

IN THE MATTER OF CATHOLIC HISTORIOGRAPHY: A PROPOSAL

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*Nineteen-sixty was a significant year in American Catholic history. The election of John F. Kennedy was heralded as symbolic of 'the arrival' of American Catholics in an American society which, in the past, had not always been quite so welcoming to Catholics. However, candidate Kennedy's celebrated insistence on a strict separation of one's private religious views from one's public life and service was not embraced by all observers, Catholic and non-Catholic alike. Two other circumstances in 1960, the publications of John Courtney Murray's *We Hold These Truths* and Thomas T. McAvoy's "American Catholics: Tradition and Controversy" in *Thought*, suggested other possibilities and concerns regarding the more complete involvement of American Catholics in the host culture. This involvement, then and now, speaks to the reality and the charity of inculturation, but also as a project incumbent on all believers and perhaps on historians and other scholars as well.*

An enduring question in American and Catholic history concerns the connection between these two realities: a nation conceived in liberty and freedom just over two centuries ago, the victor in the first successful, modern political rebellion against a colonial power; and, a religion that has a history of nearly two millennia, a Church that claims to be the true Church founded by Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, and God Himself. Which is the noun? Which the adjective? Is it that one is an American Catholic, or is it that one is a Catholic American? Which is the greater reality, the more profound identity? These questions have threaded their way through American and American Catholic history for many years, of interest to Catholic and non-Catholic alike, occasionally defined in somewhat different ways or tones, but always perhaps the same Johannine issue of just how does one live: *in* this world, or *of* this world? Several circumstances in 1960—a presidential election, a book, and an article—raised these questions anew, indeed for a self-consciously “new generation.” Again, at heart the issue was not new, but the state of affairs was, as it were, an advance beyond the American moments that had preceded it, especially because in November a Catholic was elected the President of the United States. There was much joy, and much consternation, surrounding such an event. Would the results of the

election contribute to a more complete understanding of, even a conclusion to, the old issue, or would it, along with the book and article, suggest the more profound consequences of asking whether one could be an American and a Catholic? It may be, though, that the events and the meaning of the Catholic moment in 1960 can also serve in a particular historiographical cause. Simply put, just what of distinctiveness might a Catholic historian bring to this discussion of the apparent, long-delayed triumph of religious liberty over a traditional intolerance and animosity? Ought one only to recount the details of the Kennedy election drama, noticing a tribal (né Catholic) coming-out moment, and leaving it at that? Or, might one be permitted to paint as it were on a larger ideological, or faith-informed, even theologically-informed canvas? How might an informed, even a graced, faith contribute to a richer, more profound history?

Perhaps it was not a completely uncomplicated moment, a simple triumph or arrival, but the election of John F. Kennedy as the President of the United States in November 1960 was a moment of great pride for American Catholics. One of their own had reached the highest office in the land, apparently dismissing, or at least diminishing, one of the last great, acknowledged prejudices in American culture. There is a history of anti-Catholicism in the American story, and such a history that it has been remarked that this prejudice against the Roman Catholic Church was in fact the worst and most long-lasting prejudice in a country that has famously known slavery and racism.¹ So, Kennedy's election, while by a razor-thin margin in the popular vote (49.7 million to 49.6 million, and 303-219 in the Electoral College), was viewed by many as the full arrival in American society for a religious faith that had already for over a century constituted the largest single religious group in the United States., the largest, but certainly not the most welcome.²

It is not necessary to linger over the historical difficulties encountered by Catholics in the over 300 years of American history.³ In the so-called Catholic colony of Maryland, founded in 1634, Catholics had from the first been a minority, in part necessitating a not-always-noticed religious toleration not found in other English mainland colonies. English anti-Catholicism, a compound of sectarian, Reformation animosities and nationalist fervor directed at the papacy and Catholic adversaries, Spain and France, eventually found its way into Maryland by the 1640s. After a generation of religious peace, this lingering animus was enacted in a series of laws in the late century relegating the Catholic minority to various, if not always enforced, disabilities. Anti-Catholic legislation, if not Catholics themselves, could be found in several other colonies by the time of the American

Revolution. The latter event carried along in its wake local and national religious toleration, if not outright and complete religious freedom for Catholics, with disabilities for non-Protestants to be found in a majority of the earliest state constitutions, although such was not the case in the first national constitution, the Articles of Confederation, nor in our second, current Constitution. The Catholic population of the new United States, however, was rather small at the time of the first federal census in 1790, c. 35,000 in a population of just under 4,000,000. For most Americans in the new Republic, such folks were a mere rumor. But, that situation was not to remain so simple and so remote. By the 1850 federal census, Catholics numbered between 1.1. and 1.6 million, or approximately 4.7 -6.9% of the total American populace, were now the single largest religious group in the United States, and it seemed by mid-century that more were coming in every year. And, these Irish and German immigrants were not so welcome.

Already by the 1820s, a backlash, or “Protestant Crusade,” was developing that included public, and published, debates between Protestant ministers and Catholic priests, efforts to get the King James version of the Bible into the hands of every American, and violence against Catholic churches, convents, and this budding Catholic presence.⁴ Politically, the American Party, or the Know-Nothings, were active by the 1850s, surely encouraged by the emerging concerns in an American society in disarray over social and economic changes and especially the slavery issue, but it was a political movement mostly attentive to the need to keep immigrants, especially Catholic immigrants, out of the Protestant Republic in North America.

After the Civil War, particularly by the 1880s and afterward, immigrants from newer areas in southern and eastern Europe began to hasten to the shores of that Republic of freedom and opportunity, religious and social and economic and political. Welcomed initially as workers and consumers in the newly-industrializing United States, these foreigners were yet unwelcome as ethnically and religiously different than the usual migrants from northern and western Europe. The result—especially as the numbers of Catholics in America were swelled by immigrants from Poland and central and eastern Europe, Italy, and by the turn of the twentieth century from Mexico and French Canada—was a new Nativism. The American Protective Association, created in Iowa in the 1880s, was one of the louder voices in a new effort to close the doors against such peoples. By the time of the Great War (1914-1918), a re-established Ku Klux Klan, active throughout the country, had ‘liberalized’ its message of hate, adding Catholics and Jews to the list of undesirables along with American Negroes. Issues concerning public

education and countervailing initiatives for ethnic purity, which called for separate nationality and religious schooling, issues regarding citizenship and voting rights, along with the rise of the big-city bosses empowered by the votes of such apparently mindless recent arrivals, such issues roiled the waters of American politics already agitated by increasing and strident demands for reforms in American society and politics.

By the 1920s, federal legislation had finally curtailed wide-open immigration into the United States, laws fashioned to prevent any further large entry of undesirable southern and eastern Europeans, especially Catholics, into the country. Yet, by 1920, Catholics numbered some 17,000,000, or approximately 17% of the population, with very large concentrations of this population in the northeast and midwest. These were important voting blocs for the Democratic Party. But, such voting blocs were not enough to stave off a reminder of the circumstance of Catholics in America, a circumstance of suspicion and enduring prejudice in 1928.

In that year, the Democrats nominated New York's Governor Al Smith as their presidential candidate. Smith was a Catholic. Since the late nineteenth century, the Republicans had been the dominant national political party, usually controlling both houses of Congress as well as the presidency. Times were excellent in a prosperous country seemingly immune to the difficulties, economic and political, in post-war Europe. As such, 1928 was not really a very promising year for a Democratic presidential run; Smith lost overwhelmingly to Herbert Hoover. What was amazing to people like Al Smith, however, was the virulent anti-Catholicism let loose in the country by his candidacy.⁵ Much of the animosity was rather grotesque and mean-spirited, but larger, substantive issues were bubbling just below the surface. In a celebrated "An Open Letter to the Honorable Alfred E. Smith" in the April 1927 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Charles C. Marshall, a constitutional lawyer and Episcopalian, restated a number of concerns of more thoughtful critics of a possible Smith presidential bid. There were Americans, Marshall observed, who were concerned "as to certain conceptions which your fellow citizens attribute to you as a loyal and conscientious Roman Catholic, which in their minds are irreconcilable with that Constitution which as President you must support and defend, and with the principles of civil and religious liberty on which American institutions are based."⁶ Marshall cited some of the writings of nineteenth-century Popes Pius IX and Leo XIII to demonstrate the Catholic belief that of the two powers, church and state, the church was the superior in any conflict between the two; that the Catholic Church

claimed to be the only true church of Jesus Christ, but that other religions might be tolerated, but not of right, but rather of sufferance: “Thus the Constitution declares the United States shall hold in equal favor different kinds of religion or no religion and the Pope declares it is not lawful to hold them in equal favor. Is there not here a quandary for that man who is at once a loyal churchman and a loyal citizen?”⁷ The question raised by Marshall was not in fact a new one at all. In the immediate aftermath of the American Revolution, Fr. John Carroll, who would within a few years become the first American Catholic bishop, had publicly responded to the insinuation that Catholics could not in fact be true American and republican citizens.⁸ Much of the intervening recitation of anti-Catholic prejudice had often turned on the suspicion of any true and authentic, mutual connection between American and Catholic. Marshall’s question, then, was a perennial one:

