

# Forbes

## Fighting the "Papists" and the "Popery": When America Was Anti-Catholic

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Pope Francis's visit to North America is causing great excitement. A papal parade, an address to a joint session of Congress, and a visit to the Archdiocese of Washington, DC, in addition to visits to New York City and Philadelphia. All the events are expected to be festive, peaceful, and heavily attended. Throughout most of American history, however, such "subversive gatherings of the Popery" would have likely have caused riots.

Americans were not always so excited about Catholics. In fact, throughout most of our history, Americans were downright hostile to "papists." Famed historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. called anti-Catholicism the "the deepest bias in the history of the American people."

During this papal visit, it is worthwhile to look back and learn from this anti-Catholic history.

There are lessons for both sides of the political aisle, as well as lessons for many who are mixed up in the imbroglio of our long national nightmare—i.e. the presidential race. Historically, anti-Catholicism came in a form similar to the shameful populist nativism of Donald Trump and other Republican candidates. Animus against the "other" is easily aroused by populist blowhards.

Then, just as easily as it was aroused, it dissipates as the "others" become our neighbors, our friends, our spouses, and our family members. Within only a few decades it seems absurd that such hate could have been directed against quintessential Americans like the Irish, the Germans, and the Italians.

Anti-Catholicism also teaches valuable lessons about government's limited ability to rationally and peacefully collectivize a diverse citizenry, particularly when it comes to education and health care. Government-run schools have always been flashpoints of conflict between Catholics and Protestants, and they continue to be flashpoints of controversy between various groups today.

Eventually, Catholics decided that peace would come through separation—good fences really do make good neighbors—and they created the flourishing Catholic school system we have today. Yet, as we will see, anti-Catholics in some states even tried to prohibit Catholic schools.

Recently we've seen conflicts brewing between Catholics and other religious groups over our increasingly centralized health-care system. The Hobby Lobby case—in which Hobby Lobby, as

a religious corporation, obtained a waiver from Obamacare's contraception mandate—was just the beginning. The Little Sisters of the Poor might be next.

Our diversity is our greatest strength. It allows us to learn and grow from others of different viewpoints. On a more mundane level, it brings us pastrami, spaghetti, and Szechuan. Too often in American history we have a shortsighted, biased, and bigoted majority—usually only a few generations off “the boat” themselves—that tries to use government to enforce their perception of “American values.” It still happens today, of course, but anti-Catholicism was first.

American anti-Catholicism goes back to our founding. The recent discovery of possible “secret Catholics” at the Jamestown settlement underscores the fact that, from our earliest years, Catholics were unwelcome throughout most of the country. The Puritans may have come to Massachusetts seeking religious freedom, but they certainly weren't going to extend that religious freedom to Catholics. The Spartan religious asceticism of the Puritans was a direct reaction to not only the idolatry, materialism, and excess of the Catholic church, but also the perceived remnants of that excess in the Anglican church.

Both the Puritans and the settlers of Jamestown came from an England that was awash with anti-Catholic propaganda. Ever since Henry VIII broke from the Catholic Church in order to obtain a divorce from Catherine of Aragon, England had treated Catholics quite poorly. George Calvert, the 1st Lord Baltimore, founded Maryland as “a refuge for his Roman Catholic brethren.”

Maryland was unique among the colonies for its acceptance of Catholics. Maryland's status as a Catholic colony would not last long, however. In 1692, Anglicanism was declared the official religion, and in 1704 the Assembly passed “An Act to Prevent the Growth of Popery within this Province.”

American anti-Catholicism was rooted in both religious and political ideas. Many Protestants doubted that Catholics could be truly American, not only because they held allegiance to a “foreign despot”—i.e. the Pope—but because the inherently hierarchical nature of Catholicism seemed anti-republican. America was a bottom-up nation that believed in the power of the common man (provided he was white, straight, and male). Catholicism was a top-down religion that discouraged the common man from finding religious truth for himself.

Anti-Catholicism reached a fever pitch in the middle of the 19th century. The influx of Catholic immigrants, particularly from Ireland, set off a wave of anti-immigration and anti-Catholic political movements and protests. Perhaps none was more intense than the Philadelphia Bible Riots of 1844.

