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Catholicism and Freedom

A look at the historical roots of Anglo-Saxon suspicions of Catholic intolerance

The thoughtful Catholic of Anglo-Saxon or Celtic origin is generally perplexed when Protestants, in listing their reservations about Catholicism, give high priority to a fear of Catholic intolerance. Surveying his own past, in centuries prior to the present one, the Catholic is inclined to see in it an almost unbroken record of Protestant intolerance toward Catholics. Whether the history he considers is that of England, Ireland, Scotland or newer nations of Anglo-Saxon inspiration, the Catholic tends to regard himself as a victim rather than an agent of intolerance. He looks upon his history since the 16th century as a constant struggle to gain political and religious freedom. Profoundly convinced that he is dedicated by sentiment and tradition to the principle of liberty for all, he finds it hard to comprehend the persistent Protestant suspicion that at bottom he favors some form of totalitarian control for civil and religious society.

Sometimes, in his efforts to understand his Protestant neighbor, he reasons that perhaps the latter has formed his opinions from observing a traditionally Catholic country such as Spain, where special conditions discouraged the growth of toleration. And if such indeed is the case, he may forcefully point out how unfair it is to Catholicism in general to burden it with responsibility for all that goes on in a particular country with its own peculiar cultural traditions. While this approach may carry some weight with a Protestant of exceptional good will, even he will instinctively feel there is more to the question than his Catholic friend is prepared to admit. Despite all disclaimers, he is convinced, something at the core of Catholicism is inimical to freedom. It is this instinctive mistrust that so perplexes the Catholic and prompts him at times to attribute bad faith to his Protestant friend. At this point it would be better if the Catholic reviewed the historic reasons underlying Protestant suspicions, so that he may be better prepared to remove misconceptions.

Suspicion of Catholicism as a threat to religious and political freedom has been a permanent feature of

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Anglo-Saxon thinking since the Reformation. From the moment the English monarch united in himself headship of both Church and State, the Catholic who pledged spiritual allegiance to Rome was, in theory if not in fact, a threat to the established order. Following upon the social upheaval of the 15th century, the English nation desired order at any price—even if it meant putting up with a despotic ruler. If the king was to maintain an ordered society, it was incumbent that he be obeyed in things spiritual as well as temporal. Following the monarch in religion was held up as a civic as well as a religious duty. If the king acknowledged the spiritual supremacy of the Pope, so might the people; if he chose to deny it, the people could affirm it at their peril. The concept of separation of Church and State was as foreign to 16th-century England as to 16th-century France or Spain. As long as England had a Protestant ruler, the Catholic appeared as a potential traitor; he stood for dissent in a world that demanded total assent.

From the time when Elizabeth I indicated that she represented Protestant supremacy, a large group of her Catholic subjects hoped she would be replaced by a Catholic monarch. If there were any doubts in the Protestant mind as to Catholic aspirations, Pius V successfully removed them with his bull *Regnans in Excelsis*, which deposed Elizabeth and declared it to be the sacred duty of his spiritual children to disobey her mandates. Henceforth, a monarchy pledged to the maintenance of Protestant supremacy had everything to fear from a hostile Catholicism. In vain might a heroic Edmund Campion exclaim on the scaffold: "We are dead men to the world, we traveled only for souls." In the light of papal pronouncements and incitements, no Protestant would believe him.

If fear of the English Catholic and the Holy See were not enough to make Protestants rest uneasy, there were also to be reckoned with the ever present threats of France and Spain—the two most formidable of European powers, both militantly Catholic. In addition, there was a hostile Ireland, its large Catholic population seething with unrest and eager to end Protestant rule; not until two centuries of oppression had left the Irish nation exhausted and spiritless could English

Protestants cease looking nervously westward. In England itself there was always a small group of Catholic adventurers ready to commit themselves to the support of any scheme that promised to overthrow the Protestant monarchy. Catholic plots against the Crown were by no means all Protestant fabrications. Protestants had every reason to be concerned about their security. Just how realistic their fears were was dramatically seen at the end of the 17th century, when a Catholic monarch ascended the throne and immediately began to work for a full-scale restoration of Catholicism to its former position of supremacy. A half-century later, Protestant England once again trembled with fear in the face of fierce Scottish invaders committed to the restoration of a Catholic king.

I t is no cause for wonder that Protestants did not feel secure until the Catholic population of England had been reduced to a mere handful. But by this time nearly three centuries of uneasiness had left the Protestant mind scarred by a deeply rooted suspicion of Catholicism as a threat to their freedom. Even when Catholicism as an external threat was dead, the typical Anglo-Saxon needed only a slight Popish prod to arouse his ancestral fears. The no-Popery hysteria that swept England upon the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in 1850 showed just how long-lived the fear of Catholic domination was.

A distrust of Catholicism as an enemy of freedom was carried across the Atlantic by Protestant emigrants to the United States and Canada; it was carried to Australia and New Zealand—indeed, to every quarter of the globe where British culture was transplanted. It has been given permanent record in a host of literary and historical masterpieces which, generation upon generation, have been assiduously absorbed by Catholic and Protestant readers alike. It manifests itself to this day when controverted political and religious issues involving Catholic-Protestant groupings are discussed.

In the past few years, however, the cloud of suspicion has considerably lightened. There is now hope of a genuine understanding, provided both Catholics and Protestants make a serious effort to appreciate each other's past. Protestants must generously recognize that English-speaking Catholics down through the centuries have suffered much to remain attached to the religion of their choice, i.e., to remain spiritually free. To maintain freedom of conscience they were frequently called upon to sacrifice material wealth, social position and, on occasion, life itself. Their contribution to the development of a free society has not been insignificant. While Protestants tend to interpret the growth of democracy in terms of a free Parliament developing against the arbitrary powers of the monarchy, they often leave unacknowledged the debt the modern liberal state owes to those who refused to bow even to an autocratic Parliament. In the stark antithesis some Protestant writers see between Catholicism and democracy, there appears to be no real appreciation of how well the British constitutional system—the model for all democratic states—harmonizes with the best in Catholic political thought. Lord Acton was fond of pointing out that England, in its political institutions, preserved a truer Catholic spirit than any of the Catholic nations.

Catholics, on their part, must frankly admit that if they have been mistrusted in the past, they themselves are far from blameless. Fear, not religious bigotry, was more often than not at the bottom of Protestant suspicions. Catholics must also recognize that until their highest authority speaks forcibly and unequivocally on the side of toleration, Protestants will remain suspicious of Catholic aims.

English-speaking Catholics have in the past demonstrated their deep attachment and heroic loyalty to the Holy See. Now that their Church is engaged in a searching re-evaluation of its own institutions and policies, they may with propriety urge that Rome should proclaim publicly and clearly that the Catholic Church stands for political and religious freedom for all men. They should press for a declaration on freedom, not simply that it may serve to reassure Protestants, but rather that it may bear witness to the truth. English-speaking Catholics know—better than most, perhaps—the terrible consequences of intolerance. Having for centuries experienced its tragic effects, they have come to recognize it as evil and they cannot wish it on others. The bishops at Vatican Council II have a unique opportunity to correct a great misconception.

Museum Gothics

Detached symbols from some heavenly Jerusalem,
these worm-eaten saints make awkward gestures
(from sealed displays on aseptic floors) toward
no guildsman or cleric who divine beyond forms
and would not understand this strange liturgy
of classified display in which they participate
with the Ming Dynasty.

        The Madonna has locked her hand
with her naked little son's. They endure the years
with only a slight yellowing about the smile.
It is this age's irony that it revarnishes the smile,
classifies and displays and sees only the one grace.

JESSE WRIGHT