Epilogue

The Specter of Anti-Catholicism, New Nativism, and the Ascendancy of Religious Freedom

There are not over a hundred people in the United States who hate the Catholic Church. There are millions, however, who hate what they wrongly believe to be the Catholic Church.

— Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, Preface to Radio Replies, 1938

Most people who speak passionately against Shariah do not, in reality, understand it.

—“Understanding Shariah,” an ICNA Project, 2012

Catholic Americans, once deemed “foreign” and “dangerous,” nevertheless acquired full citizenship status and broad recognition as loyal countrymen in a matter of a few generations. Appropriating the First Amendment afforded them the opportunity to stress their belonging to the republic and uphold their religious beliefs at the same time. At the turn of the twentieth century, other religious groups, including Jews and Mormons, followed the same pathways to cultural citizenship and recognition as members of the American religious establishment. In the wake of World War II, Americans were more likely to include Catholics and Jews in their conceptualization of nation, and politicians touted a new phrase to describe American values, “Judeo-Christian.” President Dwight D. Eisenhower perfectly captured this new, expanded attitude toward religion in a 1952 campaign speech, famously declaring, “Our government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith—and I don’t care what it is.” His remark “I don’t care what it is” was not meant to connote indifference but rather an acknowledgement that part of America’s exceptionality could be found in its embrace of religious freedom and particularly the three great Judeo-Christian faith traditions: Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism.

One year into Eisenhower’s administration, and during the height of the Communist scare, Congress in 1954 pressed for an addition to the Pledge of
Allegiance to broadcast that Americans, unlike the Soviets, held the moral high ground because they believed in God as well as democracy. Since their aim was not to divide Americans, congressmen did not invoke the King James Bible, which would alienate Catholic Americans, or Jesus Christ, which would exclude Jews. Rather, they voted to include in the national pledge a simple invocation to a divine Supreme Being, “one nation under God.” Jews, Muslims, and nearly all Christian denominations, Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox, believe in an ultimate supernatural being. Only the Communists and atheists, congressmen reasoned at the time, would find the reference offensive.3

Soon after, Americans witnessed the presidential campaign of 1960 between Republican Richard Nixon and Democrat John F. Kennedy. This race resulted in the twentieth century’s closest popular-vote margin, and the outcome hinged on Kennedy’s ability to convince Americans that his Catholic faith would not conflict with his duties as president. Not since Al Smith ran for the presidency in 1928 had a Catholic been a contender for the White House. Many Protestant Christians, of course, still feared that a Catholic president would be susceptible to the influence of the pope in Rome. Indeed, several columnists opposed Kennedy on religious grounds. But Kennedy’s voice as a Catholic American held legitimacy with the broader public as long as he convincingly advocated church-state separation.

As the first Catholic to realistically pursue the White House, Kennedy’s campaign determined to avoid Smith’s political mistake of defending his allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church. As early as March 1959, Kennedy broached the subject in an interview for Look magazine, stating that “whatever one’s religion may be,” the office holder ought to prioritize absolutely nothing “over his oath to uphold the Constitution and all its parts.” He strongly supported legislation upholding the First Amendment’s principle of the separation of church and state, including measures to prohibit federal aid to parochial schools.4 Seven weeks before Election Day, at the invitation of three hundred Protestant clergymen attending the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, he addressed the issue of his personal faith. Kennedy assured the gathered Protestant clergymen on September 12, 1960, that “the separation of church and state is absolute.” In an attempt to “separate the bigots from the honestly fearful,” he publicly vowed that “no Catholic prelate would tell the President (should he be Catholic) how to act and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote.” He further pledged to keep any public office from serving as “an instrument of any religious group.”5 Radio and television broadcasts replayed his remarks across the nation over the remainder of the campaign. Seven weeks later, Kennedy became
the first Catholic president of the United States. At the time, many Protestant Americans, especially the emergent Christian fundamentalists, feared that his faith remained a potential threat. On the other hand, some Catholic Americans accused Kennedy of selling out. Regardless, he won the popular and electoral vote.

Kennedy’s election to the presidency suggested that even Catholics could serve the country as legitimate political actors, but Kennedy only accomplished the feat through the strictest adherence to the tenants of civil religion. His inaugural address of January 20, 1961, positioned his own era squarely within the civil religious tradition: “the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forbearers fought are still at issue around the globe—the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God.” Kennedy included powerful references to an “Almighty God,” closing with the invocation, “here on Earth God’s work must truly be our own.” Such rhetoric has been a mainstay in politics, and one can still hear politicians uttering invocations to the Almighty.

