Through a Glass, Darkly: Antebellum American Whiggery, Catholicism, and the Ideological Roots of Nativism

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ABSTRACT

Antebellum American nativism was a choice. This article demonstrates that the sectarian violence and disorder of the 1840s and 1850s was not simply a vague, latent, inevitable anti-Catholic bigotry that sprung forth in reaction to the rising wave of Irish Catholic immigration. Instead, it was one option, dependent upon cultural, social, and moral changes occurring on both sides of the Atlantic. There is a good bit of historical irony in this conclusion because Whigs and Catholics shared many concerns about human nature and public order. However, the poverty and intemperance of many Irish immigrants, as well as their attachment to devout Roman Catholicism, and the bourgeois pretensions of American Whigs, drove many to view the Irish as socially and culturally unacceptable.

KEYWORDS
Catholics, Whigs, Intolerance, Nativism, Morality, Bourgeois

> *There can be no liberty in the presence of such masses of dark mind, and of such despotic power over it in a single man.*
>
> Lyman Beecher

> *For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.*
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> 1 Corinthians 13:12 (KJV)

Just after eleven o'clock at night, in the sultry heat of August 11, 1834, a bonfire scorched the sky in Charlestown, Massachusetts. The fire's glow revealed the silhouettes of a growing mob outside a boarding school for girls run by Catholic nuns. "Soon after this," a local newspaper reported, "a party of 50 or 100 persons, disguised by fantastic dresses & painted faces, assembled before the convent, and after warning the inmates, who had all retired to rest, by loud noises & threats of destruction to make their escape, proceeded to make an actual assault upon the house."[1] An orgy of destruction ensued. The mob put the chapel, the bishop's lodge, the stables, and the nuns' living quarters to the torch, along with three pianos, a harp, and various other musical instruments. Truly barbaric, at least in the eyes of many stunned eyewitnesses, was the razing of the

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1   "Domestic. Burning of the Charlestown Convent," *Pittsfield Sun*, August 21, 1834, 2. See also "Ursuline Report of the Burning of the Convent, August 11, 1834," The Ursuline Convent, Charlestown, MA Papers, Box 1, Folder 5, American Catholic Historical Research Center and University Archives. Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1938), Nancy Lusignan Schultz, *Burning Down the House: The Ursuline Convent Riot, Charlestown, Massachusetts, 1834* (Salem, MA: Salem State College Press, 1993) and Nancy Lusignan, *Fire and Roses: The Burning of the Charlestown Convent,* 1834 (New York: The Free Press, 2000) are thorough scholarly accounts of the convent burning.

cemetery and disinterment of Catholic dead. Grimy smoke belched and bellowed long after the mob finally dispersed at dawn the next day.

The antebellum American working classes were often a violent, disorderly lot. During the age of Jackson, Webster, and Clay, roughly spanning the years 1830-1860, the new world of market exchange, credit, rapid wealth and sometimes equally rapid ruin, often saw disturbing riots, lynchings, and mob savagery. And many believed that the problem was getting worse. Mob fury was not limited to Protestant attacks on Roman Catholics, but it seemed to intensify when focused on Catholic immigrants. A year after the Ursuline convent was burned another mob in Vicksburg hung five gamblers without benefit of trial or jury. In 1835, Protestants and Catholics brawled on the streets of Cincinnati.[2] Perhaps most gruesome yet, in 1836 a free black man in St. Louis, Frank McIntosh, was burned alive after killing a white sheriff during a brawl. Finally in the fall of 1839, New York Governor William H. Seward was forced to send in the state militia to quell insurgents in and around Albany violently protesting what they viewed as unfair lease and rent practices.[3]

Conservative politicians, newspaper editors, priests, preachers, and an anxious laity all wondered how best to suppress the radical energies of "King Mob," lest he destroy American society from the ground up. Did American individualism, or the social practice of atomistic independence and self-reliance, have any just limits, many wondered? If so, what were they? How and by whom were they defined? American society and Americans themselves, many argued, suffered from a dearth of order. It was a problem upon which seemingly disparate groups agreed. Consequently, Protestant Whig understandings of reform, citizenship, and community, in ways that neither group probably understood or acknowledged, were remarkably similar to ideas shared by Roman Catholics. A cursory reading of their speeches, sermons, pamphlets, and polemicals demonstrates the seemingly glaring room for accommodation and association along intellectual lines. Attachment to family, reverence for hierarchical institutions, and an abiding skepticism for unfettered individualism are but a few seeming points of continuity between Whig and Catholic social thought.

