



The Cold War's Transformation of Catholicism in America

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Catholicism, which had long been viewed as un-American due to its loyalty to the Vatican, was recast in a new light as a religion of true and uncompromising patriotism during the Cold War. This article details how the Cold War environment provided Catholics with an opportunity to prove themselves as loyal Americans and find their way into mainstream society. The Vatican's denunciation of communism resonated with American Catholics as they joined the struggle against communism. With their help, church attendance and participation through all branches of Christianity grew during this era and Christianity gained endorsement in politics, creating a country that encouraged a religious life and values.

Introduction

The threat of communism during the Cold War led to a new religious climate in the United States, specifically for Catholic Americans. The Soviet Union's anti-religious propaganda was perceived as an attack on Christian Americans. This led American religious institutions as well as government officials to fight with fervor against this "godless" institution. Church participation increased, contrasting the declining role religion played in American society after World War II.¹ Christianity was also leveraged in politics. President Dwight Eisenhower made amendments that introduced religious rhetoric in to the secular life of Americans. Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy garnered support from Christians to target suspected communists for his McCarthyism campaign.

The lives of Catholics were significantly altered because of the Cold War. Although Christianity was the largest religion in America at the time, Catholics were ostracized from the larger group of Christianity. Their devotion to the Vatican made them questionable patriots to many Americans. However, by the end of the Cold War, this view had changed as Catholics fiercely fought the spread of communism and defended fellow Catholics in Russia. Their protest against communism appeared extremely American and allowed them to prove themselves as patriots. Catholics were able to use the war on communism as a sociological opportunity to enter into the mainstream of society because of the heightened enthusiasm for Christianity, the endorsement of Christianity in politics, and the Vatican's condemnation of communism.

Before their full acceptance into American culture during the Cold War, American Catholics faced

¹ Herzog, Jonathan. *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle Against Communism in the Early Cold War*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011). ProQuest E-book, 19.

hostility, especially from Protestant Americans. The large number of Catholic immigrants to the United States in the 19th century led to an aggression towards Catholics that historian Ray Allen Billington named “The Protestant Crusade.”² Catholic theology and the church structure, especially the Vatican’s authority, was attacked as they were viewed as a threat to American democracy. Catholics could also not accept the modernization in America since the Church was seen as outdated and stubborn to progress.³ The Know-Nothing Party, formed in 1844, exacerbated these hostilities by promoting nativism that sought to preserve America by revising naturalization laws and preventing the foreign influence of Catholics. The party also hoped to “place in all offices... no one but native-born Protestant citizens.”⁴ The most extreme cases in “The Protestant Crusade” consisted of the Philadelphia Bible riots and “Bloody Monday” in Louisville which were instigated by the Know-Nothing Party. Catholics also faced less violent but significant aggression in anti-Catholic propaganda spread through newspapers, textbooks, religious debates, and political campaigns.⁵

Besides being ostracized from the American Christian community, American Catholics were also regarded with suspicion in the global Catholic community because of the distrust they faced from the Vatican. Americans struggled with holding American ideals in balance with their relationship to the Catholic Church. In the 19th century, the American pastor and founder of the Paulists, Isaac Hecker, argued for the assimilation of Catholicism into modern American culture which came to be known as the heresy of “Americanism.” Hecker attempted to appeal to Protestant Americans with aspects of Catholic teachings. He and other “Americanist” Catholics argued that the best way for the Church to thrive in American culture would be to conform to

American values, including the separation of church and state.⁶ In 1864, Pope Pius IX, after fleeing from the revolutions in Europe in 1848 which fought against the papacy, published *The Syllabus of Errors*.⁷ This document denounced aspects of the modern world, condemning the notion that “every man is free to embrace and profess that religion which, guided by the light of reason, he shall consider true,” as well as the idea that “the ecclesiastical power ought not to exercise its authority without the permission and assent of the civil government.”⁸ This criticism of the separation of church and state and religious toleration clashed with American values and the ideas of the Americanists. From this point on, leaders in the Vatican were doubtful of American Catholics’ ability to administer the church there. Pope Leo XIII spoke on the incompatibilities of Americanism and the Church, calling it a heresy:

