Religion and the Rise of Mass Immigration:
The Irish Community in New York City, 1815 to 1840
By Kevin G. Kenny

On March 16, 1826, two young men from Donabate in County Dublin, Patrick Martin and John McMahon, boarded the packet ship *William Thompson* at Liverpool docks. Travelling with them, in the storage quarters, were "sixteen passengers men and women all upon the same intent as ours, viz. the bettering of themselves in work. Among whom were two fiddlers and a piper. We were all agreeable and happy together," they wrote, in a letter to their fathers dated April 14th, "keeping the time in dancing, howling and other amusements." Arriving in New York City after "a very pleasant passage of twenty five days," they quickly made their way to the house of John Chambers, at 78 White Street, bearing letters of introduction from Eyre Evans of Liverpool, brother of a local Donabate landlord, George Evans. Chambers, an employment agent, provided the two men with three letters addressed "to the parish priest of Utica" and, as they wrote their first letter home, they were "proceeding by the steam boat up the mouth of the great river to Albany."

Once settled at Utica, the two immigrants wrote a second letter, in which they informed their benefactor, George Evans, of their success in their new home. Through Chambers' introduction they "were received with every mark of kindness" and quickly found jobs. "We are at present employed by Mr. Devereux at ten dollars per month and diet as good as we could wish," they wrote Evans on May 12th, "for we never engaged better health thank God and quite contented with our change of country." Within four months several of their acquaintances had followed them to Utica and in a final letter, dated September 28th, 1826, one of the men announced his intention to buy a plot of land.[1]

Stories like this one were fairly typical of the few Irishmen, both Protestant and Catholic, who made their way to America in the first twenty years of the nineteenth century. But by 1826, even as Martin and McMahon wrote, this easy and successful pattern of immigrant transition was fast becoming atypical. In the 1820's and 1830's the pattern of Irish immigration and assimilation changed radically. Years before the cataclysm of 1845 to 1853, immigrant life had begun to take on the characteristics considered typical of the Famine and post-Famine era, in which the average immigrant was indigent, ignorant and Catholic.

Between 1815 and 1845, some 800,000 Irish immigrants sailed to North America. But until the early 1830s more of them came from Protestant Ulster than from the rest of Ireland. In the period 1827 to 1832, for example, Ulster Protestants still accounted for fully fifty percent of Irish immigration to North America, most of them arriving in a position sufficiently prosperous to be able to settle the farmlands of Upper Canada and the western United States. Only after 1832 did Irish immigration for the first time become predominantly Catholic in origin.

During the exodus of the late 1840s Irish emigrants, driven from their homeland by sheer necessity, were overwhelmingly indigent. Between 1820 and 1840, by contrast, the poorest of the Irish did

not come to America. They could not afford the fare. The worst off stayed where they were, while those with a little money made it as far as Britain, in whose cities more than 400,000 Irish-born men and women lived by 1841, most of them forming a readily exploitable industrial proleteriat.

For the first time Catholics began to form a majority of the overseas migration. And, though they were not as poor as those forced to flee by the Great Famine of the late 1840s, they still arrived in a state of poverty and misery unprecedented in America. The United States had never before experienced anything like the Irish influx of the 1830s. Hand-in-hand with the shift in religious composition went a marked change in the social status of the Irish newcomers to America. Whereas 48% of the Irish arrivals in 1826 were artisans, by 1836 that proportion had dropped to 27%. In the same ten-year period the proportion of unskilled laborers among Irish immigrants to New York City rose dramatically from 28% to 60%.[2]

The economic, social, political and religious ailments besetting Ireland in the two decades after the Peace of 1815 need only be briefly sketched here. The Act of Union of 1801 ended Irish parliamentary sovereignty in Ireland and brought the country directly under British rule once more. The long-term depression which set in after the Napoleonic Wars ensured that Irish industry would remain undeveloped, except for Ulster, which participated in the English industrial revolution from the start. Then, as now, Ulster benefited from infusions of British capital; and the result was increasing loyalty to the crown and an even greater sense of antipathy to impoverished Catholic Ireland.

In Catholic Ireland, wholesale enclosures of land led to repeated subdivision of what little land the native peasantry still possessed. Ireland seemed to be the ultimate Malthusian nightmare, the one country in which the grim predictions of that misguided prophet were becoming frighteningly true. Its population in 1841 approached nine million.[3] Visitors to Ireland were shocked at the levels of poverty and misery they encountered. Between 1816 and 1818, 50,000 Irish people died of diseases related to malnutrition. 20,000 left the country for North America in 1818. Between 1827 and 1837 nearly 400,000 Irish left for North America, 65% of them for the British Provinces. In 1837 alone 48,000 crossed the Atlantic; and in the period 1838 to 1844, despite the severe economic recession in the United States, 351,000 arrived in North America.[4] Long before the Famine, mass emigration had assumed an integral place in Irish experience.

Before the Famine most of the Irish newcomers settled in New York City. Only after 1845 did Boston become a distinctively Irish-American city. The early pattern of settlement, in which the path was smoothed by letters of introduction and certificates of good character, declined in the 1830s as paternalistic benevolence gave way to sheer force of numbers. In that decade the typical Irish immigrant in New York City found himself in a situation far removed from that of Patrick Martin and John McMahon. Much more common now were feelings of utter bewilderment and despair, compounded by poverty and hunger.

The Irish immigrants to New York City in these years were true pioneers. They arrived in a city in which immigration lacked all state or federal regulation, and were immediately preyed upon by a variety of con-men, pimps and hucksters, many of them their

own fellow-countrymen eeking out a shady and disreputable living. Not until 1847 would New York establish its Board of Commissioners of Emigration; Castle Garden opened as an immigrant clearing center only in 1855, and Ellis Island in 1892. This background of poverty, and helplessness in the bustling city cannot be emphasized too strongly. The immigrants roamed the streets not as soul-less "marginal men" in troubled quest for their strangely fractured sense of cultural identity, but as flesh and blood characters in search of food and work. The problem they faced was how to survive.

In the absence of a strong, organized church in the 1810s and early 1820s bewildered Irish immigrants turned for assistance to other institutions set up by New York City's tiny but well-established Irish community. This community was predominantly Protestant in composition and leadership. Among its more prominent citizens were the wealthy Irish merchants Daniel McCormick and James McBride, and the noted lawyer William Sampson. Its acknowledged leaders were three veterans of the United Irishmen's insurrection of 1798: Thomas Addis Emmet, William J. McNeven and John Chambers....

