Catholicism, American Culture, and Politics: Being Transformed or Transforming?
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This article explores the relationship between Catholicism and American culture and politics. It begins by presenting the foundation for why there has been an inherent tension in this relationship from the Founding era on. It then addresses this tension as manifested in the phenomenon known as Americanism. It focuses on one aspect of this phenomenon whereby Catholics downplay the teachings of the Church, and demonstrates how this has occurred with prominent Catholic politicians in particular and Catholics in general. The paper concludes with a brief contemporary assessment and recommendation for the relationship between Catholics and American politics and culture.

If Catholicism could ultimately escape from the political animosities to which it has given rise, I am almost certain that same spirit of the age which now seems to be so contrary to it would turn into a powerful ally and that it would suddenly make great conquests.
—Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America

The question is sometimes raised, whether Catholicism is compatible with American democracy. The question is invalid as well as impertinent; for the manner of its position inverts the order of values. It must, of course, be turned round to read, whether American democracy is compatible with Catholicism.
—John Courtney Murray, S.J., We Hold These Truths

The above passages from Tocqueville and Murray serve as a background for this essay, which attempts to explore the relationship between Catholicism and American culture and politics. This will first require a presentation of how the Church and its saving message relates to any culture. I then provide a brief summary of the history of Catholics at the time of the American Founding, and then turn to explore the American political order and culture’s historical relationship to Catholicism with a focus on one aspect of the phenomenon (“Americanism”). I demonstrate through a few examples how this phenomenon manifested itself in the lives of Catholics running for national political office, and in the lives of the lay
and clerical population in general with respect to certain moral teachings. I then offer some brief remarks about the overall relationship of Catholics and America both as it exists today and its future prospects.

**THE CHURCH AND CULTURE**

Established by Christ as the means of salvation, the Catholic Church, being in this world but not of it, always exists in tension with the world as found in the different empires, nations, states, regions, and cultures. Thus, how the Church is to fulfill Christ’s command—“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19)—has always been a difficult question. In other words, how is the Church, as a whole and through Her individual members, to take the given conditions of particular places and peoples with their customs, ways of life, tendencies, symbols, governing structures and institutions, and laws—in short, cultures—and bring the Gospel of Christ to them so that they might have an experience with the person of Christ, respond to Him, begin to follow Him, and hopefully achieve eternal salvation? The word “inculturation” has been used to encapsulate this process.¹ The challenge has always been to discern what of the cultures can be accepted, what must be rejected, and what can and should be transformed, or as some say, be “baptized.” The fundamental question is: Are the Church and its members going to transform the culture and society for the good or will they be transformed by it for the worse? Thus, the appropriateness of John Courtney Murray’s remark: “The question is sometimes raised, whether Catholicism is compatible with American democracy. The question is invalid as well as impertinent; for the manner of its position inverts the order of values. It must, of course, be turned round to read, whether American democracy is compatible with Catholicism.”² Answering the question depends upon determining how much of American democracy (and I use this term broadly to mean the political order and culture in general) is in accordance with the truth of Catholicism—a query similar to that which must be asked with respect to any political order and culture. Or in Tocquevillian terms, what aspects of the “spirit of the age” are in accordance with Catholicism?

One can explore the inculturation of Catholicism and America from many perspectives, and here I will only mention five: (1) The specifically political perspective: that is, the issues of everyday politics related to law and policy as a citizen and as a politician; (2) The specifically cultural perspective: the customs, ways of life, tendencies, and mores, of the United States; (3) The related perspective of the dominant religious ethos and/or understanding of religion in the US, and the notion of American civil
religion; (4) The political principles perspective based on the first principles of the American Founding as expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution; and (5) The related perspective concerning American exceptionalism. These five are not mutually exclusive, indeed, they are intertwined, each exerting mutual influence on the other to some degree. In all of these areas, a Catholic must discern what is in accord with faith and morals and what is not. Here, I will focus on inculcation with respect to the first category, concerning how one approaches law and policy primarily (but not exclusively) in reference to Catholic politicians, and this will necessarily include touching on the second and fourth aspects related to culture and the dominant religious ethos.

HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP OF CATHOLICISM AND AMERICA: A BRIEF HISTORY

The earlier years of religious freedom established and experienced by Catholics in Maryland were the exception, as a number of colonies had enacted anti-Catholic laws. Protestantism, especially in the forms of Anglicanism and Puritanism, fomented anti-Catholic sentiment in the culture and in law. Indeed, the history of Catholics’ allegiance to the Church and the pope in matters of faith and morals—especially when it conflicted with government commands—in post–Henry VIII England had engrained in Anglo-American Protestants a fear of Catholics in general, but also a particular concern that Catholicism represented a threat to the security of the Colonies. Many English-American Protestants in the colonies thought that the pope sought control of the American government, that Catholics could not be trusted as loyal citizens as their first allegiance was to a foreign power (the pope), and that Catholics would try to restrict religious freedom and other civil liberties. These beliefs about Catholics have played a major role in the tension which exists between Catholics and American culture. It has affected Catholics’ discernment regarding what of the culture and the political principles it embodies can be accepted, rejected, or transformed.

The difficulties of inculcating the Gospel which Catholics experienced in American culture came to a heightened pitch in the late 1800s under the rubric of “Americanism.” The Catholic population increased tremendously in the 1800s due to the mass migration of European Catholics. Finding America different from their old country and its culture, they had to discern how to adjust to their surroundings. This naturally included an attempt to discern which American principles, customs, and tendencies could be accepted, which needed to be rejected, and which could be transformed. This led to disagreements among Catholics about how they should
adapt and assimilate into America while at the same time living their faith and evangelizing their fellow non-Catholic citizens. Some saw in other Catholics a dangerous tendency to adopt certain aspects of the American way of life and principles, exalting them as better than what the Church taught and had lived out in the Tradition—and that came to maturity in “old” Europe. Furthermore, they expressed concerns that Catholics who did this were weakening the Faith by omitting or downplaying certain aspects of it, which led to separating Catholics from the Church rather than converting non-Catholic citizens to the Faith.

These dangerous tendencies were subsumed under the name of “Americanism.” For better or worse, Americanism was closely associated with the life and writings of Fr. Isaac Hecker, a convert to the Catholic faith and founder of the Paulist Fathers. It is not my purpose to rehearse the controversy surrounding the different interpretations of the role Fr. Hecker actually played in Americanism—i.e., to what extent he advocated these purportedly heretical ideas and tendencies—but rather to underscore the very real possibility and danger of being transformed by the culture. This is evident by the fact that the Americanist controversy involved bishops and priests who were lined up on different sides of the issue, one side claiming that Americanism was not a problem for the Church while others saw it as a real danger that had infiltrated the Church, influencing bishops, priests, and laymen alike.

To this day, there has been some disagreement about both the specific content of Americanism—what ideas and tendencies it was referring to and included—and the extent to which it even existed among Catholics in the United States. I will focus on one aspect of it under the heading of ecclesiological Americanism: the idea that the Church in America was the new model of the Church for the rest of the world, especially Europe; and that following upon the American civil freedoms, individual Catholics should have increased freedoms and pay more attention to the internal workings of the Holy Spirit within them, deferring less to external guidance such as the Church’s teachings as found in Scripture and Tradition and taught by the Magisterium.

In response to the Americanist controversy, in 1899 Pope Leo XIII wrote an Apostolic Letter to Cardinal Gibbons, Testem Benevolentiae, which underscored these tendencies:

The underlying principle of these new opinions, is 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. Many think that these concessions should be made not only in regard
to ways of living, but even in regard to doctrines which belong to the
deposit of the faith. They contend that it would be opportune, in order
to gain those who differ from us, to omit certain points of her teaching
which are of lesser importance, and to tone down the meaning which
the Church has always attached to them.¹²