But if by this name are to be understood certain endowments of mind which belong to the American people, just as other characteristics belong to various other nations, and if, moreover, by it is designated your political condition and the laws and customs by which you are governed, there is no reason to take exception to the name. But if this is to be so understood that the doctrines which have been adverted to above are not only indicated, but exalted, there can be no manner of doubt that our venerable brethren, the bishops of America, would be the first to repudiate and condemn it as being most injurious to themselves and their country. For it would give rise to the suspicion that there are among you some who conceive and would have the Church in America to be different from what it is in the rest of the world.⁹

² Carey, Patrick. *Catholics in America*. (Westport, Connecticut, Praeger Publishers, 2004), 31.

³ Ibid., 31.

⁴ De usher, Charles. “The Know Nothing Riots in Louisville.” *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 61, No. 2, (1963): 122-147.

⁵ Carey, *Catholics in America*, 31.

⁶ Ibid., 57.

⁷ Hart, *American Catholic*, 22.

⁸ Pope Bl. Pius IX. “The Syllabus of Errors.” *Papal Encyclicals Online*. Accessed 10 April 2024.

<https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius09/p9syll.htm>

⁹ Pope Leo XIII. “Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae: Concerning New Opinions, Virtue, Nature and Grace, With Regard to Americanism.” *Papal Encyclicals Online*. Accessed 10 April 2024.

<https://www.papalencyclicals.net/leo13/13teste.htm>

The Rise of Christianity in Response to Communism

For Christian Americans, and specifically Catholics, fear of communism came from the threat it posed to their religion. The Russian empire had a long history of persecuting Roman Catholicism after the Great Schism, which was justified by the belief that the Orthodox Church was the true successor of the church. From the 15th until the 18th century, rulers rejected attempts at Catholic alliances, discriminated against the Catholic Church, and expanded in order to spread Russian Orthodoxy.¹⁰ Under the rule of Catherine the Great, the Roman Catholic Church operated a government office that was banned from communicating with the Vatican, and over one million Catholics were forced to convert to Russian Orthodoxy.¹¹ This persecution was amplified by the anti-religious propaganda spread during communist rule. The ideology of Karl Marx rejected religion since “the abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness.”¹² Joseph Stalin and Vladimir Lenin echoed the idea that religions act as “the organs of bourgeois reaction, used for the protection of the exploitation and the stupefaction of the working class.”¹³ When the Bolshevik party took control of Russia through the October Revolution in 1917, they made many reforms which reversed the progress that Catholics had made when they were allowed to freely practice their religion under the Provisional Government. The new Bolshevik government arrested religious clergy and ministers and decreased the Catholic population in the USSR by drawing new borders under the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918.¹⁴ Although the government did not outlaw religion, measures were put in place that

made organized religious practice extremely difficult, as well as diminishing the church by promoting atheism. In just the first few months of the Bolshevik Party’s power, they took all land, including that belonging to religious organizations, into government control. Religious schools were reformed into public schools and a new policy required that all schools teach courses in atheism. The party also shut down all monasteries and convents.¹⁵ The Soviets’ endorsement of free love further challenged Christianity. The condemnation of marriage, which is essential to Christian institutions, put Christians at odds with the Soviets. Further, the disapproval of the nuclear family showed communism to be a threat to American life and values.¹⁶

