Georgia State University
Digital Archive @ GSU

History Theses | Department of History

8-18-2010

Catholicism and Community: American Political Culture and the Conservative Catholic Social Justice Tradition, 1890-1960

Jayna C. Hoffacker
Georgia State University, jayna@fireatwill.org

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalarchive.gsu.edu/history_theses

Recommended Citation
Hoffacker, Jayna C., "Catholicism and Community: American Political Culture and the Conservative Catholic Social Justice Tradition, 1890-1960" (2010). *History Theses.* Paper 42.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History at Digital Archive @ GSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Archive @ GSU. For more information, please contact digitalarchive@gsu.edu.

CATHOLICISM AND COMMUNITY:

AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE AND THE CONSERVATIVE CATHOLIC SOCIAL JUSTICE TRADITION, 1890-1960

by

JAYNA C. HOFFACKER

Under the direction of David Sehat

ABSTRACT

The prevailing trend in the historiography of American Catholicism has been an implicit acceptance of the traditional liberal narrative as formulated by scholars like Louis Hartz. American Catholic historians like Jay Dolan and John McGreevy have incorporated this narrative into their studies and argue that America was inherently liberal and that the conservative Catholics who rejected liberalism were thus fundamentally anti-American. This has simplified nuanced and complex relationships into a story of simple opposition. Further, the social justice doctrine of the Catholic Church, although based on undeniably illiberal foundations, led conservatives to come to the same conclusions about social and economic reform as did twentieth-century liberal reformers. These shared ideas about social reform, though stemming from conflicting foundations and looking toward vastly different goals, allowed conservative Catholics to play a role in what are seen as some of the most sweeping liberal reforms of the twentieth-century.

INDEX WORDS: America, Catholicism, Christianity, Church, Clergy, Culture, History, Identity, Politics, Protestantism, Religion, Roman Catholicism, Theology, United States

CATHOLICISM AND COMMUNITY:

AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE AND THE CONSERVATIVE CATHOLIC SOCIAL JUSTICE TRADITION, 1890-1960

by

JAYNA C. HOFFACKER

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2010

Copyright by

Jayna C. Hoffacker

2010

CATHOLICISM AND COMMUNITY:

AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE AND THE CONSERVATIVE CATHOLIC SOCIAL JUSTICE TRADITION, 1890-1960

by

JAYNA C. HOFFACKER

Committee Chair: Dr. David Sehat

Committee: Dr. H. Robert Baker

Dr. Marni Davis

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

August 2010

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	**INTRODUCTION**	1
2	**AMERICANISM**	7
3	**SOCIAL JUSTICE**	25
4	**CHURCH AND STATE**	39
5	**CONCLUSION**	51

REFERENCES

1 INTRODUCTION

The history of Roman Catholicism in the United States is one of conflict, at times consensus, and, above all, it is a story about how a diverse group of people united only by a common faith have navigated the murky waters of American culture. The names and faces changed over time but they shared a remarkably similar understanding of the relationship between the obligations of their faith and the demands of citizenship. Many took to heart St. Paul's exhortation to the Philippians and argued that although they were loyal American citizens, their true citizenship was in heaven and it was therefore primarily the mission of the Church that guided their actions on earth.[1] Conservative Catholics were particularly ardent in this regard. They sought to reinforce the hierarchy's authority in defining precisely what that mission was through dictating the norms of the community. As the political and cultural landscape evolved over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, conservatives found themselves at once at odds and in agreement with the dominant visions of American political culture. Their commitment to the dictates of their faith, and the hierarchy's authority in presenting that faith to the world, colored the way in which they reacted to these transformations, which resulted in a layered and paradoxical relationship with American society.

Historians as a whole have struggled to understand conservative Catholicism and even historians of American Catholicism have misunderstood the relationship of conservative Catholics to the American polity. Jay Dolan, a leading historian of Catholicism, has characterized conservative ideology as existing solely in opposition to American liberalism. In making this argument, Dolan suggests that American political history has been dominated by

[1] NAB Phil 3: 1-21.

liberalism's notions of individual autonomy and the inclusivity of diverse peoples under the banner of a common American civic identity. It is undeniably true that Catholic conservatism exhibited highly illiberal elements, but his narrative acknowledges neither the illiberal nature of American culture nor the ways in which conservative Catholic ideology came to share in the goals of liberal reform. John McGreevy, another important figure in the field of Catholic history, presents a similar, though more ideologically subtle, view of conservative Catholics and their relationship with American political culture. According to McGreevy, the conservative rejection of individual autonomy "informed Catholic hostility" towards liberal movements and policies like immediate slave emancipation and *laissez-faire* economics.[2] McGreevy writes of the trajectories of American and Catholic history as "two traditions in motion," though somehow unconnected.[3]

The problem with such an argument is that, in addition to misrepresenting conservative Catholics, liberalism has never been the hegemonic ideology in America that many historians have pretended it to be. As such, it is important to develop a more textured understanding of American history that takes conflict and inconsistencies into account. As Rogers Smith has argued, although there is a liberal thread through American political history, it has been braided with what Smith calls an ascriptive thread. By ascriptive, he means that there exist certain qualities defined by society to which one must adhere to be accepted as a member in this civic and cultural order. Over time, these qualities have variously been the acceptance of a common political ideology, civic identity, or a shared cultural heritage.[4] Noah Pickus likewise strives to

---

[2] John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 13.

[3] Ibid., 15.

[4] On the multiple traditions thesis, see Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). Other scholars have likewise rejected the liberal narrative. See Noah Pickus, *True Faith and Allegiance: Immigration and American Civic Nationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Linda K. Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of*

rewrite the liberal narrative, though in some contrast to Smith. He argues that while Smith portrays liberalism as the ideal, appeals to communal solidarity should not always be viewed as a destructive or inhibiting force. At times, they could even be seen as a way to develop and promote the civic principles that unite the country.[5]

Both of these scholars, as well as many of their contemporaries, are seeking to rewrite the American narrative to incorporate the wide variety of ways in which Americans have striven to create and define their civic identity. Once we rewrite the American narrative so that it is no longer dominated by liberalism, the traditional understanding of American Catholicism within that narrative also changes. Conservative Catholics did indeed reject liberalism, but they did so in a wider context not dominated by liberalism. In their rejection of liberalism, they actually shared in the illiberal and ascriptive trends of American history, particularly during the Gilded Age. They focused on promoting hierarchical authority in order to strengthen and define the boundaries of the Catholic community. Many bishops, particular conservatives like Archbishop Michael Corrigan and Bishop Bernard McQuaid in the nineteenth-century, honed in on the parochial school as one of the essential building blocks in the Catholic community. Through Catholic schooling, children would grow up and learn in an atmosphere saturated with their faith. In contrast to parochial schools, priests and prelates alike saw the public school system as the gateway to schism due to its refusal to accept the Church's authority. This suspicion of public institutions opened up into broader concerns about certain civic rights, like freedom of speech and worship. Conservatives, particularly those in positions of power, were wary of allowing the faithful to freely indulge in and promote such civic doctrines lest their authority be undermined in the process. Indeed, even as Pope Leo XIII could decry the plight of the worker and call for

---

Citizenship (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998); William J. Novak, *The People's Welfare: Law & Regulation in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

[5] Pickus, *Truth Faith and Allegiance*, 187-188.

social reform, he also soundly denounced the promotion of any liberal reform within the Church itself.

The Church's insistence upon its infallible authority to dictate the moral law, however, also led to a commitment to the doctrine of social justice. This dedication to social justice, though based on essentially illiberal grounds, presents an interesting paradox. The conservative emphasis on authority coincided with a devotion to the traditions of their faith; a faith that has historically highly prized social justice. This doctrine became especially relevant in the modern period with the 1891 promulgation of Leo XIII's groundbreaking encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. In it, Leo exhorted Catholics to work to bring about justice for the worker, even as he also cautioned against socialist and liberal reform. His encyclical applied the perennial Catholic commitment to community to the modern plight of the industrial wage-worker. The impact of the encyclical was almost immediate. By the opening years of the twentieth-century, Catholic thinkers and activists were already hailing *Rerum Novarum* as their call to action. Its prescriptions for alleviating the social ills that had the greatest impact on workers seemed to fall in line with the growing liberal reform movements that culminated in the New Deal reforms of the 1930's. Because of these similarities, conservatives could work for the same reforms as the New Dealers, and twentieth-century liberals more broadly. Rather bizarrely, conservatives found themselves enmeshed in the New Deal coalition, the members of which have traditionally been heralded as the great victors of twentieth-century liberalism.

The social justice tradition of the Catholic Church grew out of Thomas Aquinas' writings on moral virtue as found in his thirteenth-century work, *Summa Theologica*. This Thomistic understanding of social justice and morality was most clearly articulated for the nineteenth and twentieth century world by Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum*. These are the foundations that clearly

separated conservatives from liberal reformers, despite their similar reform goals. Modern liberalism, as it moved from the nineteenth into the twentieth century, began to eschew the hands-off approach to liberty and, instead, focused on using the state and the community to further the rights of the individual. Catholics *did* want the state to intervene in order to protect those who could not protect themselves and they certainly felt that a strong community provided stability for the society. However, as the pope argued in his encyclical, conservative Catholics held that "no practical solution" for curing social ills "will be found apart from the intervention of religion and of the Church."[6] Leo continued, writing that "We affirm without hesitation that all the striving of men will be vain if they leave out the Church."[7] It was, for conservatives, absolutely and without doubt essential that in order to effect true social reform, each and every person had to obey the Church. In the minds of conservatives, that was the ultimate end for reform. Not, as liberals argued, individual freedom, but obedience to the Church and, as a result, the salvation of souls.

Taking these rather monumental differences into account, it becomes even more difficult to understand how conservatives could be, by the standards of secular society, so very illiberal and yet, even from those illiberal foundations, form the same ideas about reform as did their liberal contemporaries. It is these inconsistencies and contradictions that inform the conservative approach to American culture. They worked from a foundation considered to be irreconcilably and irrefutably illiberal and yet found grounds upon which they could work in tandem and engage with a movement so keen on the protection of the individual. Indeed, it was their very insistence upon maintaining a faithful obedience to their Church that helped to shape the way in which the doctrine of social justice was applied to the American cultural landscape. Contrary to

---

[6] *Rerum Novarum* in Claudia Carlen Ihm, Ed., *The Papal Encyclicals* (Wilmington, NC: McGrath Press, 1981), 2: 245.

[7] Ibid.

the liberal Catholic movement for Americanization and what conservatives saw as the dangerous cultural compromise that it required, conservatives wanted to preserve a strict adherence to the traditions and teachings of the Catholic Church as a basis for building their relationship with American culture. That relationship, though often strained, resulted in a peculiar partnership with their ideological opponents as each sought, for their own reasons, to work for the common good.

2 AMERICANISM

The lives of nineteenth-century Americans were characterized by constant fluctuation, uncertainty, and instability. In the latter half of the nineteenth century alone, the United States experienced a massive influx of European immigration, a bloody Civil War, the end of slavery, and what many believed to be a failed attempt at the reconstruction of the country in the war's aftermath. The industrialization and urbanization of the nation surged ahead while the conditions of workers – both in and out of the factory – plummeted to new depths of poverty and degradation. Despite the appalling and seemingly incurable conditions of wage-earners, some still propounded a sense of self-determination, of pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps. This was the very definition of the active spirit of the American population, a spirit, it was argued, that needed to be exported to the oppressed masses of Europe as well as inculcated within the Old World's emigrants to the New.

