Forgotten Nineteenth-Century American Literature of Religious Conversion: The Case of J. V. Huntington

Adam L. Tate

The article examines the vision of Catholicism in the fiction of J. V. Huntington, an Episcopal clergyman who converted to Catholicism in 1849 through the influence of the Oxford Movement. Huntington wrote several Catholic novels during the 1850s that won him contemporary recognition. His view of Catholicism was very different than either the republican Catholicism that emerged from the Maryland Tradition or the ethnic Catholicism of nineteenth-century urban ghettos, an indication that the views of converts, like other Catholics sitting outside of the mainstream of modern scholarly models, complicate significantly the story of American Catholicism.

Often, historical research involves more about finding out what has been forgotten than what has been remembered. As print culture expanded during the nineteenth century, hundreds of writers published books, seeking sales and fame. A few have been remembered; most have faded from memory. Rediscovering some of these forgotten authors reveals much about the society of the nineteenth-century and can deepen scholarly understandings of the culture of the era.

Jedediah Vincent Huntington (1815–1862), a medical doctor, Episcopal priest, poet, and novelist, converted to Catholicism in 1849 as a result of his interest in the Oxford Movement. Descended from a prominent New England family with ancestors who had fought in the American Revolution, Huntington attended Yale before studying medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. A convert to the Protestant Episcopal Church, Huntington was ordained a priest in 1841 and ran a parish in Middlebury, Vermont. In 1846, he left his parish and travelled to Europe with his wife, spending time in England and in Rome. In 1849, he published his first novel, and soon afterward both he and his wife converted. They lived in New York, Baltimore, and St. Louis after his conversion. During the 1850s, Huntington wrote four Catholic-themed novels, befriended Orestes Brownson, and enjoyed a reputation as a talented writer. Suffering from tuberculosis, and, seeking relief in a better climate, he died in France in 1862.¹

In his novels, Huntington proposed a vision of Catholicism in America that has continuing relevance. Huntington’s characters, usually converts,
lived and worked in a society that he depicted as nominally Christian and hostile to the Church. Conversion placed men and women into difficult situations in which they had to rely on spiritual discipline and the sacramental life while living in an increasingly rootless, individualistic culture. Politics could not fix the main social problems, and the Church lacked the strong social institutions necessary to shape the culture. The current scholarly paradigm of Catholicism in antebellum America sees a shift from a republican Catholicism that engaged the culture politically to the urban immigrant ghettos that separated from mainstream American life. But Huntington’s modern vision set him apart because he saw the faith as offering a personal, rather than political and ethnic, solution to the problems of religion in American society.

***

J. V. Huntington’s experiences as an Episcopalian shaped his approach to Catholicism. During the 1840s, Huntington became enamored with the Oxford Movement in the Anglican Church. Led by John Henry Newman and Edward Pusey, the Oxford Movement attempted to root Anglican doctrine in early Christian life and practice, thereby imbuing the Church of England with a historical sensibility in order to counter both evangelical Protestantism, which stressed an unmediated encounter between the individual and divine grace, and “Romanism,” which rooted its authority on the historical claims of the Roman See. The Church of England, the movement argued, stood as the via media—the middle ground—between two religious extremes. Partisans of the movement hoped that their newly focused religious message could speak to the increasingly secularized British society. In 1839, a New York printer published the Tracts for the Times, the writings of the Oxford Movement, immediately causing a stir in the Protestant Episcopal Church. The Tractarians, supporters of the movement, promoted a deep, heartfelt piety linked to the traditional prayers and forms of Anglicanism. They used traditional forms for evangelical ends. By 1841, a number of Episcopal clergy, suspicious of the use of Catholic-looking prayers and devotions, attacked the Tracts as hostile to Protestantism, and in 1844, opponents attempted, but failed, to gain a condemnation of the Tracts by the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church.²