Citizens who waver in your support would ask whether, as a Roman Catholic, you accept as authoritative the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that in case of contradiction, making it impossible for the jurisdiction of that Church and the jurisdiction of the State to agree, the jurisdiction of the Church shall prevail; whether, as statesman, you accept the teaching of the Supreme Court of the United States that, in matters of religious practices which in the opinion of the State are inconsistent with its peace and safety, the jurisdiction of the State shall prevail; and, if you accept both teachings, how you will reconcile them.⁹

Smith’s answer came in the May issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*. Acknowledging the assistance of Fr. Francis Duffy (chaplain of the celebrated Fighting 69th of World War fame in his response), Smith denied that American Catholics held such beliefs that would create the anticipated dilemma. Directly answering Marshall’s challenge, Smith wrote that “you imply that there is a conflict between religious loyalty to the Catholic faith and patriotic loyalty to the United States.”¹⁰ Pointing to the nineteen times that he had taken oaths of political office, each time swearing allegiance to the United States Constitution, Smith recounted some of his own political reform causes and other instances of Roman Catholic patriotism, an honor roll that included two Chief Justices of the United States Supreme Court. He accused Marshall of taking papal remarks out of context and not distinguishing between certain issues of internal Catholic concern as compared to more public issues. Indeed, as regards the encyclicals cited by Marshall, Smith

rejoined in a celebrated remark: “So little are these matters of the essence of my faith that I, a devout Catholic since childhood, never heard of them until I read your letter.”¹¹ Citing Fr. John A. Ryan, an influential Catholic public figure, Smith asserted that with regard to a country with many religious faiths such as the United States, and as compared to a completely Catholic state, toleration was in fact a right. Smith also quoted another Catholic writer on the same issue: “If religious freedom has been accepted and sworn to as a fundamental law in a constitution, the obligation to show this tolerance is binding in conscience.”¹² Noting the statements of such well-known American Catholic spokesmen as Cardinal Richard O’Connell (Boston), Cardinal James Gibbons (Baltimore), and Archbishop John Ireland (St. Paul) as to the compatibility of American and Catholic principles regarding the separation of church and state, Smith ultimately labeled Marshall’s concern or “thesis” as an ill-conceived retrieval “from this limbo of defunct controversies.” And, finally, as to this issue of American and Catholic, church and state in the United States, Smith wrote:

What is this conflict about which you talk? It may exist in some lands which do not guarantee religious freedom. But in the wildest dreams of your imagination you cannot conjure up a possible conflict between religious principle and political duty in the United States, except on the unthinkable hypothesis that some law were to be passed which violated the common morality of all God-fearing men.¹³

This exchange, then, and the dismal failure of Smith’s campaign, along with the depth of the anti-Catholic sentiment stirred up in the United States in the late 1920s, were in the living memory of many, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, in 1960. And, as John T. McGreevy has so ably demonstrated about these intervening years, the residual prejudices of ordinary non-Catholic Americans against Catholics were strongly mirrored in the attitudes and thoughts of mainstream American intellectuals. Thriving in an intellectual world marked by pragmatism, free-thinking, and scientific experimentation, such intellectuals looked askance at Catholic intellectuals and their philosophical superstructure of natural law amidst a neo-Thomist revival. A naturalist perspective was confronting a supernaturalist perspective which the former viewed as ridiculous and authoritarian, a sort of Vaticanism from which the American democratic solvent and personal freedom would surely rescue rank and file American Catholics. Artificially and unnecessarily separated from their fellow Americans,

these Catholic supporters of both such antiquated intellectual conceits, and such fascist types as General Franco in the monumental Spanish Civil War and the Catholic Senator Joseph McCarthy, would surely succumb to the peaceable homogenization of the liberating American experience. And, when such appeared not to be the case, and a self-consciously triumphalistic and prospering Catholic sub-culture appeared in turn to be making clear inroads in such areas as public funding for private education, the Paul Blanshards of the land were active both in sounding the anti-Catholic tocsin and in creating the POAU, or Protestants and Other Americans United for Separation of Church and State in 1948. What was needed in America was a common culture as against America's totalitarian enemies, an American consensus that must necessarily look with much wariness at any religion in the public square, especially any hierarchical religion and religious authority which were, *a fortiori*, an affront to democratic values and twentieth-century individual autonomy.¹⁴ And such were the circumstance and context which confronted John F. Kennedy in the late 1950s.

In a celebrated article in the March 3, 1959, issue of *Look Magazine*, Fletcher Knebel surveyed what he described as the "Democratic Forecast: a Catholic in 1960."¹⁵ His opening sentences were to the point: "An old taboo of American politics is near extinction. It is the notion that only Protestants should be nominated for the top national jobs." The prospect was that a Catholic might be offered by the Democrats for president or vice president in 1960. Featured in the story were governors David L. Lawrence (Pennsylvania), Pat Brown (California), and Michael V. DiSalle (Ohio), and Senators Eugene McCarthy (Minnesota) and John F. Kennedy (Massachusetts). Most of the pictures and the text of the article centered on Kennedy, who had made an unsuccessful bid for the vice-presidential nomination in 1956. Issues such as public funds for private schools, an ambassador to the Vatican, and the vexing, and perennial, prospect of the uncomfortable dual allegiance of an American Catholic and its effect on upholding the United States Constitution were highlighted in the article. How would Kennedy deal with such fears? Knebel reported that "In a capsule, his [Kennedy's] theme is that religion is personal, politics are public, and the twain need never meet and conflict." More at length, Knebel quoted Kennedy's reaction to the issues involved:

What ever one's religion in his private life may be, ...for the officeholder, nothing takes precedence over his oath to uphold the Constitution and all its parts—including the First Amendment and the strict separation of church and state.

Without reference to the presidency, ...I believe as a senator that the separation of church and state is fundamental to our American concept and heritage and should remain so.

Kennedy added that he was opposed to the appointment of an American ambassador to the Vatican as too “divisive” in the United States and opposed to federal monies for private schools, although buses and lunches were more open, political issues. In the end, Knebel wondered if the unofficial religious test regarding national office, with the single exception of 1928, might be erased in 1960 “by banishing the unspoken warning to presidential candidates: ‘Protestants only need apply.’”¹⁶

Among the reactions to the *Look* article was an editorial by Fr. Thurston Davis, in the Jesuit weekly, *Ameica*, critical of Kennedy’s submission to a religious test, explaining that “This kind of cross-examination, directed as it is solely to Catholics as Catholics, is discriminatory, insulting and without pertinence in terms of the U.S. Constitution.” Kennedy had attempted “to appease bigots,” which made America impatient. But, even more:

We were somewhat taken aback, for instance, by the unvarnished statement that “whatever one’s religion in his private life... nothing takes precedence over his oath...” Mr. Kennedy doesn’t really believe that. No religious man, be he Catholic, Protestant or Jew, holds such an opinion. A man’s conscience has a bearing on his public as well as his private life. As the *St. Louis Review* well expressed it: “When he implies that his religion, which teaches him to know, love and serve God above all things and to love his neighbor as himself, will not be allowed to interfere with his oath to the Constitution, it is the Constitution that ought to be examined, not his religion.”¹⁷

A week later, a prominent Protestant theologian, Robert MacAfee Brown, argued in *Christianity and Crisis: a Christian Journal of Opinion*, that while Kennedy may have been attempting to reassure some in his *Look* interview, he “has conceded far too much. In his effort to assure his possible constituency that he is just a regular American, he has succeeded only in demonstrating that he is a rather irregular Christian.” Brown also singled out Kennedy’s remark that “nothing takes precedence over his oath to uphold the Constitution and all its parts.” If, Brown suggested, a “secularist” had said such a thing, one would have to view “this elevation of the State to the pinnacle of totally uncritical adulation...[as] the seed bed in which the plant of totalitarianism

flourishes and grows.” If a Protestant should make such a statement that loyalty to the state was his highest loyalty, then he too would be guilty of something a Christian, whose “ultimate and only unconditioned loyalty is to God,” could not say, and something for which he should be criticized. And, if a Catholic should make such a statement, he too, as a Christian, should be challenged for it, “for the loyalty that the Christian has as a citizen is always a qualified loyalty.” The state, even the United States, could not demand “the Christian’s total and unqualified loyalty.” Thus, according to Brown, “Senator Kennedy seems to have forgotten this. And in his attempt to do a minor service to his constituency, he has done a major disservice to his faith.”¹⁸

