

Another Look: American Catholics and the Quest for Equality in the Civil War Era

Jason Duncan

Aquinas College - Grand Rapids, duncajas@aquinas.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Duncan, Jason (2024) "Another Look: American Catholics and the Quest for Equality in the Civil War Era," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.26.3.06

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol26/iss3/6>

Review

Summer 2024

Duncan, James

Curran, Robert Emmett. *American Catholics and the Quest for Equality in the Civil War Era.* Louisiana State University Press, 2023. HARDCOVER. \$60.00 ISBN 9780807179307. pp. 472.

The legacies and meanings of the conflicts and tensions of the Civil War era remain as contested as ever, as Emmett Curran's important new book demonstrates. His subject is Roman Catholics and the public life of the United States, in war and peace, from 1846-1877, as he offers a comprehensive, well researched, dense, but accessible narrative. The scope of his book is ambitious; Curran's focus is not only the northern states, whereby some estimates 90% of Catholics in the United States lived in 1861, but also in the border states and those Catholics living within the boundaries of the Confederate States of America. He also explores the stories of Black and Native Catholics, who as minorities within a minority are rarely included in the historiography of the Civil War. An accomplished scholar of the American Catholic experience, Curran now brings his vast learning to bear on this most complex of all episodes in the nation's history.

Curran's emphasis differs from recent historiography on Catholics and the Civil War. John McGreevy, in sections of his magisterial *Catholicism and American Freedom* and even more so, William Kurtz's in his valuable study, *Excommunicated from the Union: How the Civil War Created a Separate Catholic America* see the Civil War as one part of a continuum in which Catholics faced deeply rooted religious bias at every turn, which not even their service on behalf of the Union could eradicate. Instead, Curran's main argument is that Catholics by and large did not support Abraham Lincoln's call for a "new birth of freedom" in the United States for people

of all races, and that a direct line can be traced from that failure to the place of (white) Catholics in the current deeply polarized politics of the United States.

Curran acknowledges early on that the Mexican-American War and the massive Catholic emigration from Europe in the late 1840s and early 1850s, especially those fleeing the horrors of the Irish potato famine, sparked another wave of anti-Catholicism in the United States. But the politics of nativism, led by the American Party (“Know-Nothing”) which aimed to restrict the political rights of Catholics, gave way to renewed sectional tensions over slavery. The crisis was inflamed by the U.S. Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice Roger Taney, a Catholic and former slaveholder from Maryland (he was the first Catholic to serve in the U.S. cabinet, having previously been Attorney General under Andrew Jackson), which in 1857 issued the infamous Dred Scott decision in a disastrous attempt to solve the nation’s sectional divisions. How much of Taney’s animus toward enslaved and Black Americans came from his religion is hard to demonstrate; his partisan allegiance to the Democratic Party and his connections to slavery were more essential in his thinking in this landmark case, as Curran admits.

When the Civil War began four years later, most northern Catholics, following the lead of the party they had been largely committed to since the 1830s, were more or less “War Democrats” who had supported Democratic presidential nominees Stephen A. Douglas for president in 1860 and then former General George McClellan in the wartime election of 1864. Although Abraham Lincoln was not a Know-Nothing and was critical of them, (at least in private), members of the former American Party voters were an element in the coalition of the Republicans that elected him president. Curran hints (page 89) that Lincoln passed over General William Rosecrans, a Catholic convert, to lead the Army of the Potomac, most likely over a fear of backlash from Radical Republicans and abolitionists.

