The Dilemma of Anti-Catholicism in American Travel Writing, circa 1790-1830

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The decades between 1790 and 1830 have rightly been seen as a lull between the anti-Catholic heights of the colonial and antebellum periods. The French alliance, the imperative of religious pluralism and civility under the Bill of Rights, and the small number of Catholics residing in the United States all conspired to reduce popular intolerance toward Catholics in the post-Revolutionary period – although it needs to be recognized that anti-Catholicism remained an respectable form of prejudice throughout this era. In this paper I want to show how American travelers in Europe contributed to the early national reassessment of Roman Catholicism. Travelers enjoyed enhanced credibility because of their first-hand experience in continental Europe. They reinforced some existing prejudices, such as the danger posed by the close relationship between the Church and European despotisms.

In other ways they undermined prejudices and introduced new, more positive ways to assess Catholicism. They reaffirmed the historical connection between American culture and sacred art and architecture. They also reassessed traditional notions of Catholic ritual and piety, which Americans had traditionally derided as little better than superstition. Some travelers went beyond recognizing Catholic practice as a legitimate form of Christianity. In a sharp departure from convention, they articulated a kind of envy, arguing that Catholic ritual was in some ways superior, more genuine, than American Protestant practice. Finally, I want to show how these tentative, preliminary assessments informed American attitudes to Catholicism in the antebellum period. After 1830 anti-Catholicism did acquire a new breadth and intensity, and some travelers contributed to this trend. But others resisted, amplifying early national

arguments in favor of Catholic art, architecture, and ritual. In the midst of the heyday of nativism in the United States, travelers affirmed a powerful historical and contemporary relationship between American culture and the Roman Catholic Church.

As subjects of the British crown, colonial Americans had good reason for hating and fearing the Catholic Church. Anti-Catholicism was not a conceit for many colonists – especially in New England – but a necessity for survival. Frequent wars with Spain and France embedded fear of Catholic powers in colonials' collective memory, which the immensely popular genre of captivity narratives reinforced. Moreover, anti-Catholicism was one pillar of British nationalism, and mainland colonists affirmed their British identity by parroting conventional British caricatures of Catholic idolatry, corruption, and aggression. Colonial Americans in Europe faithfully reinforced these prejudices. The Church, they argued, discouraged innovation and intellectual inquiry, inhibited economic activity, and promoted a form of worship that was barely above the level of paganism. Travelers ridiculed Catholics' devotion to saints and the holy family and poured scorn on the elaborate rituals of the mass. They mocked popular piety, like homemade shrines to the Virgin Mary and other sacred figures. Joseph Shippen of Philadelphia ridiculed one such shrine in Normandy that was intended to honor Mary and miracles attributed to her. Shippen instead thought the shrine, constructed of detritus from shipwrecks and various "pieces of old junk," nicely illustrated Catholic superstition. Travelers also reaffirmed the popular British belief that the Church partnered with despots to oppress the peoples of the Continent. Benjamin Rush, visiting France in 1769, maintained that the clergy's survival depended on its suppressing "Learning, and those Arts which enlarge and unfetter the human mind." The Kingdom would never rival Britain while Paris teemed with priests who were

"the first and constant companions of each succeeding Prince." For their own reasons, and also because they cherished their British nationalism, colonial Americans were enthusiastic anti-Catholics.[1]

These prejudices ebbed during and after the American Revolution. Longstanding hostility toward France, the preeminent Catholic power in the Old World, gave way to gratitude for the crucial aid proffered by that nation during the struggle for independence. Likewise, the First Amendment made freedom of conscience a cardinal tenet of national identity, rendering prejudice on purely religious ground illegitimate, if not positively un-American.[2] Equally important, the threat posed by the Catholic Church, immediate and constant during most of the colonial period, seemed remote, if not non-existent, after 1783. With France expelled from the continent, only feeble Spain held Rome's standard in the American neighborhood. The Catholic Church was no longer the existential threat it once had been. Among travelers to Europe, suspicion of the Church and its activities ebbed. Early national travelers were far more likely to exhibit curiosity toward Catholicism. They still found the Church to be strange and even menacing, but Americans abroad struggled to integrate Catholic art and architecture into their cultural heritage.

