
This is volume 71 in a series called “Studies in American Religion.” It reads much like a doctoral dissertation. The author continually tells us what she is going to tell us, then tells us what she promised to tell us, and finally tells us what she did tell us. Apparently judges on degree committees, who are supposed to read theses, need considerable consideration. The repetition is excessive and at times seems to just provide filler. But the book is well worth reading, mostly clear in style, and provocative of much reflection.

The history of these campaigns from 1830 to 1860 is well known to historians of American religion. But Roy zooms in on the literature of attack and defense to analyze the rhetorical strategies of each side, and their influences upon one another. Looking closely at the detailed contents of the anti-Catholic literature is most revealing, and, of course, very sad.

Large scale immigration of Catholics from Europe grew apace throughout the 19th century. Already by 1850, Roy says, Catholics constituted the largest denomination. Quite understandably the existing population, all Protestants of one kind or another, mostly from countries largely Protestant, became apprehensive.

Immigrants other than Irish continued to use their native language, like most first generation immigrants always have and still do. So the foreign born were conspicuously so, and questionably American. But if the religious affiliations had been reversed, no doubt a similar, if not identical, apprehension would have been felt.

Protestants began questioning Catholics’ moral integrity when very cleverly composed narratives of disclosure about sexual immoralities in convents and monasteries were published. Roy points out precisely why such fictions possessed so much credibility for Americans who knew no Catholics personally. Even fictional ex-nuns and ex-priests make good copy. Add sex, and it’s page one.

Then Samuel F.B. Morse went ballistic with a Papal political conspiracy theory whose bare bones he supposedly discovered in European whispers. He, of course, filled out the skeleton with flesh. Anti-Catholic organizations arose and soon, also, anti-Catholic political parties. “Know Nothings” became notorious. Roy notes, however, a puzzling incongruity between the fearsome threats felt and the never more than mild reforms sought.

The response on the part of the Catholic Hierarchy was, she judges, purely passive. Over those 30 years they recommended patience, living so as to reassure the critics and to disabuse them of their baseless stories, fears, and
conspiracy theories. And the very submissiveness of Catholics to episcopal recommendations buttressed Protestant fears of a highly organized and controlled body of infiltrators.

There were two other Catholic responses, however. John Hughes, the archbishop of New York, stood up and publicly defended Catholics. Both in person and in writing he tried to stem the tide of the untruths and antagonism they aroused. He spoke at many public meetings, arguing that texts used in the public schools defamed Catholics and misled Protestants. And when his efforts had little success he strongly promoted a parochial school system across the country.

Orestes Brownson, a convert to Catholicism and noted man of letters, criticized both Catholic responses. Foreign born Catholics were not assimilating fast enough, he thought, and parochial schools were a divisive and insular refusal to assimilate. Roy seems to agree. But it was only incidental that parochial schools were also temporarily instruments expressing and retaining languages and customs from home countries. We know now that old country ties evaporate with second and third generations. Parochial schools were not designed primarily to preserve foreign features.

Nor were they purely passive responses to the majority's false views. I grew up in a small Mississippi river town of 750 with only two Catholic families. I was often taunted, spit on, tormented, and positively persecuted, because my parents sacrificed to take us an hour away every day to a city with a parochial school. When my father started a Boy Scout troop, the Protestant minister who became his assistant scoutmaster was soon sent packing by his congregation. My father's family never played passive.

I submit that Brownson's rejection of Hughes's parochial school initiative was too idealistic. Let us all, he urged, climb into the public forum and convert all these rumor mongers so that this country will have a church sufficiently organized and socially strong enough to serve as a genuine mediator between authority and anarchy, between political institutions seeking too much power and individuals seeking too much freedom. He said no Protestant church could fill that role, and thought that “we [Americans] have more to fear from democracy [he meant rampant individualism] than from all other causes combined” (180)

Roy does not like any of the three Catholic responses she describes. But her criticism often goes too far. The hierarchy was purely passive, and later parochial. And, “In short, Hughes spoke to Catholics as a distinct and separate community within America” (196). Say what? Although she concludes, she does not argue, that Brownson sought “an America dominated and controlled by the Catholic Church” (185).

Understandably, although she never mentions it, any motto like “Hello, MAC” (Make America Catholic) was inflammatory for apprehensive
Protestants. But how does a Church defend itself against the *National Enquirer*? One gets the impression that Bishops should have filed hundreds of lawsuits all over the nation before Protestant judges who also read the *Enquirer*. Roy calls the disapproval of mixed marriages parochial. She means religiously, not ethnically or racially, mixed. Actually, no matter what tactic was used to defend Catholics from falsehood and even, at times, violent persecution, Roy finds a way to argue that the tactic’s style, or format, or implications, or even content inadvertently served as more fuel on the fire. It’s as if, because guilty people deny the deed, innocent people dare not.

Roy does not ask if the Protestant experience of continual church breakups and multiplication of sects was not socially depressing and politically fearladen for them — if divided, they did not feel weaker and more vulnerable before the Other. But the answers she gives to what she does ask needed to be given.

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“Life Forevermore”: The Problem of Marriage

Marriage in America is in ruins. Marriage rates decline while divorce rates rise. Cohabitation without marriage becomes an increasingly acceptable option. Teen pregnancy, especially among minorities, skyrockets at an alarming rate. Births out of wedlock are common. While we pay lip service to family values, we breed a culture of selfishness through “self-help” books, publicized pre-nuptial agreements, and sanctioned greed. Intellectuals attack nature and tradition, smugly describing all human endeavor, including love, in terms of politics and power. Broken couples attack each other physically on talk shows for our entertainment. Everywhere men and women are portrayed as means for our gratification and use. We foster voyeurism through web-cams, pornographic sites, and the newest lines of fashion. And we watch and enjoy with shameless satisfaction “real-life” shows such as *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?* and *Temptation Island*.

Could the situation be any grimmer? Possibly. Cultural decline, especially as it disintegrates traditional customs and