Yet we know that Catholics and Whigs rarely found common ground. Instead, their antebellum interactions were often marred by hostile antipathy. Indeed, the Whig Party drew much of its strength from reform-minded, evangelical Protestants across the North and South, Protestants who thought of themselves and their country in terms of the rising middle class. The ideology of this new American middle class lionized work, wealth, and achievement as blessed by God.[4] Their religious fervor and social worldview inspired them to try to reform American society to hasten Christ's Second Coming, true, but it also drove them to close ranks against most foreigners who did not overtly share

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2 "Abuses of the Press Again!," *Catholic Telegraph*, Cincinnati, OH, February 27, 1835, 109.

3 David Grimstead's *American Mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) is a well done book on the rising violence of the antebellum era. For more on the Ursuline Convent burning and antebellum challenges to American Catholicism see John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2003). The violent possibilities beneath the Jacksonian culture of "go-ahead' that drove people in Vicksburg to hang recalcitrant gamblers are explored and explained in Joshua Rothman's *Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012). For more on the Anti-Rent Movement see Henry Christman, *Tin Horns and Calico: A Decisive Episode in the Emergence of Democracy* (New York: Henry Holt, 1945), Reeve Huston, *Land and Freedom: Rural Society, Popular Protest, and Party Politics in Antebellum New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Charles W. McCurdy, *The Antirent Era in New York Law and Politics, 1839-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

4 Max Weber traced the "Protestant Ethic" in his famous book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Penguin Books, 2002).

their innovative, progressive, sometimes reckless spirit of "go ahead," including Catholics. Whig embraced the new over the old, and this thinking often seemed proscriptive and narrow to groups or individuals more comfortable with tradition. Further, as the Whig Party lay dying in the early 1850s, many of its members sought refuge with the short-lived, but notorious Know-Nothings, a political movement that briefly rode a dark, caustic nativism to the halls of power. Know-Nothings beat the drums of "Catholic hordes" invading from Europe to stoke the fires of reactionary nationalism for partisan advantage. And for their part, throughout the antebellum period, Catholics voted *overwhelmingly* for the Whigs' opponents, Jacksonian Democrats, rejecting Whig candidates in almost summary fashion in election after election all across the United States.[5]

But is that the whole story? Was nativism inevitable? And if so, why? The reductionist tendency to begin with Know-Nothings and read their fears and anxieties inexorably backward, as a cynical augur for the times ignores other explanations. Antebellum nativism was a choice. It was not simply a vague, latent, inevitable anti-Catholic bigotry that sprung forth anew with the wave of Irish Catholic immigration in the 1840s and '50s. Instead, it was one option, dependent upon cultural, social, and moral changes occurring on both sides of the Atlantic.

To understand the context of American nativism and the choice it represented it is crucial to remember that Catholics and Whigs had not always been hostile to one another. In fact, many of their respective leaders, at least before 1840, attempted to cultivate generous conviviality. Charleston Bishop John England, for example, explained this point of view in 1826 when he wrote to his North Carolina friend, erstwhile Federalist-turned-Whig and eventual State Supreme Court Justice, William Gaston. "I love your countrymen," England said, "they must be instructed, not abused. They must be expostulated with, not quarreled with. They are not obstinate heretics – they are enquiring, thinking, reasoning, well-disposed, I will add a pious people."[6] England's warm friendship toward the Protestant majority was often returned in kind. Indeed, in 1832 Henry Clay convinced the United States Senate to appoint Charles Constantine Pise at

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5   Scholarship on American nativism includes Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1938), Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know-Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), Ray Allen Billington, "Maria Monk and Her Influence," *Catholic Historical Review* 22.3 (Oct., 1936): 283-96, and Clifford S. Griffin, "Converting the Catholics: American Benevolent Societies and the Ante-Bellum Crusade against the Church, *Catholic Historical Review* 47.3 (October, 1961): 325-41. Richard J. Carwardine's *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993) is still the best work on the subject. A detailed look at Catholic voting practices is seen in Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), and George J. Marlin, *American Catholic Voter: Two Hundred Years Of Political Impact* (New York: Ignatius Press, 2004).