Since 1960, there hardly has remained a public space that does not fully integrate Catholic Americans. One hundred and twenty-eight years after the Know-Nothings destroyed the marble stone Pope Pius IX had donated for incorporation in the Washington Monument, the obelisk required renovation. A Catholic priest from Spokane, Washington, jumped at the opportunity to restore Pius IX’s gesture. Reverend James E. Grant learned about how nativists had cast the pope’s gift into the Potomac River in 1854 and acquired special permission from the National Park Service to commission a replica bearing the engraving on the original pope’s stone, A Roma Americae (“From Rome to America”). In 1982 the replica Pope’s Stone was installed in the Washington Monument, 340 feet up; it remains there today, un tarnished. In recent years, nearly 24 percent of Americans have identified as Catholic. They tend to split right down the middle during national elections and, apparently, participate in all political and public spaces.

The Specter of Anti-Catholicism

In 2003 Philip Jenkins and Mark Massa argued that a “new anti-Catholicism” nevertheless existed as this country’s “last acceptable prejudice.” Jenkins took particular offense at the portrayal of Catholics in the media and suggested that parishioners are more vulnerable to open prejudice than Jews or Muslims. He gave as an example a Boston high school Halloween party in 2001, less than
two months after 9/11, in which the administration prohibited students from wearing outfits poking fun at Muslims yet presented the “most comical costume” award to two boys dressed as pregnant nuns accompanied by a third playing the priest who impregnated them. In one collection of essays on the relationship between Catholicism and American culture published a year later, author Andrew Greeley claimed that anti-Catholicism is still so pernicious in today’s society that “any Catholic who has walked down the beaches of the upper academy, the higher media, or the New York publishing companies will have been fortunate not to have encountered it.” Newsweek editor Kenneth Woodward compared the experience of Catholics in America to that of Jews, African Americans, and LGBTQ people: “It is common for defenders of the Catholic Church like William Donohue to substitute Jews or blacks or gays for Catholics, and ask those who smear Catholics if they would dare ridicule these other identity groups in the same fashion. In general, I think that is a fair test, and I am astonished to learn that his adversaries find his questions repulsive. Clearly, Catholics are fair game.”

Such complaints suffer from a myopic perspective. These attempts by Donohue and others to substitute identity politics for apologetics are designed to insulate Catholicism from legitimate ideological disagreement. Moreover, Catholic studies misleadingly conflate clear instances of anti-Catholic bigotry with otherwise valid expressions of concern about Roman Catholic dogma. Even if the superficial cases described by the expositors of “new anti-Catholicism” belie some lingering anti-Catholic bigotry in the United States, one might argue that the prevalence of Catholic imagery in media and all the poking fun proves the faith has become just as acceptable in the fabric of American religious pluralism as any of the other traditionally accepted religions. Many are hypersensitive about Muslim Americans because they are underrepresented as a group and several Muslim individuals have recently suffered persecutions. Catholic Americans, however, are well represented in society, and blatant instances of persecution lie in the more distant past. The tensions they may now feel as they encounter the American state and American media and the persecution complexes they acquire closely parallel the experiences of other religious Americans within traditionally accepted faith traditions. It is not uncommon for Christians in power to interpret ideological conflict through the lens of a persecution complex. After all, Christianity was founded by a persecuted religious minority whose archetypal leader was executed.

Historically, Catholics have oscillated themselves between two seemingly conflicting desires: either to assert the compatibility of Roman Catholic dogma
with American-style democracy or to express their alienation in modern secular society. Consider the case of Stephen Kobasa, a teacher at Kolbe Cathedral High School until 2005, when Bishop William Lori of Bridgeport, Connecticut, fired him for refusing to hang an American flag in the classroom. Kobasa objected thus: “My teaching can never take its legitimacy from any symbol except the Cross of Christ. To elevate any national emblem to that level would be for me to ignore the fundamental call of Jesus to compassion without boundaries.” With the backing of Bishop Lori, the school’s superintendent nevertheless fired Kobasa for “un-patriotism.” Bishop Lori became the archbishop of Baltimore in 2012 and thereafter led the American bishops’ campaign for religious freedom and liberty of conscience in the United States. At an address at the University of St. Thomas, William Cavanaugh pointed out that this “state of affairs” is part of an age-old dynamic: “there’s a frequent oscillation in the bishop’s rhetoric between dire apocalyptic statements about the state of American society on the one hand and patriotic boosterish statements about America on the other.” Kobasa’s case suggests an invisible line for religious persons in the United States, which Roman Catholic authority figures help enforce. Those like Kobasa who elevate their religion over nation, or vice versa, run the risk of ostracization.