One point to note here is that adopting these tendencies (omission and/or
toning down) with respect to doctrine is done in order to gain adherents to
the faith. As will be seen, Catholics later will adhere to these tendencies
so as to “fit in” or to be “accepted” by American culture, especially its
political culture. A second point to note is Pope Leo’s concern about the
“spirit of the age”—the term used in the passage from Tocqueville quoted
at the head of this article. The key is to know what is the character of the
spirit of the age and what of the age should or should not be accepted.
Among the ideas of the American spirit of the age supposedly adopted by
some Catholics and which Leo XIII also condemned was the tendency of
self-reliant individualism and distrust of religious authority that predomi-
nated in Protestantism as manifested in individual private interpretation of
Scripture. Leo addressed those who seemed to adopt this spirit and who
thought that the individual Catholic could get by without guidance from
the Church and merely rely on the internal workings of the Holy Spirit:

Moreover, as experience shows, these monitions and impulses of the
Holy Spirit are for the most part felt through the medium of the aid and
light of an external teaching authority [of the Church]. . . . Nor can we
leave out of consideration the truth that those who are striving after
perfection, since by that fact they walk in no beaten or well-known
path, are the most liable to stray, and hence have greater need than
others of a teacher and guide. Such guidance has ever obtained in the
Church; it has been the universal teaching of those who throughout
the ages have been eminent for wisdom and sanctity—and hence to
reject it would be to commit one’s self to a belief at once rash and
dangerous.¹³

It must be noted that at that time, all, including Fr. Hecker, adamantly pro-
fessed complete obedience to the Church and Her teachings. This disposi-
tion towards “less guidance” by the Church would arise among Catholics
in the future. It is this particular aspect of Americanism that has affected
the political and cultural participation by Catholics in America, including
Catholic politicians.
The suspicion about Catholics’ allegiance to America persisted from the Founding and became very relevant at the national level in 1928 when the Catholic Al Smith was the Democratic presidential candidate. This persistent anti-Catholicism was taking its toll, and Smith sought to defend himself against these charges. It is in his defense that one sees the beginnings of a disregard for, or downplaying of, the Church’s teaching with respect to politics, or at least disregarding or downplaying its authoritative and obligatory character. In his famous article in *The Atlantic Monthly* designed to refute the typical accusations, Smith wrote: “As you will find in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* (Vol. V, p. 414), these encyclicals [which include the Church’s teachings on social and political principles] are not articles of our faith.”

Although he didn’t foresee any conflict between his moral beliefs and the civil laws (because he understood that the laws of the nation were built upon the Ten Commandments), or between his faith and any presidential duties, he nonetheless claimed that “if you can conjure up such a conflict, how would a Protestant resolve it? Obviously, by the dictates of his conscience. That is exactly what a Catholic would do.” He thus implied that there is no difference between how a Catholic or a Protestant would go about resolving such a conflict. Now, in one sense, it is true that a Catholic must follow the judgment that his conscience makes (as Protestants and everyone else must do). However, a Catholic is also obligated to form his conscience by means of the Church’s teachings rooted in the truths of Scripture and Tradition, assent to those teachings, and make decisions accordingly. This is something which Smith dismissed (or at least he gave that impression): “There is no ecclesiastical tribunal which would have the slightest claim upon the obedience of Catholic communicants in the resolution of such a conflict.” Smith did not succeed in his bid for the presidency, and it would take another thirty-two years before a Catholic would be elected president. That honor would fall to John F. Kennedy, who followed in Smith’s footsteps in diminishing the role of the Church’s teaching in his political life.

For many Catholics, John F. Kennedy, the Irish Catholic Democratic candidate in the 1960 presidential election, symbolized the extent to which Catholics had advanced and become accepted by Americans. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the Catholic population grew amidst American culture and created a vibrant (at least outwardly) culture (which some call the Catholic ghetto), with an extensive array of social institu-
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tions, which one scholar calls the Catholic “plausibility structure.” However, despite this apparent strength of Catholicism, the need to be fully accepted in American culture was still a strong desire among Catholics, especially Irish Catholics. An electoral victory by JFK would surely be the sign that America had accepted Catholics and the anti-Catholic prejudices were finally overcome. Yet, JFK still had to overcome the usual Protestant suspicions about his Catholicism and his loyalty to America and its government. He set out to counteract them by giving a well-publicized speech in September 1960 to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association. This famous speech presented Kennedy’s public position on his Catholic faith, the First Amendment, and how the former would not interfere with his duties arising from the presidential oath to defend the Constitution and execute the laws.