6   John England to William Gaston, January 29, 1826, in *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* Vol. 19 (Philadelphia: American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia, 1908), 106. Works on antebellum North Carolina politics include Marc W. Kruman, *Parties and Politics in North Carolina, 1836–1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), and Thomas Jeffrey, *State Parties and National Politics: North Carolina, 1815–1861* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989). For more on 1835 Raleigh Convention, in particular, see also Harold J. Counihan, "The North Carolina Constitutional Convention of 1835: A Study in Jacksonian Democracy," *North Carolina Historical Review* 46 (December 1969): 335–364. William Gaston drew upon the intellectual traditions of his friend and priest John England, Catholic Bishop of Charleston, SC. For a concise treatment of English thinking on republicanism and religion see Patrick Carey, *An Immigrant Bishop: John England's Adaptation of Irish Catholicism to American Republicanism* (Yonkers, NY: U.S. Catholic Historical Society, 1982), especially Part III "American Republicanism, and Part IV "Republican Constitutionalism and the Catholic Church, 83-161.

its first Roman Catholic Chaplain.[7] When Philadelphia printer Mathew Carey, a Catholic pamphleteer renowned for his focus on political harmony and social philanthropy, died in 1839 his funeral was the most widely attended in the city's living memory.[8]

In his 1839 Annual Message to the New York legislature, moreover, Governor William Seward rejected nativism outright. To secure Whig social goals, he argued, "We must extend to them [i.e. Catholic immigrants] the right of citizenship," Seward boldly explained, "with all its inestimable franchises. We must secure to them as largely as we ourselves enjoy, the immunities of religious worship. And we should act not less wisely for ourselves, than generously toward them, by establishing schools in which their children shall enjoy advantages of education equal to our own, with free toleration of their peculiar creeds and instructions."[9] To assimilate growing waves of immigrants into American society Seward stressed that *inclusion* in the body politic, not exclusion or expulsion, was vital. And he provocatively grounded his position on respect for diverse creeds and religious backgrounds. Seward's arguments demonstrate another point of accommodation, another line of Whig thinking that did not view Catholic immigrants, or Catholicism itself, through the harsh light of nativism. At least not at first.

Whigs and Catholics also viewed schools, churches, and lyceums as crucial to moral improvement. Seward explained this point as well in his 1839 Annual Message, stressing that "Such [free republican] institutions can only be maintained by an educated and enlightened people."[10] Most Catholic intellectuals agreed. "Our fundamental institutions are to the statesman, what the Gospel is to the churchman," fiery Catholic convert Orestes Brownson reasoned in 1844, "the law which he is to develop and apply, but it no case to change, or set aside. We seek progress, but only progress under and through existing institutions."[11] Progress was vital, Catholics and Whigs together conceded, but it must be measured and restrained against the realities of flawed human nature. Along with the vast majority of antebellum Americans, Whigs and Catholics looked to Holy Scripture for guidance. "The Bible told us that human nature was depraved," the nationally read *American Whig Review* argued in language with which

7   "Senate Chaplains," United States Senate. Accessed February 12, 2013. http://www.senate.gov/artand-history/history/common/briefing/Senate_Chaplain.htm. See also Margaret C. DePalma, *Dialogue on the Frontier: Catholic and Protestant Relation, 1793-1883* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2004), 75-77, and Willard Thorp, *Catholic Novelists in Defense of Their Faith, 1829-1865* (New York: Arno Press, 1978).

8   Margaret Abruzzo, "Apologetics of Harmony: Mathew Carey and the Rhetoric of Religious Liberty," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 134 (January 2010): 11. Works dealing generally with antebellum American Catholicism includes James J. Hennesey, *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1985), Charles Morris, *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America's Most Powerful Church* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), and James M. O'Toole, *The Faithful: A History of Catholics in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

9   William Henry Seward, "Annual Message to the Legislature, January 1, 1839," in *The Works of William Henry Seward,* Volume II, ed. George E. Baker (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1888), 199.

