



Southern Catholics and Protestant Bias: Bishop John England's 1839 Debate with Rev. Richard Fuller

During every election season, articles appear discussing confirmation bias, pointing out that most people read news stories in ways that confirm their existing opinions while discarding pesky facts that challenge their beliefs. Writers realize that powerful narratives shape significantly what people hear and how they then act. Minority groups, however defined, often believe different narratives from the majority in order to make sense of their situation. They often find it difficult to be heard by the majority. Catholics in antebellum South Carolina and Georgia struggled to thrive as a small, poor, traditionally-mistrusted minority within a dynamic society. Largely, but not completely, Irish immigrants, they built churches, schools, and communities in the sprawling Southern landscape, usually in cities and small towns. The enormity of the material challenges combined with anti-Catholic prejudice presented a daunting task. Some historians have portrayed Catholic adaptation to life in the Old South as generally easy, recognizing Catholic collaboration with their neighbors and pointing out that most of the anti-Catholic violence during the antebellum period occurred outside the region.¹ But southern Catholics struggled mightily against deep prejudices. Many southerners believed history demonstrated that Catholicism was so corrupt and depraved that it precluded Catholics from being loyal, republican citizens. One logical response Catholics made, then, was to challenge popular historical narratives held by

their non-Catholic neighbors.

John England (1786–1842), the first bishop of the Diocese of Charleston, used varied means to spread Catholicism in his expansive diocese, which covered the states of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. The leading expert on southern Catholicism, James Woods, called Bishop England “the most significant prelate in the South, and perhaps the whole United States, during the antebellum era.”² John England came to Charleston as its first Catholic bishop in 1820 from Cork, Ireland, where he knew intimately the anti-Catholic prejudice that lingered from the English Reformation and its aftermath. In 1822, he founded the first national Catholic newspaper, the *United States Catholic Miscellany*, in part to correct common Protestant misperceptions about Catholicism. The bishop explained that his paper would examine “history for the purpose of investigating the truth of many assertions which have been, perhaps, too lightly hazarded . . . and which have excited unfounded prejudices in the minds of many well-disposed individuals.”³ Bishop England commonly contested dominant narratives through “paper wars”, newspaper debates that appealed to the public to pick a winner.⁴ In 1839 Bishop England debated a prominent South Carolina Baptist minister, Rev. Richard Fuller of Beaufort, in the pages of both the *Charleston Courier*, the city’s commercial newspaper, and the *Miscellany*. As in other debates, Bishop England’s letters sought to undermine the

authority of the Protestant historical narrative. While he doubted that the debate would change his opponent’s mind, Bishop England wrote in part because he believed that Catholicism would not spread in the South until the Protestant narratives of Catholicism changed.

The drastic increase in Catholic immigration, combined with a vigorous print culture in the United States, contributed to a growing anti-Catholic movement by the 1830s. Immigration, particularly from Ireland, boosted the number of Catholics. Historian Ryan K. Smith explained that “the number of Catholic churches in the United States increased 885 percent between 1820 and 1850, and the total number then doubled in ten years, becoming 2,550 by 1860.”⁵ Simultaneously, the Second Great Awakening increased membership in the leading Protestant churches in the country. Religious groups utilized cheap printed materials. By the late 1820s Protestant organizations sent each year about seven million issues of newspapers to approximately 60,000 homes, numbers that would increase as the antebellum period progressed.⁶ Protestants also published tracts, books, and Bibles to distribute. Some Protestants responded in print to the increasing number of Catholics in the country, publishing material both attacking Catholicism and targeting Catholics for conversions to Protestantism. Much of the

literature portrayed Catholics as belonging to a past age of ignorance, corruption, and authoritarian politics. Catholics, this literature taught, were dangers to the Republic. One of the best-selling books in antebellum America was the 1836 anti-Catholic screed *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery*, purportedly by Maria Monk who had escaped a harrowing life in a Canadian convent. Monk's tale of convent life both titillated and horrified American readers with stories of sexual perversion and secret religious practices. Anti-Catholicism assumed a considerable position in antebellum culture.