During the Cold War, church attendance in America increased as a counter action to the atheism associated with communism. Besides promoting a society and political sphere void of religion, some American communists stated that communism had become their religion because of the suffering they endured and the devotion they had for working towards their ideal future.¹⁷ In his memoir *Witness*, for example, American communist Whittaker Chambers wrote that Communism is “man’s second oldest faith,” and “is the vision of man’s mind displacing God as the creative intelligence of the world.”¹⁸ Statements like these drove some Christians to fear that if communism were to spread, it would altogether replace their own religion. These ideas were not unfounded, since the Soviet Union had endorsed anti-religious propaganda, which included a reformed calendar which removed religious holidays and replaced them with festivals celebrating the communist party and their revolution.¹⁹ This reinforcement of Christians in their faith led to a more publicly religious social state in America. After World

¹⁰ Dunn, Dennis. *The Catholic Church and Soviet Russia, 1917-1939*. (New York, Routledge 2017). PDF e-book, 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹² Marx, Karl. “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right.” *Marxist Internet Archive*. Accessed 8 April 2024.

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/index.htm>

¹³ Lenin, Vladimir. “The Attitude of the Workers’ Party to Religion.” *Marxist Internet Archive*. Accessed 8 April 2024.

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1909/may/13.htm>

¹⁴ Dunn, *The Catholic Church and Soviet Russia*, 37.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁷ Allitt, Patrick. *Religion in America since 1945: A History*. (New York, Columbia University Press, 2003). ProQuest E- book, 22.

¹⁸ Chambers, Whittaker. *Witness*. (New York, Random House, 1952). 9.

¹⁹ Dunn, *The Catholic Church and Soviet Russia*, 36.

War II and throughout the Cold War, church attendance increased and so did church building and public displays of religion. The increased construction of churches can be explained by the fact that building churches and other religious temples had not been a priority in the previous half-century, first because of the lack of funds and later because of the lack of manpower in the wake of World War I.²⁰ The post-war United States had the materials and contractors they needed to create new sites for worship. One of the most significant buildings developed during this time was the Cadet Chapel of the Air Force Academy housed in Colorado Springs. It had worship centers for Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. This conglomeration of different beliefs sharing a single space portrayed the ideas of a “united, godly America facing down the godless Soviet Union.”²¹ This uptick in church building is notable since it increased with the enthusiasm for religious practice against communism. As many Americans began to relinquish their extreme anti-communist attitudes in the mid-1960s, the construction of church buildings also slowed.²²

Besides new places of worship to practice in, Christians also made public displays of their faith. More Christians began to attend church in the 1950s and recommitted to practicing their faith. According to a study done by sociologist Ruby Jo Reeves Kennedy, 80% of Americans in New Haven, Connecticut said they believed that the Bible was the word of God, but less than half could name one of the first four books from the New Testament.²³ This study was one Kennedy used when researching the concept of a “triple melting pot,” where intermarriage among Catholics, Protestants, and Jews created this type of assimilation.²⁴ In her studies, she found that Americans married based on who shared their religion rather than those who shared ethnicity. The conservative intellectual William Herberg, formerly a

communist activist in his youth, expanded on this idea in his famous book *Catholic, Protestant, Jew* published in 1955, where he argued that Americans were now identifying themselves by their religion, rather than their ethnicity.²⁵ Nonetheless, religious knowledge among Americans remains limited. In his 2007 book *Religious Literacy*, Stephen Prothero revealed from a study directed by the Gallup Organization that “basic Bible knowledge is at a record low.”²⁶ Similar to Kennedy’s study, only half of American adults in this study could name just one of the four Gospels.²⁷ This religious illiteracy in a highly religious nation can be explained by the fact that religion is not just perceived as practices and doctrines, but as a larger identity. This began in the 19th century when Americans moved away from their focus on scripture and instead emphasized morality. Protestants abandoned rigid distinctions between denominations and gave rise to nondenominationalism in churches and institutions as an opposition towards Catholicism.²⁸ Their morals combined Christianity, republicanism, and capitalism. Their shared values formed a community and tribal affiliations that led to an identity that encompassed more than faith alone. This same privileging of morality, including American values, over scripture and theological differences occurred during the Cold War in response to communism. This allowed Catholics to join the larger group of Christians as they were encouraged to embrace their American and Catholic morals as part of a larger identity. Because Americans identified more prominently with their religious associations than with their ethnic identities, Catholics were able to utilize this to disprove the un-American associations they had faced before because of their religion by joining in the fight against communism.

