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## Catholic Identity and Allegiance to the Patriot Cause in the American Revolution

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# Catholic Identity and Allegiance to the Patriot Cause in the American Revolution

## Abstract

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Always a minute and persecuted minority in British America, most Catholics by the time of the American Revolution flocked to the Patriot cause for independence, and greater liberty for themselves. This paper explores the historical basis for Protestant prejudice toward Catholics, and reveals that Protestant Patriots in America accepted Catholics in the ranks of the Continental Army and Navy in the common struggle to achieve American independence.

## Keywords

Catholics in the American Revolution

## Cover Page Footnote

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## Introduction

“The Holy Ghost has so worked upon & tutored the minds of men, that now, agreeably to the dictates of our own consciences, we may sing canticles of praise to the Lord in a Country no longer foreign or unfriendly to us, but a Country now become our own & taking us into her protection...”<sup>1</sup>

Future bishop John Carroll preached these words in a sermon of gratitude in 1785 pronouncing a new era for America and American Catholics in the aftermath of the War for Independence.<sup>2</sup> This paper investigates Catholic identity and allegiance to the Patriot cause at the time of the American Revolution. Attitudes of Protestant Patriot opinion on Catholic colonists will be examined and the transmogrification of anti-Catholic sentiment that ultimately accepted Catholic colonists to the ranks of the Continental Army and state militias.

By the time of the American Revolution, Roman Catholics were denied religious liberty in twelve of the thirteen original colonies. John Tracy Ellis wrote that a "universal anti-Catholic bias was brought to Jamestown in 1607 and vigorously cultivated in all the thirteen colonies from Massachusetts to Georgia."<sup>3</sup> Roman Catholics were allowed to worship freely only in Pennsylvania where liberty of conscience was granted to all who believed in God. However, Roman Catholics were prohibited from participating in the public life of the colony through a qualifying oath enacted by the Pennsylvania Assembly.<sup>4</sup> Even in Maryland, the first colony to allow Roman Catholic settlement, Catholics were prohibited from free exercise of religion and disqualified from holding public office after 1689.

Why were Roman Catholics heavily persecuted by English Protestants, not only in Great Britain, but in the British mainland colonies as well? Intolerance for Roman Catholicism was born from numerous theological and doctrinal issues stemming from the Protestant Reformation, and had a Scriptural basis as well. The Biblical accounts of the Amalekites found in Exodus,

Deuteronomy, and 1 Kings were embraced by English Protestants to justify their intolerance for Roman Catholics, and for American Indians as well. From the time of the Enlightenment, writers throughout the English-speaking world attempted to incorporate the ideals and spirit of rationalism within English Protestant theology and practice. Despite the growing religious toleration that characterized the age of rationalism, the “discriminatory treatment of Catholics reflected a conflict between two significant eighteenth-century values: that of a toleration of religious differences on the grounds of either humanitarianism or indifference to theology; and that of a rationalist-scientific viewpoint that hoped to destroy the authoritarian-traditionalist approach to knowledge identified with Roman Catholic dogma.”<sup>5</sup> However, the doctrine of the “Protestant Interest” perhaps had the greatest effect inflaming anti-Catholicism in colonial and revolutionary America.

#### The Doctrine of the “Protestant Interest”

From the time of the English Reformation to the Glorious Revolution of 1688, English Protestants formulated a loose union among their fractured and variegated numbers that commonly was referred to as the “Protestant Interest.” Once English Protestants rid themselves of James II and his Catholic heir to the throne, “the predominantly Anglican members of Parliament set themselves up as global defenders of what they called “the Protestant Interest.” This “interest,” they believed – just like their Calvinist countrymen – was a commitment to individual freedom.”<sup>6</sup>

The alliance between Anglicans and Calvinists that followed the Glorious Revolution was not automatic, and it was a rocky road. The proponents of the “Protestant Interest” labored to establish a trans-Atlantic “English” identity that was rooted in a generic version of

Protestantism. “In the decades that followed the Glorious Revolution, New England’s residents became so invested in this generic Protestantism – [which was] defined more by an opposition to Catholicism and a commitment to liberty than by a Calvinist understanding of the reality of human depravity and unconditional election.”<sup>7</sup> According to historian Thomas Kidd, “the overall Protestant faith represented spiritual and political freedom, whereas Catholicism, or what was called the spirit of popery, represented tyranny and bondage. And by 1765, ‘popery’ meant not just Catholicism but any form of oppression.”<sup>8</sup> Kidd maintained that the “American colonists saw the series of wars from the 1740s to the 1770s, leading up to the American Revolution, as divinely designed to vindicate both liberty and Protestantism.”<sup>9</sup> As proof of the “providential victory of the British over the French, many Americans believed God was delivering the “Protestant interest’ from the Catholic menace.”<sup>10</sup> Historian Maura Jane Farrelly wrote that the “cementing of ‘English’ and ‘Protestant’ identity that happened in the wake of the Glorious Revolution, however, failed to stamp out one very curious animal in the early modern British world: The English Catholic. No matter how hard they tried, Great Britain’s monarchs and MPs never did manage to eradicate Catholicism from the land.”<sup>11</sup>