The turning point in the war for Curran is when the United States shifted toward making destruction of slavery a war aim in late 1862 and then officially in early 1863. Initially justified as a military necessity, it became a moral issue as well, as Lincoln made clear in his timeless remarks at Gettysburg. Here is where some previous War Democrats in the north began to question the purpose of war, as casualties mounted and there was no end of the conflict in sight. Catholics in particular, (with notable exceptions such as prominent Catholic convert and public intellectual Orestes Brownson, and Archbishop John Purcell of Cincinnati) feared the abolitionist fervor behind this moral crusade. Republicans were seen by many Catholics, north and south, as the party of “Puritans,” and ideologues and centralizers who had ill designs on the Catholic Church, and who would abuse and ignore the constitution especially now that Southern Democrats were no longer in Washington to block their ambitions. Curran does concede that anti-Catholicism was part of the world view of many of the north’s leading abolitionists, especially evangelical Christians, and that some Catholics were motivated by the fear that the end of the war would result in a new Federal crusade, this one aimed at their church. He also notes on page 277 that Catholics supported Democratic presidential nominees in 1864 in numbers similar that of 1860, one indication that Lincoln’s shift in war aims toward emancipation may not have had the massive impact on Catholic voters that he asserts.

A dramatic expression of the growing Catholic opposition to the war came with the anti-draft riots of 1863, most notably in New York City. Enraged mobs, many of them comprised of Irish Catholics, rioted, pillaged and murdered Black New Yorkers in protest of the pending enforcement of a Federal draft law, one which favored those wealthy enough to hire a substitute to fulfill their duty. Curran rightfully details the atrocities committed in the resistance to the draft but does not develop the full context of those tragic days. Irish-American law enforcement

officers and Federal troops, most of them presumably Catholic, and rushed to the city straight from the battlefields of Gettysburg, were instrumental in pointing down the uprising. Despite their profound misgivings regarding the purpose of the war, Catholic soldiers in the Union armies continued to fight and die up until the end of the war. Catholic sisters and nuns drew Lincoln's praise for their devotion in tending to wounded and dying soldiers. In the Confederate states, most pro-Union sympathy was in the remote, mountainous sections, where few Catholics lived, and southern Catholics remained in the Confederate camp, including Bishop Patrick Lynch of Charleston, South Carolina, an active supporter of Jefferson Davis's government. At war's end, among those convicted of conspiring to kill Lincoln and other leaders of the U.S. government were Maryland Catholics, including Mary Surratt, who was executed by hanging in the summer of 1865. John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln's assassin, was not a Catholic, but even so, the stigma of disloyalty could be applied to his murder by those inclined to do so, even as Catholic bishops made sure that the president's death was appropriately mourned in their churches, at least in the north.

Curran also engages with the question of Reconstruction, emphasizing Catholic opposition (at least among most whites) to the project of integrating the former slaves fully into a new republic. Black Catholics, especially in Louisiana, supported Reconstruction, as did one prominent white, former Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard, but their efforts and those of others across the former Confederacy were destroyed by the "Redeemers," most of whom were Protestant. Most Catholics in the north, however, now more loyal than ever to the Democratic party, were of little help, falling back on the mantra of 'states rights' and seeing Reconstruction as more neo-Puritanism in action, whose progenitors they did not trust and whose aims they did not understand or share.

The meaning of Curran's subtitle, "the quest for Equality in the Civil War Era," does not become fully clear until the book's epilogue. In its last section, ominously sub-titled "Catholics and a New Civil War," Curran criticizes in harsh terms those Catholics who supported Donald Trump, up to and after January 6, 2021, especially faulting them for their one issue voting on the matter of abortion. Curran falls into stereotyping when he asserts on page 382 that "Catholic voters have always been particularly susceptible to the lure of demagogues, particularly those like Charles Coughlin and Joe McCarthy." What is more relevant is that Catholics in overwhelming numbers supported Coughlin for Franklin D. Roosevelt in all four of his presidential campaigns and were staunch members of the Democratic party well into the 20th century. Even so, the great service of Emmett Curran's formidable book is that it makes its readers think anew about the varied meanings of the Civil War and its aftermath for the 19th century, and for our own time.

Jason K. Duncan, Ph.D. Professor of History at Aquinas College, Grand Rapids, Michigan, is author of the forthcoming "*The Little Magician's Greatest Trick: Martin Van Buren and the Election of 1836*," (University Press of Kansas)