McNeven and his fellow United Irishmen remained loyal to the goals of the 1780s and 1790s. To them, an Irishman was Irish by birth and his religion was of no significance. It was his Irishness that counted. All Irish immigrants were therefore welcomed by the community in New York City, and its leaders did what they could to help them. In the days before a strong Catholic church, three other institutions were used to perform the task. These were emigrant aid societies, fraternal charitable organizations, and the press.

The first emigrant aid organization, the Irish Emigration Society, was founded in New York City in 1817 by the three veterans of 1798, Emmet, McNeven and Chambers, with Emmet as President. Sampson, McCormick, and McBride also lent their money and their prestige to the venture. The Irish Emigrant Society was established to petition Congress to allocate to it, as a trustee body, ten "townships" in the Illinois district for settlement by Irish immigrants.[5] This petition was unsuccessful and the Society disbanded. McNeven and his friends, however, did not give up the goal of Irish colonization in the West. They continued to publish pamphlets, widely circulated in the British Isles, urging Irish immigrants to avoid the cities of the eastern seaboard, to go west and farm the land, and to practice the virtues of industry, sobriety, thrift, and "political morality."

As poorer, Catholic immigrants began to arrive from Ireland, McNeven set up a new body, the Emigrant Assistance Society, founded in 1826. This differed from previous bodies in two important ways. It dropped the grandiose goal of western colonization. And it avoided the pomp and ceremony of existing fraternal societies like The Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, the Hibernian Benevolent Society, and the Shamrock Benevolent Society. Though ostensibly charitable organizations, these were in fact social clubs and their assistance to poor immigrants was negligible.

The Emigrant Aid Society concentrated instead on finding employment (chiefly in railroad and canal construction) for Irish newcomers to New York City. In 1829 it was supplemented by a new body, The Union Emigrant Society. Each provided immigrants with data on job opportunities, wages, duration of employment, and routes and distances to the interior. Out of these precedents arose The Irish Emigrant Society, founded under the auspices of Bishop John Hughes in New York City in 1841.

One other institution played a central role in immigrant life. This was the Irish-American press. The first Irish-American newspaper

was *The Shamrock, or Hibernian Chronicle*, edited by Edward Gillespy and published between 1810 and 1824. *The Shamrock* was resolutely Irish nationalist in tone, paying particularly close attention to what it called "the two questions of vital import to the country," Catholic Emancipation and the Repeal of the Act of Union. In reporting on the tribulations of Irishmen at home, the newspaper clearly sought to keep nationalist sentiments alive among Irishmen abroad.

The correspondence section of *The Shamrock* was a lively forum both for Irish nationalism and for protestations of Irish-American loyalty to the United States. On March 2, 1811, the correspondent "Hibemicus" recounted in vivid language the crimes of England against his native land:

> At the commencement of their connection, Ireland was independent and her people happy, but ever since that period, to the present day, they have been systematically oppressed and plundered, they have robbed them of their liberty and independence and forced them to seek those blessings in a foreign land . . . hiding from public view every virtue of the Irish and exaggerating every one of their defeats, branding them to the civilized nations of the earth as a savage race.

Had this been written in Ireland, the language could scarcely have been stronger, or the tone more indignant. And lest Irishmen fortunate enough to have come to America forget such injustices, they were reminded that they were exiles, "forced" to "seek those blessings in a foreign land."

If England remained the age-old enemy of Irishmen even in America, a new enemy was the American nativist. This second theme was taken up in an open letter from the correspondent "Drapier," in the March 30, 1816 issue, in which John Randolph of Roanoke was denounced for supporting the exclusion of naturalized immigrants from the Directorship of the proposed National Bank. "Drapier" attacked Randolph for questioning both the loyalty of Irish-Americans to the Union, and the motives of Irish patriot rebels at home. The latter, he pointed out, "have been confined in Newgate and Kilmainham for daring to assert in their native country, the same principles which activated *Washington* in the *field*, and *Franklin* and *Jefferson* in the *Cabinet*." Expressing the hope, "for the honour of human nature," that Randolph is "not a fair sample of the real gentleman of Virginia," "Drapier" concluded by informing him that:

> I am an Irishman by birth, and an American citizen by adoption, that I am sincerely devoted to liberty and my adopted country . . . and that, notwithstanding an absence of twenty-five years from the "Green Isle," still I feel all that glow which detestation can impose against illiberality.

It is precisely this mixture of American patriotism and Irish nationalism that *The Shamrock* consistently promoted. Irish-Americans could become patriotic citizens of the Republic; but this should never make them forget their heritage and the continued plight of those who stayed behind. In every issue, *The Shamrock* reminded New York's Irish community of both.

Indeed, what is truly remarkable about Irish immigrants throughout the nineteenth century is the extent to which their historical heritage was central to their identity. One of the more striking characteristics of Irish-American history is how age-old battles were fought on new ground, the Protestant and Catholic elements seeking to outdo each other in the depth of sectarian hatred they could achieve.

The religious and political disagreements within the Irish-American community are evident in the pages of *The Shamrock*.

By the 1810s the period of harmony which had united Irishmen of all creeds, at home and abroad, was rapidly coming to an end. The growing cleavage within the Irish-American community reflected the divisions within Ireland itself at the turn of the century. It is obvious that *The Shamrock* regarded the Catholic population as the *sole* repository of the Irish nationalist heritage and hence, in effect, of true Irishness. On December 22, 1810 the editors denounced the "incorrigible depravity" of the "Orange-men" who had attacked the Catholic Church in Northern Ireland the previous June:

> *Will the eyes of those deluded men never open to the true interest of their already more than oppressed country? Will the generous and manly souls of the Irish be continually harrowed up to those satellites of oppression, trampling underfoot the vestments of the ministers of religion? or can we possibly imagine that he who holds the thunder of vengeance in his right hand will not ere long hurl it on the devoted heads of those despoilers of his sacred altars?*

Thus, one type of Irishman, the Protestant, was disowned by the Catholic majority and dismissed as an agent of alien oppression.

Interestingly, many Irish Protestants, in Ireland and the United States, were more than willing to embrace this denationalization. In the 1830s, anxious to dissociate themselves from the influx of impoverished and illiterate Catholic Irish, Protestant Irish-Americans identified themselves as "Scotch-Irish." This term was chosen by the Protestant Irish themselves, and it was particularly precise for it identified them as a hybrid, British loyalist, ethnic group originating in the Scottish plantations of Ulster-which is precisely what most of them were. In Ireland, two separate nations were in the process of formation, one Protestant and loyalist, the other Catholic and nationalist. In America, both would also establish separate ethnic identities based on their religious differences.