10 Seward, "Annual Message to the Legislature, January 1, 1839," 197. Seward probably said it best but his ideas were echoed among Whigs across the country. A few examples include "A Word With Our Friends," *New York Tribune* (New York: May 3, 1841, p. 2, "Introductory," *American Whig Review* (New York; January 18450, p. 1, "Immunity of Religion," *National Banner & Nashville Whig* (Nashville, TN: July 3, 1835), and John Chamber to J.W. Allen, Washington, Kentucky, July 31, 1839, Chambers Papers, Manuscripts, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky.

11 "Introduction," *Brownson's Quarterly Review* (Boston: January 1, 1844), 19. See also "Education in North Carolina," *United States Catholic Miscellany*, December 22, 1832, 198, "What has the Catholic Church done for Popular Instruction," *United States Catholic Miscellany*, June 20, 1835, 401, "Education," *Catholic Telegraph* July 25, 1839, 259, and "The Catholic Church," *Catholic Telegraph*, November 21, 1839, 396.

most Catholics would nod their assent, "that the thoughts and imaginations of men were evil continually, that they loved darkness more than light, and that the heart was deceitful above all things and desperately wicked."[12] The best way to achieve sustainable progress, in this view, was generous material and political support for common schools and trade colleges. For most Whigs and many Catholics, unfettered individualism seemed contrary to social progress. As we have seen, antebellum Americans displayed a disturbing tendency towards lawlessness and violence. While it is true that these ideas folded into larger Whig moral reform efforts, at least from the perspective of Whig supporters, it is misguided to view them as coda for a sinister agenda of social control. Whigs reformers certainly sought public means to encourage individuals to control themselves, but that is not the same thing as using state power and private charity in a clandestine bourgeoisie plot to coerce and control the working classes.[13]

Given at least the veneer of intellectual room for accommodation and the shared conservative reverence for order, education, and institutions, what factors best explain Whig and Catholic hostility to one another? The most enduring interpretation points to latent anti-Catholic bigotry, embedded in Protestant Americans' cultural DNA, which burst forth with renewed vigor as Catholic immigration, primarily from Ireland, rapidly increased in the 1840s and 1850s. This line of thinking suggests that Americans only *seemed* to tolerate Catholics such as John England and Mathew Carey because they were few in number, largely kept to themselves, and thus did not appear to threaten America's decidedly Protestant destiny. Another, more persuasive line of scholarship suggests that nativism flowed from economic, political, and lifestyle conflicts between native- and foreign-born, conflicts both actual and imagined. As Catholic population numbers rose, both arguments hold, so too did the threat they represented. And a cursory glance at Whig pamphlets, journals, magazines, speeches, and sermons seems to corroborate these positions, as the Irish Catholic population swelled nativist language became more and more shrill. "Have the People of Massachusetts all of a sudden fallen back two centuries to the religious bigotry of their Puritan ancestors," one editor despaired in 1854 after a spate of Know-Nothing victories, "and gone crazily into a No-Popery crusade?" But this intellectual hand-wringing was not widely shared in the 1850s. Indeed, many acknowledged anti-Catholicism as a virtue, not a vice. "We censure nobody for regarding Popery with jealousy," another Whig newspaper told its readers, "believing as we do that it is the foe of human freedom." Whiggish Americans were deeply uncomfortable, then, with what they believed these immigrants represented. The imagined threat was, in many ways, worse than any one thing observable and recorded.[14]

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12 "Human Rights According to Modern Philosophy," *American Whig Review*, October 1845, 332.

13 Paul E. Johnson's *A Shopkeepers Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill &Wang, 1978), Sean Wilentz's *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), and Charles G. Sellers' *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) are notable examples of works contributing or building on the "social reform equals control" thesis. Among the best corrective scholarship are Lawrence Frederick Kohl, "The Concept of Social Control in Jacksonian America," *Journal of the Early Republic* 5 (Spring, 1985): 21-34, and Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

14 "Slavery and Popery," *Liberator*, January 5, 1855, 2, and "Massachusetts," *National Era*, November 23, 1854, 187. See also "Popery in Old Plymouth," *Maine Farmer*, April 12, 1849), 2, "Infidelity and Popery," *Zion's Herald*, February 25, 1835, 30, and "The Spirit of Popery," *Boston Recorder*, March 23, 1843, 46. Ray Allen Billington's *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1938), Jenny Franchot's *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), and Tyler Anbinder's *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know-Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) stress this "latent bigotry" view. Oscar