Bishop Lori’s campaign to protect Catholic-affiliated institutions from unwanted government policies relies heavily on the religious freedom clause in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Catholic bishops of America frequently assert that the existence of their religion actually strengthens American freedoms. The Archdiocese of Baltimore and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’s official website have advertised dozens of patriotic prayers, displaying the Catholic Church of America’s full devotion to the United States despite pending disagreements. One can access the widely distributed Litany for Liberty and Prayer for the Protection of Religious Liberty, and even the Patriotic Rosary. Within the Patriotic Rosary, each bead symbolizes a state in the Union. For each “mystery,” to be read after every ten beads on the rosary, it invites the faithful to dwell on various quotes from the founders of the United States, including George Washington and John Adams. The fifth mystery features an 1863 quote from Confederate general Robert E. Lee.

Still, many Catholic Americans have questioned the practicality of blending together nationalism and spirituality in such a way. Cavanaugh, for one, has suggested Catholics might be better off taking a more Augustinian approach to the question of national allegiance, one that emphasizes the “homelessness” of Catholicism and describes the temporal church as a group on a special pilgrimage to its heavenly home. In other words, Catholics might expect to never feel
perfectly comfortable, or “at home,” anywhere in the world. Particular nation-states, Cavanaugh pondered, could find ways to fit into the universal Catholic Church, not the other way around. That remains to be seen. It appears for the time being that Catholic Americans have the same range of responses available as other Christian denominations.

New Nativism and Anti-Islamicism

Scholars have noticed parallels between anti-Catholicism in the nineteenth century and anti-Islamicism during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Muslim immigrants from Asia arrived in greater numbers after 1965, when the Hart-Celler Act overturned the quota system of the Immigration Act of 1924, which favored those of European national origins. Popular fears of the growing influence of Islam in the United States and the world increased dramatically after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center’s twin towers on September 11, 2001. Ensuing conflicts in the Middle East have created millions of Muslim refugees. After a temporary immigration lull during the opening years of war in the Middle East in 2002 and 2003, the United States under the Bush and Obama administrations admitted an unprecedented number of Muslim refugees into the country. In 2017 the Pew Research Center estimated a Muslim American population of 3.45 million. Between 2007, when Muslim Americans numbered 2.35 million, and 2017, the majority of their growth has been due to immigration. The year 2006 marked the first in which the United States admitted, in total, more Muslim than Christian refugees. Tens of thousands from Muslim areas entered the United States each succeeding year. In 2016 the United States admitted the highest number of Muslim refugees to date, 38,901, or about half of all refugees admitted entrance that year. The greatest number of these hailed from countries with predominantly Muslim populations, including Syria (12,587), Iraq (9,880), Somalia (9,020), and Afghanistan (2,737).

The more recent influx of Muslims to the United States, combined with steady media coverage of Islamic-related extremism and war in the Middle East, has induced a new American nativist movement. This culminated in 2016, with Republican Donald Trump’s campaign call for a “Muslim Ban” during the presidential election of 2016. In October, a month before the election, a reporter asked Trump if he still intended to ban Muslim immigration in the United States, to which he responded: “Something is going on that’s not a positive force. We are going to be looking very much at certain areas of the world. We have to be very careful with radical Islamic terror. We can be politically correct and
say it doesn’t matter but it does matter.”

This worry about the more “radical” elements within Islam in other parts of the world motivated another campaign promise regarding refugees from Syria, 95 percent of whom are Muslim: “They’re not coming to this country if I’m president. And if Obama has brought some to this country they are leaving, they’re going, they’re gone.”

Indeed, once in office, Trump issued Executive Order 13769, titled “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States,” along with its second manifestation, Executive Order 13780, which have attempted to ban refugees from seven predominantly Muslim countries, including Syria, on the grounds that refugees from these countries are more likely to include covert hostiles.

Media coverage of Islamic-related extremism has amplified foreign and domestic threats in the public imagination beyond what was ever possible in the nineteenth century. In fact, the ratio of the Muslim American population to the whole in 2020 pales in comparison to the ratio of Catholic Americans who resided in the United States during the first nativist movement. Likewise, the number of immigrants admitted each year in comparison to the total population remains smaller in the twenty-first century than the amount of newcomers allowed annually during the nineteenth century.