In the speech, Kennedy made statements that resembled those of Al Smith. First, he said that he believed “in a president whose views on religion are his own private affair” and “whose fulfillment of his presidential office is not limited or conditioned by any religious oath, ritual, or obligation.” Furthermore, he declared: “Whatever issue may come before me as President—on birth control, divorce, censorship, gambling or any other subject—I will make my decision in accordance with these views, in accordance with what my conscience tells me to be the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressure or dictates.” And, he added, “no power or threat of punishment could cause me to decide otherwise.”

Although, Kennedy, in a contradiction, also offered to resign if a conflict were to arise between his faith and his duties under the Constitution and laws, the speech’s message, as a whole, was a capitulation to Protestant complaints and a rejection of the idea that a Catholic must always be guided by the teaching authority of the Church even on moral principles which relate to politics.

The most poignant aspect of this unfortunate incident is that JFK was not forced into disavowing his allegiance to the Pope by means of any law (one should recall that the Protestants used the penal laws against Catholics in Ireland, Britain, Scotland, and the American colonies—including some up to 1844 to prevent Catholics from holding political office). Rather, under the then present and oppressive (enough) anti-Catholic culture nurtured by the Protestants (and secularists as well), he did it voluntarily! This was not the moment in which Catholics at last were (rightly) accepted in the America, overcoming all of the prejudice of the past. Rather the price for acceptance by the American people was conforming oneself to the culture, the privatization of the faith, and the rejection of the Church’s authoritative teachings on one’s public political duties.
Throughout the twentieth century, especially the post–World War II years, powerful culture changes were occurring, most notably with respect to morality. In short, there was a turning away from the morality that Al Smith took for granted as a culture of moral utilitarianism and moral permissiveness began to affect many institutions and individuals in the United States. This occurred especially with respect to the changing understanding of morality in the areas of human sexuality, marriage, and family, captured in the term “the sexual revolution.” The Church’s teachings on these matters were seen as a hindrance to the sexual revolution’s advancement in American politics and culture. This is likely why JFK mentioned divorce and birth control as issues about which he would follow his conscience (and perhaps not the Church’s teaching) in deciding what is in the nation’s best interest. Catholics, however, were not only influenced by external cultural forces, but also by forces within the Church. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the 500-plus theologians’ and other professors’ forceful and public rejection of the Church’s teachings on the meanings of marriage and human sexuality in Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, promulgated in 1968. This was a complete assault on the teaching authority of the Church—one that seemingly follows from the Americanist position which Leo XIII condemned.

The opposition to Catholic moral positions as they spilled into politics increased with many Catholic politicians acquiescing by appealing to an “I am personally opposed but . . .” approach. Made famous by New York’s Catholic Governor, Mario Cuomo, in his 1984 speech at the University of Notre Dame, this approach put forth the rationale that in a pluralistic America where there are a variety of moral and religious views, Catholics could not impose their moral views on others, but rather had to endorse and enforce what the majority consensus wanted. Of course, these Catholics failed to realize (or ignored) the fact that others were imposing their morality on them (and, of course, on those who were unjustly affected by the laws), and so they, as politicians, were in fact imposing a moral viewpoint on others.

This approach evolved further to the point where some Catholic politicians became the most active, prominent, and leading advocates of policies and laws contradictory to the Church’s teachings on such issues as abortion and same-sex relationships and marriage, all the while claiming to be faithful Catholics. Thus, instead of opposing the unjust laws—laws contrary to the natural moral law—they were, and are, championing
them. The most recent example is Senator Tim Kaine, who was the 2016 vice presidential candidate for the Democratic Party. Kaine’s largely pro-abortion position is something far beyond what Al Smith and President JFK might have done, but nonetheless this stance could be seen as a logical outgrowth from their posture toward the Church’s teachings with respect to their political lives: the adoption of the Americanist tendency recognized by Leo XIII to diminish the role of the Church’s teachings in one’s life. They have conformed to the “evolving” morality and subsequent political morality of the American culture instead of transforming it by witnessing in word and deed to what the Church teaches on these matters.