As Christians, Americans were connected to the Church. It was part of their history. Yet, as Protestants, Americans rejected Rome's authority and teachings. Most Americans continued to see the Catholic Church as a relic of a bygone, superstitious age, and a force for reaction in the present. Travelers distinguished between Catholic art and architecture, which they accepted as part of their European inheritance, and Catholic ritual and practice, which kept the Continent poor, ignorant, and unfree. Americans responded to sacred art, statuary,

architecture, and even ritual with what the art historian John Davis has called "Catholic Envy." The material and religious culture of American Protestantism seemed sterile and feeble – even inadequate -- in contrast to that of Catholic Europe. Travelers' awe stemmed partly from the total absence of grand architecture and classic works of sacred art in the United States. In that respect, travelers' response to the material culture of Catholicism resembled their reaction to castles, ruins, and great cities like London and Paris. But Catholic envy also had a normative dimension. It forced travelers, often in spite of themselves, to assess their own religious traditions. Some women and men found themselves considering the unthinkable: that as an expression of piety and as a means for glorifying God, Catholic ritual surpassed American Protestantism.[3]

Americans thought they were prepared for a visit to the Old World. They were familiar with its history and literature, and many of them had seen images of its cities, cathedrals, castles, and landscapes. Yet, again and again, travelers discovered that books were no substitute for first-hand exposure to the marvels of Europe. Andrew Bigelow of Worcester, Mass. found that his expectations of York Cathedral's "magnificence and grandeur" were more than confirmed when he visited there in 1816. His sentiments epitomize Americans' responses to European church architecture. Much like London and Paris, the United States simply had nothing to match the splendor of Europe's cathedrals and great churches. Catholic painting, statuary, and architecture awed Americans. It was not merely their grandeur and antiquity that impressed Americans, although those were important. Rather, travelers were surprised by the religious sentiments such sites awoke. Accustomed to identify the Church with superstition and idolatry, travelers were unprepared to have their religious feelings stirred by the material

culture of Catholicism. "I have seen nothing in Europe more calculated to impress the mind with awe," Francis Kinloch said of the magnificent Benedictine abbey of St. Michael in Piedmont.[4]

"Awe" appears again and again in post-Revolutionary Americans' writings as they recorded their encounters with the sacred architecture and art of Catholic Europe. The word signified more than a sense of the rawness and small scale of the human geography of the United States vis-à-vis Europe. Rather, it expressed travelers' astonishment at the profound religious sentiments awakened by that most surprising source of inspiration, the Roman Catholic Church. The young Unitarian minister Joseph Stevens Buckminster could not find the words to express the emotions stirred at first seeing Strasburg Cathedral in 1806. A vocabulary sufficient to articulate his soul's sentiments was "wholly out of the reach of my pen," he wrote. But, in a cooler moment, Buckminster recognized that this "wonderful structure" was "sacred to the piety, almost an honor to the superstition, which erected it." That qualification notwithstanding, what stands out in Buckminster's account is the genuine spiritual connection that he made with this ancient symbol of Catholic piety.[5]

Most travelers approached the Catholic Church more warily. They were eager to make the historical connection between Catholic art and American culture, but they remained alert to the religious errors and political machinations of the Church. In the 1840s some Protestants, conceding that a link existed between Catholic art and piety, adapted crucifixes, stained-glass windows, and other Catholic decorative arts to adorn Protestant churches.[6] Post-Revolutionary Americans did not. Joseph Sansom conceded that even the "most rigid Dissenter from the most rigid Protestants" could not help but feel awe at the interior of St. Peter's Basilica, "a Christian

Temple, more glorious than that of Solomon." Yet, as a place of piety, it left him unmoved. "*The heart of man is the Temple of the Lord*," Sansom reminded himself, not magnificent churches. Americans had trouble separating Catholic style from substance. Stunned by the magnificence of Church architecture, Americans had to gird themselves not to be beguiled into forgetting Rome's flaws. St. Michael's had no sooner entranced Francis Kinloch than the Fête Dieu in Milan snapped him out of it. "Such pomp of exteriour worship, such paganism, and so little devotion," Kinloch wrote, "quite put me out of conceit with the Roman Catholick system." Some of these critiques anticipated the substance and tone of antebellum nativism. John Tucker Bowdoin saw nothing to admire in the magnificence of French church architecture. He argued that a benevolent diety would prefer that the "treasures thus lavished on their buildings" be instead used to relieve the distress of the poor women and men he saw wherever he traveled in France. Observing mass or other services convinced several travelers that these rituals brainwashed believers into supporting an indolent clergy. John Godfrey thought that priests celebrated mass less from duty or conviction than from self-interest. The hokum of the mass kept the "superstitious crowd" convinced of the pseudo-magical authority of the clergy. Even amidst grinding poverty ordinary Catholics were fervently believed "it is their duty to support them [priests] in idleness."[7]