But why? What was the nature of Whig anxieties? Was it simply immigrants' Catholic faith that made them unacceptable for Whig observers with middle-class aspirations, or was it their Irish nationality? And how did that faith, based on communal sharing and devout obedience, square with emerging ideas of American nationalism and individualism? The answer lies both in the cultural context of American and Irish religious history of the 1840s and 1850s and in the social character of Whig Protestants and Irish Catholics themselves. The Irish are being considered in depth in this context because they made up the single largest ethnic contingent of foreign immigrants to the United States from 1830 through 1850. And overwhelming portions of Irish immigrants were Roman Catholic. In 1830, for example, 54,000 immigrants from Ireland came to the United States, while Germany sent the next closest amount at about 8,000. By 1850 those numbers had narrowed some but the Irish still outnumbered Germans by almost 400,000 people. Thus, for most of the antebellum era for Protestant native-born Whigs to talk about foreigners or foreign religion, meant they were talking about the Roman Catholic Irish.[15]

Whigs did not turn to nativism, or distrust Catholicism or Catholics simply because they were Catholic, per se. Instead Whigs saw in the masses of Catholic Irish poor hemorrhaging into New York and Boston year after year, the savagery, intemperance, and lack of individual control they feared in their country and in themselves. American Whigs saw the rampant poverty and violence of Catholic immigrants as telling evidence of dubious ethnic character because their worldview was based on improvement and achievement. Whigs saw their work in political and social improvement in grand terms. "It pertains to the future," one Whig reformer argued in an 1848 sermon, "the far distant future. It has respect to our country – our whole country. It looks out on all this broad land – this rich inheritance which the God of our fathers has committed to this generation, with a purpose to make it what it should be."[16] Whiggery, then, was a political culture built to win America's future, and poor Irish Catholics seemed a dark mirror, showing Whigs a future they desperately wanted to avoid. Conversely, Irish Catholics saw in Whig reformers the near intellectual and cultural cousins of the Victorian English they left Ireland, at least in part, to escape.[17]

For Whigs the rising tide of Irish Catholic immigration gave them pause to consider America's future along two broad categories. What sort of character ought Americans to have going forward, many wondered? And by what conduct could

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Handlin's *Boston's Immigrants* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941), John Higham's *Strangers in the Land: Patterns in American Nativism, 1860-1925* (Newark, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955), and Michael F. Holt's *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: W.W, Norton & Co., 1983) best explain and explore the "nativism from conflict" argument.

15 *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 1820-2011* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, 2012), and *The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850* (Washington, D.C.: Robert Armstrong, Public Printer, 1853). However, after 1848 and the uprising occurring there, German immigrants bore the "radical" brush in their dealings with antebellum native-born Whigs, and later Know--Nothings and Republicans, as well. A few good examples include Jonathan Sperber, *Rhineland Radicals: The Democratic Movement and the Revolution of 1848-49* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), and Mischa Honeck, *We Are the Revolutionists: German--Speaking Immigrants and American Abolitionists* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

16 Albert Barnes, *Home Missions: A Sermon in Behalf of the American Home Missionary Society* (New York: William Osborn, 1849), 42.

17 Walter Houghton's classic *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957) is still a good discussion of the anxieties and aspirations of English Victorians. More recent work includes A.N. Wilson, *The Victorians* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004), and Sally Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008).

that character be observed? In the eyes of Protestant Whigs, Irish Catholics fell short on both counts. Whigs stressed moral and intellectual improvement in their rhetoric and ideology. In an article for their national periodical, *American Whig Review*, one contemporary correspondent tellingly asked "How Shall Life Be Made the Most Of? "But educate a man well at the outset," the editor answered his own question, "and he may, in a life of the merest routine, still be a constantly improving man, and may work out the highest ends of his intellectual and moral being."[18] The Whiggish reading of America's future involved a grand journey of becoming, not arrival. Americans must become educated, cultured, hard working, and civilized. To Whig eyes, Irish Catholic immigrants were none of these things. "What is to become of a poor, wretched population [i.e. Irish Catholic immigrants]," a Whig editor in New York wondered in 1837, "ignorant in the extreme, naturally passionate, very mistaken in their views of American freedom, thousands of them too superstitious to seek wisdom from their neighbors, and almost always under the influence of strong drink?"[19] Irish Catholics kept to themselves, seemed reluctant to assimilate, and celebrated a lifestyle marred by intemperance. At bottom, the Irish suffered from savagery intrinsic to their ethnic character and many Whigs doubted their capacity or inclination for improvement.