Currently, Muslims represent about 1.1 percent of the total U.S. population. In 2017 Besheer Mohamed, a senior researcher for the Pew Research Center, projected an increase to 8.1 million Muslims by 2050, making up 2.1 percent of the projected total population. By comparison, Catholic Americans in 1860 constituted approximately 10.8 percent of the total free population of the United States, and most of their growth had been due to immigration during a twenty-year period. Even though the ratio of immigrants to the total population in 2020 is relatively smaller, immigrants bearing traditionally unrepresented faith traditions like Islam have arrived from exotic countries relatively quickly and have grabbed enough media attention to provoke an American nativist response.

While the target of bigotry and fear has changed, the American nativist style of discourse has not. Anti-Muslim sentiment often resembles the kind of bigotry and conspiracy nativists directed toward Catholics during the antebellum era. The Council of American-Islam Relations tracks a disturbing number of anti-Muslim hate crimes nationwide, information it makes available on its website.

“Islamophobia,” insofar as it refers to anti-Muslim bigotry, is real. It is important to distinguish, however, between the latest bout of anti-Islamic xenophobia and certain ideological disagreements Americans may have with Islamic doctrines.

As with Catholicism, Americans’ chief concerns with Islam have been political in nature, and accordingly they have advocated the strengthening of
church-state separation. Many Americans reject Islamism, a theory of governance within Islam that holds that the Qur’an and Hadith should be the dominant sources of both religious and civil law, as fundamentally opposed to American principles. In this sense, the more refined versions of anti-Islamicism witnessed in modern America mirror the anti-Catholicism of the 1850s. Most U.S. critics of Islam target “political Islam,” or Islam as an undue political force. Such has been the case in more recent efforts to ban the construction of mosques and to pass state legislation against Sharia’a law.

Notice the ideological content of the 9/11 Families for a Safe and Strong America’s official 2010 statement against the construction of an Islamic cultural center in lower Manhattan. They targeted as the source of their opposition the belief system of Islam and particularly the imam slated to manage the mosque: “Imam Rauf embraces Shariah, a sociopolitical system of jurisprudence based upon the Koran which supersedes manmade law and which rejects the Constitutional doctrine of the separation of church and state.” Replace “Imam” with “priest,” “Shariah” with “Roman Catholic dogma,” and “Qur’an” with “pope” in this sentence, and the parallels between anti-Catholicism and anti-Islamicism become obvious. The statement also points out the supposed incompatibility between American values enshrined in the U.S. Constitution and Islamism: “Islamic countries that embrace Shariah and political Islam are known for brutal policies that discriminate against women, gays, and religious minorities. Shariah law is entirely incompatible with the Equal Protection clause of the 14th Amendment and would violate 1st Amendment protections of speech, assembly and the free exercise of religion.”27 Again, replace “Islamic countries” with “Catholic countries,” “Shariah law” with “Catholic dogma,” and “political Islam” with “political Romanism,” and there is hardly any difference in the charges currently being levied against Islam today versus Roman Catholicism in the past.

These anti-Islamic arguments reveal stunning similarities with those of anti-Catholic Know-Nothings. One can hear or read about a Muslim conspiracy to infiltrate American government and society and enact Sharia’a law, which some interpret as a harsh penal code akin to the Inquisition. It is not uncommon to hear the claim that Muslims hold allegiance to the Qur’an, certain religious leaders, or to their predominantly Muslim countries of origin over the U.S. Constitution. Another concern is that those raised in theocratic regimes are not equipped to understand American democracy and bear the responsibilities of U.S. citizenship. Many worry about the compatibility of Islam with core American values related to democracy, individual rights, women’s rights, and
religion. At root there appears to be a growing concern that American homes will look dramatically different without immediate immigration reform.

Accordingly, legislatures in all but sixteen states have seriously considered passing a ban on Shari’a law. By 2014, seven states—Alabama, Arizona, Kansas, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Dakota, and Tennessee—had actually passed legislation that either explicitly banned Shari’a law by name or prohibited, in a thinly veiled reference to it, “foreign, international, or religious law.” Notice the justification issued by Tennessee representative Rick Womick, who claims to have studied the Qur’an: “He declared that Shari’a, the Islamic code that guides Muslim beliefs and actions, is not just an expression of faith but a political and legal system that seeks world domination.” Womick explained in a speech that Shari’a “is not what I call ‘Do unto others what you’d have them do unto you.’”

It is yet unclear whether such bans are constitutional. In 2010, voters in Oklahoma approved a statewide ban on Shari’a law, which prohibited the state’s courts from considering all foreign or religious laws as well, but in a challenge organized by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a federal judge ruled Oklahoma’s ban unconstitutional on the grounds that it could potentially violate the rights of Muslim Americans in the state. The Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the unconstitutionality of the ban on January 10, 2012.