The same technology that allowed Protestants to flood the country with religious material permitted Catholics a voice. Many Catholic papers in northern cities joined Bishop England's *Miscellany* in countering nativist claims. For example, in 1836–1837 Catholic newspapers publicized that the Maria Monk tale was a forgery, ghost written by two anti-Catholic ministers and based on an older Spanish forgery. Catholics also took advantage of newspapers to debate Protestant spokesmen on various doctrines. Often times, newspaper debates appeared later as bound volumes, attracting a new readership. Ray Allen Billington, a prominent historian of American nativism, noted that by 1840 religious debates with Catholics began to lose popularity with Protestants because “thinking Protestants who had been bred in a hatred of Romanism were learning for the first time that the Catholics did have a sound argument and that many of the charges aimed at Popery were equally repudiated by the Church itself”. Public debates allowed Catholics to articulate their position, which is what they were seeking all along. Billington concluded that many anti-Catholic writers learned to use “propaganda in which Catholics were given no chance for reply or rebuttal”. The more salacious, the better.⁷

By the time Bishop England debated Richard Fuller in 1839, England had extensive experience in public controversies. During the 1820s he had argued repeatedly



Bishop John Ireland

that Protestant views of history made it difficult for them to accept Catholics as neighbors. In 1826 he had been the first Catholic bishop to address Congress. In his speech, he explained basic Catholic beliefs but also devoted significant time to explaining the historical context of late medieval Europe to dispel notions that the Pope could dispense American Catholics from their obligations as citizens. Later that year, in the midst of another public controversy, Bishop England exclaimed that the “British Protestant nation has been almost continually employed in destroying the truth of history for the purpose of bringing obloquy upon the Catholics!!” He noted that the development of printing contributed to the prejudice, for “those distortions of facts

have the appearance of being the original and authentic statement of what occurred, and the press having been in the hands of only the opponents of Catholics, no counter statement could be sent forth.”⁸ Given the opportunity, Bishop England corrected the general narrative. At the same time, he noted that corrupt individuals certainly had been part of the Church and caused problems. But, he assured his readers, the Church, despite the corruption of some, had not perverted its doctrine. Bishop England would repeat this formula in his 1839 controversy with Fuller.

The debate with Richard Fuller began over a report published in the *Charleston Courier* by the Prince William's Temperance Society. Fuller had joined with other South

Carolínians in the Society to draft a petition to send to the state legislature protesting its granting of liquor licenses. Most of the statement was rather mundane, but one passage stated that the Temperance Society hoped the time would arrive “when the legislators of a Christian community will regard an enactment to license the retail of ardent spirits, with the same abhorrence which they feel toward the statute formerly passed by the Roman Chancery, making assassination and murder, and prostitution, and every crime, subjects of license and taxation, and regulating the price at which each might be committed.”⁹ The Society appointed Albert Rhett, lawyer from the prominent Lowcountry family, to present the petition to the legislature. Bishop England, sensing an opportunity to gain a public hearing, responded with a letter to the paper on July 31, 1839, demanding the Society retract that part of its statement because of its anti-Catholicism.

Richard Fuller, who had drafted the statement for the society, took the bait and proved a fitting adversary for Bishop England. Fuller was a distinguished man. Born in Beaufort, he had shown great intellectual promise, graduating from Harvard University in 1824. Admitted to the South Carolina bar at the age of twenty-one, Fuller labored to build a successful legal practice. Fuller had been baptized an Episcopalian, but, after attending a revival in 1831, was re-baptized by a Baptist preacher. In 1832 he became a Baptist minister, renouncing his legal practice. He worked tirelessly to spread Baptist influence along the South Carolina coast and gained a reputation as a gentlemanly minister unafraid of religious controversy.¹⁰ Fuller’s growing reputation meant that his debate would draw the attention of the public.

Between July and October 1839, the over-zealous Bishop England published nineteen letters to Fuller while Fuller responded six times. England argued that anti-Catholic charges had been drawn from the spurious *Tax-Book of the Roman Chancery*, a Protestant forgery from the era of religious controversy after the Reformation.

Catholics, the bishop insisted, never taught or practiced what the forgery charged: that one could pay a fee as a license to sin. Fuller responded that he had not meant to offend Catholics with the passage in the temperance petition. But, he noted that Bishop England’s charges contradicted the accounts of many prestigious European scholars (and a few Catholic scholars) who referred to the tax-book in their volumes on the Reformation. To Fuller, the Bishop strained credulity in arguing against the testimony of such great experts. Fuller, in a polite, restrained, and gentlemanly tone, explained that he would not remove the language from the petition in part because the document had been approved by the whole society and also that the charges were true.¹¹