### Catholic Identity in the American Colonies

By the time of the American revolution Roman Catholics were estimated to be just under one percent of the colonies’ total white population. There were only 56 Catholic parishes in the United States representing 1.7% of the population in 1776 out of 3,228 religious congregations, all of which were Protestant (except for 5 synagogues).<sup>12</sup> In Maryland, Catholics made up as much as 10 percent of the white population.<sup>13</sup> Catholics were among the wealthiest and most influential members of Maryland society. As such they “consequently saw themselves as full and contributing members to Maryland society who had earned the right to play a role in the political

affairs of the colony.”<sup>14</sup> Catholics made up a small portion of the white population by in British America in the eighteenth century; they were clustered in Maryland, Pennsylvania, New York, and the New Jersey shores. Roman Catholics were nearly altogether absent in New England and just a smattering in Virginia. Despite their small numbers, any Catholic presence in the British colonies was conspicuous and bore scrutiny.

In respect to Catholicism, Maryland was a special case among all the British colonies. The Maryland colony had distinguished itself from other colonial ventures with the promise of religious toleration (*de facto* religious liberty) for all who arrived on its shores.<sup>15</sup> From the very start, the second Lord Baltimore implored the Catholic minority that helped found Maryland in 1634 to keep a low profile as to not provoke Protestant ire.

Because of the privileges granted in the Maryland charter, English law did not apply to Maryland. The governor and assembly could enact legislation independent of Parliament. Lord Baltimore used his prerogative as proprietor to prevent English penal laws from being put into effect in Maryland, “enabling him to extend the rights and privileges of English citizens to all his settlers without regard to religion.” It was in this environment that Catholics and Protestants coexisted for fifty-five years before Lord Baltimore was removed from power.<sup>16</sup>

English identity was defined by profession of the Protestant faith. Anti-Catholicism served as a unifying force in the development of an English identity. As a result of the English Reformation, religious and political leaders wanted to clearly distinguish their beliefs from the Roman Catholic Church to define themselves as a Protestants. “The struggle among Catholics for a sense of identity as English citizens, as well English Protestant fears in the British mainland colonies largely transferred to the colonies with the English settlers in all of the colonies.”<sup>17</sup>

Under the pastoral care of the Jesuits, Maryland's Catholic community experienced a small religious network of priests that provided its members with a stable and supportive environment to support religious worship."<sup>18</sup> Even after the Society of Jesus was suppressed by the Holy See in 1773, Jesuits in America continued to minister to Catholics in Maryland.

The Jesuits stressed the themes of personal suffering, penance, and redemption as a means for the faithful to cope with Catholic penal measures. The Jesuits reversed the intentions of the discrimination and persecution Catholics endured for their beliefs; instead of allowing demoralization of members of the community, the Jesuits sought to promote the discrimination as welcome challenges to their faith.<sup>19</sup> "This was not a 'gospel of acceptance' but a rallying call to defend their faith. Despite the penal laws, Catholics did not compromise their faith to gain acceptance. Rather they persevered."<sup>20</sup>

By the time of the American Revolution, Protestant Americans continued to use the language of "anti-popery to defend their rights and express their fears of tyranny, because that language was evocative, effective, and easily understood. But the language was no longer directed against the Jesuits who lived in Maryland or the wealthy, disenfranchised laypeople those Jesuits served. Rather, the language of anti-popery was direct against the members of Parliament, and eventually the King of England-all of whom were Protestant."<sup>21</sup>

### Evolution of Catholic Support for the American Revolution

Catholics who had to exist in an environment of intolerance and discrimination had to have an attitude that fostered a distinction between spiritual and temporal realms. The exercise of Catholic practice and traditions required accommodation and adaptation. The decision to remain Catholic in an overwhelming Protestant community thus required compromises and flexibility to



maintain one's sense of identity as a Catholic."<sup>22</sup> In Maryland, Catholics were thoroughly integrated into the economic, cultural, historical, and-for the first 55 years of the colony's existence-political landscape.

Catholics began to view themselves as Marylandians instead of English in the period following the Glorious Revolution.<sup>23</sup> Anti-Catholicism was the force that influenced America's first Catholics to adapt an individualistic, rights-oriented, understanding of freedom.<sup>24</sup> "One of the many ironies of the American Revolution is that the same religious fears that convinced America's Protestants to rise up against their king also convinced America's Catholics to join them in this endeavor. Protestants, it must be said, were more than happy to have Catholics in the fight – even as they burned the pope and King George in effigy."<sup>25</sup>

Time and experience living together as neighbors and family by marriage in some parts of the British colonies fostered an acceptance and tolerance of Catholics in society. "Fears of Catholicism at the time of the Founding were very real; fears of actual Catholics, however, tended not to materialize, especially among Protestants in Maryland and, to a lesser extent, Pennsylvania and New York, which was where nearly all of British North America's non-Canadian Catholics lived."<sup>26</sup> Many English Protestants learned they trusted Catholics, "even as they feared Catholicism and took steps throughout the eighteenth century to ensure that 'popery' would never get the upper hand in their colonies and trump liberty. The experiences that America's first Catholics had in these colonies – right before, during, and then after the war for independence – reveal the complex nature of anti-Catholicism at the time of the Founding."<sup>27</sup>