The claims of the anti-Islamists might be misguided, but the act of raising these ideas does not necessarily disqualify one from the conversation. Actually, the discussion is essential to the democratic process. It seems disingenuous at this stage to conflate all Americans who worry about foreign-born terrorism and the potential for immigrants to disrupt democracy with actual anti-Muslim bigots or to crudely label those who raise ideological concerns “Islamophobes” in the same way it seems wrong for Catholics to accuse their ideological opponents of base prejudice. The historical record has shown, however, that such claims about a religion’s incompatibility with American democracy are highly unlikely to pass muster for long. The more Americans become acquainted with Muslims over time, the more likely they will be to see Islamic-related extremism as aberrant and not representative of the religion as a whole. And each time Muslim Americans encounter anti-Islamists, they become even more invested in securing their rights under the First Amendment. Not only have most Americans reliably presented their disagreement with Islam as a political one—as the nativists first started doing during the antebellum era—but Muslim Americans themselves have formed their counterarguments precisely along the same lines as Catholic German and Irish Americans did.
The parallels between the response of Catholics and Muslims point to the profound historical and national significance of religious freedom in the United States. Muslim Americans have challenged these bans as an assault on their constitutional right to free worship. A popular Islamic organization recently explained, “these anti-Shariah bills are far from securing Americans from an impending threat and actually infringe upon the rights of the American Muslim community.” Actually, Shari’a “demands that Muslims follow the law of the land,” the author goes on to explain, citing Surah 5:1 and Surah 9:4 in the Qur’an. “This command is binding so long as they are not forced to commit an irreligious act or prevented from fulfilling their religious duties. Thankfully, this is not the case in the United States because the Constitution protects freedom of religion.” In other words, the First Amendment makes it possible for Muslims who wish to uphold Shari’a to exist as U.S. citizens and exercise their right to freedom of worship. The document goes on to point out the potential for harmony between Islam and the Judeo-Christian faith tradition in the United States, as Muslims follow many of the same religious practices of Christians and Jews. Much of the available literature addressing the particular claims of anti-Islamists follows a similar line of response.

The Ascendancy of American Religious Freedom

Precisely because the First Amendment constitutes a vital component of American democracy and has given rise to a vibrant history of civil religion in the United States, a few present-day observations seem warranted. It is not likely the United States will follow the direction of France, for example, which is home to five million Muslims, the largest such population in Europe. The founding documents of both countries establish separation of church and state and protections for religious persons. But the French principle of Laïcité in Article 1 has embedded the strong sentiment that the church-state doctrine protects the state from religion, whereas the American system has yielded a greater historical emphasis on the separation of church and state as a fundamental protection of religion. Muslims have accordingly found it much more difficult to express their religious beliefs in France than in the United States. In 2004 France passed Europe’s first national ban on the burqa in all public spaces as well as a law prohibiting teachers and students in state-run schools from wearing religious paraphernalia like head-coverings and crosses. In 2011 Prime Minister Nicolas Sarkozy’s administration doubled down on this policy with a ban on full-face
American government and law, however, have reliably upheld the right of all religious persons to express their beliefs in public spaces. Americans highly value this principle, though sometimes it is a bitter pill to swallow.

A native-born Protestant American from the 1830s would find an American political commencement presided over by Catholic priests, female clerics, Jewish rabbis, and a Mormon choir absurd and grotesque. But this is precisely what Americans witnessed during the 2017 inauguration of the president. This is the new norm. The last several presidential inaugurations have included a cast of female clerical figures, Catholic priests, and rabbis, all of whom invoke Almighty God in public prayers. The Mormon Tabernacle Choir has sung blessings upon the United States. Soon, Americans will likely witness an imam invoke “God” at a presidential inauguration ceremony. We can anticipate more politicians who regularly include Islam as part of the ensemble of American religions. “Abrahamic tradition” or “Biblical-Qur’anic” might replace Judeo-Christian in the characterization of national values. American political culture will absorb Islam and Muslims into the fabric of the republic. It is already happening.

American nativism has compelled newcomers, repeatedly, to seek solace under the religious freedom clause of the U.S. Constitution. Unless American democracy fails catastrophically, history suggests we can reasonably assume that Islam, like Catholicism, will soon receive broad recognition in America’s political and public spaces. Catholics, Jews, Mormons, Muslims, and other minority groups have expanded the horizons of religious tolerance, and all continue to demonstrate a vested interest in strengthening church-state separation in the United States of America.