Though often awed – if only in spite of themselves – by grand buildings and stunning works of art, American travelers retained their colonial forebears' hostility to Catholic political power. When travelers compared regions of Europe to each other and to the United States (as the conventions of travel literature compelled them to do), they inevitably found Catholic regions mired in poverty, ignorance, lassitude, and unfreedom contrasted with Protestant

areas. This was no mere accident of culture and geography: Americans were convinced that Catholicism conspired with secular authorities to keep ordinary people uneducated, indolent, and deferential to religious and worldly authority. The misgovernment of priests and princes was the obvious explanation for European poverty, given the continent's natural bounty. In 1788, Thomas Shippen dismissed Chamberry (about 82 km south of Geneva) as "a dirty hole of a town," its inhabitants "poor half-starved ignorant devils." Nature had lavished upon Savoy "her choicest gifts with the most profuse hand," but the corruption of human institutions distorted the egalitarian tendencies of the natural world. "[I]f the government is bad & Catholicism prevails," Shippen concluded, "wretchedness & want must ever reign along with it." In 1811, James West echoed Shippen on how religious and secular despotism conspired to subvert the will of the environment. Nature intended France to be a land of prosperity, he told his father. "[M]an or rather *despotic government* has been constantly engaged in counteracting her intentions."[8]

Post-Revolutionary Americans assessed Catholicism in very sophisticated ways. They distinguished between the cultural treasures of the Church, whether or not they articulated doctrines with which they disagreed or whether they glorified papal authority, because they saw themselves as tied to Catholicism by history and the chain of European culture. Catholic art and architecture was theirs, whether or not they had any respect for the Church's rituals or teachings. Some Americans, like Joseph Stevens Buckminster, went beyond recognizing these historical and cultural connections. The magnificence of great cathedrals and the grandeur of the mass, which all travelers acknowledged, provoked them to reassess the conventional American Protestant conviction that Catholic ritual was little more than "mummery," as

travelers often labeled it.[9] Catholic practice might not only be a genuine expression of Christian piety, but a particularly beautiful and reverent one. Clearly most American travelers were not prepared to go that far. Like Joseph Shippen and James West, they balanced respect with sacred art with a lingering contempt for the secular influence of the Church. As Americans embraced self-government and religious toleration as cardinal national characteristics, the Catholic Church seemed not only foreign, but absolutely un-American.

With the massive surge of Catholic immigration from Ireland and Germany in the 1840s, anti-Catholic sentiments intensified. Catholicism, a distant curiosity in the 1810s and 20s, was now a clear and present danger to the republic. Travelers fed these prejudices, because they could testify directly to the Church's toxic effects on society, its medieval superstitions, and its oppressive, un-republican nature. Americans abroad boasted that they saw the Church in its real, unadulterated form. It was not the Americanized, accessible institution personified by New York Archbishop John Hughes, and it certainly was not the creaky, feeble faith they thought was barely surviving throughout Europe. In places like Spain and Italy, it was a vital, thriving parasite, living off the ignorance and fear of the masses and the support of despotic regimes. And yet, other travelers employed their authority in contradicting the direst prescriptions of nativists. Admiration and even envy toward Catholic ritual intensified during the antebellum period, as did the consciousness of historical bonds between American and Catholic culture. Even more surprising at this high point of American anti-Catholicism, some travelers even entertained the possibility that Catholic ritual and piety might not only be a genuine, legitimate variety of Christian religious expression, but in some ways a superior one.

Some travelers used their expert authority to chide Americans for their complacency in the face of the new Catholic threat. Naval chaplain Charles Rockwell published his travel account in part to counter "the singular ignorance and apathy which prevail in the United States, with regard to the essential and inherent superstition, bigotry, and idolatry of the Papal religion, its hostility to general education, to freedom of thought and action, and to civil and religious liberty in every form." Henry Cheever agreed. Religious toleration, as well as the small number of Catholics in the population, led Americans to misunderstand the peril posed by the Church. These travelers strained to prove that Catholicism was not just another Christian sect, but a malignant political force. Cheever chose two metaphors to explain how Catholic priests would undermine republicanism. They were "rattlesnakes," injecting "poison through the body politic." They were also "sappers working under the orders of a foreign general, & if not prevented they would undermine the liberties of our republic."[10]

