Chapter 14

“Americans, you are marked for their prey!” Jesuits and the Nineteenth-century Nativist Impulse

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1. Plus le change, plus le meme

In February 2017, the New York Times ran a piece on the strange alignment of President Donald Trump’s (in office 2017–) former chief strategist, Steve Bannon (b.1953), with certain Vatican officials opposed to the progressive policies of Pope Francis (r.2013–). The author noted that among the convictions Bannon and this Vatican bloc share is the belief that the modern age is witnessing a fundamental clash of civilizations—Muslim East versus the Judeo-Christian West. Bannon, of course, has a long history of promoting white identity and Islamophobic politics. It is the height of irony that a Catholic, as Bannon identifies himself, should be a major player in this new nativism, when one considers how much Catholics were portrayed by the old nativists of the nineteenth century as the major threat to the United States, with Jesuits at the core of the Catholic threat. Now there are neo-nativists, a fair number of them Catholics, fixated on another religion, Islam, as the new subversive element in US politics, and one of the Muslim world’s chief allies, so these new conspiracy-mongers posit, is the Jesuit pope. Plus le change, plus le meme.1

2. Citizenship in the Colonial Era

From our colonial era to the present day, nativism has been a particularly virulent force in American life. As John Higham defined it in his classic study, Strangers in the Land (1955), nativism denotes “intense opposition to an internal minority on the ground of its foreign (i.e. ‘un-American’) connections.” Higham noted that anti-Catholicism is the oldest form of this xenophobia, but that the linkage held up only where Catholics were seen to be agents of foreign

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interests bent on undermining, if not destroying, this republic. More times than not, it was the Jesuits who provided the foreign connection as the surreptitious agents of the pope and other despotic Catholic rulers in Europe, using their influence to undermine the great experiment in democracy. The Jesuit, after all, was the epitome of what it meant to be un-American.

That Jesuit status as the nucleus of the Catholic threat to the Protestant enterprise in the United States goes back to the beginnings of the Catholic experience in British America. Once George Calvert (1579/80–1632) brought in Andrew White (1579–1656) to assist him in planning for his American colony in the Chesapeake area in 1630, the Society became the public face of Catholicism in Britain's North American colonies, a position it held until the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773. Uprisings against Catholic rulers in Maryland and New York in the seventeenth century inevitably included Jesuits among their targets, with tragic results in some instances.

In the aftermath of the 1689 revolutions in New York and Maryland, the long Penal Era in British America began for Catholics, a nearly ninety-year stretch in which Catholics were put under the same penal laws that they had, at least in part, fled England to escape. They did not, however, go quietly into the night, and Jesuits were in the middle of the resistance. In 1720, for instance, Peter Attwood (1682–1734), the superior of the Jesuit mission in Maryland, wrote a paper as the representative of the Catholic minority that systematically destroyed the argument that Catholics could not qualify for citizenship since Catholics were not true Englishmen, not being able or willing to take the necessary oaths of loyalty to their monarch as king and head of the church. Attwood used Maryland's own history to demonstrate that, from the colony's beginning, its charter and legislation had guaranteed to Catholics all the rights and liberties enjoyed by British citizens both at home and in the colonies, rights and liberties that had been unjustly denied them since 1689.

Despite Attwood's polemics, Catholics remained an outcast minority through the colonial period. In the 1750s, there was a sharp increase of anti-Catholicism in Maryland that anticipated an epidemic of nativism a century later. Then, as in its later manifestation, nativism was driven by a surge of Catholic immigration, plus groundless fears of native Catholics conspiring with the encroaching French and their Indian allies. Among the punitive legislation passed by the Maryland Assembly in the mid-1750s was a bill authorizing the seizure of Jesuit property. Authorities had convinced themselves that the Jesuits were the head and soul of the Maryland Catholic community. To force them

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