The Shamrock was expressing not the propaganda of the American Catholic hierarchy, but the reality of contemporary developments in Ireland. It was a newspaper put out by a layman for laymen. The community it served was led by Ulster Protestants, veterans of '98, who remained loyal to a brief-lived nationalist tradition which had transcended religious differences. *The Shamrock* reflected the decline of that movement and the polarization of Irish society into two antagonistic groups, adhering to irreconcilable religious and nationalist views. The stage was set for the Catholic Church to capitalize on the nationalist sentiment of its congregation. By insisting on an identity between Irishness and Catholicism, the church could greatly strengthen the religious adherence of its members.

The increasingly nationalist tone of New York's Irish-American press became much more explicit when, in 1824, *The Shamrock* ceased publication. Within a year it was succeeded by *The Truth Teller*, founded by two Catholic priests-the Irishman John Powers and the Cuban Felix Varela. This newspaper had much the same format as its predecessor, covered the same type of news, and used the same types of sources. But from the start it adopted a violently anti-British and unashamedly pro-Catholic stance. The first issue, on April 2, 1825, launched straight into an attack on the British press, "paid to misrepresent and slander the Catholic creed," and then took the reader on an excursion into history in which the verities of Catholicism were lauded over Protestant delusions, and the reign of Henry VIII was characterized as one in which "religion was sacrificed to the lust of a king."

By the late 1830's, the *Truth Teller* was dominated by two questions: the Irish struggle for Repeal of the Union, and the affairs of the Catholic Church in Ireland and America.[6] In the twenty years before the Famine it was the major forum for Irish Catholic opinion in the United States.[7]

As Catholics, the Irish came under immediate suspicion from the Protestant majority of native-born Americans, and immediate attack by the more zealous of American clergymen. The spirited and belligerent manner in which the attack was rebuffed was the first significant step by the Catholic Church on its road to dominance within the Irish-American community.

Before the 1820s the Catholic Church was an insignificant institution in America. In 1815 there were some 100,000 Catholics scattered throughout the United States, with roughly 15,000 of them living in New York City.[8] The Catholic community was centered on Baltimore, and was chiefly an Anglo-American community with a dash of French. Its leaders, Bishop Carroll of Baltimore, and the French-born Bishops Dubois of New York and Cheverus of Boston, were regarded as urbane gentlemen and accepted readily into the social elite. New York City organized its first parish, St. Peter's on Barclay Street, in 1785 and opened a second church, St. Patrick's on Mott Street in 1815.[9] The Church would grow in numbers only with the German and Irish Catholic immigrant influx from the 1830s onward.

The Catholic Church in America in the 1810s was an aristocratic institution. From an institutional point of view, the story of antebellum Catholicism is the story of the displacement of the old elite by the far more rough and ready Irish. From a philosophical point of view, it is the story of the replacement of a rather timid and genteel brand of Catholicism with a uniquely Irish-American brand of theology. Though other ethnic groups resisted these developments (particularly the Germans, who were numerous enough to form their own ethnic parishes), by 1840 the Irish were firmly in control of a New York City Catholic Church which now numbered ten churches (only two of them German). By 1865 they dominated a nationwide church; New York City had thirty-two churches and Roman Catholicism, with over three and half million members, was the largest single religious denomination in the United States.[10]

Historians, and in particular historians of Irish America, have tended to see religious extremism and bigotry as the sole preserve of evangelical Protestantism. But to see antebellum Catholics exclusively as innocent victims is to over-simplify. It is true that Catholic spokesmen, being on the defensive, were less likely to exhibit as vitriolic a strain of bigotry as their Protestant assailants. But, simply because religion was so central to the worldview of both sides, it is not surprising that the Catholic Church in the antebellum era, as well as the Protestant sects, was a belligerent Church Militant.

Centuries of persecution and repression had served to strengthen rather than weaken the Catholic faith in Ireland, and its Irish-born spokesmen in America responded to Protestant detractors with a spirited defense and counter-attack. Irish-American Catholics relished the opportunity to do battle on new ground with an ancient oppressor, Protestantism. And that ground, despite their enormous difficulties in accommodating themselves to America, was at least more open than in repressed Ireland.

By the 1810s the spirit of tolerance ushered in by the American Revolution was clearly in its twilight phase. The lingering tolerance of American Catholics can be explained simply by the fact that they were so small a group that they did not pose much of a threat to anybody. But the arrival of Irish-American Catholics in the 1820s and 1830s re-activated a deep-rooted tradition of anti-Catholicism.

Between 1800 and 1850 American Protestantism underwent a series of revivals. Religious enthusiasm reached its peak between 1825 and 1837. The 1830s was the great period of religious controversy, and it was in this decade that the defenders of Protestantism and Catholicism fought their most significant battles. The important theological debates took place in New York City and Philadelphia, which had the largest Irish-born populations in America before the influx into Boston during the Great Famine.

The first significant exchanges took place in Philadelphia and through them a newly-ordained Catholic priest, the Reverend John Hughes, made his name. He went on to become the dominant figure in antebellum American Catholicism, administering the diocese of New York, the nation's largest and most populous, for four years before becoming Bishop in 1842. In 1850 he became the first Catholic Archbishop of New York, and from 1838 to 1864 he ran the hierarchy in an energetic and autocratic style.

Born in 1798, the year of bloody rebellion, Hughes grew up in County Tyrone, in the province of Ulster, where Catholics were in a distinct minority. There they felt the sting and shame of the Penal Laws more intensely than in the South, and bore the full brunt of Protestant hostility and hate. Like many others, the Hughes family escaped by emigrating to America. Hate, it should be added, was a two-way process. Slightly further south, in the borderlands with Catholic Ireland, many Irish Protestants—themselves in a minority—opted for emigration to escape the mass Catholic agitation of O'Connell and the intimidation of violent underground organizations.