Huntington promoted the Oxford Movement in his first novel, Lady Alice, written while he was still a Protestant. The novel featured a love story between Alice, a wealthy heiress and Puseyite, and Frederick Clifford, a member of an old Catholic gentry family in England. Alice and Frederick are both sincerely devout but Alice will not marry until Fred-
erick converts to the Anglican Church, which he eventually does. Frederick becomes convinced that the Anglican Church was rooted in Christian antiquity whereas the Roman Church had become corrupted. Both Alice and Frederick appreciate the historic character and prayers of the Anglican Church and, although Protestants, frequent Catholic sacraments, including confession, while in Italy. Huntington used the novel both to examine the arguments of the Oxford Movement, particularly in his portrayal of the Anglican Church as the via media, as well as to depict fervent devotion as an antidote to the corruption of the world. As he told Orestes Brownson, he captured his own religious views in the novel. Huntington’s use of novels to express his theological opinions and emphasize personal piety would continue during his life as a Catholic.

Huntington’s decision to use novels to explore religion and society coincided with an explosion of popularity in the genre. Scholars have identified both practical and ideological reasons for the popularity of novel reading in antebellum America. Technological developments contributed greatly to the availability of books. Better presses produced more and cheaper books, although book prices were high enough to exclude many working class readers. Improvements in eyeglasses, domestic lighting, and railroads (for book distribution) allowed the pastime of reading to grow. Novel reading, as Cathy Davidson has argued, was a democratic act as well. Novels, like the burgeoning American democracy, operated on conflict and appealed directly to the reader, bypassing traditional authorities. Empowered readers could select books on their popularity rather than on supposed artistic merit. But novels shaped readers too. Nineteenth-century novelists, as Jane Tompkins highlighted, included both the “aesthetic and the didactic” in their works. Popular literature, she argued sought both to “redefine the social order” and to inculcate virtue in the reader. As novels increased in popularity, particularly among the middle class, a number of religious groups sought to use the genre for their own purposes.

As Catholic writers began to produce religious novels to defend their faith from numerous literary attacks, Orestes Brownson, the leading intellectual of antebellum American Catholicism, initiated a national discussion of Catholic literature in the pages of his influential Brownson’s Quarterly Review. Even though Brownson wrote several novels, he remained suspicious of the genre as a means of presenting a Catholic perspective. The democratic nature of the novel bothered him, and he used his authority as editor of the Review to pronounce on the worthiness of Catholic literary productions. His sharp criticisms riled many authors. In an 1847 essay, Brownson objected to sentimentalism in the novels of the day because he believed unfettered sentiment, produced by the love stories of the
plots, was “the deadliest enemy to true piety.” Sentimentalism produced an “effeminacy of character” that indisposed readers “to whatever requires steady thought and sober judgment.”10 The love stories of popular religious novels, Brownson wrote in 1848, distracted readers from considering the doctrinal aspects of the story.11 But the popularity of novels in America led Brownson to accept the necessity of producing Catholic literature. He preferred novels that eschewed “formal dogmatizing” or “express ascetic dissertation” but integrated the supernatural life of faith into the natural order of human life.12 For Brownson, such books could offer a compelling portrait of Catholicism.13

Huntington participated in the literary debate about religious novels, and his place in the wider discussion offers an interpretative key for his own works. Shortly after his conversion to Catholicism, he sent Brownson a copy of his first novel, Lady Alice, along with a short defense of his method as a novelist. He told Brownson that his novel “was not in its original conception a ‘religious novel’ at all.” Instead, it was a love story. While Brownson was suspicious of love stories in novels, Huntington defended his choice. He defined love as “the voluntary sacrifice of inward reserve in favour of a chosen one, approved by the imagination, elected by the will.” Love, he added, “presupposes chastity, and chastity presupposes the consciousness of sex.” The love between a man and a woman was good, and “human nature is incomplete without love in this sense.” Huntington insisted that he had portrayed passionate love in the novel without sin, a feat that would instruct readers.14 In the preface to his third novel, The Forest, Huntington also embraced the theme of the operation of grace in the “human heart” as an appropriate trope for the Catholic novelist. He noted: “Natural virtue has been the theme of a thousand novelists, and is a pretty thing enough; but infinitely more beautiful in our eyes, is the virtue which rises on the ruins of natural weaknesses. This is a study worthy not of men but of gods.”15 While editing a Catholic monthly magazine, The Metropolitan, in 1854, Huntington noted that “the special aim of literature” was “to please or to instruct.” He saw literature as a “common ground” or “neutral territory” for people “from opposing camps” to “meet and hold intercourse.”16 Literature then presented an argument in a narrative. The Catholic novelist, like his secular counterparts, sought to “redefine the social order,” in Tompkins’s words, for his readers. During the 1850s, Huntington used three novels to define Catholicism’s place in the American social order.17