The intense, devotional form of Catholicism practiced by antebellum Irish immigrants also worried Whigs who believed that Catholics were not "true Americans" because they relied on clergy, pomp, and ceremony to order their lives. The whole ceremonial of the Romish church," the *American Quarterly Review* explained, "the doctrine and gorgeous ritual, are adapted precisely and admirably to meet the inclinations and circumstances of all the ignorant men and women in our land."[20] Irish Catholics also voted en masse for Whig opponents, which seemed to confirm, at least for Whigs, that the Irish were a controlled, ignorant people who supposedly blindly listened to their clergy and made secret deals with intransigent Jacksonian demagogues, thus thwarting legitimate attempts by Whigs to improve American society. "Let the ban of society go forth against the drone," one Whig editor argued, "whether in broadcloth or in rags."[21] Whigs respected religious liberty, at least in the abstract, but questioned the orthodoxy of any faith tradition such as Roman Catholicism for example, that seemed to discourage individual inquiry and improvement.

In the face of the "threat" that poor, "savage" Irish Catholics posed, Whigs believed the moral soul of America was in peril. "We might allude, in justification of this remark," the American Sunday School Union argued in 1845, "to the spread of popish

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18 "How Shall Life Be Made the Most Of?," *American Whig Review*, April 1845, 423.

19 *New York Morning Herald*, June 17, 1837 quoted in Dan T. Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationalism in Antebellum America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), 54. For other examples of similar sentiments see Paddy's Fricase," *Sangamo Journal*, November 24, 1832, 4, "What Creates Mobs?," *Zion's Herald*, September 2, 1835, 138, "Opinion of the World," *New York Tribune*, September 3, 1842), 1, and Rev. W Clark, "The Home Field of Christian Effort," *New York Daily Tribune*, June 22, 1850, 2. Knobel's *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationalism in Antebellum America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1986) is still the best look at the perception of Irish immigrants in antebellum America. Other solid accounts include William V. Shannon, *The American Irish: A Social and Political Portrait* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 2008), and Jay P. Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008).

20 "Papacy in the United States," *American Quarterly Register* 7, August 1835, 59. See also John Hopkins Morison, "An Address Delivered at the Centennial Celebration, in Peterborough, N.H. October 24, 1839," "The American Character," *American Magazine* 1 (July-August, 1841): 26, and L. Giustiniani, *Intrigues of Jesuitism in the United States of America,* 7th ed. (New York: R. Craighead, 1846).

21 "How Shall Life Be Made the Most Of?," 423.

errors and delusion; the influx of foreign ignorance, superstition and vice, and consequent depravation of morals; the corruption of social virtue and the abuse of civil liberty."[22] The Catholic Irish were a controlled people. Their access to the franchise meant the perversion of American republicanism, and the independent thought which was supposedly its lifeblood. America, and Americans themselves, it was argued, must move beyond the capricious whims intemperance and base passions, whims the Irish seemed only too ready to indulge. "Passion has helped us," one modest Illinois Whig conceded, "but it can do so no more. It will in [the] future be our enemy. Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defence [sic]."[23] The fundamental problem with the Irish was one of character, they seemed *too* passionate, *too* wild, *too* Catholic, to assimilate and control themselves.