American Catholics held a particular stake in how this story would unfold. The vast majority of lay Catholics in the United States at this time were both immigrants and members of the working class. In addition to the millions of Irishmen who had flooded the nation during the height of the Potato Famine, Italian immigrants began to join the already beleaguered immigrant class. The bulk of these Irish and Italian immigrants were Catholic and their poor station in life led some native-born Americans to deride the foreigners for not only their cultural and ethnic differences, but their religious differences as well. Catholicism came to be seen as the religion of aliens and one that was wholly inconsistent with liberal American principles of democracy and freedom. They argued that Catholics' every thought and action was controlled by the Church

and that, should the pope order it, these dormant treasonous foreigners would rise up and install an authoritarian theocracy. In furtherance of this goal, these immigrants would, it was claimed, mindlessly vote as a block based solely on religious grounds and upon the instructions of their parish priests. Unfounded though that accusation may have been, organizations like Tammany Hall certainly did nothing to quell the fears of a Catholic coup. As a whole, Catholics were seen as a threat to the moral purity of the nation as well as a danger to the tenuous stability of society.[8]

In spite of this, Catholics did not simply allow themselves to be marginalized by the Protestant mainstream, but their response was not unified. Liberal Catholics wanted to appropriate the American spirit that anti-Catholics claimed set true Americans aside from false. They could, it was argued, feed their faith through the tenets of liberalism and democracy, which they saw as the dominant ideology in the American cultural and political landscape, and create a new Catholicism that had a comfortable home in American society. This new version of the old faith could then be used to modernize the whole Church under the guidance of the new American Catholic spirit. Conservatives, by contrast, rejected the Protestant ethic and liberal political values that they felt had led to the then-current ills of society. Their rejection was based upon the belief that unrestrained individualism led to social disunity and fragmentation. In uncompromisingly upholding the faith, they would, essentially, save American society from itself. Liberal Catholics argued that the benefits of adaptation and appropriation far outweighed the risks. Through their acceptance of American culture, they could effectively staunch the flow of criticism and anti-Catholicism from nativists as well as revive what they saw as the decaying devotionalism of Old World Catholicism. The ends of both conservatives and liberals were identical: both sought the betterment of mankind and the proliferation of the Catholic faith.

---

[8] See James O'Toole, *The Faithful: A History of Catholics in America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008), 94-99.

Conservatives claimed that the liberal plan would irreversibly compromise the faith, while liberals argued that the conservative approach was insular and out of touch with the modern world.[9]

Conservatives objected to the liberal plan of attack on two points. First, they claimed that any adaptation of the faith to secular culture would promote indifferentism to religious differences. As conservatives understood it, it was Protestantism that had initially and inevitably led to secularization and the crumbling moral order due to the Protestant rejection of the Church's authority. They claimed that Catholics needed to avoid at all costs the possibility of compromise on the basis of Church teachings and principles; otherwise, they too would end up in schism. Conservative American bishops, Bishop Bernard McQuaid of Rochester in particular, saw strictly Catholic organizations, such as parochial schools, as a way to battle this threat. In this way, they could, through the promotion of a strong Catholic identity, prevent their flocks from converting to a Protestant sect or, even worse, from defecting altogether and joining a socialist movement. And second, the liberal approach to reform was argued to be inconsonant with Church teachings. Conservatives believed true reform could only occur as a result of slow deliberation on the part of the whole Church. Liberal reform, they argued, emerged from individual opinions and cultural trends, rather than through the unerring work of the Holy Spirit. And, in a more concrete sense, they claimed that this type of reform would lead to a rejection of hierarchical authority, thus resulting in the weakening of Catholic moral authority. It was a highly illiberal stance, to be sure, and while the dominant ideology of the Gilded Age was far

[9] See John Ireland, *The Church and Modern Society* (St. Paul, MN: Pioneer Press, 1905), Vol. I-II; John J. Keane, *Emmanuel* (1915).

from liberal itself, Catholics of any stripe remained to be cultural and political outsiders in an era striving to counteract the immigrant threat.[10]

By the mid-1880's, the liberal contingent had coalesced into a distinct reform movement. Three men in particular were at the forefront of what would come to be known as the Americanism movement: Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul, Bishop John Keane of Richmond and the first rector of the Catholic University of America, and Monsignor Denis O'Connell, the rector of the North American Pontifical College in Rome. These men, taken together, crafted a movement through which they could create for the universal Church a version of Catholicism based upon their American model. Their vision was founded upon a firm belief in American exceptionalism that included not only cultural hegemony, but ecclesiastical superiority as well. According to Americanist opinion, the European Church was in decline and because, as they understood it, America had already embraced the best of modernity, the American Church would thus be the best hope for the future of Catholicism. Bishop Keane believed that "the Church in America is to exercise a dominant influence in the world's future" and that "the Old World has many lessons to learn from the New."[11] Ireland himself wrote that "[t]he spirit of American liberty wafts its spell across seas and oceans, and prepares distant continents for the implanting of American ideas and institutions."[12]

For the Americanists, the Catholicism of the Old World was characterized by passivity and submissiveness. It was believed to be, as Archbishop Ireland put it, a "pusillanimous and self-satisfied sanctuary religion."[13] The independent spirit of America, they argued, created a

---

[10] B. J. McQuaid, "The Decay of Protestantism," *The North American Review* 136 (Feb. 1883), 135-152 and McQuaid, "Religion in Schools," *The North American Review* 132 (Apr. 1881), 332-344. For a critique of the origins of liberal thought, see "Professing Themselves to be Wise They Become Fools," *The American Catholic Quarterly Review* 6 (Apr. 1891), 309-330.

[11] *Catholic Mirror*, October 15, 1887.

[12] Ireland, *The Church and Modern Society*, 1: 75.

[13] Ibid., vii.

desire for an active participation in the life of the Church that could revive what they saw as the outmoded medieval piety of European Catholics. This did not necessarily mean that they felt that the role of the laity in the bureaucratic processes of the Church needed to be expanded. However, they did believe that it was the obligation of Catholics to escape the ghettos of conservative Catholicism that prevented them from an active engagement with both their own faith and the world. They co-opted the nineteenth century belief in American geographical and ideological expansion and adapted it to their arguments concerning the need to renew the faith of all Catholics through the lessons of the American Church.

Not, of course, that they believed that the American Church had already fully taken these lessons to heart. However, it was through an emersion in what they saw as the dominantly liberal American culture that would smooth the process. Bishop Keane felt that democracy "represent[ed] an Ideal that hath ever been close to [Jesus'] Heart, and that shaped [His] Own life on earth."[14] In this light, it was only right that Catholics should embrace the tenets of democracy just as their own savior had done. Liberals understood the advent of global democracy to be inevitable and thus saw no reason to reject it as their conservative co-religionists had done. Through the tyranny and corruption of its monarchies, Europe had lost its ability to guide the rest of the world into modernity. It was only natural, then, that America would have to take on that burden. American Catholics were thus obliged to shoulder this burden in order to help their Old World brethren emerge from their Catholic ghettos. As Archbishop Ireland claimed in an 1888 sermon, "[w]estward, it has been said, the start of empire moves. Westward, methinks, moves too, the apocalyptic candlestick."[15]

---

[14] Keane, *Emmanuel*, 194.
[15] *North-Western Chronicle*, August, 24, 1888.

Given the Gilded Age movement toward cultural homogeneity and the deep tensions that divided nativists and immigrants, one can see why Catholics would want to make an effort to engage American culture on its own terms for purely practical reasons. The priests and prelates of the Americanism movement could not have been blind to the suffering of their immigrant flocks. Their remedy for those Catholics was to allow their faith to become acculturated to its American surroundings, rather than clinging to the Old World practices that alienated them from their fellow citizens. It was, ironically, this perceived need to promote the ideals of democracy and liberalism that illustrates how illiberal the country was, particularly in this period. The golden promise of capitalism in the aftermath of a failed reconstruction effort created an era in which the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant ideal once more gained ascendancy as wealth continued to accumulate in fewer and fewer hands. As the egalitarian hopes of Reconstruction faded, an ever-increasing pressure – whether or not it was acknowledged – was placed upon outsiders to conform. The liberal Catholics who crusaded for the reform of their Church in the Gilded Age did so within these confines. As they continued to believe in liberalism as the fundamental American ideology, they were seemingly unaware of the patently illiberal trends that sprang up in the wake of Reconstruction. In their defense, it is surely not surprising, given that historians themselves are only beginning to overturn the traditional liberal narrative, even with over a century of hindsight.[16]

Conservative Catholics were no less confined by the times. Their cure, however, was to reject the ideology that they felt had led to the deteriorating social and political conditions. The widespread political corruption that came during and in the aftermath of Reconstruction was, in their minds, due to previously unrestrained liberalism and the loss of moral authority that had inevitably resulted from the Protestant roots of the nation. As Bishop McQuaid and other

[16] On the illiberal nature of the Gilded Age, see Smith, *Civic Ideals*, 347-409.

conservatives argued, because Protestantism was a religion based on private interpretation of revelation, it could have no divine or infallible truths and would therefore only lead to division and unavoidable decay. As a result, any country in which Protestantism was a driving force in the cultural landscape would doom itself to not only secularism, but also to disorder and destruction. The inhumane treatment of wage-earners and, they argued, the selfishness of the barons of capitalism were a direct result of founding a nation upon Protestant principles. Therefore, it was absolutely necessary to formulate a new solution to the problem. For conservatives, the acceptance of the system by their liberal co-religionists would only help to perpetuate its evils and even allow its corruption to enter the Church. Their answer was to emphasize and strengthen the Church's ability to infallibly define the moral boundaries of mankind. Their prescriptions were undeniably illiberal; conservatives were wary of unrestrained freedom of speech and worship and found nineteenth century liberalism lacking in the kind of centralized authority and power needed to enforce moral virtue.[17]

This solution required the restoration of Catholic Christian morality to the state and to the political life of the country. As Pope Leo XIII argued in 1881, "the divine power of the Christian religion has given birth to excellent principles of stability and order for the State."[18] The Catholic doctrine on the origin of civil power taught that God and God alone conferred the right to rule. The social contract was, according to Leo, "a falsehood and a fiction, and … it has no authority to confer on political power such great force, dignity, and firmness as the safety of the State and the common good of the citizens require."[19] Government and society could find these guarantees when it understood that the realization of these goals could only occur once God had

---

[17] McQuaid, "The Decay of Protestantism" and "The Spirituality of the Catholic Church," *The American Catholic Quarterly Review* 9 (Jan. 1884), 166-177.

[18] *Diuturnum* in *The Papal Encyclicals* 2: 51.

[19] Ibid., 2: 53.

been universally accepted as the only true source of civil power. This acceptance, it was argued, could be reached more easily through the recognition of the Catholic Church as the source of moral authority and divine revelation. As Leo wrote, "[a]ll nations which have yielded to her sway have become eminent by their gentleness, their sense of justice, and the glory of their high deeds."[20] The pontiff, and other conservatives, did not make the claim that democratic nations were incapable of achieving these goals, but they did feel that democracy carried within it a rejection of absolute hierarchical authority. As such, the goals of justice and social stability would be all the more difficult to achieve without that same authority guiding the way in which the moral law was passed on to its citizens.