In Huntington’s novels, Catholics are a minority and inhabit a world only nominally Christian where their faith is both feared and despised. In his 1851 novel Alban, the “mental history of a young Puritan,” as Hunting-
ton described it, the main character Alban Atherton studies at Yale where during his senior year he decides to convert to Catholicism.\textsuperscript{18} Huntington depicts Yale as a place of irreligion with a façade of devotional compliance by the students. Alban discusses his crisis of faith with his fellow students, most of whom cannot believe he takes religion seriously. When a theology student decides to convert to Catholicism on his deathbed, no priest can be found and local ministers try to prevent Alban from visiting him. So, Alban is snuck into the man’s room where he prays with him and asks if his intentions were sincere. The student dies professing Catholicism, and the furious theology professors want Alban expelled. Instead, he is “rusticated,” sent away for the remainder of his senior year to complete his studies far from campus. His parents, hearing of his pending conversion, write, begging him not to join the Roman Church.\textsuperscript{19} In Huntington’s sequel to \textit{Alban, The Forest} (1852), Alban’s future father-in-law, a committed Unitarian and anti-Catholic, tries to dissuade his conversion: “This is essentially a Protestant country. Why make yourself an outcast?”\textsuperscript{20} In Huntington’s final novel, \textit{Rosemary} (1860), the main character, Rosemary, is a devout Catholic girl initially raised by her French \textit{philosophe} maternal grandfather, but now living with her immensely rich paternal grandparents who are nominally Protestant but intensely secular in their perspectives. Rosemary’s grandmother, thinking her granddaughter has died, remarks to one of her friends that Rosemary “was always at prayers—it was her only fault, you understand?” In another passage, her grandmother complains about Rosemary’s fasting and habitual attendance at early morning mass.\textsuperscript{21} In fact, the only place in any of Huntington’s Catholic novels that possesses an openly Catholic society is a remote Indian village serviced by Jesuit missionaries.\textsuperscript{22} Otherwise, Catholicism’s public presence in the novels is institutionally insignificant.

The Catholics in Huntington’s novels encompass varied classes and ethnicities in a manner different from scholarly models. Whereas scholars have recognized the ethnic diversity of American Catholicism, many have noted that by the 1840s Catholics divided into urban ethnic parishes, separating themselves from other Catholics and the rest of American society. Ghetto Catholicism promoted a devotional style grating to Protestants, celebrated papal rule of the Church, and featured ethnic voting blocs providing political protection for immigrants.\textsuperscript{23} But Huntington presented a different vision. The main characters of his novels are members of the upper class, a convention which, as Huntington admitted in a letter to Brownson, was meant to attract readers.\textsuperscript{24} Yet his novels depict American Catholicism as a gaggle of various groups. In \textit{Alban}, for example, Alban’s cousin Jane is horrified that Alban goes to church with poor Irish and Germans.\textsuperscript{25} The
same novel also depicts Irish servant girls as important figures in the lives of rich converts, modeling to their masters a humble faith. In *Rosemary*, the rich heiress describes a three-hour wait in a confession line filled with servant girls. The priest who converts several characters in *Alban* and *The Forest* is a French refugee, while in *Rosemary*, a Swiss Catholic nanny instructs young Rosemary in the faith and took her to mass. Huntington did not see such ethnic and class diversity as distracting from a common religious faith.