For their part, Irish Catholics did not shrink from their desire for full inclusion in the American body politic based on toleration and respect, and often appealed to an idealistic vision of America's past to justify their arguments. "Remarkable it was, that under a Roman Catholic proprietary," the *United States Catholic Miscellany* reminded readers, "puritans were indulged that liberty of conscience which was denied them by their fellow protestants. Liberty of conscience was allowed to Christians of all denominations."[24] Toleration for all faiths was at the heart of the American colonial experience the *Miscellany* very optimistically argued, and it pointed back to Maryland's example for proof. The implication of this claim, of course, was that the Puritans' literal and ideological heirs ought to return the favor. "Hope is the star which cheers us on through the troubled voyage of life." Charles Constantine Pise also boldly told a delegation at Annapolis, "America is our country – her laws our safeguard – her Constitution our Magna Carta – her tribunals our appeal – her Chief Magistrate our national head – to all which we are subject and obedient, in accordance with the injunction of our religion, which commands us to give honor where it is due – to be subject of the powers that be – and to give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's."[25] Beneath Pise's rhetoric of national fealty lay the inference that "the things that are God's," in his case Catholic things, were beyond the purview of misguided, would-be reformers.

If we briefly look across the Atlantic to Ireland, it becomes clearer why Irish immigrants cherished their Catholic faith and sacred rituals in the intense, devotional manner that increased Whig anxiety. The Irish Potato Famine of 1845-52 has nearly become a tragic legend in the American public memory of Ireland. Remembered in Gaelic as "*an Gorta Mór*" or "*an Drochshaol*" [trans. "the Great Hunger" or "the Bad Life"], the blight to the potato crop spurred massive immigration to the United States, as over one million poor Irish slowly starved to death. Often lost in this exodus, however, were the immigrants' deep feelings of exile. Most Irish Catholics did not want to come to America and word in Irish and British newspapers that the blight likely came to Ireland from ships out of

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22 Alexander Henry, *Considerations Touching the Principles and Object of the American Sunday School Union* (Philadelphia: American Sunday School Union, 1845), 4.

23 Abraham Lincoln, "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions: Address before the Yong Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois (1838)," in *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*, ed. Roy P. Basler (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2001), 81. For similar argument see "Human Rights," *American Whig Review* (New York: Wiley & Putnam, November 1845), 437-43, "Ireland," *Albion, A Journal of News, Politics and Literature*, September 27, 1845, 467, and "Irishmen in America, and so on," *New Mirror* May 27, 1843, 116.

24 "Catholicism and Liberty," *United States Catholic Miscellany*, October 26, 1833, 29.

25 "Hope," *Catholic Telegraph*, August 3, 1833, 319. See also John Hughes, "Rule of Faith," *Catholic Telegraph*, April 27, 1833, 201, "Is the Catholic Religion Hostile to Liberty?," *Catholic Telegraph*, December 26, 1834, 34. "Catholicism *versus* Republicanism," *Catholic Telegraph*, February 20, 1835, 100, "The Foreign Vote and the Catholic Press," *United States Democratic Review* (New York: John O'Sullivan, September 1854), 193.

New York, Philadelphia, or Baltimore did help matters. Many Catholics, then, in this Irish diaspora turned to faith for consolation and hope. Its promise of rewards for the penitent and devout, if not in this life then in the next, offered solace to millions driven far from home. Thus, the Catholicism of Irish immigrants to America in the 1840s and '50s, was tempered by country-wide starvation and the Irish perception that the British Parliament was both powerless to help and apathetic to their plight. Many Irishmen felt that the Victorian middle class, who dominated government and set national policy, were only too happy to see them dead or on famine ships bound for America. And it was this perception that colored their view of the reformist Whigs they encountered after their arrival. Whig efforts to reform their habits, restrain their religion, and restrict their voting seemed the same song, but perhaps a different verse from what they had just fled in Ireland.[26]

Whigs looked, talked, and acted like British Victorians. Indeed, British Victorians and their allies in print parsed their view of the Irish along geo-religious lines, looking kindly on Protestant Northern Ireland, while viewing the Roman Catholics in southern Ireland with thinly-veiled contempt. "They are blessed with the same laws," one Dublin editor with British sympathies noted in 1852, "but the people are not the same. The Northerns [*sic*] are animated with the warmest spirit of loyalty, and imbued with a profound respect for the laws; peace, consequently prevails. In the South, a blind submission to the Roman Catholic priesthood takes the place of loyalty, and a desire to advance the interests of the Roman Pontiff rises superior to every other consideration."[27] Substitute Boston, New York, or Cincinnati for Dublin, and a Whig "hack editor" for the Irish one, and many Irish Catholics believed the rhetoric would be largely the same. "The Whig Party has no creed on the subject of Human Rights," one Cincinnati editor thundered, "[and] is not pledged to the cause of Human Freedom."[28] Whig rhetoric proved the hostile to the very faith that sustained exiled Irish Catholics through desperate hardship. Thus, they were not inclined to turn the other cheek when slighted in a land whose creed promised equality, as a self-evident right granted by God. During an 1844 wave of nativist riots in Philadelphia, for example, New York's Archbishop John Hughes alluded to Napoleon's destruction of the famous city in 1812, when he coldly informed the Mayor that "if a single Catholic church in New York was burned, the city would become a second Moscow."[29] Now Americans, at least in their own minds, Irish Catholics were willing to fight for what the viewed as sacred.