Kennedy, of course, did gain the Democratic nomination for president in July 1960, but the religious issue continued to dog his steps even though, for example, he had taken 61% of the primary vote in West Virginia in early May, a state with a Catholic population of only 3%. The decision was made to tackle the issue head-on in an address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association on September 12, 1960.¹⁹ Suggesting that there were more pressing issues in the election than his religion, Kennedy told the assembly that he had agreed “to state once again—not what kind of church I believe in, for that should be important only to me—but what kind of America I believe in.” And that was: “an America where separation of church and state is absolute.” No Catholic prelate could tell a Catholic president how to act, nor could a Protestant minister tell Protestants how to vote. Kennedy was against religious intolerance. He “believe[d] in a President whose religious views are his own private affair, neither imposed by him upon the nation or imposed by the nation upon him as a condition to holding that office.” Kennedy described himself as a patriot. He had visited the Alamo in San Antonio that very day, and noted there had been no religious test among the defenders at that shrine. He emphasized that what he was sharing with the gathering, however, were his own views, “for contrary to common newspaper usage, I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I am the Democratic Party’s candidate for President, who happens also be a Catholic. I do not speak for my church on public matters—and the church does not speak for me.” He would make his decisions, whether about birth control or divorce or gambling or whatever, based upon his own conscience and what it “tells me to be the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressures or dictates. And no power or threat of punishment could cause me to decide otherwise.” But if the presidency would require him to violate the national interest or his own conscience, he would resign... but he could not envision such a situation ever occurring. He was running for office on the real issues,

and the results of a fair contest would be accepted by him. “But if this election is decided on the basis that 40,000,000 Americans lost their chance of being President on the day they were baptized, then it is the whole nation that will be the loser, in the eyes of Catholics and non-Catholics around the world, in the eyes of history, and in the eyes of our own people.”²⁰

In the end, John F. Kennedy was elected President of the United States on November 8, 1960. In his 34 months as president, he did not appoint an ambassador to the Vatican, nor did he push for any appreciable public monies for private education. He did, of course, demonstrate that a Catholic could be elected to the highest office in the land, but the words of one of those involved in his Houston speech perhaps undercut his achievement from a particular Catholic perspective: “Yet he remains, as John Cogley has suggested, the first President who was a Roman Catholic rather than the first Roman Catholic President.”²¹

Within a month of the election of Kennedy, a Jesuit priest was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine. Fr. John Courtney Murray, S.J., (1904-1967) had been writing and teaching about the issues of church and state in the United States, and especially the relationship between the American polity and Roman Catholicism for two decades while he taught at Woodstock College in Maryland and edited the Jesuit journal, *Theological Studies*.²² The circumstance of Kennedy’s recent election, and the publication of Murray’s *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (1960), had created a serendipitous moment to ponder the traditional question regarding American and Catholic in the article entitled “City of God & Man.” As *Time* phrased it in striking couplets:

Who Is Safe? It did not take the 1960 election to establish—though it well served to recall—what a unique encounter of diverse traditions is contained in the words “American Catholic.” In the historical reality behind those words, St. Ignatius Loyola, founder of John Courtney Murray’s order and soldier-saint, meets Citizen Tom Paine, soldier-atheist. St. Thomas, the Angelic Doctor and patient builder of a great intellectual system, meets John Dewey, pragmatist and patient destroyer of systems. Monasticism, shielding a candle through the Dark Ages, meets the blaze of the Enlightenment. The Inquisition meets the Supreme Court. The apostolic succession meets the clapboard Congregationalist Church, the Sacred Roman Rota meets Reno.²³

And, at the extraordinary risks of over-simplification and reductionism of Murray's intellectual corpus and thought, this dualism was very close to the heart of Murray's project. Quite simply, according to Murray, American and Catholic were not at heart antithetical to each other, but rather they were compatible. One could be both a good American and a good and authentic Roman Catholic. Rota and Reno could lie down together in peace!

In the Foreword to his collection of essays published as *We Hold These Truths*, Murray displayed an engaging confidence in his own basic religious and ideological tradition. He was offering these "reflections" as an American citizen seeking to understand "What are the truths we hold?" But he was also offering:

the reflections of a Catholic who, in seeking his answer to the civil question, knows that the principles of Catholic faith and morality stand superior to, and in control of, the whole order of civil life. 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. The question, thus turned, is part of the civil question, as put to me. An affirmative answer to it, given under something better than curbstone definition of "democracy," is one of the truths I hold.²⁴

The founding of the United States had been within the natural law tradition, according to Murray, a natural law tradition not only known to the Founders and influential in their republican project, but a tradition with concurrently deep roots in Catholic thinking. The Declaration of Independence, for instance, acknowledged such fundamental truths as human liberty and freedom, and limited government, recognizing these rights as grounded in and reliant upon God's law. Such truths were intelligible to human reason and had been working out in Western, and especially Catholic, political thought and theology for hundreds of years prior to 1776. (In referring to the American consensus regarding "free government," Murray suggested that "a free people under a limited government" puts the matter more exactly. It is a phrase that would have satisfied the first Whig, St. Thomas Aquinas.)²⁵

Along with a common natural law tradition, Americans and Catholics could readily agree on the First Amendment's opening

phrases: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The issues here, echoed and re-echoed in the years before and after 1927-1928, spoke directly to a principal part of the enduring suspicion of Catholics in America: Whatever they said publicly, they were not content as to the non-establishment of their Church in the United States, their leaders were always actively working to effect such an establishment through a variety of means based in the fundamental ignorance of the pope’s legions, and when securely in control of the American state, they would end the religious freedom of non-Catholics. In short, and as recognized since the colonial period, Catholics were poor risks as real democrats and viable citizens of the American Republic. Hence, the periodic persecutions and harassments of such people in American history. Murray argued that these parts of the First Amendment were “articles of peace” rather than “articles of faith.” And the wisdom of such an arrangement in a nation marked by religious pluralism (which, by the way, Murray lamented), was a matter of social necessity, the rightness of the separation of church and state in the religiously pluralist United States, and the experience of American history.²⁶ What was operative here, in the modern world, and particularly valid in the United States, was not the great and fundamental issue of religious truth, as opposed to religious indifferentism, but the common good in a context of religious liberty and freedom in a religiously pluralist society.²⁷ Catholics were good American citizens because of this common founding, natural law tradition, and also their recognition of the validity in the United States of religious freedom and the prohibition of any specific religious establishment.

It should be noticed that Murray was not completely out of touch with current circumstances and the sense of a deep spiritual crisis in American society and culture at the beginning of what would become the turbulent 1960s. He wrote in *We Hold These Truths* of a necessary “revival” of the older tradition now seemingly replaced by the projects of positivists and pragmatists, both groups denying any such natural law tradition or any metanarrative other than democratic and majoritarian procedures or desirable results. Modernity, according to Murray, had “rejected the freedom of the Church... as the armature of man’s spiritual freedom and as a structural principle of a free society.” The traditional system of Christian moral values, personal and social, had long been maintained and developed, and “[was] adopted as the very basis for the modern political experiment.” What Murray termed “not only a falsification of history but a basic betrayal of the existential structure of reality itself” had now consequently occurred,” what Romano Guardini had named “the interior disloyalty of modern times”:

Modernity, however, has maintained that these values are now known to be simply immanent in man; that man has become conscious of them in the course of their emergence in historical experience; that, whatever may have been the influence of the Christian revelation on the earlier phases of this experience, these values are now simply a human possession, a conquest and an achievement of humanity by himself. Now that I have arrived, said modernity, Christianity may disappear. Whatever aesthetic appeal it may still retain as a myth, it is not needed as a dynamic of freedom and justice in this world. *Res sacra homo* is now under a new patronage—singly his own.