Huntington’s embrace of ethnic pluralism in American Catholicism served as an example of a social ideal he promoted explicitly in the mid-1850s, catholicity. Many Americans during that decade feared for the continued survival of the Union amidst tremendous social tensions. For Catholics, increased immigration had not only sparked a new nativist movement, the Know Nothing Party, but reinforced the prejudice that Catholicism was foreign to the United States. Critics often identified persistent ethnic loyalties as problematic. While editing the magazine the *Metropolitan* in 1854, Huntington wrote about the Irish, “The attachment of the Irish to their native land is sometimes spoken of as rendering them foreigners in heart wherever they colonize, but it seems to be forgotten how long our own colonial ancestors retained a like feeling in regard to England, which, even as late as the period of the Revolution, it was customary to call ‘home.’” Huntington had great pride in his own New England heritage but did not see this loyalty as a hindrance to his faith. He explained in a letter to Orestes Brownson in 1855: “In *sentiment* I am a Nativist. I dislike foreigners, I am proud of my New England descent, &c.” But his religious ties superseded his own ethnic affections. “Catholicity,” he continued, “is more to me than my race—hence I go for the Catholic foreigners and their political influence.” Huntington believed that Catholicism in the United States offered the antidote to the cultural tensions pulling the nation apart. “For ourselves,” he wrote in 1854, “we have a profound conviction that the foundations of American nationality are destined to be cast deeper than in mere race, in a unity that will not sacrifice hereditary sympathies, but consecrate and preserve them—a unity of religious and political faith.” Catholicism offered a deeper unity that could bind Americans together far better than their own traditions. Ethnicity and race need not be barriers as long as religious unity existed.

While Huntington asserted that Catholicism offered a religious and political unity that the United States lacked, he did not depict the faith as offering a specific political agenda. Much of the scholarly literature of Catholicism in the Early Republic celebrated the rise of a “republican Catholicism” that embraced American political liberty, religious freedom,
and lay involvement in the church. For many scholars, this movement promoted Catholic political and social engagement with their neighbors on equal terms, offering a potential Catholic influence on American politics. The Catholic immigrants, these scholars note, overwhelmed this republican moment, replacing it with ethnic voting blocs that forestalled full acceptance into American society. Huntington’s novels depicted no such transition. He offered no political solutions in his novels and warned against political or social utopianism. In The Forest, Alban Atherton remarks, “Let us fasten our eyes on that unchanging state which awaits us from the moment that we put off the body, and we shall soon see through the illusion that would still conjure up a Paradise here, where Paradise is long since forfeit.” Part of Alban’s conversion is his recognition that Catholicism can help him fight his passions and live a life of virtue, which will have important social effects. But living a Catholic life did not necessarily translate into specific partisan positions. In Rosemary, Huntington assigns his main characters different political ideologies. The skilled lawyer Cahal O’Morra describes himself as “an old Jeffersonian States Rights democrat,” while Rosemary, the precocious main character, claims she is “an imperialist” who admires Louis Napoleon. In the Metropolitan, Huntington admitted that while American Catholics agreed on matters of faith, they disagreed about everything else, especially politics. Catholicism, in Huntington’s view, did not promote an interest group ethnic politics but promised a unity that could transcend endless partisan bickering.

Whereas the scholarly models used to describe antebellum Catholicism have stressed the social support structures created by American Catholics, particularly the parish church, Huntington’s landscapes are devoid of such social aids. The Catholics in his novels must rely on prayer, a few Catholic friends, and the sacraments, when available. These practices, then, form a lifestyle. For example, Alban Atherton’s conversion suffers many delays not because of his flagging will, but because a priest cannot be found to hear his confession. Most family ties in Huntington’s novels also fail to support the faith. After all, the main characters are converts whose families barely tolerate their new convictions. In Rosemary, Alban Atherton, now a successful lawyer in New York City, socializes with other members of his class—few of whom are Catholics—and gains support from his wife, who is also a convert, and his children. In The Forest, Huntington has several characters convert as they journey together through the wilderness, possibly a metaphor for the dearth of Catholic institutions in antebellum American culture.

