



## DOC 5.1.11

# A Debate over Catholic Immigration

**B**etween 1776 and 1830, relatively few Europeans immigrated to the United States. Then, as the text explains, an increase in population and in poverty sparked the migration of increasing numbers of Germans (both Catholics and Protestants) and Irish Catholics. The arrival of hundreds of thousands of foreign Catholics in the midst of the intense Protestantism of the Second Great Awakening led to religious riots, the formation of the nativist American Party, and sharp debates in the public press. By using contemporary newspapers and other writings as a source, historians can gain insight into the public rhetoric (and often the private passions) of the time.

Lyman Beecher

## Catholicism Is Incompatible with Republicanism

Lyman Beecher (1775–1863) was one of the leading Protestant ministers of his generation and the father of a family of Christian social reformers and well-known authors: minister Henry Ward Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*), and Catharine Beecher (*A Treatise on Domestic Economy*). In *A Plea for the West* (1835), Lyman Beecher alerted his fellow Protestants to the centralized power of the Roman Catholic Church and its opposition to republican institutions. That opposition was formalized in papal encyclicals issued by Pope Gregory XVI (*Mirari Vos*, 1832) and Pope Pius IX (*Quanta Cura*, 1864), both of which condemned republicanism and freedom of conscience as false political ideologies.

Since the irruption of the northern barbarians, the world has never witnessed such a rush of dark-minded population from one country to another, as is now leaving Europe, and dashing upon our shores. . . .

They come, also, not undirected. There is evidently a supervision abroad—and one here—by which they come, and set down together, in city or country, as a Catholic body, and are led or followed quickly by a Catholic priesthood, who maintain over them in the land of strangers and unknown tongues an [absolute] ascendancy. . . .

The ministers of no Protestant sect could or would dare to attempt to regulate the votes of their people as the Catholic priests can do, who at the confessional learn all the private concerns of their people, and have almost unlimited power over the conscience as it respects the performance of every civil or social duty.

There is another point of dissimilarity of still greater importance. The opinions of the Protestant clergy are congenial with liberty—they are chosen by the people who have been educated as freemen, and they are dependent on them for patronage and support. The Catholic system is

adverse to liberty, and the clergy to a great extent are dependent on foreigners [the Pope and church authorities in Rome] opposed to the principles of our government.

Nor is this all—the secular patronage at the disposal of an associated body of men, who under the influence of their priesthood may be induced to act as one . . . would enable them to touch far and wide the spring of action through our cities and through the nation. . . . How many mechanics, merchants, lawyers, physicians, in any political crisis, might they reach and render timid . . . ? How will [the priesthood's] power extend and become omnipresent and resistless as emigration shall quadruple their numbers and action on the political and business men of the nation?

A tenth part of the suffrage of the nation, thus condensed and wielded by the Catholic powers of Europe, might decide our elections, perplex our policy, inflame and divide the nation, break the bond of our union, and throw down our free institutions. . . .

[Catholicism is] a religion which never prospered but in alliance with despotic governments, has always been and still is the inflexible enemy of Liberty of conscience and free inquiry, and at this moment is the main stay of the battle against republican institutions.

Source: Lyman Beecher, *A Plea for the West* (Cincinnati: Truman & Smith, 1835), 72–73, 126, 59–63, 85–86, 59.

Orestes Brownson

## Catholicism as a Necessity for Popular Government

Like Lyman Beecher, Orestes Brownson was born into the Presbyterian Church, but he quickly grew dissatisfied with its doctrines. After experimenting with Unitarianism, communalism, socialism, and transcendentalism, Brownson converted to Catholicism in 1844. A zealous convert, Brownson defended Catholicism with rigorous, logical, and provocative arguments in this article, "Catholicity Necessary to Sustain Popular Liberty" (1845).

Without the Roman Catholic religion it is impossible to preserve a democratic government, and secure its free, orderly, and wholesome action. . . . The theory of democracy is, Construct your government and commit it to the people to be taken care of . . . as they shall think proper.

It is a beautiful theory, and would work admirably, if it were not for one little difficulty, namely, the people are fallible, both individually and collectively, and governed by their passions and interests, which not unfrequently lead them far astray, and produce much mischief.

We know of but one solution of the difficulty, and that is in RELIGION. There is no foundation for virtue but in religion, and it is only religion that can command the degree of popular virtue and intelligence requisite to insure to popular government the right direction. . . . But what religion? It must be a religion which is above the people and controls them, or it will not answer the purpose. It cannot be Protestantism, . . . for Protestantism assumes as its point of departure that Almighty God has indeed given us a religion, but has given it to us not to take care of us, but to be taken care of by us.

[Moreover,] Protestant faith and worship tremble as readily before the slightest breath of public sentiment, as the aspen leaf before the zephyr. The faith and discipline of a sect take any and every direction the public opinion of that sect demands. All is loose, floating,—is here to-day, is there tomorrow, and, next day, may be nowhere. The holding of slaves is compatible with Christian character south of the geographical line, and incompatible north; and Christian morals change according to the prejudices, interests, or habits of the people. . . .

Here, then, is the reason why Protestantism, though it may institute, cannot sustain popular liberty. It is itself subject to popular control, and must follow in all things the popular will, passion, interest, ignorance, prejudice, or caprice.

If Protestantism will not answer the purpose, what religion will? The Roman Catholic, or none. The Roman Catholic religion assumes, as its point of departure, that it is instituted not to be taken care of by the people, but to take care of the people; not to be governed by them, but to govern them. The word is harsh in democratic ears, we admit; but it is not the office of religion to say soft or pleasing words. . . . The people need governing, and must be governed, or nothing but anarchy and destruction await them. They must have a master. . . .

Quote our expression, THE PEOPLE MUST HAVE A MASTER, as you doubtless will; hold it up in glaring capitals, to excite the unthinking and unreasoning multitude, and to doubly fortify their prejudices against Catholicity; be morally scandalized at the assertion that religion ought to govern the people, and then go to work and seek to

bring the people into subjection to your banks or moneyed corporations. . . .

The Roman Catholic religion, then, is necessary to sustain popular liberty, because popular liberty can be sustained only by a religion free from popular control, above the people, speaking from above and able to command them, and such a religion is the Roman Catholic.

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Source: Orestes A. Brownson, *Essays and Reviews, Chiefly on Theology, Politics, and Socialism* (New York: D. & J. Sadlier, 1852), 368–370, 372–373, 376, 379–381.

## ANALYZING THE EVIDENCE

- According to Beecher, what specific dangers does Catholicism pose to American republican institutions? Why would he argue that Protestant churches do not pose the same dangers?
- Does Brownson disagree with Beecher's criticism of the social and political impact of Catholicism? If so, why does he disagree? If not, on what basis does he defend the values and practices of the Catholic Church? Explain your answer.
- Given Brownson's statement that "the people must have a master," what would be his view of democracy and popular government?
- Would the leaders of the Protestant Benevolent Empire agree with any aspects of Brownson's social and political philosophy? Why or why not?