²⁰ Allitt, *Religion in America Since 1945*, 33.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

²² *Ibid.*, 40.

²³ Kennedy, Ruby Jo Reeves, “Single or Triple Melting Pot? Intermarriage Trends in New Haven, 1870-1940.” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 49, No.4. (1944). As cited in Allitt, *Religion in America Since 1945*, 30.

²⁴ Kennedy, Ruby Jo Reeves, “Single or Triple Melting Pot? Intermarriage Trends in New Haven, 1870-1940.” *American*

Journal of Sociology, Vol. 49, No. 4. (1944). As cited in Herberg, William. *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983). 33.

²⁵ Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, 34.

²⁶ Prothero, Stephen. *Religious Literacy*. (New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 30.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

Christianity Promoted in Politics

The reigniting of many Americans' faith to defend their country's values was further encouraged and leveraged in politics in order to combat communism. Dwight Eisenhower, who was inaugurated as President in 1953 at the peak of the Cold War era, encouraged religious practice to fight communism. Resonating with the ideas that the Cadet Chapel of the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs promoted, Eisenhower said in one of his early speeches that essential to American institutions was "a deeply held religious faith—and I don't care what it is!"²⁹ Eisenhower's impartiality in this speech stresses the importance of religious belief to defending liberty, regardless of varying faiths. In just the first year of his presidency, Eisenhower encouraged Americans to "turn to Almighty God for guidance and strength, especially in times of national stress," by creating the National Day of Prayer to be observed annually on July 4th.³⁰ By putting this day of religious observance on Independence Day, Eisenhower stressed the close relationship between American values and religion. In 1954, Eisenhower continued to concretize this idea with the addition of "under God" to the pledge of allegiance as a way of "reaffirming the transcendence of religious faith in America's heritage and future," and to "constantly strengthen those spiritual weapons which forever will be our country's most powerful resource, in peace or in war."³¹ Eisenhower was inspired to make these changes after hearing the reverend George Docherty promote the idea earlier that same year in a sermon given at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington.³² Also during Eisenhower's presidency, "In God We Trust"

was inscribed on all U.S. currency. Before this it was only seen on coins. A Joint Resolution approved in 1956 made "In God We Trust" the national motto of the United States, and a year later all currency was printed with the new motto.³³ This clearly showed that Eisenhower believed religion to be a strong force against communism—so much so that he embedded it into the everyday life of all Americans, no matter their personal religious faith or the policies of the first amendment.

Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy seemed to agree that Christianity would be the best way to fight against communism, however his goals differed from those of other politicians in that he focused on perceived threats within the country in order to combat the international threat of communism. This crusade came to be known as McCarthyism. McCarthy began giving speeches calling to investigate these supposed communists until his censure by the Senate four years later. Authors Anne Butler et. al. summed up the events leading to his censure and fall from favor:

McCarthy had temporarily stepped aside as committee chairman after the army charged him with seeking special treatment for a former staff member, and the committee decided to look into that complaint as well. Still, the Wisconsin senator continued to play an active role in the hearings, with the power to cross examine witnesses. The Army-McCarthy hearings, fully covered on national television, showed McCarthy in an increasingly unattractive light, as he badgered witnesses while ignoring parliamentary procedures and the rules of common courtesy.³⁴

²⁹ Allitt, *Religion in America Since 1945*, 31.

³⁰ Eisenhower, Dwight. "Proclamation 3023—National Day of Prayer, 1953" *The American Presidency Project*. Accessed 9 April 2024.

<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/proclamation-3023-national-day-prayer-1953>

³¹ Eisenhower, Dwight. "Statement by the President Upon Signing Bill to Include the Words 'Under God' in the Pledge to the Flag." *The American Presidency Project*. Accessed 9 April 2024.