It is this reasoning that fueled the conservative claim that Catholics could best serve American society by retaining their Catholicity. They wanted Catholics to emphasize their internal unity and to foster a strong sense of community through maintaining Catholic institutions. Conservatives argued that the uniquely Catholic emphasis on community as defined by the Church could create a sense of social obligation. The individualism of Protestantism and liberalism, they argued, could only create a society in which each person acted in their own self-interest. Though most did not consider democracy to be the most ideal system of government for the proliferation of Catholicism, they contended that their faith was not only compatible with American citizenship, but that it could also be a positive good for American society. One such conservative, Monsignor Thomas Preston, the Vicar General of the Archdiocese of New York, argued that "[i]n discharging our duty faithfully towards God, in maintaining, as we are bound to do, the truths which He has revealed, and the integrity of our faith, we subserve in the best possible manner the interests of our country, the preservation of true liberty and the perpetuity of

[20] *Immortale Dei* in ibid., 2: 107.

our free institutions."[21] Of course, by true liberty, Monsignor Preston did not mean the kind of liberty espoused by liberals. The liberal goal of individual liberty clashed with the Catholic belief that the individual should give up his own personal freedoms in order to best serve the community.

He, along with his contemporaries like Bishop McQuaid and Archbishop Michael Corrigan of New York, claimed that American society was languishing in secularism and infidelity because of the deleterious effects and inherent relativism of Protestantism. Through strict adherence to their faith, which, they argued, could be enforced most successfully by the American episcopacy, and its emphasis on the obligation to act in the common good, they could preserve the Union better than any Protestant or atheist ever could. The underlying, and often unspoken, implication of this argument, however, was that through strictly adhering to their faith, others would be moved to conversion. A Catholic nation founded upon the Church's divine authority *was* the ultimate goal, but even conservatives were wary of publicly announcing such an objective.

As liberal Catholics urged the Americanization of the churches, conservatives sought to reject both liberalizing trends, which emphasized the sanctity of the individual, as well as the labor impulse toward socialism, which emphasized communal obligation in light of industrial wealth. The politics of class espoused by socialism were surely attractive to the immigrant workers who found themselves helplessly trapped in what amounted to nothing more than wage slavery. Further compounding the issue, the conspicuous consumption of the Gilded Age helped to highlight the growing stratification between the socioeconomic classes. The socialist appeal to the working class thus prompted nervous clergymen to clarify the Church's position on the

---

[21] Thomas S. Preston, "American Catholicity," *The American Catholic Quarterly Review* 16 (Apr. 1891), 396.

relationship and the system of obligations between the classes as well as the need to keep God and the Church at the center of one's life. Although socialism had at its center the notion of a communal bond, its emphasis on the inherent tension between the classes and the rejection of religion put it wholly at odds with the definition of community and morality as propounded by the Church. The moral virtue found in Christianity, and, more specifically, Roman Catholicism, was the only way to maintain the health of the community and to encourage it to promote what the Church saw as the true eschatological goal of man: the salvation of souls. For the Church, conservatives claimed, socialism was only concerned with temporal needs and had no interest in allowing man to achieve his full potential as a creature of God.[22]

These tensions came to a head during the New York City mayoral campaign of 1886. The campaign resulted in a clash with lasting consequences between the leader of the conservative movement, Archbishop Michael Corrigan, and one of his liberal priests, Father Edward McGlynn. McGlynn was already known to Corrigan as a radical liberal due to the priest's past activism as well as his involvement in a group of ultraliberal priests based in the Archdiocese of New York who had dubbed themselves the Accademia. The race featured the campaign of Henry George on the United Labor Party ticket. George was an outspoken proponent of the single tax, which proposed that land should be taxed only on its own value and not what is built on it. Father McGlynn publicly campaigned for George and earned a reprimand from his ordinary for his efforts. Archbishop Corrigan pointed to the socialist tendencies of George's platform and the party he represented as well as the impropriety of a priest involving himself so deeply and so publicly in politics.

Though he had been warned about participating any further in the campaign, McGlynn made one more appearance in October of 1886 that resulted in his suspension from active

[22] *Exeunte Iam Anno* in *The Papal Encyclicals* 2: 197-203.

ministry. The suspended priest was ordered to Rome by both Cardinal Giovanni Simeoni, the Prefect of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, and Pope Leo XIII himself. McGlynn refused to go and proclaimed that he would never cease to teach that "private ownership of land is against natural justice, no matter by what civil or ecclesiastical laws it may be sanctioned."[23] He was swiftly excommunicated for his refusal to appear before his pontiff as well as his rejection of the Church's teachings on private property. McGlynn would not have that excommunication lifted until 1892 when he publicly affirmed Leo's teachings on private ownership of property and labor relations.[24] It is important to note that his excommunication came more as a result of his disobedience, rather than the specific platform he was promoting. McGlynn found that to challenge the authority of the American episcopacy, which had steadily been gaining strength over the previous four decades, was to fight a losing battle.

In response to the increasing unrest amongst the working class and the growing threat of socialism, Leo XIII issued in 1891 one of the most influential encyclicals of his pontificate: *Rerum Novarum*. The pope acknowledged the plight of the lower classes, observing that "a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the laboring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself."[25] Though he denounced the socialist notion of communal property, his reasoning was based upon a certain understanding of natural rights and communal obligation anchored in divine mandate. According to Leo, under socialism, the state would be the sole legal owner of property. This particular arrangement, he argued, was in violation of a man's natural right to private property. "Man precedes the State," he wrote, "and

---

[23] Archives of the Archdiocese of New York C-10, McGlynn to Corrigan, New York, December 20, 1886. Quoted in Robert Emmet Curran, "The McGlynn Affair and the Shaping of the New Conservatism in American Catholicism, 1886-1894," *The Catholic Historical Review* 66 (April 1980), 190.

[24] For a very thorough discussion of the whole affair, starting with McGlynn's early activism in the 1870's through the lifting of his excommunication, see Ibid., 184-204.

[25] *Rerum Novarum* in *The Papal Encyclicals*, 2: 242.

possesses, prior to the formation of any State, the right of providing for the substance of his body."[26] Embedded in this line of reasoning was the assertion that just as man precedes the State, so too does the Church. The natural law that protected the right to private property was born of a divine mandate. The divine source from which that mandate flowed also granted to the Roman Catholic Church the sole authority to interpret and impart that law to mankind. This was the foundation upon which the argument for hierarchical authority rested. The episcopacy held through apostolic succession what they believed to be a divine and unquestionable right to define the moral law for not only the faithful, but the whole of mankind.[27] It was this understanding of their divine right to define and enforce the moral law that fueled the vigor with which social justice would be pursued in the following century. Ultimate, real, and lasting social justice could only be attained with one eye on the community and the other on obeying the laws of the Church. The idea of achieving individual liberty through social reform that characterized the aims of twentieth century reformers was not only unacceptable to conservative Catholics, but, as they saw it, potentially dangerous to mankind.

Leo likewise did not want a leveling of society. He firmly rejected the notion that the rich and poor were locked in inevitable conflict and called, instead, for the classes to exist in harmony. Though a rather idealistic notion, the pope maintained that if all of mankind could acknowledge their fellow beings as children of God, the worth of the human could be based upon Christian virtues, rather than those dictated by the marketplace. However, he also urged the working class to form unions and to "make every lawful and proper effort" to better their

---

[26] Ibid., 2: 243.

[27] By apostolic succession, I mean that the College of Bishops are understood to be the spiritual successors of the Apostles and are therefore tasked with passing on the faith. The pope himself is understood to be a successor of Peter (known as Petrine succession) who, according to Catholic belief, was appointed by Christ as the first pope. (NAB Matthew 16: 18-19).

situation in life.[28] The belief in an underlying Christian community founded upon timeless moral truths that predates both the state and market pervaded the encyclical. There had always been rich and poor, according to the pope, and that reality was not likely to change, even in a socialist society. The attempt to eradicate class differences, however, was not the way to ameliorate these differences. The rich and poor had to realize that they had mutual obligations based on ideas of Christian charity, obedience to just authority, and the stewardship of divinely granted gifts. His prescriptions were remarkably illiberal, given the nature of the encyclical. The outcome of his arguments, unintended though it may have been, was the initial spark in a growing commitment to social justice that brought conservatives into close quarters with twentieth century liberal social reformers. As the emphasis on negative liberty and a *laissez-faire* market that characterized nineteenth century liberalism transformed into a twentieth century promotion of positive liberty assured by the state's authority, the Catholic doctrine of social justice began to more and more reflect the liberal prescriptions for social ailments.

Objections to individualism and socialism were mainstays in the conservative critique of liberalism. Religious pluralism formed a third component in their critique. According to conservatives, religious pluralism flowed naturally from the liberal emphasis on individual autonomy. Although the Church's teachings allowed for man's free will to choose his own beliefs, it added that Catholics could not approve of those choices, much less give the impression that the Catholic Church was merely an option among many. The World Parliament of Religions in 1893, in which both Archbishop Ireland and Bishop Keane had participated, was an event that conservatives took particular exception to. The goal of the Parliament was to promote interfaith dialogue through highlighting common elements across belief systems. Conservatives, however, argued that it diminished the acceptance of the absolute truth of Catholic teachings. Bishop

[28] Ibid., 2: 256-257.

McQuaid later condemned their participation, and lamented that the Parliament had succeeded in relativizing "the Catholic Church … with its unerring teaching … with every pretense of religious denomination from Mohammadanism and Buddhism down to the lowest forms of evangelicalism and infidelity."[29] This relativism, and the rejection of hierarchical authority that came with it, was the doorway to indifferentism and dangerous compromise.

All of these issues—democratization, social leveling, and religious pluralism—came together in an 1893 sermon at a Mass celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of James Cardinal Gibbons' episcopal consecration. There, Archbishop Ireland announced to the assembled congregation that "[t]o conquer the new world to Christ, the Church herself must be new, adapting herself in manner of life and in method of action to the conditions of the new order."[30] Statements such as these, in conjunction with the continual push for reform to bring the Church in line with modern liberal ideology, prompted Leo XIII to issue an apostolic letter in 1895 directly to the American episcopacy. *Longinqua Oceani* contained thinly veiled denouncements of Keane's and Ireland's emphasis on the spirit of American independence and individualism, as well as the need to export this 'active' spirit to the Old World. Leo made sure to point out that "[t]he fact that Catholicity with you is in good condition … is by all means to be attributed to the fecundity with which God has endowed His Church, in virtue of which unless men or circumstances interfere, she spontaneously expands and propagates herself."[31] In this statement, Leo clearly claimed for Rome the credit that liberals were claiming on behalf of their American heritage, while at the same time criticizing the liberal approach to reform. He went on to advise the bishops that "[Americans] can in no better way safeguard their own individual interests and

---

[29] *Union and Advertiser* (Rochester, New York), June 26, 1899. Quoted in Glen Janus, "Bishop Bernard McQuaid: On 'True' and 'False' Americanism," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 11 (Summer 1993), 74.

[30] "The Church and the Age," October 18, 1893, in Ireland, *The Church and Modern Society* (St. Paul: Pioneer Press, 1905), 1: 107.

[31] *Longinqua Oceani* in *The Papal Encyclicals*, 2: 365.

the common good than by yielding a hearty submission and obedience to the Church."[32] This submission to the Church, the pope argued, would allow Catholics to develop a sense of community and social obligation that would further the betterment of mankind. The implication of this remark was that liberal ideology did not serve the common good because, in the pope's eyes, it eliminated, or at least diminished, the central force (the Church) around which the community was formed.