Maura Jane Farrelly, in an interview in 2012, observed that "men who were proposing and implementing anti-Catholic legislation were also married to Catholics and descended from Catholics; they owned land with Catholics, entered business partnerships with Catholics, and

sometimes even attended religious services that were conducted by Catholic priests, because so few Anglican ministers were willing to travel to North America. ‘Anti-Catholicism’ in Maryland was not necessarily about a fear of actual Catholics by the time of the American Revolution.”<sup>28</sup> She further explained there was a kind of melting of hostility to Catholics in the years leading to the revolutionary period. “In Maryland the Catholic population’s commitment to the Patriot cause was there from the very beginning.”<sup>29</sup> There was no discernable difference between Catholic support before 1778 with the alliance with France, and the number of Catholics who joined afterward.

However, not all Catholics in America supported independence from the British Empire. Roman Catholic Loyalists were few, and mainly from Philadelphia (like New York, a noticeably Loyalist city).<sup>30</sup> The Catholic population in Pennsylvania was less than half the size of Maryland, and many were Germans who found they had more in common with German speaking Protestants than with English speaking Catholics. Additionally, many Pennsylvania German Catholics were loyal to King George III, who incidentally was also the elector of Hanover.<sup>31</sup> Further, the Catholic community in Pennsylvania, and New York for that matter, were fragmented and not nearly as community tight as Maryland.<sup>32</sup>

In 1778 British General Howe organized a local Loyalist company of Roman Catholic Volunteers in Philadelphia that probably never exceeded 200 members. Many of the members were deserters from other militias and Valley Forge, “so their numbers and allegiance were never stable. As membership shrank, the Roman Catholic Volunteers was later absorbed into the Volunteers of Ireland, a less Catholic and more regularized regiment.... which deployed later from New York in late 1779 or 1780 to Charleston.”<sup>33</sup>

### Catholics in the Continental Army and State Militias

With the outbreak of war in 1775, army service influenced religious toleration in the ranks. When the new states began crafting constitutions in 1776, with Virginia, Pennsylvania and Maryland pondering proposals for religious toleration, many Catholics stepped forward in service to their nation.<sup>34</sup> Figures on how many Catholics served in the Continental Army or the state militias is speculative as records of religious affiliations were not normally recorded. Estimations would be at least five percent of the uniformed soldiers of the Patriot cause were Catholic, in excess of the Catholic percentage of the population.<sup>35</sup>

George Washington was an inspired leader and recognized that he needed all Americans, irrespective of religion or social standing, to support the armed forces of the United States. His genius illustrating inclusion and respect for others was demonstrated immediately after taking command of the Continental Army in 1775. General Washington issued an “Address to the Inhabitants of Canada” as American forces approached Montreal. He said, in part, “Let no one flee as before an enemy. The cause of America and of liberty is the cause of every virtuous American citizen, whatever may be his religion or descent.”<sup>36</sup> Washington issued a general order on Pope’s Day, November 5, 1775, ending the traditional observance planned by his soldiers. The general order read in part “at such a juncture and in such circumstances, to be insulting their religion is so monstrous as not to be suffered or excused.”<sup>37</sup>

Much of the literature on the participation of Catholics in the War for Independence lists many notably contributions and leadership, such as John Barry with the Continental Navy (twin Father of the U.S. Navy, with John Paul Jones), and others. George Washington appointed several Catholics to his inner circle as aides de camp, including John Fitzgerald and Stephen

Moylan. They served well, and Moylan was later advanced by Washington as a cavalry commander.<sup>38</sup> Despite anti-Catholic rhetoric, there is little evidence to show that Continental Army leadership (with the exception of Benedict Arnold, who was virulently anti-Catholic) never accused Catholics among them of being dangerous, even as they railed against the threat of popery. That “explains why Protestant soldiers who hanged the pope in effigy every November 5<sup>th</sup> were still able to serve side-by-side with Catholics...”<sup>39</sup>

### Epilogue

Historically, Maryland Catholics knew what it was to experience religious toleration - and then lose it. “Such toleration was something that English Catholics in the United Kingdom would not enjoy until 1829. Catholics in Maryland understood that the reason they had lost religious toleration was that their colony was tied to England.... This reality rendered Maryland’s Catholics uniquely capable of accepting the psychological implications of independence for England.”<sup>40</sup>

Maryland’s Catholics understood after 1689 that English identity alone was not going to provide them with the liberty they sought. To claim the rights of Englishmen, they were going to have to reject English identity, and adopt ‘Marylandian’ identity, since religious toleration had been a fundamental component of Maryland’s founding. “In 1776 that is precisely what they did.”<sup>41</sup>

By the 1770s Maryland Catholic were the colonists most prepared to accept the cultural and psychological implications of independence from England. They had been transforming into Americans ever since the first Catholics set foot on Maryland’s western shore in 1634.”<sup>42</sup> The

American Revolution enabled Catholics of the English colonies of North America to earn a new and better place for themselves in a new emerging American Republic.<sup>43</sup>

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