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AMERICANIST DEBATES

The Americanist debates focused on the relationship of the Roman Catholic Church to the culture, values, and political institutions of the United States. These were matters of intense controversy at the close of the late nineteenth century, as European Catholicism continued to come to terms with the significant political setbacks of the previous century. Some progressive voices suggested that American Catholicism could provide guidance to the European Church as to how it should engage with its increasingly democratic political context. Conservative Catholics believed that this “Americanism” would lead to the undermining of the Catholic Church’s authority, and resisted it with full force.

Origins of the Debates

These issues had been simmering for some time on both sides of the Atlantic. In the United States, many Americans were coming to see their democratic and individualistic society as a beacon of light on the world stage. These values were out of step with nineteenth-century Catholic culture, which emphasized the church’s hierarchical and juridical authority. The American bishops were divided between those who saw no serious conflict between Catholic and American values, and those who wanted to guard ecclesiastical authority against encroaching individualism. Meanwhile, in France the church was divided on the question of whether or not Catholics should cooperate with the Third Republic. Traditionally the Catholic Church had supported a monarchist agenda. Republicans were naturally distrustful of the Catholic hierarchy and sought to weaken the church’s social and political influence. In 1892, however, Leo XIII issued his encyclical *Au milieu des sollicitudes*, urging French Catholics to find a way to work with the government. The response was divided, with a core of monarchists resisting “Leo’s Republic,” and progressive voices looking to the United States as a potential model for a new kind of Catholicism separated from the state. In both Europe and the United States, “Americanism” was a term that was used in describing the progressive cause (by both sides), though in reality various levels of affirmation of American values were being advanced under this banner.

Flashpoint of the Debates: Isaac Hecker

The Americanist controversy reached a climax in the years 1897–1899, and centered on the French translation of the biography of Isaac Hecker, founder of the Paulist Fathers. Hecker, a Catholic convert and enthusiastic advocate of American values, believed that divine Providence had assigned a special place for the United States in world history, and that the experience of US Catholics could help to solve the problems facing the church in Europe. Hecker died in 1888, and his biography, by fellow Paulist Walter Elliott, appeared in 1891. The French translation of Elliott’s biography was prepared by Abbé Felix Klein, a partisan of the progressive cause who took liberties with Elliott’s already-hagiographical account in order to present Hecker as the ideal priest and a man of extraordinary holiness. French monarchist Charles Maignen wrote a withering attack on Hecker in response to Klein’s translation, though Maignen relied exclusively on Klein, and did not interact with Hecker’s own writings at all. Maignen accused Hecker and his fellow Americanists of denying the external authority of the church, seeking to separate the US Catholic Church from the worldwide communion, and making several doctrinal errors concerning the sacraments, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the virtues. Maignen’s book spawned other books and pamphlets, along with responses from progressive Catholics.

Testem Benevolentiae and the Legacy of Americanism in the US Catholic Church

The Americanism controversy reached the Vatican because the Pope’s theologian, Albert Lepidi, had given his imprimatur

to Maignen's book, thereby putting a taint of suspicion on all progressive Catholics in Europe and America. Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore, the ranking American bishop, wrote a letter of concern to the Vatican, causing Leo XIII to take the matter into his own hands. Leo XIII responded with *Testem Benevolentiae*, an apostolic letter addressed to Gibbons. In *Testem Benevolentiae* the Pope rejected any form of Americanism which sought to undermine the authority of the Catholic Church, or advocated that Catholics should abandon their traditional teachings and structures in order to make themselves more palatable to American culture. He also censured several errors, relating to external authority and guidance, the virtues, the religious life, and methods of communication. *Testem Benevolentiae* affirmed that there were aspects of American culture and values that were praiseworthy, but sought to guard against any move to weaken the church's authority in favor of individual freedoms.

Testem Benevolentiae marked the end of the Americanism debates. The conservatives felt that a "heresy" of Americanism had been identified and rejected, while the progressives would argue that they were not guilty of teaching the errors identified in the letter. On the whole, the incident had a chilling effect on the liberal branch of American Catholicism, which was only compounded by the condemnation of Modernism by Pius IX in 1907. The subduing effect of *Testem Benevolentiae* upon progressive Catholics in America can be seen in the dearth of scholarship on the subject in the four decades following the letter's promulgation. It was not until the middle of the twentieth century that reassessments of Americanism began to shift. Since that time, Vincent Holden and more recent scholars, such as William Portier, have argued that Hecker did not hold any of the positions condemned by *Testem Benevolentiae*.

References and Resources

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—JAMES E. PEDLAR