Given the backing of the Pope, conservatives mobilized to suppress the liberals and set the course for the Church in America for the next half-century. In 1895, Monsignor Denis O'Connell was pressured to resign as the rector of the North American College, and, in 1896, Bishop Keane was likewise pushed to leave his rectorship at Catholic University. The greatest of these events, however, ironically did not even occur on American soil, though it effectively ended the nineteenth century Americanism movement. In 1897, French liberals translated and published the 1891 biography of Father Isaac Heacker, the founder of the Paulist Order, which is a religious order of priests dedicated to evangelization.[33] Though Hecker had been loosely associated with American liberals throughout the 1870's, he was also known and well liked by the leading proponents of the conservative camp (Bishop McQuaid even defended Hecker after the French translation resulted in misunderstandings of Hecker's own beliefs). Father Hecker is most remembered for his emphasis on the development of one's interior spiritual life and his work for the conversion of his fellow countrymen. Though he was somewhat averse to the conservative emphasis on the Church as an institution, his criticism never reached the level that it was later painted to be. Abbé Félix Klein, who wrote the introduction for the translated biography, offered a far more radical interpretation of the Paulist's intentions. In it, Klein

[32] Ibid., 2: 367.

[33] This publication coincided with the growing laicization movement in France that resulted in the 1905 law that officially separated Church from state.

presented Hecker as a priest who embodied the spirit of the age and whose spiritual life emphasized an active and personal relationship with the Holy Spirit, rather than what Klein saw as the passive reception of the Spirit that had characterized the Church of the past.[34]

Klein's explanation of Hecker's ideology was mistakenly used as the basis for Leo XIII's 1899 denunciation of Americanism. The problem, as the pope saw it, was that Hecker embodied the spirit of Americanism that looked to the individual rather than the good of the whole. Leo's understanding located the "underlying principle" of Americanism in the idea that "in order to more easily attract those who differ from her, the Church should shape her teachings more in accord with the spirit of the age and relax some of her ancient severity and make some concessions to new opinions."[35] While this did seem to address the issues raised by Hecker, primarily that the spiritual essence of all persons should be acknowledged prior to their religious affiliations, Leo went on to say that Americanists believed that "these concessions should be made not only in regard to matters of discipline, but of doctrines in which is contained the 'deposit of faith.'"[36]

This statement would have been better aimed at the translators of Hecker's biography because whatever the Americanists thought or did, on the whole they did not seek to alter the deposit of faith. Nevertheless, Leo's condemnation of those who would individually seek to alter the Church's "rule of life" did hit the mark.[37] Though the Americanists may not have wanted to change doctrine, they did strive to reform the *behavior* of the Church and its members, not only in their own country, but also throughout the entire Catholic population. This idea of a standard

---

[34] Gerald P. Fogarty, *The Vatican and the American Hierarchy from 1870-1965* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1982), 152.

[35] Pope Leo XIII, "Leo XIII on 'Americanism,'" *The Catholic World* 186 (Apr. 1899), 133.

[36] Ibid., 133-134. The "deposit of faith" is the term reserved for the Church's infallible teachings and revelation as interpreted by the Church.

[37] Ibid., 134.

'rule of life' mirrored the community-oriented principles of the conservative American bishops. Those who made up the Body of Christ were to share one set of principles and behaviors that would guide their life. There principles were also to be firmly based upon those defined by the *magisterium* and therefore grounded in the infallible authority of the Church.[38] These shared behaviors would create a unified Catholic community able to withstand the errors of the modern age. It was to be only on the Church's prerogative that the Church reform to modern principles, which Leo argued was entirely possible, provided that those principles were consistent with Christian morality. Those who sought to do so as individuals outside of the universal Church, whether they were clerics or not, could bring about only temporary – and perhaps erroneous – change. Americanists, as Leo pointed out, pushed for the active pursuit reform, as opposed to what they saw as the passivity that had characterized Catholics of the past.[39]

As the Pope's comments showed, conservatives thought that ideas such as these could easily slide into indifferentism and, eventually, unbelief. Liberals responded with cries that the pontiff's characterization of their movement could not have been more wrong and that none of the heresies described in the document could be ascribed to their cause. After all, they acknowledged the existence of a pre-eminent supernatural order. But conservatives did not see the difference between the then current state of liberal thought and what it could become. In this course, they pointed to the 'decay' of Protestantism and its ever-quickening descent into secularism. By opening up the ranks of the Catholic community to non-Catholics, and even adapting their voice to the culture, conservatives saw liberals as setting a dangerous precedent that could one day result in the destruction of the Church on earth. At the same time, Leo clearly stated in his letter that the Church *could* change, but it could not be the result of individual

[38] The *magisterium* is the teaching authority (made up of the pope and his bishops) of the Church.
[39] Recall Ireland's denunciation of sanctuary religion and devotions.

prerogative. The conservative dedication to the preservation of the Catholic community precluded the option for individual reform that liberal Catholics upheld. The Church had to act as one through slow deliberation and progress, conservatives claimed, and not be pulled swiftly along into reform by a select few who were convinced of their cause.

Conservative Catholics did not simply reject Americanism without offering an alternative solution for the American Church. Their solution involved falling back upon and promoting what they argued were the absolute moral truths of their faith. And, contrary to the liberal accusation that they were out of touch with the modern world, they were fully aware of and responsive to modern culture. Their engagement, however, was not based upon a desire to assimilate themselves into that culture. They were keen to be aware of cultural and political developments in order to better uphold their faith in this new environment. In this context, they were far more than a mere foil for the liberal cause. They held their own beliefs and agendas and sought to promote them for reasons that reached beyond a simple rejection of liberal ideology. This reality would come to show itself ever more clearly in the conservative involvement in the New Deal coalition. Conservatives were more than simply aware of the shifting sociopolitical context in which they lived; they were actively engaged in pursuing the same reforms as their twentieth century counterparts. Out of illiberal foundations came an uneasy alliance with a movement that worked for what have come to be seen as some of the most sweeping liberal reforms in the nation's history.

3 SOCIAL JUSTICE

Leo XIII's pontificate ended with his death three years after the promulgation of *Testem Benevolentiae*. His teachings on the state and social justice, especially as found in *Rerum Novarum*, served as a starting point for twentieth-century social reform movements. The teaching grew out of an illiberal foundation and emphasized the need to accept the moral law and the authority of the Catholic Church to define it. However, with the growing liberal social reform movements, it became apparent that the two camps could, surprisingly, find points of agreement. While Catholics saw the Church's authority as a necessary force in pursuing social justice, they also operated out of a position that prided the community over the individual. To be sure, this position was at odds with the liberal focus on the ultimate liberty of the individual, but it was also this emphasis on community that allowed conservative Catholics to find common ground with liberal reformers. Both factions sought reforms that were designed to better the life of man and, in spite of their differing understandings of the "good life," it was because of this shared desire to promote the commonweal that they could form an alliance geared toward social reform.

The language of social justice was used increasingly in support of economic themes, particularly the worker's right to a living wage. The divide separating liberals from conservatives shifted as both argued that the government should enact legislation that would promote this end. Some liberals, Monsignor John Ryan in particular, chafed against the liberal label and insisted that their prescriptions were based solidly upon the Church's teachings on the

matter. His theological conservatism and understanding of social justice as propounded by Leo XIII led him to a position as an economic liberal. He was not a typical example of the Catholic conservative faction given his liberal credentials, but his liberalism came from a conservative position. While some conservatives, specifically Father Charles Coughlin as we shall later see, accused him of shilling for liberal administrations, the lack of reprimand from Rome suggests that he remained well within the scope of Church teachings.

In 1906, Ryan's dissertation was published as a book entitled *A Living Wage: Its Ethical and Economic Aspects*. In it, he claimed that a worker's claim to a living wage was based in natural rights, not legal. It is a natural right, he argued, because "it is born with the individual, derived from his rational nature, not conferred upon him by a positive enactment."[40] The obligation of the state to provide for the individual's well-being, therefore, is based upon the assumption that every man has the natural right to self-perfection and he likewise has the moral obligation not to impede his fellow man in the pursuance of that goal. While he based his argument on individual rights, he was not a proponent of the unrestrained individualism that had characterized the liberalism of the nineteenth-century.[41] His firm belief in absolute moral truths put him at odds with his more liberal counterparts who rejected his scholastic moorings, while his economic activism based upon individual rights was not entirely consonant with the conservative near-complete emphasis on the moral virtues of working for the common good. Still, the fact that his liberal economic thought stemmed from Thomistic theology allowed him to build a bridge between secular liberals and religious conservatives. Ryan's ability to find a home in both camps foreshadowed the coming developments in liberalism that focused more on a

---

[40] John A. Ryan, *A Living Wage: Its Ethical and Economic Aspects* (New York: Macmillan, 1906). Reprinted in Harlan R. Beckley, Ed., *Economic Justice: Selections from* Distributive Justice *and* A Living Wage (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 161.

[41] Ibid., 162-166.

social program aimed at promoting the good of the individual rather than an absolute individual autonomy that left each man to fight for himself.

Ryan's reliance upon theological justifications and timeless moral truths in his understanding of economic and social reform reflected a growing disconnect between religious and secular reformers. Members of the Pragmatist school, in particular, like William James and John Dewey rejected the notion that these truths could exist a priori. Basing one's entire understanding of social justice and reform on these unproven truths was therefore, neither rational nor practical. These differences in interpretation prompted Pope Pius X to issue the encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* in 1907. He characterized their method of inquiry as one in which there "is a fixed and established principle among them that both science and history must be atheistic: and within their boundaries there is room for nothing but *phenomena*; God and all that is divine are utterly excluded."[42] The solution to these developments lay in scholastic philosophy, and "[o]n this philosophical foundation the theological edifice is to be solidly raised."[43] The pope proclaimed that all applicants for professorships at Catholic universities and seminaries as well as men discerning vocations should be thoroughly schooled in scholasticism as handed down by the Angelic Doctor, Thomas Aquinas. This reaffirmation of Leo XIII's official endorsement of scholasticism would continue to shape and inform the Church's conception of what constituted sound academic and philosophical principles.

These were principles that Monsignor Ryan, even with his liberal credentials in secular circles, adhered to. The growth of the socialist movement in the United States, as well as the increasingly organized opposition to it by the Church, resulted in a request that Ryan engage in a debate on the merits and deficiencies of socialism with the socialist leader Morris Hillquit. The

---

[42] *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* in *The Papal Encyclicals*, 3: 73.
[43] Ibid., 3: 93.

debate, which played out in the pages of *Everybody's Magazine*, was published as a book entitled *Socialism: Promise or Menace?* in 1914. Ryan argued that the socialist understanding of morality was, in fact, immoral. According to socialists, Ryan claimed, "the moral law has no objective existence apart from the codes of conduct that have prevailed among nations and classes throughout history."[44] He further argued that were moral laws mutable, as socialists claimed, human beings would not be recognized as having any intrinsic moral worth. Therefore, "society does [a man] no moral wrong when it treats him" as nothing more than an animal to be used at will.[45] Because of these foundational elements in socialist theory, Ryan argued, the idea that the then-current economic system should be overthrown and replaced with a socialist state was not only impracticable, but immoral. Although he did acknowledge that there were social ills brought upon by the abuses of the economic system, he flatly denied that the system was entirely irreparable.[46] Ryan's debate with Hillquit is a prime example of the ability and willingness of Catholics to engage in public discourse while maintaining a grounding in traditional Catholic theology.