For Huntington, Catholicism was primarily about conversion rather than building social or political institutions. Some scholars have lamented
this point of view in antebellum Catholicism as a retreat into socially insignificant devotionalism. But Huntington’s view did not privatize religion, for conversion was a public act with public consequences, especially in antebellum America. For Huntington, the faith primarily concerned the personal battle with sin and the search for redemption through divine love. Whereas other Catholic novelists in the antebellum period featured lengthy scenes of apologetics in which Catholics answer Protestant objections and produce conversions, Huntington’s Catholic novels contained few such passages. Characters instead convert after witnessing various rites of worship—the mass, benediction, and baptism. Catholicism moved the heart. In the midst of a discussion of conversion in The Forest, Huntington remarks of Catholicism that it “considers that to instruct the understanding without training the will, would be to infuse a poison.” Huntington’s converts model this position. As they go about their normal social lives, they pray, fast, give alms, frequent the sacraments, and fight their passions. For Huntington, such behavior was not a retreat to a private devotionalism but had profound social effects. In Rosemary, for example, the young artist Rory O’Morra meditates on the four last things (death, judgement, heaven, and hell) and performs ascetical labors before he sculpts so that he may see reality—both spiritual and temporal—clearly. Rory’s art attracts and influences people, a sign that his religious life engaged the world around him by shaping the performance of his duties. For Huntington, Catholicism transformed the culture soul by soul.

***

Huntington’s vision of Catholicism in American society lies outside of the main interpretations of antebellum Catholicism. Whereas scholars have focused on a transition from a republican Catholicism that engaged the social and political structures of the country to a devotional, immigrant Catholicism that retreated from the culture, neither model captures Huntington’s example. As a convert, he lacked the ethnic identity of the new Catholic immigrants. Thus, the urban ethnic ghettos were neither his world nor ideal. In addition, Huntington’s conversion came from his engagement with the theological questions posed by the Oxford Movement, not the social or political questions of “republican Catholicism.” Huntington, however, was not unique. In fact, his perspective was similar to that of Catholics in the Deep South, another group ignored in the dominant scholarly narratives of American Catholicism. Like the characters in Huntington’s novels, southern Catholics labored as members of a tiny, often despised, minority. Lacking political power and strong social institutions, southern Catholics had to survive in a society that was nominally...
Christian. They had to work with and live alongside non-Catholic neighbors. Like Huntington, southern Catholic clergy encouraged their small flocks to live devout lives and by doing so effect the social order around them. Also, like in Huntington’s novels, southern Catholics, particularly in South Carolina, were ethnically diverse and included a number of converts. Southern Catholics and converts like Huntington were minorities in the antebellum Church, yet they devised a vision of Catholic interaction with American culture that has continuing relevance. Current models of nineteenth-century Catholicism leave out the experiences of too many. Normally in modern historical literature, such appeals for inclusion focus on minorities and other marginalized groups. But in this case, converts and writers—many of them prominent men like Huntington—need their perspectives and influence accounted for in the scholarly narratives of antebellum Catholicism in order to provide a more accurate depiction of the Church in that era.

Notes


4. Huntington to Orestes Brownson, February 5, 1850, Orestes Augustus Brownson Papers, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend, Indiana. “I had actually practiced for years what I represented my heroine as practicing at Rome. It is well there should be a delineation of this phase of pseudo-catholicity.”


9. Huntington to Orestes Brownson, April 19, 1855, Orestes Augustus Brownson Papers, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend, Indiana. Huntington comments on the hurt feelings Brownson’s reviews caused.


11. Ibid., 226–228.

12. Ibid., 300.


14. Huntington to Brownson, February 5, 1850, Orestes Augustus Brownson Papers, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend, Indiana.


18. Huntington, *The Forest*, 6. He was speaking of *Alban*, his previous novel, when he made this comment.


Forgotten Nineteenth-Century Literature of Religious Conversion


22. The village is depicted in *The Forest*.


24. Huntington to Brownson, February 5, 1850, Orestes Augustus Brownson Papers, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend, Indiana.


28. Huntington to Orestes Brownson, April 19, 1855, Orestes Augustus Brownson Papers, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend, Indiana.


35. Huntington, *Alban*, 471–474. Alban finally goes to confession, but then there is uncertainty about the validity of his baptism and he has to wait longer. He finally comes into the Church in *The Forest*.

36. Ibid., 210–40.


39. See a possible corrective to this trend: Adam L. Tate, *Catholics’ Lost Cause: South Carolina Catholics and the American South, 1820–1861* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018).