If adherence to Catholicism was strengthened by persecution, it was strongest among those who experienced persecution at first hand. In 1861, shortly before his death, Hughes would reflect on his teenage years in a letter to the Dublin *Freeman's Journal:*

> *I could not, then or now, exchange my religious privileges and hopes as a Catholic for all the power, all the honours, all the glory (as it is sometimes called), or all the wealth of the British Empire.*[11]

Throughout his long career Hughes consistently emphasized three related ideas. First, he conveyed an unshakeable sense of Catholic Irish nationalism. Second, he argued that this nationalism was in no way incompatible with the patriotic loyalty of Irish-Americans to their adopted country. Third, he was ever-ready, and sometimes over-eager, to jump into combat to defend his cherished faith against its Protestant detractors. His main work as an apologist was carried out between 1827 and 1836, but from time to time he would revive the old combative spirit. In late 1850, for example, he published a sermon, *The Decline of Protestantism and its Causes,* in which he boldly stated:

> *Everybody should know that we have for our mission to convert the world, including the inhabitants of the United States—the people of the cities, country, officers of the navy, commanders of the army, the legislature, the Senate, the Cabinet, the President and all! We have received from God what Protestants never received . . . a command to go and teach all nations . . . to convert all Pagan and Protestant nations.*[12]

After emigrating to America in 1817, Hughes spent seven years at the Seminary of Mount Saint Mary's, near Baltimore, before being ordained in Philadelphia in 1826. Within a year of his ordination, he·had leapt into print to denounce the editor of the Philadelphia *Recorder* for publishing an attack on "papists." In 1828 he set up a publishing house to distribute Catholic literature, modelled on similar ventures by the Protestant sects to disseminate literature among their own followers. In the same year he tried his hand at propagandist literature. He published a short novel, *The Conversion and Death of Andrew Dunn,* in which the eponymous hero, on being informed of the inadequacy of the Bible as a source of faith, converts to Catholicism and promptly dies an edifyingly Christian death.

In February, 1830, Hughes employed a new tactic, sending a series of letters under the pseudonym "Cranmer" to the virulently anti-Catholic New York City newspaper *The Protestant,* founded the previous month and edited by the Reverend George Bourne. The letters described the Catholic menace in extravagant terms and were published in successive issues of *The Protestant,* accompanied by high praise for this new Defender of the Faith. To considerable Protestant embarrassment, Hughes finally revealed the hoax in *The Truth Teller* on July 30, 1830, in an article headed "Cranmer Converted."

Finally, in 1833, Hughes found the opportunity he was looking for when the Reverend John Breckinridge, a Kentucky-born Presbyterian, the same age as Hughes and, like him, the rising star within his own denomination, issued a challenge. Hughes responded by agreeing to debate him in a series of published letters. Breckinridge published in *The Presbyterian;* his opponent in *The Catholic Herald,* Philadelphia's counterpart to *The Truth Teller,* founded by Hughes in 1833. The discussion ran in these newspapers from January to October 1833, and was resumed in 1835 in a series of public debates between the two protagonists. The controversy with Breckinridge spread Hughes' reputation as the foremost apologist of American Catholicism throughout the country, and even as far as The Vatican. In 1838, as a result, he was appointed assistant Bishop to the ailing Bishop Dubois in New York, and effective administrator of the diocese.

At the same time as Hughes and Breckinridge engaged in their debate, a similar controversy was taking place in New York City. It took the form of a six-month exchange of letters between the Reverend William Craig Brownlee and four prominent New York Catholic priests. Brownlee, who in January, 1831, had founded the New York Protestant Association, to "unfold the true character of popery,"[13] took over the editorship of the *The Protestant* in the same year.[14] The February 2, 1833, issue of *The Truth Teller* published a letter from Brownlee formally challenging "Bishop Dubois, Dr. Power, or Dr. Varela, or Dr. Levins, to enter the lists in a series of letters."

Power, Varela and Levins accepted the challenge, but proposed that it be limited to two issues. These were the theological notions of 'The Rule of Faith' and 'The Final Judge of Controversy.' Brownlee, in the February 9 issue, dismissed this suggestion and instead launched a contemptuous broadside against Catholicism in general. Denouncing Catholicism for its ritualistic traditions he wrote:

> *For the Pope, I shall yield myself a dutiful son of "Holy Mother Church" and throw myself at his Holiness' feet as soon as he can produce, before the Christian world his genuine and authentic credentials, from the court of heaven; confirmed infallibly by the miraculous gift of tongues, and prophecy, and miracles, that God Almighty has really constituted him, the legal deposit of truth: the fountain of immaculate purity, and the accredited expounder of the Holy Bible; to create mental light, and with his keys seal up darkness in the heretical mind, and be the final judge of controversy.*

The idea of papal authority was a superstitious delusion rather than a divinely ordained apostolic tradition. Or, as Brownlee put it:

> *Nay, so unruly has the human mind become, in consequence of its bursting the horrid chains of darkness and*

*superstition, and emancipating itself from the ghostly power
of the dark ages, that it not only ventures to call a man a
fanatic-but actually to propose a tight-jacket, and a bedlam
for the man who would enact the scenes of former days,
and propose and constitute himself the final judge of con-
troversy, to set up claims over God's own word; to press
gag laws against freedom of speech and the press; to forge
chains for the human conscience; and prevent the progress
of glorious liberty.*

By August 1 Power and Levins had decided to give up the
debate in frustration at Brownlee's refusal to adhere to their pro-
posed parameters of discussion. *The Truth Teller* of that date
carries their final letter, in which they inform Brownlee:

*Our controversy with you personally is terminated. It would
be folly to continue it with a preacher who can neither form
nor appreciate argument. . . . To continue polemic discus-
sion with you cannot add to reputation, for your substitute[s]
for argument are falsehood, ribald words, gross invective,
disgusting calumny, and the recommendation of an obscene
tale. These have been your weapons from your first to your
last puerile letter. . .*

Though they centered on two rather obscure points of dogma,
the substance and significance of the apologetic debates of the
early 1830s are quite easily stated. To the Protestant mind, to set
up an individual, the Pope, as a figure of ultimate spiritual authority
was not only thoroughly undemocratic, it was superstitious
nonsense. To argue the power of papal authority and clerical ritual
over human reason was *redolent* of the dark ages. Hence, in the
modern rational age, he who would set himself up as Pope de-
served to be carted away to the nearest lunatic asylum. To the
Catholic, however, papal authority was the apostolic bedrock of
the one true faith.