Ryan's refusal to accept Hillquit's grim diagnosis of capitalism coupled with his conservative theological foundation has confounded efforts to properly categorize his place in the political spectrum. Jay Dolan, for instance, glosses over Ryan's traditional Thomistic approach to theology and, instead, perhaps overemphasizes his commitment to the liberal cause.[47] Historians have found it difficult to reconcile these seemingly conflicting notions in Ryan's thinking. If he is released from the constraints of the American political order, however, one can better understand how he arrived at his conclusions and why he was reticent to label

---

[44] Morris Hillquit and John A. Ryan, *Socialism: Promise or Menace?* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 143.
[45] Ibid., 147.
[46] Ibid., 27-31.
[47] See, for instance, Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism*, 148. Dolan vaguely refers to Ryan's merging of Catholic social thought with the reform movement.

himself as a liberal. Ryan drew upon the immutable moral virtues found in Thomistic theology, which led him to purvey a vision of social justice that included wage reform, labor protection laws, and other economic reforms that came to be associated exclusively with the liberal movement. Ignoring these kinds of inconsistencies and tensions has resulted in an historiographical that has consistently failed to acknowledge the paradox in the ability of conservative theologians who worked from an illiberal foundation to share a stake in the social reform movements led by political liberals.

In the aftermath of World War I, Monsignor Ryan authored the Bishops' Social Reconstruction Plan that was published under the auspices of the National Catholic War Council (later renamed the National Catholic Welfare Council). According to the program, "all [of the program's] essential declarations are based upon the principles of charity and justice that have always been held and taught by the Catholic Church."[48] These principles of charity and justice stemmed from a dedication to the ultimate goal of the preservation of the community over and above the liberty of the individual. It was argued that every effort should be made to integrate returning soldiers back into the industrial sector, that wages should at least be sustained at their current level, and that the cost of living should be reduced.[49]

These recommended reforms, Ryan claimed, would work to correct what they saw as the defects of the then-current state of the capitalist system. Those defects, as they were defined, were an "[e]normous inefficiency and waste in the production and distribution of commodities, insufficient incomes for the majority of wage-earners, and unnecessarily large incomes for a small minority of privileged capitalists."[50] It was argued that social reform should take as its "basic proposition that every human being is of inestimable worth, and that legislation should

[48] John A. Ryan, *Social Reconstruction* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1920), 217.
[49] Ibid., 218-219.
[50] Ibid., 235.

recognize persons as more sacred than property."[51] In essence, all of the prescriptions were based upon the assumption that the state should either furnish the basics of life or ensure through legislation that all of its citizens could provide basic necessities for themselves. Though it was called a program of social reconstruction, they took pains to point out that they were not recommending any kind of radical socialistic reform. Rather, they claimed, they were merely reasserting traditional and long-held doctrine in order to repair, not destroy, the existing system.[52]

The Program reiterated much of what Monsignor Ryan had been claiming during his already two decade long career. He responded to critics and proponents alike of the Bishops Program and argued once again that the program did not represent a radical departure from traditional Church teachings. He further argued, in response to those who claimed that the Program was more concerned with economic rather than social reform, that "the economic problem seems to be the most important of the social problems."[53] In the context of Church teachings, the treatment of wage-earners and the perceived selfishness of wealthy capitalists were both a result of the rejection of cardinal virtues. In addressing these issues, then, they saw themselves as responding to the source of the problem. If the condition of the workers could be improved through these reforms, they would be better disposed to further develop their moral virtues through religious worship and the family. The restoration of the principles of the Catholic Church in the broader society was the only way to redress injustice.[54]

The decade leading up to the Great Depression saw a great resurgence of fierce anti-immigration, and anti-Catholicism in particular. A second wave of the Ku Klux Klan helped to

---

[51] Ibid., 222.
[52] Ibid., 217.
[53] Ibid., 3.
[54] On the importance of the promotion of virtue through worship and family, see Hillquit and Ryan, *Socialism*, 145-152.

lead the charge against Southern and Central European immigrants who were overwhelmingly Catholic. The German American community likewise suffered backlash during and after the war due to their German cultural cohesion. The quota placed upon immigrants that favored certain regions of Europe in 1921 and the following Immigration Act of 1924 stemmed the tide of unwanted immigration. Both pieces of legislation helped to highlight the institutionalized discrimination against particular racial and ethnic groups. This discrimination reached new heights as the Klan was reborn in Stone Mountain, Georgia, while Southern Protestant religious leaders renewed their attacks on the immorality of Catholicism. These social developments seeped into the Democratic Party due to its Solid South constituency; a party that had, over the years, earned the loyalty of a vast majority of Northern immigrant Catholics.[55]

It was in this atmosphere that Catholics renewed their efforts to prove their American credentials. Monsignor Ryan weighed in on the Church-state debate and forcefully claimed that any "reference to the Pope as a temporal sovereign is entirely irrelevant. [Catholics'] obedience to him is entirely in the spiritual order."[56] Articles from Catholic scholars started to litter the pages of periodicals, aiming to prove that the origins of democracy, love of country, and true freedom lay within the Church and under Christian precepts. Father John Burke, a Paulist priest and editor of the long-running Paulist periodical *The Catholic World*, claimed that "[t]he love of one's country, of one's fellow citizens is one of the holiest and highest loves on earth" and that these feelings are "not only laudable and obligatory, but they are instruments of human progress

---

[55] See José Casanova, "Roman and Catholic and American: The Transformation of Catholicism in the United States," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 6 (Autumn 1992), 79-80. For a more encompassing view of nativism in America, see John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

[56] Ryan, "The Civic Loyalty of Catholics," National Welfare Conference Bulletin (Nov. 1924). Quoted in Zachary R. Calo, " 'The Indispensable Basis of Democracy': American Catholicism, the Church-State Debate, and the Soul of American Liberalism, 1920-1929," *Virginia Law Review* 91 (Jun. 2005), 1055-1056.

and human betterment."[57] The Jesuit priest, Father Moorhouse Millar, in the same issue of the *Catholic Historical Review* no less, argued that the principles of democracy and natural rights as enshrined in the Constitution were founded upon Catholic tradition and could be found perfectly elucidated in the writings of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas.[58]

This tense relationship with non-Catholic Americans affected the 1924 and 1928 presidential elections. The Tammany Hall-backed New York governor and Catholic, Alfred Smith made a run for the Democratic ticket at the 1924 Democratic National Convention. Under pressure from the Klan, who objected to Smith's machine politics and anti-Prohibition stance, in addition to his religious beliefs, the nomination went to John W. Davis.[59] Four years later, however, Smith was able to secure the nomination. Throughout the campaign, his Catholicism was pointedly left out of public debate. Smith eventually lost to Herbert Hoover, though there has been debate as to the lengths to which his religion played a part.

One month after the campaign ended, Monsignor Ryan weighed in on the loss. He agreed that prejudice played a role in the campaign, but Ryan also pointed out that this prejudice was also based upon cultural and racial prejudice, perhaps even more so than religious. However, Ryan also acknowledged that there *were* those who argued that Smith's faith rendered him an inadequate candidate. On the whole, he argued, much of the anti-Catholic remarks were born of a misunderstanding of Catholic teachings regarding the relationship between the Church and the state. In Ryan's opinion, those who voted against Smith solely because he was Catholic "are inheritors of a long anti-Catholic tradition, compact of misrepresentation and falsehood

---

[57] John J. Burke, "Historical Attitude of the Church toward Nationalism," *The Catholic Historical Review* 14 (Apr. 1928), 69.

[58] Moorhouse F. X. Millar, "The Origin of Sound Democratic Principles in Catholic Tradition," *The Catholic Historical Review* 14 (Apr. 1928), 104-126.

[59] For a full analysis of the convention, see Rory McVeigh, "Power Devaluation, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Democratic National Convention of 1924," *Sociological Forum* 16 (Mar. 2001), 1-30.

[who] have never had adequate opportunity to learn the facts about the Catholic Church."[60] This anti-Catholic tradition was embedded in a culture steeped in a distrust of 'the other.' Even given this allowance, however, Ryan remained openly unhappy about the entire campaign. "As a Catholic," he wrote, "I cannot be expected to rejoice that some millions of my countrymen would put upon me and my co-religionists the brand of civic inferiority. As an American, I cannot feel proud that the spirit of the Sixth Amendment … is thus flouted and violated."[61]

Despite this setback, Monsignor Ryan's and his fellow Catholics' commitment to the furtherance of social justice through the precepts of the Catholic faith continued unabated. Conservatives continued to engage in public debate over the subject and they likewise continued to rely upon the gold standard in Catholic teachings on social issues: Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. The fortieth anniversary of the landmark encyclical presented Pope Pius XI, who succeeded Benedict XV in 1922, with the chance to issue a commemorative encyclical that could address the fears and uncertainty of the world in the aftermath of the 1929 stock market crash and the ensuing Great Depression. In the encyclical, Pius reiterated the arguments of *Rerum Novarum* and sketched a history of the economic life that followed it. Pius characterized the then-current state of economic life as having devolved into a "despotic economic dictatorship" in which "all economic life has become tragically hard, inexorable, and cruel."[62] The pontiff likewise condemned socialism and its "more violent section," Communism.[63] He claimed that Christianity, and Catholicism more specifically, was completely at odds with socialism and that the two were no less than contradictory terms. The answer in those troubled times was not, he suggested, a defection from Christian morals to radical socialism (or anywhere

---

[60] Ryan, *Questions of the Day* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1967), 98.
[61] Ibid., 99.
[62] *Quadragesimo Anno* in *The Papal Encyclicals* 3: 431-432.
[63] Ibid., 3: 432.

in between). Rather, it was absolutely necessary that the principles of economics be brought into line with Christian morality. As Pius wrote, any economic reform "will be wholly defective and incomplete unless all the activities of men harmoniously unite to imitate and attain … the marvelous unity of the Divine plan."[64] Pius was in full support of social reform, but he, as did Leo XIII, argued that it needed to emerge out of fidelity to the moral law and the need to propagate the faith, rather than a desire to achieve one's own individual freedom.

The election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932 and his subsequent New Deal reforms offered plenty of fodder for Catholic social justice advocates, both congratulatory and critical. Monsignor Ryan has been commonly pointed out as one the most ardent supporters of the president. In fact, he himself later reflected that Roosevelt "did more for those who stood most in need of social justice than any other man who ever occupied the White House."[65] Ryan disapproved of the Court's nullification of the National Recovery Act and argued "[t]he underlying idea and the main provisions of the law represent a nearer approach to the vocational group system of economic society, as recommended by Pope Pius XI, than any other piece of legislation in this or any other country."[66] Here we can plainly see Ryan make the connection between aspects of liberal reform and the prescriptions offered by the Church, which were necessarily based upon motivations that contradicted those of the liberal movement.

Throughout the Roosevelt administration, Ryan faced off with Father Charles Coughlin, the infamous Radio Priest of Royal Oak, Michigan. Coughlin was an early and vehement supporter of Roosevelt. In fact, in a January 1934 speech given by the priest, he proclaimed that it was "Roosevelt or ruin" for the nation, and even referred to Roosevelt as "our most beloved

---

[64] Ibid., 3: 437.
[65] John A. Ryan, "Roosevelt and Social Justice," *The Review of Politics* 7 (Jun. 1945), 297.
[66] Ibid., 298.

