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God and Race in American Politics

A Short History

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Among Progressives

The more progressive segments of the Protestant world that did retain an interest in social justice did not always include racial matters in these concerns. Notable social reformers

who otherwise exerted unusual efforts at embodying biblical values in their reforms regularly turned aside from racial problems. William Jennings Bryan, the era's most consistent political Christian, may have hinted at the need to address racial injustice, but those hints were overwhelmed by his need to maintain good relations with the Democratic power base in the South. Especially as Jim Crow hardened during Bryan's repeated campaigns for president, he acceded more and more to external realities and so paid less and less attention to African Americans. In the judgment of Michael Kazin, who quotes a contemporary critic of the Democratic Party, its "'overpowering, localized, negro problem' gave the lie to Bryan's attacks on the haughty, selfish policies of the GOP—a flaw the candidate himself never understood."[27]

The Social Gospel movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did include a few figures who consistently struggled for racial transformation. Among them the midwestern Congregational minister Harlan Paul Douglass, author in 1909 of *Christian Reconstruction in the South*, was the most active opponent of the nation's ingrained pattern of racial discrimination.[28] But for the most part, leaders of the Social Gospel focused their attention on problems of urban poverty and class alienation among whites rather than on racial injustice.

Walter Rauschenbush, the movement's most profound theologian, was representative. He saw much in American society that needed the rebuke of Christian reform, but he felt no particular urgency in challenging the era's conventions about race. For Rauschenbush, the sad plight of African Americans would be rectified by the same sort of economic improvements and Christianizing impulses that he felt were improving the circumstances of at least

some immigrant communities.[29] From all sides of the well-established American Protestant world, in other words, came silence, complicity, or active assistance to the "redemption" of the South.

Among Catholics

Religious cooperation with the imposition of Jim Crow laws in the post-Reconstruction South extended, however, beyond the Protestant world. Historically, the American Catholic Church had never been as concerned about questions of race and slavery in themselves as they were about how race and slavery affected integration into American society and the church's ability to maintain its internal unity along with ties to Rome.[30] Broader patterns of Catholic interaction with the political environment had determined Catholic positions on slavery during the Civil War era and strongly influenced Catholic attitudes toward race deep into the twentieth century.

The early history of Catholics in the United States was defined by the daunting task of making their way in an American nation that had been founded by largely Protestant interests and in which a strong revival of evangelical Protestantism was under way since the early nineteenth century. In this setting, the American church tried to provide cohesion and stability for its relatively small number of traditional adherents as well as for the great burgeoning of Irish and German immigrants who poured into the country from the 1840s. Within the large population of Catholic immigrants, the Irish were warned off abolition because of its British and nativist associations, while Germans reacted against the abolitionism, liberalism, and anticlericalism of the European supporters of the 1848 Revolutions, who had also migrated to America in great numbers. For this constituency, the

church's main goals were conservative: to achieve social stability for its often impoverished adherents, religious stability through the promotion of traditional Catholic teaching, and cultural stability through its opposition to radicalism and revolution.

And they had to do so while always conscious of hostile or suspicious evangelical, reforming, and nativist forces. These forces had come to the surface dramatically in the career of the American Party (known popularly as "Know-Nothings") that in the mid-1850s rode its anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic stance into brief political prominence. Moreover, of all "Yankee" reforms, abolition was the most radical for its potential to disrupt social order and threaten communal unity. Given these American dynamics, Catholics were pushed ineluctably toward the Democratic Party. Although this party also harbored some evangelical and nativist elements, it was organized to protect local interests, especially the interests of slaveholders in the South.

American clerics did attempt to promulgate traditional Catholic teachings on slavery, which had never considered slaveholding a sin, but which did include strict guidelines for humanizing the institution by protecting slave marriages, demanding slave religious instruction, and maintaining the mass as a rite to which all (black and white) were called for common worship. The apostolic letter *In Supremo* (1839) from the very conservative Pope Gregory XVI pointed the way with its strong denunciation of the slave trade and its strict instructions about humane treatment of the enslaved. In addition, a traditional wariness about unrestrained capitalism came into play when the church criticized the notion of chattel slavery (treating humans as objects) and the lust for profit that seemed to drive American society as a whole, including the slave system.

If, however, Catholic teaching offered a powerful, if moderate, voice against the abuses of slavery, that voice never exerted much influence on the Catholic faithful because of the particulars of the American environment. Rather, Catholics remained more concerned about the threat of radical reform than the abuses of the slave system. When President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation (January 1, 1863) announced the manumission of slaves in the Confederacy, even most northern Catholics were only tepid in their support. No Catholic came out four-square for abolition until the Civil War was well under way. And especially Irish Catholics were key participants in riots and other violent resistance to the slavery reforms promoted by the Republican Party. After the war, while the bishops maintained their position of apolitical conservatism, lay voices spoke out forcefully against passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments.

Also after the war, especially lower-class Catholics, often Irish, who were economic competitors with liberated slaves, found themselves pulled along when the Democratic Party allied itself with the Ku Klux Klan and other racist movements to strip blacks of their newly won civil rights. In these circumstances, it was a short step for some Catholics to move from a religiously based ideological anti-abolitionism to a racially grounded opposition to black civil rights. In Michael Hochgeschwender's careful phrase, "Antiradical perception of political enemies and racism defined the practical stance of Catholics in relationship to the freed slaves."[31]

Eventually, this general Catholic position also came to prevail in the unusual racial configuration of Louisiana. As James Bennett has shown in his superb study of New Orleans, Louisiana Catholics long displayed an unusual flexibility on race, with an unusual triracialism—blacks, whites, creoles—that moderated at least some of the nation's strident biracialism.[32] By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the Catholic Church in New Orleans began to bring its traditional racial flexibility into line with the nation's hardening racial categories. In the mid-1890s—at the very time when the Supreme Court ruled against a Louisiana Creole in *Plessy v. Ferguson* and sanctioned the segregationist regime of "separate but equal"—Catholics in New Orleans opened their first church designated for blacks only. Over the next two decades, the forces that had led Louisiana's large Methodist population to sanction Jim Crow discrimination also came to prevail in the state's Catholic churches.