This situation, Murray wrote, was “the gravest issue presented by the whole experiment of modernity. The issue, again, is one of truth. Upon this issue hangs the whole fate of freedom and justice, if only for the pragmatic reason that the structure of reality cannot with impunity be disregarded, even less by society than by the individual.” And, in the end, according to Murray, “the doctrine of natural law offers a more profound metaphysic, a more integral humanism, a fuller rationality, a more complete philosophy of man in his nature and history.”²⁸

What Murray was counseling was conversation, democratic dialogue, civil argument in the public square about such profound and significant issues concerning the American project and proposition. And, according to *Time*, he was a willing participant:

For that kind of argument, Murray may be counted on. At present, he sees not even a “common universe of discourse.” The various groups in the pluralist society do not share one another’s premises or vocabulary so that only confusion, not real disagreement, results: “Disagreement is not an easy thing to reach.” If anyone can help U.S. Catholics and their non-Catholic countrymen toward the disagreement that precedes understanding—John Courtney Murray can.²⁹

Thus, a Catholic could be elected president in 1960 and in the same year, a month later, a member of the historically notorious Society of Jesus could appear on the cover of—and be featured quite appreciatively in—one of the nation’s most popular magazines. And, both moments could be interpreted and valued as positive steps in the nation’s maturation. Kennedy’s election, however, might seemingly be cast in rather non-Murray terms, as he had himself strongly argued during his campaign for a separation of his religious beliefs and

principles, while the Jesuit had argued for the validity of separation of church and state, but that the public square itself would be the direct, unabashed beneficiary of those religious beliefs and principles in civil conversation and argument. Indeed, Murray had surely sharpened and deepened the issue of the relationship of American and Catholic in what reads today as a rather poignant and prescient commentary on our post-modern period:

Perhaps the dissolution, long since begun, may one day be consummated. Perhaps one day the noble many-storeyed mansion of democracy will be dismantled, leveled to the dimension of a flat majoritarianism, which is no mansion but a barn, perhaps even a tool shed in which the weapons of tyranny may be forged. Perhaps there will one day be wide dissent even from the political principles which emerge from natural law, as well as dissent from the constellation of ideas that have historically undergirded these principles—the idea that government has a moral basis; that the universal moral law is the foundation of society; that the legal order of society—that is, the state—is subject to judgment by a law that is not statistical but inherent in the nature of man; that the eternal reason of God is the ultimate origin of all law; that this nation in all its aspects—as a society, a state, an ordered and free relationship between governors and governed—is under God. The possibility that widespread dissent from these principles should develop would introduce one more paradox into history. The Catholic community would still be speaking in the ethical and political idiom familiar to them as it was familiar to their teachers, both the Fathers of the Church and the Fathers of the American Republic. The guardianship of the original American consensus, based on the Western heritage, would have passed to the Catholic community, within which the heritage was elaborated long before America was. And it would be for others, not Catholics, to ask themselves whether they still shared the consensus which first fashioned the American people into a body politic and determined the structure of its fundamental law.³⁰

The third, and final part, of this Catholic moment in 1960, is an article which appeared in the Jesuit journal *Thought*. A recent appreciation of Fr. Thomas T. McAvoy, C.S.C. (1903-1969), indicates the significant contributions he made while at the University of Notre Dame

to American Catholic historical studies as archivist, teacher, and author.³¹ Of his many writings, *A History of the Catholic Church in the United States* (1970) and *The Great Crisis in American Catholic History, 1895-1900* (1957) were especially well-received. Of his many essays, one published in 1960 bears particularly on the present discussion.

Entitled “American Catholics: Tradition and Controversy,” McAvoy offered in his essay an exploration of the historical minority status of the Catholics in the United States, who were now a minority community ‘coming of age.’ According to McAvoy, the American cultural tradition (“the body of culture, custom, and knowledge which is generally accepted in the community”) historically consisted of elements brought from Europe, beliefs and customs, which had been “modified” in the environment of the new world: “[T]his inheritance is essentially English in language and literature, in religious tradition, in political ideals, in social and economic concepts.” The modifications to this cultural inheritance had included a commitment to a more popular leadership, along with local political representation in government, and a written constitution with guaranteed rights, including legal religious toleration. And Catholics had surely benefited from the latter circumstance.³²

This legal equality of Catholics in American society, however, had not necessarily translated quickly or easily into cultural equality or cultural acceptance by the larger or host culture. Indeed, according to McAvoy, there is “a *conflict of traditions* [italics added] in American history because the right of American Catholics to full social and economic liberty is not a question of law but of an interpretation of its American cultural tradition.” What McAvoy is describing here is the fact that although Catholics were legally allowed toleration of the practice of their faith, there was yet a cultural conflict or ill-fit between Catholics and “the dominant Protestant traditions” over the religious contents welcome within the “traditional Anglo-American culture.” McAvoy suggested that there were two problems to address as far as an equal, and not simply legal, integration of Catholics into this larger Anglo-American culture: “the first is the revision of the American cultural tradition to recognize the validity in the English-speaking world of the Catholic tradition. The second is the elimination in that Catholic tradition of those customs and social and economic ideas which are part of other traditions and less consonant with the Anglo-American tradition.”³³ But, even more to the point was the fact that Catholics were a singular sort of minority in this larger, host culture:

It is fundamental to repeat that essentially the Catholic minority is a religious group. Their bond is a common faith and practice in the field of religion. This does not mean that they intend to be a minority in the sense that they think that one religion is as good as another. They certainly do not believe that, and the fact that Catholics recognize only one religious faith as fully valid tends to make the Catholic minority not only distinct but unique in American life.³⁴

This situation of legal equality and cultural separateness was behind “the great crisis of American Catholic history,” or the Americanist controversy in the late-nineteenth century, the subject of McAvoy’s recent book. At heart, the issues revolved around the relationship of American and Catholic. In his papal pronouncement intended to settle the crisis, *Testem Benevolentiae*, Leo XIII had resolved the issue regarding American and Catholic as far as McAvoy was concerned: “There is no conflict between American democracy or American civic tradition and Catholicism just as there can be no religious compromise between Roman Catholicism and Anglo-American Protestantism.”³⁵ But, even over half a century later, the issue was still alive: “American Catholicism has not yet convinced its American neighbors of their [Catholics’] full Americanism nor their European critics of their full Catholicism. It is in this sense the [continuing and pertinent] major controversy of American Catholicism.”³⁶

Over the next several pages, McAvoy provided a brief history of the American Catholic presence in American history, emphasizing its growth, both in organization and in population, and indicating the development of a self-conscious Catholic intention to be accepted as culturally American. The latter design, of course, was challenged by the extraordinary influx of foreign Catholics into the nation in the generation after the Civil War. While a disfiguring American nativism was one response to the millions of newcomers, the challenge within the enlarging Catholic community took the form of outright antagonism between many of the newcomers and the earlier Catholic arrivals: These newer nationalities “felt that the dominant American culture was not Catholic and that these Americanizing Catholic clergymen and laymen were giving up essential Catholic doctrines in [too uncritically] accepting American culture.”³⁷ This, in fact, was a very significant aspect of the Americanist crisis itself. Finally, since the end of World War II, McAvoy wrote, American Catholics were emerging from their self-conscious sub-culture, or ghetto, and looking “to decide what shall

be the proper place of American Catholics in the composite sometimes called American Civilization.” Fr. McAvoy was ready with several suggestions: American Catholics should not be embarrassed by their minority status, culturally and religiously, nor that they had no group political designs. Second, American Catholics, lay and clerical leaders alike, needed to recognize the vibrancy of American Catholicism in a global setting, “active, practical, and full of external zeal, like most American efforts.” And finally, American Catholics should acknowledge that they were “very appreciative of American liberty under which Catholics can practice their religion and under which they can also hope to be first-class American citizens with full economic and social independence.”³⁸

Perhaps in answer to a much-noticed indictment of the poverty of American Catholic intellectual achievement published in the same journal five years earlier by Msgr. John Tracy Ellis, McAvoy was more ready to notice that “social leadership in the cultural world of Anglo-America is something that does not arise quickly without generations of preparation and without certain financial aids. Many Catholics lack both.” But, “the cultural achievement of Catholics in the next generation will be in proportion, chiefly, to the present-day efforts and that means the sacrifice of some present comforts for higher things because the financial means of the Catholic minority are not proportionate to their needs.” But, while retaining “greater devotion to traditional Catholic ideals in learning and culture,” American Catholics would be able to become real Americans, part of the larger democratic culture while yet remaining a self-contained minority. Perhaps in such a year as 1960, with the election of a Catholic as president, and the national publicity focused on the ideas, and recent book, of one of the sons of St. Ignatius Loyola, Fr. McAvoy’s own sense of the manifold possibilities now apparently open to his fellow Catholics is quite intelligible. Surely, his own faith and charity, with no visible sense of self-conscious irony, was present in the final, hopeful, sentence of his essay: “American Catholicism must work out the reconciliation of Catholicism and the American tradition, *bringing to American democracy at the same time the fullness of life, the theological and sacramental faith and grace of Catholic Christianity*” [italics added].³⁹ Has any of this, the expected movement out of the Catholic sub-culture and into mainstream America, socially, economically, intellectually, and politically, has any of this occurred? And, if so, has part of the baggage been “*the fullness of life, the theological and sacramental faith and grace of Catholic Christianity*”?