<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-the->

[president-upon-signing-bill-include-the-words-under-god-the-pledge-the-flag](#)

³² Allitt, *Religion in America Since 1945*, 31.

³³ "History of 'In God We Trust.'" *U.S. Department of The Treasury*. Updated 8 March 2011.

<http://www.treasury.gov/about/education/Pages/in-god-we-trust.aspx>

³⁴ Butler, Anne and Wolff, Wendy. *United States Senate Election, Expulsion and Censure cases, 1793-1990*. S. Doc. 103-33. Washington, GPO, 1995. Cited in "The Censure Case of Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin." *United States Senate*. Accessed 9 April

All of McCarthy's targets were members of the U.S. State Department. This was consequential in igniting fear in Americans, since the department worked closely as advisors to the President and helped to guide international affairs and guard the country. Despite his lack of evidence, McCarthy's accusations ruined the reputation of many American politicians who he believed to support the communist cause. Although all of these accusations were unsubstantiated, Americans supported McCarthy's claims because of their intense fear of communism.³⁵

By combining American patriotism with Christian values, McCarthy intensified the war on communism to manufacture support for his crusade. The same idea of American exceptionalism that motivated events in American history, including Manifest Destiny and the Trail of Tears, now inspired the battle against communism. Americans still resonated with John Winthrop's 1630 sermon "A Model of Christian Charity," in which he tells Puritans en route to the New World, "We shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us," and that they "must be knit together, in this work, as one man."³⁶ Moral objectivism also guided United States policy, which fought back against any opposition to American systems and beliefs. America utilized these ideas to justify their duty to end communism and serve as an exemplar to the rest of the world. Although Catholics had been rejected from American society in the past, they were now able to embody this American exceptionalism too because of their hostility towards communism.

Although McCarthy was not Catholic, he was able to establish support specifically from the members in the Catholic church. This support can be seen through the changes in Catholics' party loyalties. Previously, the majority of Catholics were associated with the

democratic left. However, their allegiance to McCarthy proved to be so strong that the Democratic Party began to worry that Catholics may turn to the Republican Party.³⁷ Besides the anti-communist rhetoric that the Vatican endorsed, Catholics were drawn to McCarthy's strong attitudes towards communism and the actions he took to target suspected communists. McCarthy's rigid views and strict demands of beliefs and values appealed to Catholics because of the similarities they shared.³⁸

A Sociological Opportunity for Catholics

The prominence of Christianity in American social and political life created a sociological opportunity for Catholics to enter the mainstream of society without the stigma they were linked to before. In 1951 Catholics were still ostracized from their full capabilities of participating in society and government because of the significant differences that remained between Protestants and Catholics.³⁹ Until this point, Catholics had been viewed as un-American because of their devotion to the Vatican. In a 1927 article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Charles C. Marshall questioned the first Catholic presidential candidate, Alfred E. Smith, on this basis. He told Smith that voters questioned his morals because they "attribute to you as a loyal and conscientious Roman Catholic, which in their minds are irreconcilable with that Constitution which as President you must support and defend, and with the principles of civil and religious liberty on which American institutions are based."⁴⁰ This was because the church taught that they should be the highest form of authority to which the Catholics answered, meaning that the church's values and goals were superior to those of the nation.⁴¹ Protestants saw further incompatibilities

2024. https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/censure/133Joseph_McCarthy.htm

³⁵ Ericksen, Robert and Littell, Franklin. "The Role of American Churches in the McCarthy Era." *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 3, no.1, (1990): 45-59.

³⁶ John Winthrop. "A Modell of Christian Charity." *Hanover Historical Texts Collection*. Accessed 9 April 2024.

<https://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html>

³⁷ Ericksen and Littell, "The Role of American Churches in the McCarthy Era," 50.

³⁸ Ibid., 52.

³⁹ Hart, Darryl. *American Catholic: The Politics of Faith During the Cold War*. (Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 2020), 9.