Cheever wrote about prevention. He and other zealous anti-Catholic travelers sought not merely to warn their compatriots of the danger they faced, but to recommend a course of action. Here, they stepped beyond conventional anti-Catholicism into more radical territory. Cherished liberties needed to be reassessed in light of the nature of Rome's threat. Long-accepted policies had to be reviewed and, perhaps, scrapped. George B. Cheever recommended that Americans reconsider their open immigration policies and gird themselves for a long struggle with a domestic enemy. He noted that since 1800 immigration had swelled the Catholic population of Geneva. Should they become a majority, Cheever predicted that the Genevans would soon lose their political and religious freedoms. The implications for the United States were obvious. Catholic immigrants were, quite literally, a fifth column biding

their time until they could convert the United States into another barren, enslaved province of Rome. Charles Rockwell told Americans that their "whole country is regarded by Catholics as missionary ground." The Church was marshalling its strength to invade the United States with its un-republican – but seductive -- faith. Rockwell admonished Americans not only to be vigilant against missions that would spread "popular ignorance, and . . . civil and religious despotism," but to counterattack, to carry the Protestant gospel into the strongholds of Catholicism. The nativists of the antebellum era saw Catholicism as an alien and hostile tradition, the antithesis of middle-class, republican principles. It was a negative reference point, a symbol of all that the United States was not and never ought to become.[11]

Travelers resisted these admonitions. They did not believe that the Catholicism posed a danger to fundamental American values. It did not require that Americans reassess their civil liberties or adopt aggressive countermeasures. Despite nativists' dire warnings, Americans continued to link themselves historically to the Catholic Church. Moreover, they balanced widely-held anti-Catholic prejudices against openness toward the value of Catholic religious practice. Confronted with Catholic art and piety, Protestant Americans often found their own religious traditions wanting. The early national tradition of "Catholic envy" expanded in the antebellum decades. Catharine Sedgwick thought that the interior of any Catholic edifice made Protestant churches, including Westminster Cathedral, look like "a disfurnished house." She told her correspondents who had grown up worshipping in the spare, utilitarian churches of New England that they could have no conception of the majesty of a structure like the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. Americans were even more amazed that these churches could be found not only in Rome, but throughout Europe. No American could even imagine the splendor

of sacred architecture in Palermo, a Massachusetts diarist wrote in 1844. "It seems to me that the humblest chapel I have visited, would attract thousands of visitors in America, and would be gazed upon with wonder."[12]

Travelers were not only moved by the magnificence of Catholic architecture, but the beauty of sacred music and even the rituals of the mass. Paris's Le Madeleine impressed Henry Colman with its magnificent interior and exterior, but what really awed him was Christmas mass, which "conspired to present a scene of most extraordinary and affecting magnificence, and a beauty which is perfectly indescribable." Although travelers conventionally contrasted the Church's brilliance with the poverty endemic to much of Catholic Europe, very few did so while touring churches or attending mass. What struck travelers most forcibly in these contexts was the authenticity of Catholic devotion. Some even had the courage to admit Catholic superiority to American practice. Virginian Martha Custis preferred the "indiscriminate mingling of all the classes" in a Parisian church with American pew rental, whereby richer worshippers sat toward the front, because "in Heaven, surely it will be so – for there all distinctions will be annihilated." What struck travelers most forcibly about Catholic piety was how effectively it integrated what American Protestants were accustomed to thinking as discrete aspects of religious experience. Art, architecture, music, and ritual all conspired to stimulate religious sentiments and deference to the Church's authority. As Elizabeth Cady Statnton wrote after seeing her first cathedral (in Exeter, England), "The novelty and solemnity of the surroundings roused all our religious emotions and thrilled every nerve in our being. Can one wonder at the power of the Catholic religion for centuries, with such accessories to stimulate the imagination to a blind worship of the unknown?"[13]

Avid anti-Catholics, whether in the early republican or antebellum eras, were deeply alarmed by these attitudes. They tried hard to break the spell of Catholic envy. J. Peter Lesley maintained that "men who know nothing of the truth" were apt to be awed by cathedrals and incense, but "the true Christian" could not be. That was wishful thinking. In fact, in 1850, as in 1790 Americans, led by those with first-person experience in Catholic Europe, assumed a skeptical position toward both the Catholic Church and its most fervid critics. They agreed that the Church walked hand-in-hand with princes, aristocrats, and other despots to keep European peoples in economic, political, and intellectual shackles. Travelers remained on guard lest the United States suffer the same fate, yet they did not expect that to happen. America's robust Protestant traditions did not create a promising environment for Catholic predation, they believed. Thus, those travelers who sounded the loudest alarms about the dangers of Catholic Europe were drowned out by the majority who, cautiously or enthusiastically, praised Catholic art and even ritual on both aesthetic and religious terms. A strong, confident republic need not quake in fear before the Catholic Church. The United States, after all, sprung "directly out of the civilization of modern Europe," as Henry P. Tappan pointed out. It was a part of western civilization. That civilization included Catholic Europe.[14]