Perhaps what I might do here is to reassemble the questions, and hopes, political, intellectual, and spiritual, briefly assayed above and suggest some meaning or challenges that they may represent. Of course, we today (and every yesterday, too) face, really, the same sorts of issues because, at heart, what was occurring within a national election, and within the public thoughts of two students of the American Catholic experience in 1960 was a joining of the perennial Catholic and Christian question, so easy to formulate, but so difficult to work out every day: How do we live in but not be of the world? It is yet God's world, entered into by God Himself, and the precious gift of faith cannot be buried in the deep recesses of one's own garden but must in some way be not only lived, but proclaimed. To the point: How can we be both Americans and Catholics? And, more simply again to the point: Which is the noun, which the adjective? Is there, in fact, an easy resonance and compatibility between the two? Or, is the more important and foundational reality such that, in the end, no complete and easy commensurability between them is possible? How are they then to be integrated or present to each other, American and Catholic? Is religious toleration, even religious freedom itself, to be defined in the end as it so readily, and unreflectively, is as religious indifferentism, championed as the only possible definition in a land seemingly dedicated to personal choice and personal autonomy, and personal truth? Indeed, should we, individually and collectively, be concerned by all or much of this, smacking as it does of the arch modern "sin," judgmentalism? A few thoughts, then.

Much has been written about these issues of American and Catholic since 1960. Kennedy had proven that Catholics could be elected president. Many Catholics are currently serving in Congress, and 5 of the 9 current Supreme Court justices, including the Chief Justice, are Catholics.⁴⁰ Catholics numerically abound in political and public offices on state and local levels. They have seemingly fitted themselves into the American political, social, economic, and intellectual mainstreams. Soon after 1960, with all of the hopes of such as Murray and McAvoy for a reflective and authentic immersion of the faithful into American life, though, came the '60s, a decade of protest and assaults on the given and on authority. And right in the middle of this decade, the Second Vatican Council sought to open the Church more readily to the modern world. Since then, the Church and the larger national society have both had to wrestle with the promises and the difficulties related to an "openness" that is often translated into a sort of non-foundationalism: All is open to question and the questioner is privileged to determine their own truth, or at least what truth their own

conscience will affirm. Both Church and state, and society, appear deeply divided into partisanship not necessarily limited to “liberal and progressive” and “conservative and traditional.” Often one yearns for the civil conversation recommended by Murray, even as one yearns for a more explicit and courageous witness to “*the fullness of life, the theological and sacramental faith and grace of Catholic Christianity*” in the public square, apparently now open to Catholics... if perhaps not Catholicism.

In his recent *A People Adrift: the Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America*, the *New York Times* religion writer, Peter Steinfels, has offered an excellent and generally well-received presentation of issues currently exercising the Church in America. A lack of leadership, effective and thoughtful leadership, troubles this self-pronounced “liberal” Catholic, as does a seeming reluctance on the part of the institutional Church to recognize the need for dialogue and transparency given a more educated and assimilated Catholic population. He is also concerned, however, with the problems as to an authentic Catholic identity of colleges and hospitals and other elements in the American Catholic world. He also cautions liberal or radical Catholics that:

They have been reluctant to measure their program of doctrinal revision and democratic governance in the church against the liberal Protestant experience. They are given no pause by the fact that the ordination of married men and of women; the acceptance of contraception, abortion, and remarriage after divorce; inclusivity in membership; latitude in theological doctrine; and general alignment with liberal social and political concerns—all aspects of contemporary mainline Protestantism that many proponents of an egalitarian and democratic Catholicism would like to emulate—have proved no antidote to decline in these Protestant church bodies.⁴¹

Steinfels does look toward some definite “progressive” ventures, for example the ordination of women as deacons and an open mind about further changes regarding the role of women in the Church, but like McAvoy, he comes down squarely on the need to maintain traditional Catholic faith and doctrine, and to pass on the faith through parishes revived liturgically as well as catechetically. As such, while episcopal leadership is sorely lacking, according to Steinfels, the laity, an informed and faithful laity, have much to offer in the current crisis: “[Part of] the hope is in activists like those who not only say, ‘Keep the faith, change the church,’ but are willing to devote no less thought and effort to keeping the faith than to changing the church.”⁴²

In another challenging and learned recent effort, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History*, John T. McGreevy presents a dialogue in American history about freedom between Catholics and non-Catholic American liberals. The difference between the two sides might be encapsulated in the remark of a Catholic writer in the mid-nineteenth century: “They say that true liberty is a freedom from right as well as from wrong; we assert that it is freedom only from wrong.”⁴³ One hundred years later, fears of Catholic power and its alleged ongoing assault on American democratic ways were yet being raised by, for example, Paul Blanshard and the POAU, and numerous liberal intellectuals, but Americans seemed finally to be accepting their fellow Catholic citizens by 1960. The defense of democracy, individual rights, and religious freedom mounted by Murray and others seemed to indicate that the tension between Catholic and American was dissipating, if not disappearing entirely, despite the upsets surrounding the election of 1960. Perhaps, not, however, given Catholic opposition to euthanasia and assisted suicide, contraception, and abortion which were percolating up as “rights” in the generation after 1930. According to their advocates, such “rights” were manifestations of the continuing development of individual autonomy and individual choice, the cornerstones of American, indeed, human freedom. The Catholic attachments to natural law, and the existence of objective truth, with consequential restraints on the individual stood in stark contrast to what Jacques Barzun had commended in 1939, and what appears to be the contemporary understanding, examined or not. Barzun wrote in favor of a “relativist-instrumentalist philosophy,” and argued that such a non-dogmatic philosophy “is the philosophy of free democracy par excellence.”⁴⁴ Many Catholics have seemed to oppose such a position, at least officially and philosophically, in the conversation in the public square. As Philip Jenkins has noted in *The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice*, however, Catholicism is not merely “subjected to unjust abuse, but that it is virtually the only major [American] institution with which such liberties are still permitted.” And, a new wrinkle has been added to this old story line: In those days of yore, Catholics had been a fairly “united front against prejudice,” but contemporary divisions in the Church had created the spectacle in which “many arguments that would have once have seemed nakedly anti-Catholic [have] now gained an audience among Catholics themselves, giving this rhetoric much greater legitimacy. Catholic divisions contributed to opening the Church to attacks by the mass media that would hitherto have been unthinkable.”⁴⁵

Recently, this unusual circumstance has been brought more emphatically into the open. Joseph A. Varacalli has argued in *The Catholic Experience in America* that during the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church in the United States consciously constructed an institutional and cultural “plausibility structure” or institutional and cultural sub-culture which sustained and nurtured her faithful until the 1960s. With the subsequent withering of much of this Catholic world, and the mainstreaming of so many Catholics, an aggressive secularization has made large inroads into the Catholic community:

With the decomposition of the Church commencing in earnest in the mid-1960s, it was a predictable reality that the majority (not all) of Catholics, now “freed” of the demands of their once integrated and internally consistent subculture, would start to assimilate quickly into an American society emphasizing such values as autonomous individualism, materialism, moral and religious relativism, and utilitarianism. With the destruction of the Catholic “plausibility structure,” it was almost a certainty, orthodox Catholic thinkers argued, that individual Catholics would start to define “success” not in Catholic religious terms, but in terms dictated and articulated in a society that was quickly losing its original Protestant cast and becoming ever more secular.⁴⁶

And, while Catholic “progressives” were applauding these developments as long overdue and in step with modern democracy and ecumenism, etc., what Varacalli calls Catholic “restorationists” were opposing these same developments and their consequences. Rather than a retreat back to some golden age of Catholic ‘ghettoism,’ however, these “restorationists” are intent on working out, or perhaps better stated, cultivating the traditional tension of American and Catholic. Their goals, according to Varacalli, include:

...bringing a dynamic orthodoxy back into the Church and of having it serve as a leaven in the larger society. The Restorationists are concerned with institutionalizing a strong Catholic/Christian presence in the American public square and of co-opting and strengthening whatever is useful in modern life to promote Catholic/Christian goals (e.g., scientific or technological advances; cultural and political ideas such as democracy and the separation of Church and State, properly understood; rational systems to provide mass education and health care services; etc.).⁴⁷

One more voice (but actually two) might be raised here that speaks to the heart of the matter highlighted by the three circumstances identified above in 1960, as well these other observers who write of an American Catholic “crisis” since the 1960s. The Murray project, in particular, but also by logical extension the election of a Catholic who seems to have seen absolutely no meaningful or moral connection between his faith and his public life, along with the effort of an essayist who called for an emergence of Catholics into the public square who must be bringing with them “the fullness of life, the theological and sacramental faith and grace of Catholic Christianity” come together to raise afresh the issue of the compatibility of America and the Catholic faith. The issue is not that the faith cannot or should not be present in American culture and within the American story. Freedom of religion is an extraordinary right enjoyed by Catholics and non-Catholics alike in the United States, a right to be guarded and cherished. Yet, at the same time, a Catholic is by definition someone on a journey, with an allegiance beyond the here and now, with an obligation to evangelize, to share that unearned gift of faith. This is a faith that makes truth-claims, and an apostolic and universal faith that privileges the Good News and Jesus Christ. One does not have to stand on a local street-corner proclaiming this eternal message, but it must be, as it were, the horizon of one’s life and the mark and grounding of one’s charity toward one’s neighbor, even as one loves God above all else. Prudence and a charitable sense of realism in the public square are required, of course, but the obligation ought to gnaw even as it remains. What then of this freedom of religion in the American story, and the tension of American and Catholic? How ought it to be framed, and narrated?