So-called Protestant rationality, based on individual interpreta-
tion of the Bible, was in fact absurdly irrational, the editors of the
Truth Teller asserted as early as May 7, 1825:

*Some parts of the Bible were not in existence when Christ-
ianity was established; therefore how can the Bible be the
source of Christianity [?] . . . It was four hundred years after
the establishment of Christianity before the Bible was col-
lected in its present form by St. Jerom[e], therefore it is
IMPOSSIBLE that the Bible could be the source whence
Christianity derived; many parts of it being written to ex-
plain the system of Christianity established by the apostles.*

What was most galling to Catholic sensibility was the evangelical
Protestant emphasis on reason over faith, the exact opposite of
the Catholic formulation. To Catholic apologists, to exalt human
reason in this way was to commit the sin of pride, to inflate man's
position beyond his God-given capabilities, to set up man as God.
As *The Truth Teller* put it in the same issue:

*The Catholic does not think man wiser than God; but the
Protestant does, by rejecting the authority God has com-
manded him to submit to, and priding himself upon his own
reason. . . . It is not the Catholic that considers man [i.e., the
Pope] to be wiser than God; it is the Bible Defenders that
entertain this blasphemous notion.*

Here, in a nutshell, is the Catholic justification for faith over
reason-a justification which, in its explicit fatalism and implicit
social conservatism, was fraught with consequences for the
development of the Catholic Irish community in antebellum
America.

The religious controversies of the 1830s were more than a
question of theological debate. At issue were radically different
social philosophies. Theology alone was no solution to the very
pressing social problems facing Irish-Americans in New York City.
In the effort to alleviate these problems the Church, once again,
played the crucial role. To the questions of charity and social
reform it brought a highly distinctive philosophy, one which served
to divorce the Irish-American community from the majority of
Americans in the era of Jacksonian democracy and middle-class
reform.

What lends a particular air of heroism to the social role of pre-
Famine Irish clergymen and women is the fact that the Church
in America was so underequipped to face the problems it con-
fronted. It is a testament to the Irish allegiance to Catholicism that
the Church survived at all. Debt-ridden and understaffed, the
Church was also clearly unwelcome to most Americans.

In 1820 there were 15,000 Catholics and two Catholic churches
in New York City. By 1830 both figures had doubled. And by
1840 there were ten churches, serving almost 90,000 parishioners.
And by 1865 thirty-two Catholic churches served between
300,000 and 400,000 believers. The proportion of Catholics to
the entire population of the city increased dramatically. That
population stood at 160,000 in 1820, at 310,000 in 1840, and
at 800,000 to 900,000 in 1865. On the other hand, the ratio of
churches to members was starkly inadequate, and remained fairly
static.

Despite its growth in size and numbers, then, the pre-Famine
Catholic Church in America was beset by significant problems.
One key piece of evidence is a report drawn up by Bishop Dubois
in 1836, which he used as part of an appeal for aid to the Arch-
bishop of Vienna. Appeals of this sort help explain the nature
of the Catholic Church in antebellum America. The Vatican
classed the United States as a "missionary country": an
undeveloped land whose Church was therefore to be funded in
large part by the well-endowed Catholic churches of Europe.[15]

Dubois estimated the number of Catholics in the entire diocese
of New York (which include all of New York State, and eastern
New Jersey) at 200,000. Mass was celebrated regularly in fifty
private accommodations, in addition to the chruches.[16] Most
Catholic Churches were seriously in debt: in 1840, for example,
St. Peter's on Barclay Street owed $135,000 and had an annual
deficit of $6,450.[17] In such a parlous situation, what Dubois found
most striking was the unshakeable faith of his flock:

*In spite of all the difficulties the zeal of my Catholics ex-
ceeds belief. I myself, another salaried priest and my
chaplain who receives an uncertain salary, hear three hun-
dred confessions a week. Not a Sunday passes without giv-
ing communion to at least a hundred faithful . . . From eight
to ten thousand [children] and about six hundred adults are
baptized annually.*[18]

This mixture of institutional weakness and pietistic zeal points
to an important characteristic of Irish Catholicism in the pre-Famine
years. Given the shortage of churches and clergy it seems unlikely
that the Catholic Church could have played a significant role in
immigrant life. The Church was clearly inadequate in terms of
size, personnel and money. It could not adequately minister to
the religious needs of its members, let alone their social needs.
Less than half of American Catholics attended church on a regular
basis. The most obvious reason for this was the lack of priests
and churches. But there were other reasons too. Many could not
get time off work; those who could were often embarrassed to
arrive at Mass penniless and dressed in rags.

Yet the American pattern of church attendance, in fact, mir-
rored that in pre-Famine Ireland, where roughly 40% of Catholics

attended mass on a regular basis.[19] In the first half of the nineteenth century Catholics took the sacraments annually rather than weekly. Weekly attendance at church was not obligatory. Irish Catholics, both at home and abroad, were blissfully ignorant of theology and liturgy. Thorough instruction in such matters, together with a rigid insistence on regular observance, came only in the post-Famine period. In both countries, this involved the consolidation of power by the Church over its members. By identifying Irishness with Catholicism, the church sought cultural and political hegemony over all true Irishmen. By the late 1840s Catholicism had become central to Irish and Irish-American identity.

In New York City the parish churches were the central institution in the Irish immigrant experience. With the possible exception of the saloon, they were invariably the one institution familiar to the newcomers. They were also the social and cultural centers of what the leading historian of American Catholicism aptly calls "the ethnic village." Catholic New York City was comprised of a series of such villages, predominantly Irish, but also German. And each village was organized around a Catholic parish church.[20] The churches dispensed a whole range of practical services to the community. And in New York City these services were badly needed.

New York in the 1830s did not extend past Fourteenth Street. The Irish-American community was concentrated in the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Wards. The Sixth Ward alone was probably the largest Irish community in America. Significantly, it was also the center of the Democratic Party and The Society of St. Tammany (Tammany Hall). At its boundary stood Broadway, a place for ostentatious display of wealth. Only a few blocks from Broadway, at the intersection of Worth, Baxter and Park Streets, was the notorious Five Points District. Though New York City had developed small slums as early as the 1810s, it had nothing on the scale of Five Points until the Irish arrived. There they lived in rough dwellings on the site of the filled-in Collect Pond. As numbers increased and living conditions deteriorated, the district became infamous as a center of filth, disease, crime, violence and prostitution. In the eyes of nativists, it was the classic early example of the dreaded "Europeanization" of American life.

In an effort to solve some of these problems, the Old Brewery, on the banks of the Collect River, was converted in 1837 into a huge dwelling which housed, in roughly equal numbers, immigrant Irish and African-Americans. Elsewhere, throughout the city, the Irish sought accommodation wherever they could find it–in attics or lofts, in basements or cellars–and, invariably, in conditions of appalling squalor, filth, and suffocation. One result was heavy drinking, sometimes expressed in a pathetic braggadocio born of sheer despair.