Now this phenomenon does not merely apply to Catholic politicians, but also to many Catholics with respect to certain issues. If recent polls are to be believed, one can conclude that a near majority, and in some cases more than a majority of Catholics are just as likely as other Americans to support moral and political positions that are contrary to the teachings of the Church. They also support politicians who advocate for these immoral political positions and who will violate the Church’s and individuals’ religious freedom.

The fundamental premises driving this support appear to arise from an understanding of the autonomous individual, moral relativism, freedom as license, and a voluntaristic conception of reality and the Church. It is thought that the individual decides for himself what reality is, what it means to be Catholic, and what it means to be a member of the Church. The individual is not conforming his desires to the truths of the faith, but is creating the “truth” to fit his desires. At bottom is the cultural phenomenon of the triumph of the will: that reality can be constructed by willing it into being as opposed to coming to discover the nature of reality, and then acting in accord with the truth of that reality. This is a profound metaphysical crisis, as it marks the rejection of a permanent human nature with its inherent moral laws and telos and manifests itself in considering some moral and political evils to be good, and moral and political goods to be evil—most notably in the areas of marriage, family, human sexuality, and human life. This, of course, has been very detrimental not only to the lives of Catholics who conform to this way of thinking and living, but also to many other Americans and the culture in general.

CONCLUSION

If the Catholic Church is to be the “pillar and bulwark of truth” (1 Tim 3:15) in America (including in American politics) in order to fulfill Christ’s command to make disciples of all nations, all of Her members—bishops,
priests, religious, and laity—first must assent to the Church’s teachings with docility and humility, embracing them and living them out, no matter how different they seem to be from their and the surrounding culture’s way of thinking. Only then is one prepared for a careful discernment about what American principles, tendencies, customs, and mores are harmful to a Catholic’s faith or obstacles to evangelizing and inculturating the Gospel. A return to the acceptance of the full range of Christ’s teachings and to living them out is the only future path for Catholics in America. This will determine whether or not the culture will continue to transform Catholics. However, it might not determine whether in the future Catholics will be successful in transforming the culture according to the Gospel. Faithfulness does not necessarily imply success.

Notes


4. As a Catholic, Cecilius Calvert (the son of George) established the Religious Toleration Act of 1649 in Maryland, allowing Catholics religious freedom and all civil liberties of a typical (non-Catholic) Englishman—for a limited


7. The irony, of course, is that the Anglo-American Protestants were doing to the Catholics exactly what they feared the Catholics would do to them, and it was the Protestant “churches” that were established in a number of the colonies.


10. Among others, on the side against Americanism there were Bishop McQuaid of Rochester and Archbishop Corrigan of New York, and on the other side, promoting Americanism, were Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul, Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore, Monsignor Denis O’Connell, and Archbishop John Keane.


13. Ibid.
14. For an example of a U.S. Senator, Thomas Heflin from Alabama, making the typical accusations against Catholics with respect to Al Smith, see http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5073/. Ironically, what brought on this specific criticism was Al Smith’s (correct) opposition to the Ku Klux Klan (which, although anti-black and anti-Jewish, was very anti-Catholic) and his desire to have the Democratic Party denounce it. See Schwartz, *Persistent Prejudice*, 91–101.


16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.


22. Ibid., 100–33. Also see E. Michael Jones, *John Cardinal Krol and the Cultural Revolution* (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine Press, 1995), 227–300.

23. See E. Michael Jones *Libido Dominandi, Sexual Liberation as Political Control* (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine’s Press, 2000), 433–53, for a presentation of the history of some Catholics’ capitulation to and advocacy of the sexual morals of American culture.


25. It is important to note that this approach is advocated not only by self-identified Catholics who are members of the Democratic Party, but also some who are Republican politicians.

26. Senator Ted Kennedy at one time supported the Church’s teachings regarding abortion, but then changed and worked against them. “A Tale of 2 Teddies: Pro-Choice Kennedy was Pro-Life in 1971” (August 3, 2005), http://www.wnd.com/2005/08/31615/.