In 1960, the issue was surely the possibility of a Catholic being elected to the presidency, but it was also the compatibility of Catholic beliefs and the American constitutional context. If these two realities were indeed antithetical, Catholic faith and Constitution, then critics were obligated to oppose the election of someone whose faith tradition would undermine the very principles upon which the laws of the land stood. Murray was able to demonstrate that there was a compatibility between the natural law tradition which was part of the Catholic philosophical heritage and certainly present in the American founding. The problem was that the natural law tradition was, at the least, under assault, and the American project was coming to be viewed as rooted in more naturalistic than supra-or supernatural foundations. Whether one prefers to notice positivistic or pragmatic or contextualist or simply majoritarianist impulses, the fundamental grounding of the American republic was coming to be considered either merely of antiquarian

interest or an issue otherwise to be contested. In this sense, then, the uncritical acceptance of the compatibility of American and Catholic, intertwined narratives of meaning, must itself be contested. Murray, of course, noticed this contesting, and the apparent contemporary eclipse of the earlier foundational tradition. It has been argued, then, that the Murray project, while marked with some considerable strengths, was in the end rather too incomplete and simple. It has been argued that what might be called “Americanist history,” such a “belief in the fundamental compatibility of Catholicism and U.S. political institutions,” is quite wanting though a very powerful interpretive paradigm in American Catholic historiography.⁴⁸ It was said that to elect a president of a democratic republic in 1960 and to explain that Americans and Catholics ‘held these same [political and moral] truths,’ was to arrive, to tap directly and confidently into the great American Dream of opportunity and equality, and so to demonstrate the goodness of freedom, religious and otherwise, in America. And, as now ‘typical’ Americans, it was high time for those Catholics to arrive fully in the “City on a Hill” discerned by John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay colony in 1630, ‘with all eyes upon us.’ Michael Baxter has sorted this situation out and noted that despite many good American Catholic historical studies, the “Americanist history” with its attendant belief in the compatibility of Catholicism and American political structures has served to encourage “the kind of methodological atheism that has become so characteristic of the academic writing of history.” And:

This is because Catholic historians since mid century, in spite of their openness to pursuing new and exciting advances in historical methodology, have nevertheless slavishly conformed to one methodological exclusion that remains powerfully operative in the academic guild of professional historians—the exclusion of theology from the explanation and narration of historical events. The effect of this methodological exclusion has been to censor the traditional Catholic belief about the interpenetration of primary and secondary causes and the workings of divine providence in history.⁴⁹

Baxter suggests the possibility of what he styles an Evangelical Catholic historiography, with an accent on personalist categories and the insights of such as Paul Hanley Furfey, a twentieth-century professor of sociology at Catholic University of America, who found Murray’s attempt to ground politics in any but a supernatural end as empty; Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin, and the Catholic Worker movement, who

were critics of statist charity instead of a personal commitment to follow the example of Jesus Christ; and the renowned Catholic liturgist, Dom Virgil Michel, O.S.B., who described the liturgy as a living basis both for worship and for social action. According to Baxter:

When the terms of the [American] history are inverted according to an Evangelical Catholic perspective, it becomes clear that the so-called “arrival” of Catholicism in the United States should be narrated not so much as a success but as a failure, inasmuch as Catholicism’s entry into the U.S. mainstream has been an occasion of accommodation to unchristian elements of the existing political and cultural order.

What, then, might be another historiographical methodology or narrative that might serve more authentically or completely to tell the story of American and Catholic and, perhaps, place the three circumstances of 1960 in a different and perhaps clearer light? In a recent article on the Vatican II document for which John Courtney Murray has received much credit, *Dignitatis Humanae Personae*, or the Declaration on Religious Freedom (1965), William L. Portier has combined gratitude for the document, which he describes as “the most momentous teaching” of the Council, along with a rather direct criticism.⁵⁰ Murray’s description of a natural law tradition, along with the First Amendment, as a foundation for peace (and progress?) in the American polity is described as deeply flawed: Murray’s contention of an affinity between the two is “a highly debatable, if not dubious, interpretation of the American founders and a theologically inadequate understanding of natural law.”⁵¹ Working in a postwar period when an American consensus was prized and encouraged in the face of the Cold War, Murray was championing what Portier calls “a theology of manners,” a recognition of the need for peace and harmony in a religiously pluralist society, and a society in which a Catholic could consequently be elected President of the United States. Portier’s “preferred reading” of *Dignitatis*, which document surely has connections to *We Hold These Truths*, is that it was a recognition not of religious indifferentism, but rather a rejection of the project of Christendom. Portier sees particularly the papacy of John Paul II (“the first evangelical pope since Christendom”) as such a rejection, which “frees the Church to continue the resistance of modern popes, as heads of an international or Catholic body, to the deforming effects of liberalism and nationalism, but without the specter of Constantinianism or integralism.” Rather than a theology of manners and consensus, then,

Portier, as Baxter, looks to a more critical, evangelical commitment by Catholicism and Catholics in the American story: “For Catholics, the end of Christendom cannot mean the end of the Johannine incarnational imperative to make the word flesh. Catholicism cries out to be embodied in a culture at the center of which is the church.”⁵² Simply put, there must be an end, or End, that orders the means, a telos that raises human freedom above a mere democratic proceduralism and ultimately a religious indifferentism.

In an article concerning the Americanist and Americanization tradition so present in American Catholic self-understanding and historiography, Portier has suggested an alternative narrative: inculturation. Portier makes use of a very direct definition of the term offered by Fr. Pedro Arrupe, S.J.: Inculturation is “the incarnation of Christian life and the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs, and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about a ‘new creation.’” Portier argues that making use of an inculturation narrative for American Catholic history might “illumine the experience of the Church in the United States and all of the Americas.” He suggests that:

Here is a more nuanced alternative to Americanization’s built-in equivocation. It allows for a distinction between serious theological reflection on American culture and mere sociological accounts of a seemingly inevitable process of Americanization that a given historian might be for or against. Instead of telling the story of how Catholics became American, historians might use inculturation to join historical reconstruction to the search for religious meaning in the study of U.S. Catholic history.

Portier is well aware that this is not necessarily “academic history as usual. Inculturation is a theological and, indeed, a Christological category. It does not refer to a merely procedural or mechanical mutuality between Catholicism and American culture. Rather, *it privileges Christ*” [italics added].⁵³ This, indeed, is not “academic history as usual,” but one can forgive a theologian for disciplinary poaching when the possibilities are so potentially attractive.⁵⁴

In the end, then, one returns to the beginning: In 1960 the enduring question of whether one could be both an American and a Catholic was invested with several new circumstances: a presidential

election, a book, and an article raised anew the persistent issue of American Catholic identity, individual and institutional. The election of John F. Kennedy, and the publications by Fr. John Courtney Murray and Fr. Thomas T. McAvoy, surely contributed to the conversation as to “the more profound consequences of asking whether one could be an American and a Catholic.” It is, and must be, an enduring question and conversation, but always one grounded firmly, and charitably, and humbly, in the vocation of “*bringing to American democracy at the same time the fullness of life, the theological and sacramental faith and grace of Catholic Christianity.*”⁵⁵

The historiographical challenge raised by the Catholic moment of 1960, then, is whether such a self-conscious *vocation* embraced by scholars, while perhaps immediately suspect in a supposedly value-free and “scientific” academic environment—suspect most likely by non-Catholic and Catholic alike—is not rather an authentic *vocational descriptive* for the American Catholic historian and scholar. Why, indeed, should the potential unity suggested by a theologically-informed history make one uncomfortable amidst the multiplicity and methodological chaos of contemporary American historiography? Rather than a peremptory foreclosing of the traditional comfort of the rhetorically vivid openness and creativity asked of the disinterested observer, it may be that such a prism is, in fact, more flexible and deeply imaginative and empathetic in the re-telling of the American Catholic story. Fideism in a new dress? Perhaps not so if the diligent and honest use of the sources, and the sympathetic appreciation of the American myth, are marked by an openness and creativity yet open in turn to *the fullness of life as promised, and experienced in the theological and sacramental faith and grace of Catholic Christianity.*

Notes

1. In a discussion of “discrimination against Catholics,” Msgr. John Tracy Ellis indicated that Professor Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., had told him that “I regard the prejudice against your Church as the deepest bias in the history of the American people.” See Ellis, *American Catholicism*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969, 1956), 151.