Federal aid was non-existent, and state or voluntary assistance to needy immigrants was hopelessly inadequate. Recent research in antebellum American Catholicism, however, has revealed the significant role of the church as social activist. In Philadelpia and New York City, two men in particular stand out: John Hughes and the Cuban-born Catholic priest, Felix Varela.[21] Each man had a host of liturgical duties to perform, each founded the chief Catholic newspaper in his city, and each played a central role in the apologetic debates of the period. It is therefore surprising that they found any remaining time for social activism at all. Yet it was in this sphere that these two men achieved some of their finest accomplisments.

Hughes, for example, opened St. John's Orphan Asylum in Philadelphia in 1829; and he and Varela helped organize Catholic relief efforts in their cities during the cholera epidemic of 1832. In this respect, the key institution was the Sisters of Charity.

Throughout the epidemic their display of selfless dedication won for them, and for American Catholicism, the unstinted praise of all but the most bigoted of Americans. As early as 1817 the Catholic Church in New York City established a Benevolent Society. In the same year it set up St. Patrick's Asylum for girls, run by the Sisters of Charity, at a time when there was only one other orphanage in the city. It was supplemented by a second Catholic asylum, for boys, in 1830; and by 1845 these two together cared for some three hundred and fifty children.[22]

A more contentious issue was the question of separate parochial schools for American Catholics. As the Irish-American community established itself, it came to see the Common School system as a bastion of Protestantism. In New York City, at least, this was essentially true. There, the Public School Society and the texts it approved, were unabashedly Protestant. For antebellum Americans, education was more than an intellectual enterprise: it was a means of inculcating moral values. With the arrival of large numbers of Catholics in America, the nature of these values became the subject of intense debate. The *Truth Teller* objected not to education itself but to Protestant education:

> . . . the education we would give them, is a real religious education, as well as a knowledge of letters. To learn boys and girls to read without implanting in their tender minds the precepts and practices of true religion, and the necessity of shunning bad books, is only to prepare them to receive that deadliest poison, vended by almost every Bookseller in England in the stage of Romances, amatory verses and epistles, and by two [sic] many in gross obscenity and blasphemy. Here is the quicksand upon which so many innocent souls are wrecked and ultimately fill the goals of England.[23]

The Catholic desire to protect children from corruption in Protestant schools is evident as early as 1800 with the establishment of St. Peter's, the first Catholic elementary school in New York City. Given the poverty of pre-Famine Catholicism, most subsequent schools tended to be set up in church basements. Felix Varela opened a school in the basement of his new church when Transfiguration parish moved its headquarters to Chambers Street in 1836. John Hughes opened the Western Academy for Boys in his Philadelphia church in 1834.

One of Hughes' more striking assertions of the growing power of American Catholicism took place in the early years of the 1840s, when he challenged the New York State government over the issue of state funding for Catholic schools. Many private Protestant schools received state funding. Hughes demanded that Catholic schools get funding too and argued that neither denomination should be funded if the other was not. The victory his opponents won in that struggle was pyrrhic indeed. Their aim was to eradicate ethnic diversity by denying Irish Catholics the financial means necessary to maintain separate schools. Instead, the Catholic failure to win state funds simply spurred the community on to greater efforts, leading to the consolidation of its parochial school system. Thereafter, it operated even more effectively as perhaps the key instrument in the maintenance of an independent Irish community in America.

Education was a question of cultural identity. To Protestant detractors of Irish Catholic immigrants, nothing rankled more than their refusal to accept the school system common to all Americans. Were these people Americans at all? To the Catholic Irish community, common schools were the foremost threat to their efforts to establish in their new country a distinctive identity which had for centuries been repressed at home. In fact, education was

merely one important aspect of an entire social philosophy which, like the effort to foster nationalism, served to set the Irish apart from the rest of American society. And, once again, the Catholic faith was central to this development.

Both the Irish and the German immigrants carried with them to America an indigenous brand of Catholicism. On arrival, they fought desperately and successfully to preserve their faith, setting up separate parishes to do so. Central to each faith was a distinctive philosophy of social reform. The more liberal philosophy of the Germans enabled them to find some common ground with native-born Americans and caused them to distance themselves from the Irish. The Irish Catholic philosophy was profoundly pessimistic and, together with the theology on which it rested, it comprised a world-view which was grimly fatalistic. It is difficult to imagine a set of beliefs more antithetical to the optimistic norms of social reform which prevailed in the United States in the era of Jacksonian Democracy.

The notion of the primacy of faith over reason, so cogently expressed by the Catholic apologists of the period, lay at the very heart of this dichotomy. Nowhere is the incompatibility of antebellum Protestants and Catholics more starkly evident than in their opposite formulations of this key issue. For, in social terms, the debate came down to one between progressivism and conservatism–between a godless rationality which aimed to transform society, and a humble quiescence which saw human suffering as inevitable and immutable. Or so, at least, the protagonists framed the terms of the debate. Only Catholics, of course, saw Protestants as exalting God over man; social reform was itself conceived in religious terms by Protestants. The burning spirit of evangelism lay at the very heart of antebellum American reform. And standing directly in its path was Irish Catholicism, perceived as obscurantist, defeatist nonsense, an unwarrantable hangover from the Dark Ages.

To dismiss this as bigotry is to dodge the question rather than attempt to answer it. The Protestant critics of Catholicism had some very real grounds for concern. The brand of Catholicism with which they were confronted was distinctive to the Irish. Reformers and nativists condemned *Irish* Catholicism much more frequently than Catholicism itself. German Catholics escaped relatively unscathed. The Catholic Irish carried with them a world-view, fostered by their ever-active clergymen in America, which ran headlong into the dominant currents of social and political development in the United States.

To the reformers of the 1820s and 1830s, American society was an abomination: it must be transformed. To their Catholic opponents, the idea that society *could* be transformed was itself an abomination. Whatever its contribution to the expansion of market capitalism, the motivating impulse of reform was religious rather than secular. It had as its primary goal the saving of souls and the bringing about of the millennium. Sweep away drunkenness, ignorance, illiteracy, poverty, and slavery–and this would usher in the perfect society. To Irish Catholics such thinking was nothing short of heresy. It was the sin of pride in its grossest form. Man's lot on earth was to suffer; the reward, for those who accepted this with humility and tried to live accordingly, was eternal bliss in the next world. In this earthly life, therefore, man should focus on preparing himself for grace after death–not on the idle, egotistical, goal of changing an unchangeable world.

