word *idiotes,* which originally signified a private person with no responsibility for public affairs and gradually came to mean a person who was irresponsible.[8] The 1948 Supreme Court decision only increased his alarm. The American bishops, for their part, shared his concern about the implications of the decision, but, prohibited by Vatican legislation from formally cooperating with Protestant groups, they could only quote the Protestant protest in their annual pastoral letter.[9]

In the late 1940s and 1950s a new outbreak of anti-Catholicism surfaced in the form of the organization Protestants and Other Americans United for the Separation of Church and State (POAU) and its principal exponent, Paul Blanshard. In his book, *American Freedom and Catholic Power,* Blanshard argued that Catholicism was incompatible with American democracy because Catholic loyalty to Rome precluded true loyalty to the United States and the Church's hierarchical structure infringed on individual freedom.[10] Among his other arguments was the fact that although civil law permitted divorce, the Catholic Church prohibited it. He was, of course, bringing up the charges registered against Catholics from the colonial period, through the Know-Nothing campaign, and into the Ku Klux Klan era, but he still struck a chord in American society. Many Protestant thinkers, however, saw that in reality he was attacking all religion and was a proponent of secularism. However, the attacks on Catholicism from the POAU and Blanshard were offset by a new threat to American democracy: Communism. In effect, the two threats to American society, Catholicism and Communism, cancelled one another out, in part because Catholic anti-Communism, symbolized by Senator Joseph McCarthy's witch hunt, proved that one could not be both a Catholic and a Communist. One could well argue that American fear of Communism paved the way for the election of the first American Catholic president.

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8. John Courtney Murray, S.J., *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), 117.

9. See Fogarty, *Vatican and the American Hierarchy,* 355–58.

10. Paul Blanshard, *American Freedom and Catholic Power* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949).

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John F. Kennedy symbolized the ideal American. Harvard educated and a war hero, he was an apt candidate for president; however, he was a Catholic. In his famous speech to the Houston Ministerial Association, he defined himself as the candidate who happened to be a Catholic, but not the Catholic candidate. He stated that if there were ever a conflict between his "conscience" and his office, he would resign. During the question and answer period, an interrogator followed through on that statement, but misquoted Kennedy as stating that if there were a conflict between his "Church" and his office, he would resign. Kennedy immediately corrected him by asserting his original statement.[11] In retrospect, one could argue that Kennedy espoused an essentially secularist position—that religion was a merely private matter that might or might not influence his conscience. Despite later claims that John Courtney Murray assisted Kennedy in writing his address, Murray later recounted that Kennedy's aide, Theodore Sorensen, had phoned him to read the address on the way to Houston. Murray recalled that he may have suggested some changes but "told Sorensen at the time that it was unfair to ask me for an opinion just on hearing the speech on the phone by the side of a plane just about to take off for Houston."[12] Kennedy's response was antithetical to Murray's position because it made religion private.

Regardless of Murray's reservations, Kennedy was elected the first Catholic president of the United States in 1960. For many Catholics, it was a sign of their acceptance. But was this the case? First of all, the questions to which Kennedy had to address himself were merely political issues on which Catholics were and could be divided: federal aid to Catholic schools and diplomatic relations with the Vatican. There was, therefore, no public disavowal from Catholic leaders. The major issue in the contemporary political world was and remains the moral issue of abortion, and Catholic politicians have been largely left to their own devices, without theological input in shaping their consciences.[13] Second, was Kennedy elected because of toleration for Catholics or because at the time religion was ceasing to be an issue in American politics? The latter issue is the one to which the remainder of this article will be directed.

One result of the Catholic educational "ghetto" was that a whole generation of Catholics was poised to take advantage of the GI Bill of Rights. From a basically working class and urban population, older ethnic Catholics were catapulted into the middle class and suburbia as they obtained college educations in the same proportions as their Protestant counterparts. In the suburbs, however, religion played a different role in their lives. It was a private matter, virtually symbolized by families on Sundays getting into their own cars to drive to church, where, perhaps, they knew few of their fellow worshippers and might have to hurry after Mass to vacate the parking lot for those attending the next Mass. The sense of community engendered by the earlier urban, and

11. *New York Times,* 6 October 1960.

12. Quoted in Donald E. Pelotte, S.S.S., *John Courtney Murray: Theologian in Conflict* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975), 76.

13. For the most recent expression of this, see Robin Toner, "Accusation of Bias," *New York Times,* 27 July 2003.

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frequently ethnic, parish was lost. With their newfound economic and social standing, Kennedy's appeal to "conscience" rather than "Church" was alluring. Catholics were beginning to embrace the secularism of American society, and ironically, the Church had provided the educational opportunities that enabled them to reach the middle class and secular environment. In that environment, anti-Catholicism did not seem to be a factor. In some ways, Catholics adopted a Protestant ecclesiology in which religion was ultimately private and invisible, as opposed to the Catholic position that the Church was visible and inserted in the world.

In the contemporary world, many American Catholics are not concerned with the issue of anti-Catholicism, and, for that matter, politicians no longer see anything like a "Catholic vote." When George W. Bush, then a presidential candidate, spoke at Bob Jones University, Senator John McCain, also a contender, accused him of anti-Catholicism—the university had hosted Ian Paisley only a short time before and posted his attacks on the Church on its web page. Bush, of course, apologized, but it is likely that his advisers did not anticipate any problem. In a sense, they were right, for there was nowhere near the Catholic reaction that could have been expected a generation before.