2. Although there are some issues involved in determining exact numbers of Roman Catholics in the United States at specific moments, it would appear that their number in 1850 was between 1.1 and 1.6 million, or c.4.7 to 6.9% of the American population. In 1960, the number was 42 million or 23.4%. See Michael Glazier and Thomas J. Shelley, eds., *The Encyclopedia of American Catholic History* (Collegeville: the Liturgical Press, 1997), 287-288.

3. The next several paragraphs are informed by the excellent, balanced general history by Patrick W. Carey, *Catholics in America: a History* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2004).

4. Cf. Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860: a Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964, 1938). A recent study indicates the extraordinary efforts, in part, to counter the gathering Catholic “menace,” but pays little attention to it specifically, nor to Catholic publishing efforts: David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

5. Carey, *Catholics*, 82-83. Still useful is Oscar Handlin, *Al Smith and His America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1958). For a biographical sketch of Smith (1873-1944) see Michael Glazier’s entry in *Glazier and Shelley*, eds., *Encyclopedia*, 1329-1332.

6. Marshall, vol. 139, 540-549, quotation on 540. Cf. Thomas J. Shelley, “‘What the Hell is an Encyclical’: Governor Alfred E. Smith, Charles Marshall, Esq., and Father Francis P. Duffy,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 15 (Spring 1997), 87-107. Msgr. Shelley also has an interesting comment on this affair and its aftermath in “Vatican II and American Politics,” *America* 189 (October 13, 2003), 16-19.

7. Marshall, 543.

8. Cf. Thomas W. Jodziewicz, “The Wharton-Carroll Controversy and the Promise of American Catholic Life,” in Francis R. Swietek and John R. Sommerfeldt, eds., *Studiosorum Speculum: Studies in Honor of Louis J. Lekai*, O.Cist. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1993), 135-154.

9. Marshall, 544.

10. Smith, vol. 139, 721-728, quotation on 722. For a biographical sketch of Duffy (1871-1932), see Richard G. Smith in Glazier and Shelley, eds., *Encyclopedia*, 466-467.
11. Smith, 724. The Catholic Chief Justices were Roger B. Taney (1835-1864), the successor of John Marshall, and Edward D. White (1910-1921), The current Chief Justice, John Roberts, is a Catholic.
12. *Ibid.*, 725.
13. *Ibid.*, 726. Some might argue that Smith was a trifle sanguine here.
14. John T. McGreevy, "Thinking on One's Own: Catholicism in the American Intellectual Imagination, 1928-1960," *Journal of American History*, 84 (June 1997), 97-131. See also Robert D. Cross, *The Emergence of Liberal Catholicism in America* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968, 1958).
15. Knebel, vol. 23, 13-17.
16. *Ibid.*, 17.
17. "On Questioning Catholic Candidates," Vol. 100, March 7, 1959, 651.
18. "Senator Kennedy's Statement," Vol. XIX, March 16, 1959, 25-26. See Timothy J. Sarbaugh, "Champion or Betrayer of His Own Kind: Presidential Politics and John F. Kennedy's "LOOK" Interview," *American Catholic Historical Records*, 105 (Spring-summer 1995), 55-70, for a more comprehensive survey of Catholic reactions. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., offers an interesting assessment of Kennedy's Catholic faith, which was, he writes, primarily encouraged by Kennedy's mother and sisters. Kennedy could take the Catholic side in historical disputes and use typically Catholic terminology, "nor could one doubt his devotion to his Church or the occasional solace he found in mass." But, the writer of Kennedy's Houston speech, John Cogley (sic, see below, n. 19, 21), was correct, according to Schlesinger, that the senator was "the first President who was a Roman Catholic rather than the first Roman Catholic President." He could be irreverent about Catholic prelates, although he admired Pope John XXIII, he did not frequent the Knights of Columbus circuit [although a member], and "his attitude toward life showed no traces of the black and-white moralism, the pietistic rhetoric, the clericalism, the anti-intellectualism, the prudery, the fear of Protestant society, which had historically characterized parts of the Irish Catholic community in America." Nor was he a committed Catholic intellectual such as Senator Eugene McCarthy. In the end, his religion "was humane rather than doctrinal," much like Franklin D Roosevelt's Episcopalian faith. Kennedy had no real interest in Catholic dogma, he was not, for example, a student of *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII's great 1891 social justice encyclical, and "one can find little organic

intellectual connection between his faith and his politics. However, according to Schlesinger, an adviser to President Kennedy, “his basic attitude was wholly compatible with the sophisticated theology of Jesuits like Father John Courtney Murray, whom he greatly admired.” Schlesinger’s well-remarked admiration for Kennedy included an ironic encomium: Kennedy was not a typical 1950s American Catholic, but “his example helped create the progressive and questing American Catholicism of the sixties,” as Kennedy had demonstrated “that there need be no conflict between Catholicism and modernity, no bar to full Catholic participation in American society.” Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965), 108-110. Cf. a similar interpretation of Kennedy’s Catholicism in Lawrence H. Fuchs, *John F. Kennedy and American Catholicism* (Meredith Press, 1967). For a more critical assessment of Kennedy, see Thomas C. Reeves, *A Question of Character: a Life of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Free Press, 1991). The most recent biography of Kennedy is Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2003), which is in agreement as to the nature of Kennedy’s religious faith as not quite well-informed, nor deeply-held.

19. For the circumstances of the Houston speech, see Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1960* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1962), 259-262. According to White, the speech was the work of Kennedy and his close adviser Ted Sorenson, a Unitarian, and succeeded in that Kennedy “had for the first time more fully and explicitly than any other thinker of his faith defined the personal doctrine of a modern Catholic in a democratic society.” (261-262) Schlesinger’s only comment on the Houston speech is that: “On September 12, before the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, he knocked religion out of the campaign as an intellectually respectable issue; it would persist, of course, as a stream of rancor underground.” *A Thousand Days*, 68.

20. For the text of the speech, and reactions, see Patricia Barrett, *Religious Liberty and the American Presidency: a Study in Church-State Relations* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963). This volume contains a very affirmative Foreword by John Courtney Murray as to the issues raised. Much of the slim volume (60-148), “Campaign Pieces,” includes a lengthy listing (with brief and informative descriptions) of the booklets and pamphlets (anti-JFK and anti-Catholic), as well as newspaper articles, books, and periodicals concerning the campaign.

An interesting Protestant reaction to the speech appeared in *Christian Century* 77 (September 28, 1960), 1109, in an approving

piece entitled “Kennedy Clarifies Stand to Houston Ministers”: “It is difficult to see how a Roman Catholic candidate could have gone farther or said more and remained a member of that church. The statement strengthens the evidence that Senator Kennedy could resist political pressures from his church.” Thus, Kennedy would be free to take on such issues as international relations, foreign aid, civil rights, education, defense, slums and depressed areas, agriculture, as well as the issue of “a worthy national purpose.” Ibid.

21. Schlesinger, *ibid.*, 107. In *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), Theodore Sorenson, a Kennedy speechwriter and advisor, has indicated that he was the principal author of the Houston speech, relying on the candidate’s previous comments and statements on the issue. It was read over the telephone to Murray, “a leading and liberal exponent of the Catholic position on church and state,” and reviewed by James Wine and John Cogley: 188-195, quotation on 190. Sorenson does not record Murray’s response. But, Gerald P. Fogarty, S.J., has written that Murray was not enamored of Kennedy’s strict wall of separation between church and state, and had perhaps offered some suggestions during the phone call despite the awkwardness of the time restraint. Murray, of course, did not at all consider religion to be strictly a private matter: Fogarty, “Reflections on Contemporary Anti-Catholicism,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 21 (Fall 2003), 37-44, notice of conversation on 41.

22. The biographical sketch of Murray in Glazier and Shelley, eds., *Encyclopedia*, 993-996, is by Joseph A. Komonchak. It may be supplemented by the entry on Murray by J. Leon Hooper in John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes, eds., *American National Biography* 24 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 16, 158-160. Both sources include bibliographies.

23. Vol. 76, 64-70; quotation on 64.

24.. Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), ix-x.

25. *Ibid.*, 32.

26. *Ibid.*, 76. Murray’s lamentations may be found in two places in the text: “Religious pluralism is against the will of God. But it is the human condition; it is written into the script of history. It will not somehow marvelously cease to trouble the city” (23); and “... government represents the truth of society as it actually is; and the truth is that American society is religiously pluralist. The truth is lamentable; bit is nonetheless true. Many of the beliefs entertained within society ought not to be believed, because they are false; nonetheless men believe them. It is not the function of government to resolve the dispute between conflicting truths, all of which claim the final validity of transcendence.