Bishop England realized that he had a large audience, both Catholic and non-Catholic, that would see his responses in the *Courier* and undoubtedly belabored his letters to demonstrate that prejudices against Catholics rested on myths and distortions. Bishop England hammered away at the root of the Protestant narrative, the authenticity of Protestants’ historical claims about the Reformation-era Church. Bishop England and Rev. Fuller had access to decent libraries in Charleston and Beaufort to peruse the works of many Protestant historians. Their debate turned on the accuracy of these historical accounts. Fuller, citing several European scholars, noted that there were copies of the *Tax-Book* published in 1514 in Rome as well as other editions.¹² But, Bishop England, after digging through the works, noted two interesting points. First, none of the historians Fuller cited admitted to possessing an original copy of the disputed *Tax-Book*. Thus, the proliferation of accounts of the book were simply historians citing each other rather than the authentic source. Certainly, many copies of the supposed book had been printed, but without an original and knowing that the Catholic Church never taught what the spurious *Tax-Book* charged, these could not be accepted as authentic.¹³ In response Fuller admitted that one of the earliest Protestant sources for the book claimed to be shown a

copy of the *Tax-Book* by a monk in Rome, but Bishop England countered that the author in question had not possessed an actual original copy of the book.¹⁴ Second, the Bishop noticed that the various accounts of the *Tax-Book* claimed different prices for the supposed license to commit sins. If the historians had been examining the original source, it would stand to reason that their accounts of the details would be similar.¹⁵ Bishop England concluded that Protestant historians had based their accounts on forgeries, neglecting the question of authenticity because it confirmed their views of Catholicism. The bishop claimed they either had suffered from—to use an anachronism—confirmation bias or, like the authors of the Maria Monk tale, maliciousness.¹⁶

Bishop England then explained the historical context of the Roman Chancery. He admitted that the Chancery did indeed issue a *Tax-Book* at the beginning of each pope’s reign. The Chancery consisted of lawyers who prepared legal documents pertaining to various church offices and church activities. The *Tax-Book* stipulated the fees for each legal transaction. The Chancery did not teach doctrine or issue indulgences.¹⁷ Some forger, England suspected, had taken an existing book and inserted the taxes for certain sins. By distorting a real book, the original forger lent credibility to his charge.

Fuller was not necessarily malicious, but he, like some of the Protestant scholars of Europe, had been misled by the forgery.¹⁸ The Bishop then provided an analogy, certain to affect his readers, of what had happened. Just like travelers coming briefly to America and then publishing their criticisms “to amuse Europe and fill their own purses”, so too did Protestants, who knew little of Catholicism or of Church history, condemn the Church. Ignorant critiques of Catholicism, like travelers’ accounts of America, should be exposed and dismissed.¹⁹

Fuller remained unconvinced by Bishop England’s argument but changed the subject. After raising other common historical charges against Catholics—the burning at

the stake of John Hus and the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre—Fuller insisted that Catholics could not be trusted because they believed themselves free to break oaths if the Church demanded it. This too was a common charge made by nativists to deny Catholics could be republican citizens. By now the *Courier* made the men pay for space to continue their debate. Bishop England did, again delving into historical context to explain the Hus affair and to dispel the charge that the Church could dispense Catholics from their oaths. The *Miscellany*, reporting on the debate, noted on October 12, 1839, that Fuller “in his retreat is flinging all sort of missiles at his pursuer”.²⁰ The tedious debate ended in October. But some requested that the debate be published in book form, which happened in 1840. Copies of the debate circulated in Europe, and, according to the *Miscellany*, someone had produced an abridged Italian version.²¹

In his last letter, Bishop England revealed his delight in the debate. He noted that he had achieved eleven things in the debate. Most were clarifying points of Catholic doctrine or church history that had nothing to do with the original issue, the petition of the Temperance Society.²² Bishop England revealed that the paper war with Fuller allowed him to show Catholics their true history so that they could answer Protestant objections. It also provided a plausible, if not conclusive, argument that the common Protestant interpretation of the corruption of the Church at the time of the Reformation was suspect. Questioning the validity of the narrative on one point could raise doubts in the minds of Protestants about the overall veracity of their larger narrative of church history.

The process of changing popular narratives to defeat confirmation bias is slow, tedious work with often little chance to see the effects of one's labors. Bishop England saw few fruits. At his death in April 1842, however, the *Charleston Courier* wrote of

him, “He was distinguished for strength of mind, power of argument, deep and various learning, and a bold and impressive eloquence; and was justly ranked among the intellectual and literary ornaments of our city.”²³ As the Bishop's body lay in the cathedral for popular viewing, Richard Fuller paid his respects. As Fuller's biographer, J. H. Cuthbert, put it: “For some time, with folded arms and thoughtful countenance, he [Fuller] stood near the body of the distinguished man whom he had recently met in controversy. . . . It was a scene for some great artist to have caught and immortalized on canvas.” When England's successor to the see of Charleston, Ignatius Reynolds, published the first edition of Bishop England's writings, Fuller, Cuthbert noted, bought a set.²⁴ While Fuller's mind never changed on Catholicism, the debate seemed to have given him respect for the leading Catholic prelate in the South.

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