ANTI-CATHOLIC SERMONS IN VICTORIAN BRITAIN

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There is no longer that general dislike, dread, and aversion to Popery, which was once almost universal in this realm. The edge of the old British feeling about Protestantism seems blunted and dull.

–J.C. Ryle¹

The 19th-century reader seeking to arm him- or herself against the blandishments of Rome could turn to a number of useful sources: lecture series, whether attended live or read in their published form; Catholic deconversion narratives written by ex-nuns, ex-priests, and the occasional layman; magazines dedicated to the Protestant cause; anti-Catholic catechisms; tracts and pamphlets galore; reprints of earlier Protestant classics, ranging from John Foxe’s Acts and Monuments (full or abridged) to Anthony Gavin’s The Red Dragon or Master-Key of Popery; potted history; and didactic fiction. In this veritable cacophony of texts competing for the reader’s attention, the sermon came closest to the tract or pamphlet in its ability to respond almost instantly to the ebb and flow of particular Protestant causes. Obviously, there would be some delay between the sermon’s initial oral delivery and its eventual appearance in the press, which might be speeded by a full printing or report in a dedicated journal like The Pulpit. An enterprising preacher like the indefatigable (and apparently inexhaustible) Baptist Charles Haddon Spurgeon could publish a new sermon every week, but even relatively unknown clergymen might see an individual sermon through the press fairly rapidly, and certainly in the same year as they originally delivered it.

It is not surprising, then, that the sheer quantity of anti-Catholic sermons tracks fairly closely to the sheer quantity of anti-Catholic uproar in the culture at large. Historians have consistently identified the early 1850s as the high water mark in Victorian anti-Catholic sentiment, thanks to the resentment rapidly compounding on a series of perceived slights to the Protestant establishment: first, in 1829, the Catholic

Emancipation Act; then, beginning in 1845, the debate over renewing the Maynooth Grant, which funded the Irish college dedicated to training Catholic priests; and finally, in 1850, the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in England, widely understood as a subversive, even treasonous invasion of the nation’s boundaries.2 There was also ongoing Protestant angst about the noticeable failure of the so-called Second Reformation in Ireland, which arose and died during the 1820s. By 1860, much of the uproar had died down, although it was temporarily fanned back into flames by the controversy over Ritualism (or Anglo-Catholicism) within the Church of England itself. The Public Worship Regulation Act (1874), intended to outlaw Ritualist practices, was the last significant attempt at passing anti-Catholic legislation – or, at least, quasi anti-Catholic legislation – in the 19th century, and politicians soon discovered that it was not actually enforceable without great embarrassment to all concerned. While Sir John Trelawny might write in 1865 that the ardent anti-Catholic campaigner Charles Newdigate Newdegate was definitely receiving a more serious hearing than formerly, thanks to “time and perseverance, with honesty of purpose & courage”, it was still the case that Newdegate’s pet project – inspecting monasteries and convents – conspicuously failed to gain much traction.3 By the end of the century, Catholics could matriculate at Oxford and Cambridge, although such liberalization was not greeted with much enthusiasm by the Catholic hierarchy, who feared that an ecumenical learning environment would undermine students’ faith. In terms of legislation, then, the overall trend in the 19th century was undeniably positive for both Roman Catholics and Anglo-Catholics.

The rhythms of anti-Catholic sentiment in the wider culture, of course, did not neatly follow those of anti-Catholic sentiment in high

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