Yet, there is a more subtle form of anti-Catholicism, one that Peter Steinfels addressed in his column in the *New York Times,* where he noted meeting a woman who referred to her daughter-in-law as a Catholic, but "a thinking one." Steinfels commented that the implication was that those who examined, thought about, and then accepted Church teachings were written of as "not thinking."[14]

Steinfels struck a chord, but one could add to it that the mentality he described is prevalent in many academic circles, especially those enamored with postmodernism, in which there is no reality behind a text—a position that relegates creeds and dogmas to mere opinions. In such circles, the Catholic Church is seen as authoritarian and opposed to freedom of thought. Individual reason, then, becomes the sole source of truth. Much of this form of anti-Catholicism has its roots in the past when both the Catholic Church's hierarchical structure and its loyalty to Rome made it seem incompatible with American institutions, but it now has a new philosophical basis.

There is another academic undercurrent of anti-Catholic bias. In 1986 the University of Virginia sponsored a symposium on the bicentennial of Virginia's Statute on Religious Freedom. One of the speakers on a panel was Robert Drinan, S.J. He noted that in spite of legally established religious liberty, over sixty million Americans felt themselves disenfranchised because the Supreme Court had recently declared unconstitutional the practice of providing remedial education teachers for poor children in parochial schools.[15] Drinan then commented that on issues like this Catholics might find themselves politically allied with groups with whom they have little in common and that political parties should take this fact into account. The next day, several atten-

14. *New York Times,* 4 March 2000.

15. *Aguilar v. Felton,* 473 U.S. 402 (1986). At issue was the application to parochial schools of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965.

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dees privately stated to me that Drinan sounded like Jerry Falwell! Some also challenged how any intelligent person could hold such an opinion. It mattered not that Drinan was then an officer of Americans for Democratic Action. Only with difficulty did I manage to get across that I agreed with him, a position that, I presume, relegated me to the group of unintelligent persons.

Yet, Catholics have to be careful to distinguish between anti-Catholicism and anti-religion. The Catholic Church remains the single largest Christian denomination in the country. At least until the sex abuse scandals, it was the only mainline denomination that continued to grow both in numbers and in percentage of the population. Its size and dogmatic system make it an easy target for attacks, but some of these are actually attacks on organized religion in general. Catholics also have to be careful in judging the media coverage of the sex abuse crisis as motivated by anti-Catholicism. In its annual report even the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, regarded by many liberals as too conservative and defensive, praised the handling of the crisis by the *Boston Globe* and the *New York Times*.[16] The crisis was of Church leaders' own making, and the media rightfully reported it, although some writers admittedly seemed to take delight in their task.

Unfortunately, the failure of Catholic leadership in the sex abuse scandal contributed to its inability to get the Church's message across on social issues and the Iraqi war. An opinion piece in the *Wall Street Journal* queried why the pope took so long in addressing the sex abuse scandal and yet was so quick to challenge American policy toward the war with Iraq.[17] Underlying that opinion is the erroneous notion that bishops are delegates of the pope. The two issues under consideration are, in fact, quite different. The pope intervened in the sex abuse crisis only after the American bishops had failed to exercise adequately their duties as bishops and address this domestic question themselves. As a universal moral teacher, the pope has the obligation to directly address issues like war, and the imminence of war is not something that allows for delay. Whatever one thinks of the inconsistency of the papal responses, the fact is that the bishops have lost their moral voice at a time when the nation needs to hear it and when anti-Catholicism remains a fact in American life.

Just as in the nineteenth century, when American Catholics were partially shaped by an anti-Catholic culture that was predominantly Protestant, so now they are influenced by an antireligious culture that is now decidedly secularist. A century ago, Catholics embraced the defensive ghetto erected by their bishops; now many Catholics react negatively to episcopal authority. Contemporary anti-Catholicism occurs in a milieu where Catholics had been divided long before the sex-scandal crisis. Some conservatives see the solution to the problem of the contemporary Church as a more centralized papal authority, a move that would not only denigrate the office of bishop but also increase American suspicions. Others imagine that a certain period of the Church's past

16. http://www.catholicleague.org/2002report/summary2002.html
17. Rod Dreher, "Finally, a Rapid Response," *Wall Street Journal,* 7 March 2003.

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represented its ideal state. Some liberals want to break from the past, whether real or imagined, to create an ideal American Church along democratic lines. In the process, some writers come close to embracing the anti-Catholic arguments of the past and present in attacking Church structure and authority rather than the abuse of authority. The proponents of neither position have a sense of history as development, but both illustrate the division within the Church that makes it so vulnerable to attacks from without.

As long as Catholicism in the United States remains loyal to the Bishop of Rome and maintains that it has the authority to teach doctrine as something objective, it will be foreign to the contemporary American ethos. Implicit in the righteous outrage against sexual abuse is the fact that bishops and priests failed to live according to the objective norms of Church teaching; their actions can be judged not only criminal according to civil law but also immoral by the very standards of the Church they were ordained to serve. Despite its weaknesses and the sinfulness of its leaders, the Catholic Church still holds that revelation and doctrine are objective. Its structure in the United States is in need of reform, especially in the areas of accountability and oversight, but reformers have to avoid seeming to adopt the premises of contemporary anti-Catholicism by rejecting the need for structure and authority.

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