⁴⁰ Marshall, Charles. "An Open Letter to the Honorable Alfred E. Smith." *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 139 (April 1927): 540-549.

⁴¹ Hart, *American Catholic*, 37.

between Catholicism and Americanism. Protestant views boasted the idea of “a city on a hill,” and the responsibility America had in universal salvation. This gave Protestants reason to suspect Catholics as less than patriotic, because they put their faith for salvation in the Vatican rather than in the United States⁴²

Catholics saw a chance to prove their patriotism with the war on communism. American Catholics had further reason to distrust communism because of the Vatican’s condemnation of socialism early on. During the Second World War, Catholic leaders had disapproved of America’s alliance with Russia and warned that “its ideology was based on falsehoods, and that it was the implacable foe of religion.”⁴³ Further, the Catholics in Rome disagreed with communism because of their belief on the social good of private property.⁴⁴ This expression of anti-communism appeared extremely American, as Catholics were defending and holding up their nation’s ideals. The fact that many of the American communist spies that were found out were Protestant also worked in favor of the Catholics.⁴⁵ They were able to assert themselves as the most anti-communist group, thus the most patriotic. The result of this sociological opportunity served as an entry point for Catholics into more prominent roles in politics because of the country’s need for strong anti-communist arguments. Catholic politicians now appeared in debates and gave speeches, which was significant given the United States’ important position in international affairs after the Second World War and during the Cold War.⁴⁶ The improved political standing for Catholics is reflected in the election of the first Catholic President, John F. Kennedy. It also improved American Catholic’s relationship to the Roman Catholics of the Vatican. Church leaders began to take American Catholic’s leadership more seriously and even looked to them for support. This contrasted with the historical marginalization of American Catholics from the Roman Catholic Church.

⁴² Ibid., 64.

⁴³ Allitt, *Religion in America Since 1945*, 22.

⁴⁴ Hart, *American Catholic*, 13

Conclusion

America’s war on communism during the Cold War was crucial in altering Americans’ perceptions of American Catholics and their role in society. The threat of communism revived Christian belief and practices in the lives of many Americans. Further, Christian values were reinforced into the everyday lives of Americans, from Eisenhower’s additions to the dollar bill and pledge of allegiance to the building of churches across the nation. McCarthy also leveraged the increased religiosity in society to gain support from Christians, and especially Catholics, in persecuting suspected American communists. Catholics were drawn to the cause of anti-communism because of the Catholic church’s past denunciation of communism, as well as the long history of Catholic persecution in Russia. The responsibility that Catholics had in upholding American values transformed their identity from Catholic Americans with questionable loyalties to valuable patriots. These events show the importance religion has in a society and the power it has in politics as well as the larger culture.



Eisenhower with his son, John, and daughter-in-law, Barbara, received at the Vatican by Pope John XXIII, June 12, 1959.

⁴⁵ Allitt, *Religion in America Since 1945*, 23.

⁴⁶ Hart, *American Catholic*, 13.

A threat to one's religion can cause great fear, leading to major social upheaval. The threat of communism in the United States did just this, especially for Catholic Americans. The Cold War served as an opportunity for Catholics to express their condemnation of communism learned from the Vatican, as well as express their Americanism. Historically, Catholics had been ostracized from both the Vatican and the larger American society on this basis. The Vatican was distrustful of the Church in America because of their Americanism, while Americans were distrustful of Catholics because of their loyalty to the Vatican. The rise in religious activity and propaganda through political and social action created a space that encouraged a strong religious identity, including Catholics. The reforms made by Eisenhower also promoted the practice of religion, through his implementation of religious speech in the pledge and on the dollar bill. Continuing in the political sphere, Catholics were able to combine their nationalism with their political beliefs to join the fight in McCarthyism, where his leadership appealed to the Catholic community. These factors ultimately worked together to create a sociological opportunity that brought in a new era for American Catholics.

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