President."[67] By the end of that same year, however, Coughlin and his National Union for Social Justice turned on the president and the New Deal reforms. The fact that Coughlin had at his disposal literally millions of avid listeners served to make the Radio Priest a real player in the political sphere. His privileged position became very clear in the election of 1936. Father Coughlin trekked across the country, giving stump speeches for Union Party candidate William Lemke. Coughlin lashed out against Roosevelt's economic reforms and accused him of having Communistic tendencies. Monsignor Ryan's public radio address in support of the president, as well as his condemnation of Coughlin's rhetoric, prompted Coughlin to divert his attention momentarily away from the president and deride Ryan as the "right reverend New Dealer."[68] Despite Coughlin's animosity toward both the president and his "ecclesiastical spokesman," Coughlin's incessant critiques were confined almost entirely to monetary reform, rather than Roosevelt's social welfare policies.[69]

The reason for Coughlin's infamy, and ultimately his undoing, was his stance on fascism and Nazism. He was not alone as a Catholic with sympathetic views toward fascism. For many American Catholics, Mussolini's greatest triumph was saving a Catholic country from the evil clutches of Communism. The Church's staunch opposition to Communism as well as its consistent emphasis on upholding and obeying authority were very likely to be contributing factors in the Catholic support of fascism. This became especially evident when Il Duce's actions were compared with the anti-clerical regimes in Mexico and Spain. In addition to the German Concordat that the Holy See had signed with Hitler in 1933, which in theory allowed the Church to continue its mission unmolested by the Third Reich, the perceived loyalty of

---

[67] *Washington Post*, January 17, 1934.

[68] *Baltimore Sun*, October 11, 1936. Quoted in *Religion and Public Life: The Legacy of Monsignor John A. Ryan* (New York: University Press of America, 2001), 26.

[69] Ibid.

American Catholics to their country was becoming ever more tenuous by the day. As the *New Republic* saw it, "the Vatican had married itself to the ultimate (and most violent) form of reaction, namely, fascism."[70] Some Catholics rushed to assure Americans that these claims were at least somewhat unfounded. New York City Democrat, J. J. Lyons, claimed that "the vast majority of the 21,000,000 Catholics have been active in progressive democratic movements … and are among the most ardent upholders of the liberal American tradition."[71] Lyons statement was undoubtedly true, despite what the motivations may have been for those involved in those movements.

Though Father Coughlin had been making vague allusions to his anti-Semitic disposition for most of his radio career, it was in 1938 that his statements became all the more disturbing in light of the Nazi regime's treatment of the Jews. *Kristallnacht* occurred in the fall that same year and Coughlin's remarks followed right on its heels. According to the redoubtable Radio Priest, "[i]t is the belief, be it well or ill founded, of the present German government that Jews … were responsible for the economic and social ills of the fatherland since the signing of the Treat of Versailles."[72] For the rest of the broadcast, Coughlin presented evidence that he felt supported this claim. He attempted to vindicate Nazism by claiming that it was merely "a defense mechanism against Communism."[73]

His appeals to the promotion of social justice in the same broadcast were tainted by his condemnation of what he referred to as Atheistic – a term synonymous with Communist, as far as Coughlin was concerned – Jews who, he claimed, were firm supporters of Lenin and Trotsky. For three weeks, he spent his one hour weekly radio show attempting to disprove his critics by

---

[70] George Seldes, "Catholics and Fascists," 97 (November 9, 1938), 6.
[71] Quoted in ibid.
[72] Charles Coughlin, November 20, 1938.
[73] Ibid.

asserting first, that nothing he had said was based upon anti-Semitic sentiment and, second, that according to his unquestionable sources, Jews were in fact supporters of Communism and were nothing better than the money changers in the Temple. Monsignor Ryan sharply denounced Coughlin's on air rants. Ryan argued that the Radio Priest's entire broadcast was made up of "evil impressions" that "[n]o intelligent person could publicly countenance" and their only purpose was to "arouse further ill-feeling against Jewish people in America and to discourage feelings of sympathy for the Jews in Germany."[74] Coughlin's claims, coupled with his virulent isolationism, sounded the death knell of his radio show. Shortly after the United States entered the war, and facing possible sedition charges, Father Coughlin signed an agreement with his ordinary, Archbishop Edward Mooney, which would prevent him from any and all further political activity.[75]

The period between the turn-of-the-century and the end of World War II presented some of the brightest and the darkest moments in American Catholic history. The increased influence of the Catholic doctrine of social justice as propounded by Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum* had gained a foothold in even secular movements in the scant decade since it had been promulgated. Eager social justice activists like Monsignor John Ryan were acknowledged as masters in their field even as they held fast to the teachings as put forward by Leo XII and Pius XI, in particular. And finally, many Catholic soldiers distinguished themselves in both World Wars and sought to prove that they could be just as patriotic as any other pureblooded American.

These were also times, however, when any ideological rejection of American principles of democracy and freedom were seized upon as being un-American and treasonous. Increased immigration and two foreign wars with nations from whence those immigrants came served to

---

[74] Ryan, "Anti-Semitism in the Air," *Commonweal* (Dec. 1938), 260-261.

[75] Archives of the Archdiocese of Detroit, May 1, 1942. Quoted in Donald Warren, *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, the Father of Hate Radio* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 264.

heighten these accusations, particularly toward those who had retained their Old World cultural heritage. Even more detrimental for Catholics in America was when their leaders failed to live up to their own system of morals. Father Charles Coughlin presents the most blatant of these failures. His stance against Communism was consonant with Church teaching, but his accusation that it was the Jews who supported and perpetuated what the Church taught were the evils of Communism was surely the worst of these transgressions. Pope Pius XII's silence during the war, whatever his private actions or thoughts may have been, has proven to be a permanent blight upon the Vatican's human rights record.

These shortcomings, however, did not end the search for social justice or, indeed, the search for alternative methods to achieve it. Even in the midst of a period in which secular liberalism appeared to rule supreme, Catholics found ways to promote theories of social justice based upon a conservative theological foundation. This paradox and the political alliance that arose out of it became strained in the following decades as liberal Catholics, under the leadership of John Courtney Murray, picked up and furthered the goals of nineteenth century Americanists. Because liberal Catholics found more space for the tenets of democracy and began to reject the idea of an unquestionable hierarchical authority, they became more easy allies with secular liberals than did conservatives, who may have had similar views regarding social reform, but rejected the liberal position from which those reforms came.

4 CHURCH AND STATE

The Cold War years found Americans striving to return to normalcy in the aftermath of World War II. The looming Soviet threat behind the Iron Curtain pushed them to redefine and strengthen their civic identity in opposition to Communists. Catholics were forced to reestablish their own place in Cold War America and increasingly did so in a way that fell in line with the Cold War liberalism that dominated American life in the two decades following World War II. As this happened, a very visible liberal shift occurred in the American Church led by the Jesuit priest, Father John Courtney Murray. The shrinking majority of staunch conservatives who, like their nineteenth-century predecessors, refused to adapt Catholic principles to American culture found themselves facing a country that was almost paranoid in its patriotism. As Catholic liberals continued to find a larger place for the ideals of secular liberalism within their belief system, the relationship that had been forged between conservatives and liberal reformers during the New Deal years began to deteriorate as the ideological gap widened. The tone and content of the debates between liberals and conservatives reflected these social and political developments. Social justice and the common good remained guiding forces, but the theme of the debates moved from economics and labor reform to ideas about the Four Freedoms, particularly religious freedom, and the nature of the relationship between Church and state.[76]

Two of the most visible, certainly most vocal, and perhaps most misrepresented conservative figures in this period were Monsignors Joseph Fenton and Francis Connell. Throughout the late 1940's and 1950's, Fenton and Connell, who were both professors of

[76] See, for example, Francis J. Connell, "The Catholic Position on Freedom of Worship," *Columbia* 23 (Dec. 1943), 6, 24.

Theology at Catholic University, argued for the primacy of the Catholic Church and the pride of place it held in the world. They published at an almost frantic pace; racking up literally hundreds of articles and countless other books, pamphlets, and leaflets. The two priests were instrumental in reviving the Americanism debate that had, presumably, been ended in 1895 by *Testem Benevolentiae*. They firmly rejected the liberal faction's renewed movement toward Americanization and were completely at odds with Father Murray's emphasis on the strict separation of Church and state and his assertion that culture could shape Catholic doctrine.[77]

Both priests were dedicated Thomists and their writings frequently and quite deliberately reflected this foundational element of their theology. Fenton drew heavily upon Aquinas' understanding of divine grace in his explanation of the doctrine e*xtra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the Church there is no salvation). According to Fenton, the three theological virtues named by Aquinas – faith, hope, and charity – "are the primary expressions of the life of grace [and] are themselves the inward principles of unity within the Catholic Church."[78] Consequently, "[s]ince every person who is saved must possess sanctifying grace at the time of death, he must possess a reality which properly belongs to the Catholic Church."[79] Connell acknowledged the "unique influence" that Aquinas had upon Catholic theology and explained that "[t]he law of the Church obliges teachers of theology in her universities and seminaries to expound their science according to the principles enunciated by the Angelic Doctor [Aquinas]."[80] Aquinas' teachings on justice also formed the core of their ideology. As justice is one of the cardinal virtues, social justice is defined as that which "prompts one to render to society what is

---

[77] Connell, "Pope Leo XIII's Message to America," *The American Ecclesiastical Review* 109 (Oct. 1943), 249-256.

[78] Joseph Fenton, "Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus," *The American Ecclesiastical Review* 110 (Apr. 1944), 301. On the theological virtues, see Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 821-823.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Connell, *The Concept of Sacred Theology* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1941), 7.

due it."[81] This entailed a near complete subordination of one's own personal desires to the needs of the broader community. "It is the virtue," Connell wrote, "which prompts one to realize that he may not live for himself alone, that as a member of society he must contribute to the common welfare."[82] Fenton, Connell, and other conservatives continued to share the concerns of the liberal movement for social justice, but just as their New Dealing predecessors had done, they relied upon an illiberal foundation to come to their conclusions. In contrast to the conservatives of the early twentieth century, mid-century conservatives found it increasingly difficult to strike an accord with their liberal counterparts.

The argument for the primacy of the Catholic faith against all others was a bold claim to be making in a political atmosphere that was deeply suspicious of un-American activities. The two priests were aware of and engaged with this reality. In the summer of 1946, the *Christian Herald* and *Time* reprinted passages from a 1943 pamphlet on religious freedom by Monsignor Connell. In the pamphlet, Connell explained that Catholics "hold that any creed which differs from that of the Catholic Church is erroneous, and that any religious organization which is separated from the Catholic Church lacks the approval and the authorization of God."[83] He acknowledged that this belief "presents a striking contrast to the statement we hear so frequently today, that everyone has a perfect, inalienable right to practice any form of religion he wishes."[84] Connell further elaborated the Catholic position to prove that while Catholics believe that there exists no objective, supernatural right to practice any other but the Catholic faith, this belief does not include civil rights. "If the word 'rights' is taken in the sense of civil rights in the United States," he wrote, "Catholics have no hesitation in stating that all religions should have equal

---

[81] Connell, *Morals in Politics and Professions: A Guide for Catholics in Public Life* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1955), 176.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Connell, "The Catholic Position on Freedom of Worship," *Columbia* 23 (Dec. 1943), 6.
[84] Ibid.

rights."[85] This justification, apparently, did not convince either periodical. *Time* asked the following question: "Does Catholicism support the first article of the Bill of Rights?" And answered their question thus: "In U.S. practice, yes; in principle, no."[86] This statement can perhaps be understood as *Time* not having drawn a distinction between an ecclesiastical principle and a civic principle. As the magazine saw it, the doctrinal intolerance that the Church required did not allow Catholics to uphold the Bill of Rights on principle.