Some of the more practical implications of such thinking were succinctly stated by John Hughes, in an exchange of letters with The Reverend Hugh Delancey. Hughes took Delancey to task for his opposition to Catholic Emancipation, in a letter dated July

13th, 1829, and asked:

Why is it, Sir, that your zeal never prompted you to write a paragraph against Mr. Owen or Miss Wright, who have been endeavouring to establish . . . a doctrine, the operation of which would shake every stone in the walls of your beloved Zion . . . Why is it that there is such constant carping at the Catholics, and scarcely a word said about the principles of New Harmony, which teach that the belief in Jesus Christ's divinity is a "superstition" that must be eradicated out of the human mind before man can be happy [?][24]

Here, early feminism, sexual liberality, rational free thought, free secular education, communitarianism, and utopian socialism, all come under attack. As for abolition, Irish anti-black sentiment was a pronounced feature of Catholic Irish-Americans throughout the nineteenth century.

To the other great reform of the day, temperance, the Irish were also implacably opposed, but here the reasoning was different. An astounding high rate of liquor consumption was a problem Irish-Americans shared with all antebellum Americans. But the Irish response was the same as that in the issue of education. They would sober up through their own devices; not through the proseletyzing medium of Protestant evangelicalism. Felix Varela, for example, established in 1840 a Temperance Society–for Catholics.[25]

Whatever their theological objections to antebellum social reform, the main concern of parish priests was to alleviate the lot of impoverished Catholics through charity. Such was the poverty of Irish immigrants, that charitable aid often took precedence over more long-term goals like education and temperance. In part, the Catholic clergy were motivated by direct competition from Protestant revivalists, whose chief aim in succouring the Irish poor was to convert them to true Christianity. More was at stake than this, however. In their very different approaches to charity the two religions revealed even more starkly their irreconcilable world-views.

In the Protestant mind, charity was a form of self-help, a means of raising the indigent to independence. Accordingly, the aim was to inculcate the values of sobriety, thrift, deference and industriousness. By this means, those who merited salvation might improve themselves materially; and, freed from poverty and ignorance, they might be converted and saved. If able-bodied people, when given the chance, failed to help themselves and persisted incorrigibly in their evil ways, they showed by their very behavior that they were hopelessly damned. In the Catholic mind, by contrast, charity was a means of prevention rather than one of reform. To put it bluntly, Catholics sought to cure the symptoms of the disease rather than eradicate its causes. Poverty was inevitable and ineradicable. In a spirit of selfless love, the more fortunate could succour the most miserable; but that was all. True happiness could be attained only in the next world.

Given the institutional weakness of antebellum Catholicism and the poverty and ignorance of the immigrants, the Church was faced with a formidable task. Yet by the early 1840s it had succeeded in remarkable measure in asserting its cultural and political power within the community in New York. Catholicism became the central component in the new ethnic identity of most Irish-Americans. To understand this we must examine the history of Ireland in conjunction with that of the Irish in America.

The first generation of Catholic immigrants were both Irish and American. The idea of "the melting pot" is often more of a hindrance than a help in the study of American immigration. For it is impossible to understand the nature of Irish-American identity

without considering Irish nationalism. That nationalism originated in Ireland, but it was also central to the experience of the Irish when they came to America.

To understand the pre-Famine Irish-American experience, both Protestant and Catholic, the manner in which Irish history continued to unfold itself in the new country can not be too strongly emphasized. For the two social philosophies evident in antebellum New York had already begun to set Protestant against Catholic at home in Ireland as early as the 1810s. There, in the wake of the Act of Union in 1801, the country was in the process of dividing itself into two nations. One was formed by Ulster Protestants, the descendants of the largely Scottish plantations of the seventeenth century. Not only were Ulster Protestants increasingly loyal to Britain; their religion was also undergoing a transformation strikingly similar to that occurring in the United States.

The other Irish nation was formed by the indigenous population, defining its identity through a process in which Catholicism and nationalism were fused. In these developments lay much more than the re-emergence of age-old antipathies which had been subdued temporarily in the closing years of the eighteenth century. In the making was a pattern of emigration which would enable the nineteenth-century Protestant Irish to adapt to American life with comparative ease. Conversely, it marked off Irish Catholics as both unwilling and unable to assimilate.[26]

Inspired by the values of evangelical revivalism, Ulster Protestants in the pre-Famine era departed for America with the conscious intention of self-improvement. As late as 1826, Patrick Martin and John McMahon, the two young men from County Dublin who introduced this paper, did very much the same. From the late 1820s onwards, by contrast, thousands of Irishmen arrived in America nursing a terrible sense of grievance. They were more than ready to embrace the notion that they had been driven from their native land by the pernicious forces of English Protestant tyranny. The propaganda of the clergy was crucial to the perpetuation of this idea in America. . . .

In America religion was central to the process by which each type carved out for itself a new and distinct ethnic identity. For the Protestant Irish this was relatively easy: Americanization involved embracing values which they regarded as essentially similar to their own. For the Catholic Irish, conversely, to embrace the values of Protestant America was to subvert the very national identity which they now, at last, had the chance to assert.

The pre-Famine Irish came to America from a country in which a powerful new sense of nationalism, expressed in a mass political movement of unprecedented scope and power, had recently arisen. Through a brilliant exploitation of this existing sentiment, the Catholic Church in America went a long way to becoming the custodian of Irish culture in America. In effect, the Church worked to fuse Catholicism and nationalism, to hold itself up as the one, true repository of Irish identity. And this process of fusion took place both in America and in Ireland. . . .

Few peoples have arrived in the United States more thoroughly imbued with a sense of politics than the nineteenth century Irish. But, in the pre-Famine era, this expressed itself mainly as a politics of nationalism, rather than one of class. This was the age of "The Liberator," Daniel O'Connell, who stands as one of the greatest popular leaders in nineteenth century Ireland.