As representative of a pluralist society, wherein religious truth is—as it must be—free, government undertakes to represent the principle of freedom.” (74-75)

27. *Ibid.*, 50. Murray suggested that there were three other interpretations, or “Theologies of the First Amendment”: Some did see this part of the amendment as “true articles of faith” and akin to Protestant “free church” beliefs; a second interpretation viewed the articles as merely law, a view of American deists and rationalists; and a third interpretation was that of “secularizing Protestants, so called,” in whose consideration their own Protestantism and America’s secular culture were the norm of the preferred “secular democratic society” in which there was “a coincidence of religious and secular-liberal concepts of freedom.” (48-53)

28. *Ibid.*, 214-215, 335.

29. *Time*, *ibid.*, 70. [One is put in mind of the September 12, 2006, lecture of Pope Benedict XVI at the University of Regensburg, “Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections.” He seems to be calling for the same sort of dialogue both within the Muslim community as well as with it. The subtleties and goodwill of the pope’s challenge have, not surprisingly, been misinterpreted and misreported.]

30. Murray, *We Hold*, 42-43. For critical comments on the Murray project, see below. One might begin, though, with Michael J. Baxter, C.S.C., “John Courtney Murray, “ in Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 150-164, who argues that no American consensus exists, much less the natural law tradition identified by Murray, and thus “If Murray was right that the church is the only living repository of the moral tradition, then loyalty to Christ, to the politics of Jesus, must be in fundamental tension with loyalty to the nation-state” (163); the *U.S. Catholic Historian* 24 (Winter 2006), which issue is entitled “Dignitatis Humanae, The Declaration of Religious Liberty, on its Fortieth Anniversary”; and Robert P. Hunt and Kenneth L. Grasso, eds., *John Courtney Murray and the American Civil Conversation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992). Robert W. McElroy, “He Held These Truths: John Courtney Murray and the Future of American Public Discourse,” *America* 192 (February 7, 2005), 8-12, admits some of the time-bound elements in Murray’s writings, but is yet a well-taken appreciation of the continued currency of certain of Murray’s assertions about the American democratic project, but viewed through, and informed by the Catholic tradition: “1. The American experiment in democracy rests primarily upon a moral consensus rooted in the transcendent rights of the human

person....2. Because the foundation of American democracy is a moral consensus, substantive and civil dialogue within American society concerning the key issues of the day is necessary for democracy's survival.... 3. American culture is warped by an exaggerated dedication to technology and material acquisition, and thus is prey to the increasing instrumentalization of the human person in the name of progress. 4. The primary challenge to religious liberty in America in the present day comes not from government's establishment of religion, but from encroaching denials of the free exercise of religion....5. American foreign policy must seek to attain the international common good as well as the national interest of the United States." (passim)

31. Richard Gribble, C.S.C., "Thomas T. McAvoy, C.S.C.: Historian, Archivist and Educator," *American Catholic Studies*, 115 (Spring 2004), 25-43.

32. McAvoy, in *Thought* 35 (Winter 1960), 583-600; quotations on 585-587.

33. *Ibid.*, 588.

34. *Ibid.*, 590.

35. *Ibid.*, 591. This interpretation is contested. One might begin with an issue of the *U.S. Catholic Historian* 11 (Summer 1993) entitled "The Americanist Controversy: Recent Historical and Theological Perspectives." For other criticism, see below.

36. McAvoy, *ibid.*, 592.

37. *Ibid.*, 597.

38. *Ibid.*, 599. The appreciation was not universal among Catholics in the nation, as McAvoy somewhat mysteriously reported: "That some Catholics have also, in some communities, accepted some less desirable local traditions is not surprising since the struggle to control the mind of the American people is a vehement one."

39. *Ibid.*, 599-600. Cf. Ellis, "American Catholics and the Intellectual Life," *Thought* 1955 351-388. McAvoy's charitable "charge!" reads quite a bit differently than the notorious public, and duly publicized, comments of the irrepressible Archbishop John Hughes of New York in November 1850 in the midst of the nativist reaction to Catholics. Hughes was clear that the purpose of the Catholic Church was to extend its spiritual rule to the entire world: "There is no secret about this. The object we hope to accomplish in time, is to convert all Pagan nations, and all Protestant nations, even England with her proud Parliament and imperial sovereign. There is no secrecy in all this. It is the commission of God to his church, and not a human project... Protestantism pretends to have discovered a great secret. Protestantism startles our eastern borders occasionally on the intention of the Pope with regard to the

Valley of the Mississippi, and dreams that it has made a wonderful discovery. Not at all. Everybody should know it. Everybody should know that we have for our mission to convert the world—including the inhabitants of the United States,—the people of the cities, and the people of the country, the officers of the navy and the marines, commanders of the army, the Legislatures, the Senate, the Cabinet, the President, and all!” *Billington, Protestant Crusade*, 291. Cf. Richard Shaw, *Dagger John: the Unquiet Life and Times of Archbishop John Hughes of New York* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).

40. A web-site that offers a quick source for religious affiliations of presidents, supreme court justices, senators, representatives, and governors is www.adherents.com. As of May 2005, 22 governors were Catholics, as well as 23 senators and 130 representatives.

41. Steinfels (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004, 2003), 354-5.

42. *Ibid.*, 388.

43. McGreevy (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2003), 36-37.

44. *Ibid.*, 231.

45. Jenkins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 15, 48.

46. Varacalli (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 2006), 44.

47. *Ibid.*, 50. In Part VI of his book (“What Lies Ahead? Charting Out Different Possible Scenarios for the Catholic Church in the United States,” [243-252]), Varacalli suggests six possibilities: “Dissolution,” “An ‘American’ Church,” “Retreat to a 1950s Pre-Vatican Church or to a Rural Sectlike Existence,” “Neo-Orthodoxy,” “Formal Schism,” and “Pluralism” or “Protestanization.” He does add, hopefully, though: “The appointment of Pope Benedict XVI was immediately cheered by orthodox Catholics while disappointing and angering progressive Catholics. His reign is expected to increase, at least incrementally, the hopes and chances of the restorationist camp within the Catholic Church organized in the name of John Paul II, both within the United States of America and throughout the world.” (255)

48. Cf. Michael J. Baxter, C.S.C., “Writing History in a World Without Ends: an Evangelical Catholic Critique of United States Catholic History,” *Pro Ecclesia* 5 (1996), 440-469; and William L. Portier, “Americanism and Inculturation: 1899-1999,” *Communio* 27 (Spring 2000), 139-160. See also the 1993 summer issue of *U.S. Catholic Historian* noticed in n. 35 above.

49. Baxter, “Writing History,” 468.

50. Portier, “Theology of Manners as Theology of Containment: John Courtney Murray and *Dignitatis Humanae* Forty Years Later,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 24 (Winter 2006), 83-105; quotation on 102.

51. *Ibid.*, 97.

52. Ibid., 104.

53. Portier, “Americanism and Inculturation,” 157. To expand just a bit, given perhaps the anticipated qualms regarding an apparently less (or more) than “scientific” and “objective” academic history, or some sort of ‘fideistic’ historiography, Portier argues: “Interpreting Catholicism in the U.S. through the medium of inculturation, historians and theologians would not necessarily gain a sure theoretical standpoint above cultures. Instead they would find themselves in a dialogical position, tacking back and forth between Catholic and American. Neither are *abstract* essences [italics added]. Nor are they merely juxtaposed. We are both and more simultaneously and incarnationally. The American pole of the exchange cannot, on theological grounds, as Hecker was fond of pointing out, be simply bereft of Christ the Logos. Christ may, however, be well hidden. In addition to the requisite research, finding him might be more like a process of spiritual discernment than a theoretical move.

Historians are rightly wary of imposing abstract constructs such as inculturation on what are sometimes called the data of history. But historiographical studies make clear that historians of American Catholicism rarely avoid their own unspoken theologies. That leaves a space for inculturation. Rather than as a rigid theoretical structure, it might serve, for the present, as a kind of metavisoin or heuristic from which to do American Catholic history. Fashioning inculturation into an incarnationally-based analytical category, with both retrospective and prospective potential, would require long-term efforts that far exceeds the limits of this essay.” (159)

54. One might consult the *U.S. Catholic Historian* 23 (Spring 2005), an issue entitled “Theology and History,” for some discussion of the relationship of these two ways of knowing.

55. Cf. Fogarty, “Contemporary Anti-Catholicism”: “As long as Catholicism in the United States remains loyal to the Bishop of Rome and maintains that it has the authority to teach doctrine as something objective, it will be foreign to the contemporary American ethos.” And, given the recent sex abuse scandals and the shortcomings of episcopal and clerical fidelity, i.e., “despite its weaknesses and the sinfulness of its leaders, the Catholic Church still holds that revelation and doctrine are objective.” And perhaps in one last nod to the issue of American and Catholic, Fogarty cautions that the Church’s “structure in the United States is in need of reform, especially in the areas of accountability and over-sight, but reformers have to avoid seeming to adopt the premises of contemporary anti-Catholicism by rejecting the need for structure and authority.” (44)