The following fall, Monsignor Fenton responded to *Time*'s assessment. Fenton claimed that "[d]isseminating the false notion that … American Catholics [are] 'in principle' opposed to the Bill of Rights can only serve to encourage that religious underworld which is continually engaged in badgering the Catholic faith and which can apparently be satisfied with nothing less than an out-and-out, Russian style persecution."[87] Fenton argued that although the Catholic Church acknowledged the free will that man possesses in choosing his religious affiliation, he has no moral right to practice any faith other than Catholicism. Fenton maintained that "since there is a real and objectively manifest divine precept that all men live within the Catholic Church, it is objectively a moral wrong for any American or, for that matter, for anyone else, to adopt a non-Catholic religion."[88] The fact that a man has a natural right to religious freedom refers only to man's free will. "[E]very one has a natural, God-given right to accept and to practice whatever form of religion appeals to him individually," Fenton maintained, but "this does not give him a genuine right to do so."[89] Man would be abusing that free will should he knowingly choose to reject the Catholic faith. Fenton was careful to point out, as Connell had

---

[85] Ibid., 24.
[86] *Time*, July 29, 1946, 56. Quoted in Fenton, "The Catholic Church and Freedom of Religion," *The American Ecclesiastical Review* 115 (October 1946), 286.
[87] Ibid., 287.
[88] Ibid., 300.
[89] Ibid., 255.

done three years earlier, that every man has a *civil* right to pursue any religious affiliation he wishes, but it is also true, he argued, that "civil law makes no attempt to enforce the divine precept" that man breaks the moral law when he does not belong to the Catholic Church.[90] These arguments were based upon the understanding that divine law always and everywhere supercedes civil law because of its moral and spiritual superiority. And to deny that moral law would be to deny the virtues that it bestowed upon its adherents. These were the virtues, which, under the conservative Catholic understanding, were the only path to the true promotion of the common good.

By contrast, John Courtney Murray put forward a depiction of the relationship between Church and state as well as freedom of worship that stood in stark contrast to that of both Fenton and Connell. It was also a position that allowed him easier access to good relations with secular liberals. While Fenton held that "it cannot possibly be a good thing … to have any State or civil society to fail to acknowledge and to reverence the Church as God's kingdom on earth," Murray wished to detach the direct link between the power of the state and that of God and the Church.[91] The state was not conceived as a creature of God; rather, its power was "ordained of God, the author of nature, but deriving from the people."[92] Along these lines, Murray also advocated the separation of the Church and state. In connection with his position on the need for the Church to adapt to the current political reality, he argued that the idea of a state-sanctioned religion was simply an example of the adaptation of ahistorical principles to historical reality. "[T]he institution of the state-church," Murray wrote, "was an adaptation to a particular historical

---

[90] Ibid., 298.
[91] Fenton, "Theology of Church and State," 19.
[92] John Courtney Murray, "The Problem of 'The Religion of the State'," *The American Ecclesiastical Review* 124 (May 1951), 330 n.6.

context [and] does not represent a permanent and unalterable exigence of Catholic principles."[93] According to Murray, this arrangement was no longer applicable to modern culture. Instead, he argued that "[democracy] is presently man's best, and possibly last, hope of human freedom."[94] This argument hearkened back to the Americanist claim that the burden of salvation had been transferred from Europe to the United States. This link was perhaps made most clear when Murray wrote that the Church should explore "the possibilities of a vital adaptation of Church-State doctrine to the constitutional structure, the political institutions, and the ethos of freedom characteristic of the democratic state."[95]

This proposal for the American Church brought him in line with both the nineteenth century Americanists as well as the desire for conformity pushed by the broader American society. The very idea that the Church "must undergo a vital adaptation to the realities given at the moment" stood in near complete opposition to conservative opinion.[96] This was surely the most objectionable component of liberal ideology to conservatives. As had been the case in the nineteenth century Americanism debate, conservatives argued that this kind of reform, as well as the new interpretation of Church history that Murray put forward, suggested that reform was driven by the will of man and that it relied upon individual action to achieve it. The need to adapt to man-made institutions that liberals advocated seemed to imply that the divinely instituted Church was subject to the transient trends of the temporal order.

It is true that Murray did not argue that the principles of the Church were subject to change, but conservatives on the whole did not distinguish between abstract principles and their

[93] Ibid., 334.
[94] Ibid., 336.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid.

practical application.[97] The validity of the teachings of the Church was, according to conservatives, not subject to a constantly shifting secular moral order. For conservatives, the assertion that some principles did not apply to certain time periods denied the Church's immutable moral authority, an authority that had time and time again reaffirmed the centrality of Thomistic theology in its understanding of morality and virtue. This theology was the well from which conservatives drew their conception of social justice and it was the foundation upon which their claims rested. This theology was also, by secular standards, highly illiberal. It stressed obedience to authority and prizing the good of the community over the liberty of the individual. Murray's argument allowed for a larger place of the individual and included more than a reluctant acceptance of religious freedom. Indeed, Murray would later play an integral role in the promulgation of the Second Vatican Council document on religious freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*. The Council proclaimed that there did, in fact, exist an individual right to religious freedom and did not include the caveat that Catholics must on no account approve of another individual's choice to not be Catholic.

The conservative position on reform led Monsignor Connell to the conclusion that Murray's thesis needed to be reported to Rome. In 1953, he did just that. Shortly after his appointment as the Pro-Secretary of the Holy Office, Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani gave a speech in honor of Pope Pius XII on the subject of Church-State relations.[98] The cardinal explicitly referenced the debates that had occurred between Murray and his conservative counterparts throughout the late 1940's and 1950's in the pages of *The American Ecclesiastical Review*. He named Murray's argument "the liberalizing thesis" and clearly sided with the position of Fenton

---

[97] Recall *Testem Benevolentiae* and Pope Leo XIII's argument concerning the Church's 'rule of life.'

[98] The Holy Office was re-named the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1965. On the events that led up to Cardinal Ottaviani's speech, see Joseph A. Komenchak, "Catholic Principle and the American Experiment: The Silencing of John Courtney Murray," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 17 (Winter 1999), 28-44.

and Connell.[99] In a letter sent to Connell the following year, Ottaviani agreed that Murray's claims affected "the common good" and he assured the priest that he saw it as his "duty to act … for the protection of the truth and for the defense of Catholic thought."[100] As Ottaviani and American conservatives saw it, Murray's prominence in theological circles created a dangerous situation. They were sure that the Jesuit's thesis contained within it corruptive elements that could damage the faith. Later that very year, the Holy See censured Murray based on what the Holy Office saw as four erroneous propositions in his writings. These propositions referred primarily to Murray's claim that democracy was at present the most ideal form of government and that full religious liberty should be embraced rather than simply tolerated by Catholics. Murray was strongly advised to cease writing about his 'liberalizing thesis.' It is at this point in the Jesuit's career that the historiography tends to lament Murray's Roman censure. Many write of him as having been attacked and silenced by Rome, while Fenton and Connell worked Stateside to sully his integrity and reputation.[101]

The censure proved to be, contrary to the commonly accepted narrative, less than effective in silencing Father Murray. He continued to argue that institutions had to adapt to historical realities, but he carefully avoided explicitly including the Church in these arguments. Much of his focus was shifted from prescriptions for the Church in society to explanations of American civil society and what the place of religion was within it. He extolled the virtues of democracy and religious freedom, but was able to keep within the bounds of his censure because he stopped short drawing out a full plan of action for the American Church. The Church did, to

---

[99] Alfredo Ottaviani, "Church and State: Some Present Problems in the Light of the Teaching of Pope Pius XII," quoted in Ibid., 32.

[100] Ottaviani to Connell, Rome, March 31, 1954, quoted in Ibid., 35.

[101] See Dolan, *In Search of An American History*, 160-162; McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom*, 207-209; Komonchak, "Catholic Principle and the American Experiment," 41.

some extent, incorporate Murray's argument about individual religious freedom, but the priest himself felt that it did not go far enough.[102]

As the decade wore on, the Church became ever more accepted in liberal circles. Aside from its own developments, growing anti-Communist sentiment served to deflect attention away from the Catholic threat. No longer, on the whole, was it seen as the totalitarian threat to American democracy that was just as dangerous as the Red Menace. The Church's work toward racial equality likewise placed Catholics amongst the vanguard of liberal activists. Even inside the Church, the liberal base swelled alongside these developments. They began to argue against the doctrinal intolerance that priests like Fenton and Connell had championed throughout their careers. The subjective and purely civil freedom of worship that conservatives had supported throughout the foregoing seven decades was replaced with an emphasis on the absolute freedom of worship that did not include the explicit warning that it was an objective moral wrong to belong to any faith outside of the Catholic Church.

For conservatives, these were problematic changes. While they were not opposed to recognizing human dignity, they were opposed to doing so at the expense of maintaining the absolute truths of the Church and the obligation of man to believe in those truths. To do so, they believed, would be to risk a clear sense of Catholic identity and compromise the legitimacy of the deposit of faith and the *magisterium*'s authority. They saw liberals as wanting to impose the liberal democratic model upon the hierarchical Church. The Second Vatican Council thus came to be understood by many conservatives as a liberal mission to modernize doctrine, rather than modernize the way in which doctrine was imparted, and to force the Church into reforms that would make it more adaptable to modern cultural values. Liberals saw the conservative

---

[102] See Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960).

resistance to such reforms as purely reactionary and based upon an antiquated understanding of the Church's place in the world. Conservatives, on the other hand, argued that it rejected the Church's role in shaping culture and instead promoted the shaping of the Church by culture, which, as it happens, was *exactly* what Father Murray had been arguing for throughout the preceding decade.

From the latter half of the 1950's through to the Second Vatican Council in 1963, the American Church experienced a massive liberal shift. This shift entailed an effort to mould the structure and function of the Church to the American democratic model. This was, for many historians and liberal contemporaries, the vindication of the Americanism movement as envisioned by Archbishop John Ireland and his fellow nineteenth century liberals and, more recently, of Father Murray. It was, for conservatives, a potentially dangerous compromise of long-held Catholic truths and traditions. As they saw it, their objections were not based upon a reactionary nostalgia for the clericalism and ostentatious trappings of the 'preconciliar' (that is to say, the period prior to Vatican II) Church. They were based upon a theological understanding, rooted in their Thomistic training, of the need for community and justice found through the infallible teachings of the Church, not the secular liberal movements that placed the foundation of their reforms in individualism and democratic theory. The conservative insistence upon holding steadfastly to their illiberal foundation highlighted the ever-increasing agreement amongst religious and secular liberals and served to widen the gap between conservatives and liberal reformers.

Conservatives did not, however, want to completely distance themselves from these debates. They understood themselves to be working toward bringing about a new acceptance of the moral law that they felt was better suited to meeting the goals that liberal social reformers

had set. The promotion of the common good under the moral law as defined by the Catholic Church had to be found in the striving for the true end of man; an end that required transcendence above the temporal order to the supernatural. The only way, conservatives argued, an individual could be truly inspired to work for this common good, the ultimate good, of man was within the framework and system of morals as laid down by Thomas Aquinas and taught by the Roman Catholic Church. After the Council, however, the American Church came to be dominated by a liberal majority that was much more inclined to carve out space for the individual, even in a Church that remained to be hierarchical. The liberal rejection of authority and growing emphasis on a democratic model that allowed for a much larger role for the laity in the guiding the mission of the Church – whether it be through pastoral councils or the skyrocketing number of parish-based and lay-led apostolates – effectively severed the ties that had been made between liberals and conservatives in the first three decades of the twentieth-century.