If Whigs held sacred a vision for America's future along Protestant, ultimately individualistic lines, so too did the Irish dream of an imagined Catholic tomorrow

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26 On the origins of Phytophthora infestans, the disease behind the blight, see W. C. Paddock, "Our Last Chance to Win the War on Hunger," in *Advances in Plant Pathology*, Vol. 8 (London: Academic Press, 1992), 197-222, Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845–52* (New York: Gill & Macmillan, 1995), 31, and James S. Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Gloucestershire, UK: Sutton Publishing, 2005), 41. On devotional Catholicism in Ireland see Emmet Larkin, "The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850-75," *American Historical Review* 77.3 (1972): 625-52, and Michael P. Carroll's, *Irish Pilgrimage: Holy Wells and Popular Catholic Devotion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). On the sense of exile, see Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

27 „Ireland-its Garden and its Grave." *Dublin University Magazine,* September 1852, 369. See also "Two Aspects of Ireland," *Household Words / Conducted by Charles Dickens* October 4, 1851, 27-32, "What is to be done with Ireland?," *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, December 1847, 796, and "The Evils and Benefits of the Irish Famine," *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction,* April 1, 1847, 235-37.

28 "The Party of Progress," *Cincinnati Weekly Herald and Philanthropist,* December 17, 1845, 1.

29 John Hassard, *Life of the Most Reverend John Hughes, First Archbishop of New York* (Cosimo, Inc., 2008), 276.

where their children and grandchildren could worship in peace, and perhaps achieve a modicum of prosperity. Finally, not all Whigs chose nativism. For example, Illinois Whig Abraham Lincoln rejected expedient bigotry in favor of principle in an 1855 letter to his Kentucky friend Joshua Speed, at the height of the Know-Nothings' "protestant crusade," explaining, "As a nation, we began by declaring that *'all men are created equal.'* We now practically read it 'all men are created equal, *except negroes'* When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read 'all men are created equal, except negroes, and *foreigners, and Catholics.'* When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretence of loving liberty -- to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocracy [*sic*]."[30] For Lincoln and at least a few other Protestant conservatives there was room enough in America for Protestants and Catholics to build a future together. But too often their tolerance, proved the exception and not the rule.

Last, we know that many Whigs chose nativism. And American hostility toward and suspicion of Catholic immigrants in the United States lingered long into the twentieth and indeed twenty-first centuries. It is reasonable to ask if an alternative course was truly possible, given the cultural and sociological factors detailed above. If Irish Catholic immigration represented the worst fears held by native-born Whigs, how could nativism not arise? Yet inevitability is a poor substitute for context and often lends itself to didactic carte blanche. And the modern story of religions and politics is littered with ideological clashes of peoples and ideas in motion. Even in our own day. Antebellum American nativism *was* a choice. That it was a choice made possible by religious developments in Ireland and the United States, by the culture, conduct, and character of Protestant Whigs and Irish Catholics, and by a clash of different visions for America's future, should not excuse the dark, caustic violence and reactionary intolerance nativists often relished. "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal" is how Thomas Jefferson's famously explained America's national purpose to the watching world. The antiseptic nature of Jefferson's creed forms the heart of a perpetual American moral self-critique. And by that standard, bourgeois Whiggish nativism came up short.

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30 Abraham Lincoln to Joshua Speed, Springfield, Illinois, August 24, 1855, *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*, ed. Roy P. Basler (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2001), 335-36.

31 The article recommends many publications for comparison/ confrontation of the mentioned views, or for further reading but the bibliography tends to include only directly quoted materials.

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