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[1]"Diary of Joseph Shippen in Europe," July 15, 1760 (Historical Society of Pennsylvania); Benjamin Rush, "Account of a Journey to Paris, 1769," n.d. [p. 14], (Literary and Historical Manuscripts, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, N.Y.). On colonial anti-Catholicism, see Brendan McConville, *The King's Three Faces: The Rise & Fall of Royal America, 1688-1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of American History and Culture, 2006); John Patrick Barrington, "Studies in the Anti-Catholic Origins of the Anglo-American Self," (Ph.D. dissertation, College of William

& Mary, 1997); Joseph J. Casino, "Anti-Popery in Colonial Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 105:3 (1981), 279-310.

[2] Chris Beneke, *Beyond Pluralism: The Religious Origins of American Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 180-86.

[3] John Davis, "Catholic Envy: The Visual Culture of Protestant Desire," in David Morgan and Sally M. Promey, eds., *The Visual Culture of American Religions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 105-28.

[4] Andrew Bigelow Diary, Octavo Vol. 2, November 8, 1816 (American Antiquarian Society); Joseph Sansom, *Letters from Europe, During a Tour through Switzerland and Italy, in the Years 1801 and 1802, written by a Native of Pennsylvania* 2 vols. (Philadelphia: A. Bartram, 1805), 1:224-25; Francis Kinloch, *Letters from Geneva and France, Written During a Residence of Between Two and Three Years, in Different Parts of those Countries, and Addressed to A Lady in Virginia* 2 vols., (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1819), 1:304

[5] Eliza Buckminster Lee, ed., *Memoirs of Rev. Joseph Buckminster, D.D., and of his Son, Rev. Joseph Stevens Buckminster*. 2nd ed., (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1851), 280.

[6] Ryan K. Smith, "Protestant Popery: Catholic Art in America's Protestant Churches, 1830-1890,' (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Delaware, 2002); Phoebe B. Stanton, *The Gothic Revival and American Church Architecture: An Episode in Taste, 1840-1856* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968); Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); David A. Gerber, "Ambivalent Anti-Catholicism: Buffalo's American Protestant Elite Faces the Challenge of the Catholic Church, 1850-1860," *Civil War History* 30 (June, 1984), 120-43.

[7] Kinloch, *Letters from Geneva and France,* 1:306; John Tucker Bowdoin Diary, n.d., p. 124 (Virginia Historical Society, Richmond); John W. Godfrey Diary, n.d. [Antwerp entry] (Historical Society of Pennsylvania).

[8] Thomas Lee Shippen Journal, October 1-2, 1788, Shippen Family Papers (Library of Congress); James West to William West, June 1811, folder one, box one, West Family Papers (Historical Society of Pennsylvania).

[9] As in Anne Catherine (Boykin) Jones Diary, July 15, 1851 (Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill).

[10] Charles Rockwell, *Sketches of Foreign Travel and Life at Sea; Including a Cruise on a Man-of-War, as also a Visit to Spain, Portugal, the South of France, Italy, Sicily, Malta, the Ionian Islands, Continental Greece, Liberia, and Brazil; and a Treatise of the Navy of the United*

States, 2 vols., (Boston: Tappan and Dennet, 1842), 2:256-57; Henry T. Cheever Diary, Vol. 2, September 11, 1835 (American Antiquarian Society).

[11] George B. Cheever, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in the Shadow of Mont Blanc* (New York: Wiley & Putnam, 1845)*,* 20-21; Rockwell, *Sketches of Foreign Travel,* 1:311.

[12] [Catharine Maria Sedgwick], *Letters from Abroad to Kindred at Home*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1841)*,* 2:230-31; Roe (?) Diary, May 12, 1844 (American Antiquarian Society).

[13] Henry Colman, *European Life and Manners; in Familiar Letters to Friends,* 2 vols. (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1850)*,* 2:123; Martha Custis (Williams) Diary, March 24, 1853, Diary B, Part II, p. 44 (Tudor Place Manuscript Collection, Washington, D.C.); *Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences of Elizabeth Cady Stanton* (New York: European Publishing Co., 1898), 77.

[14] J. Peter Lesley Diary, August 18, 1844 (American Philosophical Society Library, Philadelphia); Henry P. Tappan, *A Step from the New World to the Old, and Back Again: with Thoughts on the Good and Evil in Both,* 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1852), 1:148