Pennsylvania created its first real public school system in 1834. Like most schools of the day, the Bible featured prominently in instruction. Yet, this raised the question: which Bible? Protestants and Catholics use different versions of the Bible. For Protestants, it was a religious act to read the Bible in public schools; for Catholics it was a form of Protestant sectarianism.

Some Catholics urged parents to remove their children from schools that read Protestant Bibles. Others petitioned the government to allow parents to decide whether or not their children would participate in Bible reading activities.

Even this moderate request for accommodation met with Protestant vitriol. According to the *Presbyterian* newspaper, allowing a Catholic exemption was merely a “determined attempt to exclude...all semblance of religious instruction.” Removing the Bible from the schools would convert them to “infidel” institutions. Another newspaper asked “Are we to yield our personal liberty, our inherited rights, our very Bibles, the special blessed gift of God to our country, to the will, the ignorance, or the wickedness of these hordes of foreigners, subjects of a foreign despot...?”

Tensions hit a breaking point in May, 1844. In the Philadelphia district of Kensington, Catholics began breaking up meetings of “nativists.” As the fighting mobs grew, shots were fired, killing an 18-year-old Protestant boy. Soon the homes of Irish Catholics were being raided, burned, and destroyed. Catholics fired upon nativists as they tried to set fire to a Catholic schoolhouse, killing two and wounding more.

Violence continued over the next few days. Nativist newspapers fanned the flames. The *Native American* newspaper wrote that “the bloody hand of the Pope has stretched itself forth to our destruction.” Handbills and fliers called for mass Nativist organization in Independence Square: “Let every American come prepared to defend himself.”

A crowd of six thousand showed up. Soon they were marching on Kensington, and, despite the presence of the militia, approximately 30 Catholic homes were burned. In addition, St. Augustine’s Church and St. Mary’s Church were battered, pilfered, and partially burned.

It took many months for nerves to calm. In the end, Catholics learned their “lesson,” as it were. The Catholics were simply not powerful enough to fight the Protestants in a royal rumble over public schools. If Catholics were going to educate their children according to their consciences they would have to start their own schools.

Catholic schools began thriving in the later part of the 19th century. But some states that were bastions of nativist bigotry would not even countenance Catholics running their own schools. After all, if Catholics are seen as a contagion on the body politic, then letting them abscond with their children to their own sanctuaries does not fundamentally solve the problem of the enemy within.

Oregon has a shockingly bigoted history. It was admitted to the union as a free state in 1859, but with a clause in its constitution allowing African Americans to be excluded from the state. Although the clause was overridden by the 14th and 15th Amendments, the provision remained in the Oregon constitution until 1927.

By the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan was particularly active in the state. Always vehemently anti-Catholic, the Klan was able to influence both attitudes and policies concerning the “dreaded papists.” In particular, the Oregon Compulsory Education Act of 1922 mandated children between the ages of 8 and 16 to attend public schools, outlawing private and parochial schools.

Although non-sectarian private schools, such as military academies, were affected by the law, the legislature’s primary focus was on eliminating Catholic schools. It took a visit to the Supreme Court, the landmark case of *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, to vindicate the rights of Catholics to educate their children according to their consciences. Oregon paternalistically argued that “it

takes a village” to raise a child, and thus the state’s interest in creating a homogeneous citizenry overrode parental rights. The Court unanimously disagreed and overturned the law, writing that “the fundamental theory of liberty upon which all governments in this Union repose excludes any general power of the State to standardize its children by forcing them to accept instruction from public teachers only. The child is not the mere creature of the State.”

From the Founding until the 20th century, American Catholics have dealt with bigotry and small-minded opposition. That bigotry was given teeth when Protestants used the power of government to try to enforce conformity and “American values.” Surprisingly, much of this history has been forgotten.

The election of John F. Kennedy was a true watershed moment for American Catholics. A 19th-century version of Ben Carson would certainly have believed that a Catholic couldn’t even be president, given that Catholic values are fundamentally at odds with American values and that Catholics are beholden to a “foreign despot.”

Demagogues will always be there to stir up “nativist” passions, and centralizers will continue to call for uniform “American values” in our schools, our health care, and our families. America’s anti-Catholic history can teach us the limits and pitfalls of those nationalistic and centralizing tendencies.

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