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Anti-Catholicism & The Founders

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Distinctly Catholic

With Glenn Beck and the Tea Party crowd constantly invoking the Founders, it would be nice to see them discuss the role that virulent anti-Catholicism played in the lead up to the American Revolution. In the event, the Founders were able to transcend their anti-Catholic bigotry, but the bigotry of the Tea Party crowd seen in the anti-mosque effort and their hysteria about the imminent threat to American liberties posed by sharia, to say nothing of the racist bigotry of the anti-immigrant advocates (are these the same groups?), remains among the grass roots of the movement. You will pardon the expression. A point of honor.

Last week, I called attention to John Adams' 1765 opus, "A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law." It is filled with anti-Catholic animus. He was not alone. The pastor of Old West Church in Boston, Jonathan Mayhew, was renowned for his fear that the Church of England, which he thought still infected with Romish tendencies, was trying to make inroads into the true believing, Congregational bastion which was New England. His sermon on the anniversary of the execution of King Charles I, "A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission," was a kind of ecclesiastical primer for resistance.

In Virginia, the Church of England was established by law, so its inhabitants did not trace their lineage to the Roundheads of Cromwell's day. Indeed, when the Royalists lost the English Civil War, some of their number fled to Virginia. Nonetheless, when the "Two Penny Act," designed to keep the salaries of Anglican pastors from inflating, was invalidated by Britain, the battle that ensued was a precursor to later strife. It was also the battle that first brought Patrick Henry to prominence. When it appeared that the Church of England, in accord with its own statutes, intended to install a bishop in America, all hell broke loose. Virginia's Anglicans were so decidedly "low church" that they resisted the effort fiercely. They saw bishops as vestiges of Catholicism, vestiges that were best eliminated, and they worried that the introduction of an ecclesiastical hierarchy would also lead to the creation of a civil nobility and further

royal control.

There were many ideological influences on the Founders, and different historians have made their case championing those influences. Certainly, the civic republicanism of ancient Rome had been passed down to many of the Founders who were deeply read in Cicero, Suetonius and others. The Enlightenment influences on the Founders? thought is well documented, and most of us grew up thinking John Locke was the most significant intellectual precursor of the American Republic. But, in his seminal work, ?The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution,? Bernard Bailyn highlighted the influence of ?Country Whig? ideology. This ideology was rooted in the writings of fiercely anti-Catholic politicians like Algernon Sidney and John Hampden. As the colonists grew suspicious of Britain, men like John Wilkes (of Wilkes-Barre fame), championed the cause in Great Britain while the pulpits of America swelled with sermons quoting these great Country Whig thinkers. They saw ecclesiastical and civil liberties as one, and both were threatened by the encroachments of Rome and Romish tendencies.

In the immediate years before the outbreak of the Revolution, the Quebec Act served as a particular cause for concern. This Act of Parliament had allowed for the toleration of Catholicism in Quebec. It was listed among the ?Intolerable Acts? that the First Continental Congress was called to address. In a famous letter to the British People, penned by John Jay, the Continental Congress wrote these words about the Quebec Act: ?Nor can we suppress our astonishment that a British Parliament should ever consent to establish in that country [Quebec] a religion [Catholicism] that has deluged your island in blood, and dispersed impiety, bigotry, persecution, murder, and rebellion through every part of the world.?

These anti-Catholic sentiments are part of the historical record and, arguably, the most stunning thing about them is that they came forth at a time when there were almost no Catholics in America. That?s the thing about prejudice: You don?t have to know a Catholic, or a Muslim, or a Jew, to hate them.

These prejudices were largely overcome among the Founders by a variety of factors. The alliance with Catholic France did not hurt. Gradually, the Enlightenment influences on the Founders grew as the political leadership of the colonies passed to self-identified politicians, who were conscious of their political power, and the role of ministers in addressing the affairs of state diminished. Finally, while the Congregational Church could dominate New England, the Presbyterians New Jersey and the Anglicans the southern states, the variety of religions throughout the new country made any kind of establishment impractical as well as undesired. It should be noted, however, that various forms of state establishment persisted into the nineteenth century in several states.

I do not intend these reflections to impugn the Founders. They shared the prejudices of their age. But, the question before Mr. Beck and the tea Party crowd is this: Can they learn, as the Founders learned, to shed their prejudices?

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