The paradox, however, remained. Conservatives continued to maintain an essentially liberal position on social and economic reform that was based upon illiberal ideas about authority and individual freedom.[103] This reality has been overshadowed by an historiography that has focused exclusively on the illiberality of conservative ideology (or, in the case of John Ryan, glossed over the illiberal roots of a liberal icon) without acknowledging that liberal conclusions could be, and were, drawn out of that ideology. The liberal narrative has likewise failed to grasp the fact that liberal Catholics continued to accept liberalism as a dominating American ideal, in spite of the clearly illiberal times in which many of them lived. The historiography has ignored these tensions in favor of simplicity and has wound up purveying a vision of American Catholic

[103] Though it must be pointed out that issues like abortion and contraception were not included in their platform. For many conservatives, these matters were of a moral nature and, as such, the state had no place in their regulation.

history colored by a liberal triumphalism in contrast to a reactionary conservatism that was incapable of finding a place in the American cultural landscape.

whose ideology mirrored the conservative emphasis on community and the common good.

5 CONCLUSION

The history of the Catholic Church in America has been fraught with tension and division, both amongst the faithful themselves and with the broader American culture. Tensions that began with a massive influx of Irish immigrants in the 1840's grew to a full-fledged divide over the place of those immigrants in American life by the 1890's. The conservatives in this era faced off with illiberal political trends as well as an Americanism movement that argued for the need to Americanize the Church and its immigrant faithful in order to fall in line with these trends. Conservatives did not reject this argument because they were opposed to the very idea of America. They rejected it because they felt that the liberal ideology in American political culture and its emphasis on individual autonomy was at odds with the teachings of their Church. Conservatives were not ignorant to the arguments of religious or secular liberals and did not see themselves as arguing for the building of impermeable walls between Catholics and American society in order to enclose themselves and the faithful inside a Catholic ghetto. They wanted to hold onto strong Catholic ideals in an effort to promote in American society the moral law and its emphasis on the common good.

This history was also one of a perplexing paradox, one that existed on multiple levels. The liberal Catholics who wanted to 'Americanize' the Church fully believed liberalism to be the dominant American ideology. They struggled to incorporate the principles of democracy and liberalism into a Church that was very much at odds with such ideas and within a culture that was far from liberal itself. During periods of heavy immigration, American society closed in

upon itself and adopted a position that highly prized an homogenous culture, whether that was in terms of race, ethnicity, or religious affiliation. In spite of this, liberal Catholics purveyed a vision of American culture that was geared toward promoting an individualistic active spirit, a spirit that would be the perfect vehicle with which the Old World Church could be reformed. As they argued, once the Church could accept this necessary measure for reform, they would be welcomed with open arms by Americans. Total acceptance of hierarchical authority and doctrinal intolerance were outmoded viewpoints that only served to sever the Church from modernity. Modernity, for liberals, was liberalism and democracy, not passive piety and hierarchical rule.

Conservatives rejected liberalism outright, whether it was the dominant political ideal or not. For them, it was simply not compatible with Catholic teachings on the Church's infallible authority to define the norms of the community. To uphold the stability of the community, society had to submit to the Church's authority and not allow itself to define its own law outside of the Church. This highly illiberal position ironically led to a very deep commitment to social justice, particularly in the wake of *Rerum Novarum*. Social justice had existed as a defined tradition in the Church since Aquinas, but it was Leo XIII's articulation of the tradition in conjunction with socioeconomic conditions that were in deep need of reform that led to the hold it took upon Catholics. It proved to be a pivotal moment in Church history, and it made a very lasting mark upon American Catholics in particular. While it may seem illogical that such illiberal foundations could lead to what are seen as liberal conclusions, it becomes clear once one looks at the reasoning behind the Church's emphasis on obedience to authority and its wariness toward many aspects of liberal ideology. Individual autonomy, in the mind of the Church, would only lead to fragmentation and disorder. Obedience to what the Church claims is its infallible

authority creates for the community a stable foundation out of which flows immutable truths designed to promote the common good. Despite the fact that twentieth-century liberals had come to realize that unrestrained individualism was not a practical path to the common good, conservatives disagreed with the notion that the community's ultimate goal should be the liberty of the individual. For conservatives, the community had to take precedence over the individual and the boundaries of that community had to be defined by the Church.

And yet, despite these deep-rooted divisions, both liberals and conservatives could agree on the necessity for economic and social reform, and even some of the methods through which to achieve it. All sides argued that the government had to do more to protect those who had no bargaining power in the workplace. While this presented a definite shift in the liberal approach to government interference in society, for conservatives, it was little different from relying upon the Church to enforce the moral law. These reforms were needed to better the lives of workers so that they make more room for spiritual development. Supporting social reform, then, was a way to combat vice and injustice so that the moral law could prevail. In this way, conservatives operated out of an illiberal foundation and, indeed, had ultimately illiberal goals. The paradox lay in the fact that both conservatives and liberals identified the same methods as a mean to further their own ideological goals.

Following the New Deal years, conservatives did not cease to promote the Church's social justice tradition. However, it became clear that Catholic liberals found themselves more able to find space for the individual in their ideology and, as such, became a more attractive option for a political alliance. Conservatives were unwilling to follow in their footsteps and remained unwavering in their understanding of religious freedom and the relationship between the Church and the state. Their staunch opposition to the Americanization of the Church, in

conjunction with a rapidly growing liberal Catholic movement, led to the deterioration of the uneasy coalition that had sprung up in the mutual quest for social reform. The fact remains, however, that this coalition did indeed exist, despite the wildly different ideological traditions of its members. But how is it that secular liberal reformers and staunchly conservative Catholics could identify the same methods to achieve their goals? It is a paradox that seems determined to go unexplained. It is also a paradox that contributes to the tension that has characterized the history of Catholicism in America. The story of the Old Faith in the New World remains to be fully unpacked by historians and that can only be achieved if conflicts and inconsistencies are identified, even if they are inexplicable or illogical. The current place of the Church in America is not without tension and controversy and its past is no less so. To simplify it in order to avoid unanswerable questions results in a history devoid of the complications that seem to come part and parcel with the human experience.

REFERENCES

Primary Sources

Catholic Mirror, October 15, 1887.

New American Bible (Washington D.C.: Catholic World Press, 1990).

North-Western Chronicle, August 24, 1888.

Washington Post, January 17, 1934.

Aquinas, Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, Trans., The Fathers of the Dominican Province (Notre Dame: Christian Classics, 1981).

Anonymous, "Professing Themselves to be Wise When They Become Fools," *The American Catholic Quarterly Review* 6 (Apr. 1891), 309-330.

Beckley, Harland R., Ed., *Economic Justice: Selections from* Distributive Justice *and* A Living Wage (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

Burke, John J., "Historical Attitude of the Church Toward Nationalism," *The Catholic Historical Review* 14 (Apr. 1928), 69-80.

Connell, Francis J., *The Concept of Sacred Theology* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1941).
_____"Pope Leo XIII's Message to America," *The American Ecclesiastical Review* 109 (Oct. 1943), 249-256.
_____"The Catholic Position on Freedom of Worship," *Columbia* 23 (Dec. 1943), 6, 24.
_____*Morals in Politics and Professions: A Guide for Catholics in Public Life* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1955).

Coughlin, Charles, Radio Address, November 20, 1938.

Fenton, Joseph C., "*Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*," *The American Ecclesiastical Review* 110 (Apr. 1944), 300-306.
_____"The Catholic Church and the Freedom of Religion," *The American Ecclesiastical Review* 115 (Oct., 1946), 286-301.
_____"Theology of Church and State," *Proceedings of the Annual Catholic Theological Society of America Convention* (1947), 15-46.

Hillquit, Morris and John A Ryan, *Socialism: Promise or Menace?* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1914).

Ihm, Claudia Carlen, Ed., *The Papal Encyclicals* (Wilmington, NC: McGrath Press, 1981), Vol. II-III.

Ireland, John, *The Church and Modern Society* (St. Paul, MN: Pioneer Press, 1905), Vol. I-II.

Keane, John J., *Emmanuel* (1915).

Leo XIII, "Leo XIII on 'Americanism,'" *The Catholic World* 69 (Apr. 1899), 133-142.

McQuaid, B.J., "The Decay of Protestantism," *The North American Review* 132 (Apr. 1881), 135-152.
_____"The Spirituality of the Catholic Church," *The American Catholic Quarterly Review* 9 (Jan. 1884), 166-177.

Moorhouse, F.X. Millar, "The Origin of Sound Democratic Principles in Catholic Tradition," *The Catholic Historical Review* 14 (Apr. 1928), 104-126.

Murray, John Courtney, "The Problem of 'The Religion and the State,'" *The American Ecclesiastical Review* 124 (May 1951), 327-52.
_____*We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960).

Preston, Thomas S., "American Catholicity," *The American Catholic Quarterly Review* 16 (Apr. 1891), 396-409.

Ryan, John A., *Social Reconstruction* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1920).
_____*Questions of the Day* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1967).
_____"Anti-Semitism in the Air," *Commonweal* (Dec. 1938), 260-262.
_____"Roosevelt and Social Justice," *The Review of Politics* 7 (Jul. 1945), 297-305.

Seldes, George, "Catholics and Fascists," *New Republic* 97 (Nov. 9, 1938), 6-9.

Secondary Sources

Calo, Zachary R., "'The Indispensable Basis of Democracy': American Catholicism, the Church-State Debate, and the Soul of American Liberalism, 1920-1929," *Virginia Law Review* 91 (Jun. 2005), 1037-1073.

Casanova, José, "Roman and Catholic and American: The Transformation of Catholicism in the United States," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 6 (Autumn 1992), 75-111.

Curran, Robert Emmet, "The McGlynn Affair and the Shaping of the New Conservatism in American Catholicism, 1886-1894," *The Catholic Historical Review* 66 (Apr. 1980), 184-204.

Dolan, Jay P., *In Search of an American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Fogarty, Gerald P., *The Vatican and the American Hierarchy from 1870-1965* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1982).

Highman, John, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1880-1925* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

Janus, Glen, "Bishop Bernard McQuaid: On 'True' and 'False' Americanism," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 11 (Summer 1993), 53-76.

Kauffman, Christopher J., *Faith and Fraternalism: The History of the Knights of Columbus, 1882-1982* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982).

Kennedy, Robert G., et al, Ed., *Religion and Public Life: The Legacy of Monsignor John A. Ryan* (New York: University Press of America, 2001).

Kerber, Linda K., *No Constitutional Right to be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998).

Komenchak, Joseph A., "Catholic Principle and the American Experiment: The Silencing of John Courtney Murray," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 17 (Winter 1999), 28-44.

MacIntyre, Alasdair, *Whose Justice? Whose Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

_____*After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008, Third Edition).

McGreevy, John T., *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003).

McVeigh, Rory, "Power Devaluation, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Democratic National Convention of 1924," *Sociological Forum* 16 (Mar. 2001), 1-30.

Novak, William J., *The People's Welfare: Law & Regulation in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

O'Toole, James M., *The Faithful: A History of Catholics in America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008).

Pickus, Noah, *True Faith and Allegiance: Immigration and American Civic Nationalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

Sandel, Michael J., *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, Second Edition).

Smith, Rogers M., *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Ideals of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Have, Yale University Press, 1997).

Taylor, Charles, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

Warren, Donald, *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, the Father of Hate Radio* (New York: The Free Press, 1996).