Throughout his long political career Daniel O'Connell emphasized three ideas: non-violent agitation, constitutional reform, and inter-religious cooperation. The bloody events of 1798, coupled with his terrifying experiences as a teenager in Revolutionary France, do much to explain O'Connell's life-long abhorrence of

violence of all sorts. He was also deeply influenced by the success of the liberal parliamentarianism and religious cooperation of the 1790s. As the author of a new biography of O'Connell puts it: "The idealizations of the growing boy crystallized into lasting certitudes."[27]

It is beyond question that O'Connell's rejection of violence was absolute and unequivocal. But his repeated assertions of the unity and identity of Irish people of all religions, and the thinking that lay behind those assertions, are open to debate. True inter-religious harmony was little more than a pipe-dream. But O'Connell, as well as being Ireland's peerless orator, was a master politician. He realized that to bring about Repeal of the Union the flames of class and religious hatred must be doused rather than fanned. Only in this way could the British be convinced that a united Ireland could be ruled from Dublin. The achievement of a national parliament, he hoped, might then somehow usher in an era of religious tolerance and harmony. But Ulster Protestants had every justification for resisting and fearing the designs of "The Liberator." Whatever his own tolerant intentions, the force of historical development and accumulated hate made his dream unfulfillable. His main political allies were the Catholic clergy and Dublin-based middle class, his followers the Catholic peasantry; and the free Ireland they envisioned would have been intolerable to Irish Protestants.

O'Connellism was the quintessential expression of the emerging identity between Catholicism and Irishness. For it served to politicize the clergy, through the ingenious technique of galvanizing the existing nationwide parish structure into concerted mass political action. In the 1820s O'Connell mobilized the largest Catholic mass movement ever seen in the history of Europe. His Catholic Association spread its propaganda by using parish institutions already in place, and by adding new ones like reading rooms and arbitration boards to settle local disputes. A "Catholic Rent" was levied at the rate of one penny per person per month. It was collected from each churchgoer at Sunday Mass by specially appointed church wardens. In 1828 alone, the Rent raised the massive sum of $28,000. On Sunday January 13, 1828, simultaneous meetings were held in 1600 of the 2500 parishes in the country. The Dublin Evening Post calculated that 1,250,000 people attended. In the words of O'Connell, writing to the most radically nationalist of all the Irish hierarchy, Bishop James Doyle, this was indeed "all Catholic Ireland acting as one man."[23] . . .

In their thousands, O'Connell's followers carried his dream of nationalism with them to America. The message of non-violent resistance and toleration, however, they generally left behind. The evident relish with which the Irish-born Catholic defenders took to apologetic debate can be properly understood only if it is borne in mind tht they were fighting old battles on new, more open, ground. Not only was the notion of a Christian Protestant seen as a contradiction in terms, Protestantism was itself the living symbol of the age-old oppression of Ireland. "What have the people of Ireland to be grateful for from England?" asked the Truth Teller on April 16, 1825:

> What have the English government done for the Irish, but persecute her children, for adhering to the religion of her forefathers, to that system of Christianity derived from the apostles, and forcing them to leave their home to wander in foreign countries [?] Let the government solve the penal laws, emancipate the Catholics, and allow them to read the Bible as they are taught to do so, and we shall then see whether Irish character would not stand so high as the English.

. . .Once in New York City, the Irish immigrants turned naturally to the Catholic churches, which recreated the familiar structure of the Irish parish, and lay at the heart of the "ethnic villages" in which the newcomers now lived. In both countries the parish priest was more than a ceaselessly active social figure. He was, more often than not, an expounder of O'Connellism, and a figure of immense authority and prestige. Building on their existing status within the community, the clergy sought to establish Catholicism as the essence of the new Irish-American identity. The means for them to do so was provided by the existing nationalist sentiment of the immigrants. By interweaving nationalism with religion, the American church succeeded in establishing immense cultural and political power in the community.

The Irish were never allowed by their clergy to forget their historical heritage. Lest they grow fat and forgetful in the land of opportunity–which in New York City, at any rate, was highly unlikely–the message was drummed home weekly by the Catholic press and in the sermon at Sunday Mass. Yet the clergy were not simply opportunistic power seekers. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of their own nationalist sentiment. And, once again, they were not simply imposing views on a docile flock. They were giving a tremendously powerful, and peculiarly apt, expression to views which their followers already held.

Though an avid supporter of O'Connell, the *Truth Teller* was also prepared to concede that the rural violence endemic to Irish life in the 1820s and 1830s was, if not quite justifiable, then at least understandable. In a land which "has been under the slavery of England, and has been treated more like a colony of slaves than a civilized Christian people," occasional acts of violence committed in "moments of desperation" were scarcely surprising.[29]

Equally committed to the cause of nationalism was the dominant figure in antebellum American Catholicism, John Hughes. The circumstances of his upbringing had branded his soul with an indelible sense of the crimes committed against his native land. He could never forget this; nor would he allow his flock to do so. In a sermon preached in Philadelphia in 1829 he announced:

There is in the heart of every man that which interests him– the land of his nativity; and until that heart cease to beat, no distance either of time or of place will be able to extinguish the sensation. He may banish himself from his country–his judgement may give a decided preference to any other–his reason may be at variance with his feelings– absence and age, and reason and philosophy may all conspire against the rebel affection of his bosom, but they will not be able to sustain it.

The remainder of the sermon was a litany of England's crimes against Ireland. Hughes plunged into Irish history, starting in the fifth century with the land of saints and scholars, and moving through the Viking outrages to the English conquest, "which operated as the canker worm at the root of the nation's happiness, blighting every virtue that adorns human nature, and giving occasion to the exercise of every vice that degrades humanity."

That a Catholic priest in Philadelphia in the 1820s should lecture his audience at considerable length on Irish history is by no means surprising. The events of Irish history, however shrouded in mists of myth and melancholy, were so familiar to most of his flock as to be ingrained in their very consciousness. Sermons like this were designed to preserve precisely this state of affairs in America. Throughout their history, Hughes continued, the Irish remained unconquerable, for Ireland had the Catholic religion to sustain her: ". . .it was hers before she knew England; it was at all times the solace of her grief; it was the anchor of her last and

best hope, and neither bribery nor persecution could detach her from it." Religion, in other words, was both the source and the essence of Irish nationalism. Without it, for Hughes, the Irish spirit would long ago have been extinguished and the Irish nation would have ceased to exist.[30]

In 1835 Hughes preached another sermon on Irish history and nationalism, this time in far more strident tones:

According to the [penal] laws, Irish birth was a crime, property was a crime, religion was a crime. And under the operation of these almost infernal laws, Ireland was pinioned down to earth; trodden and trampled on by the iron hoofs of oppression's stalking horse, whilst the heartless rider sat with a visage as fixed and cold as . . . chiselled marble . . . He stripped her of property, and then mocked at her destitution. He robbed her of education, and then ridiculed her ignorance. He made the infant fatherless and wrecked the widow's heart, and then laughed at her desolation.

In imagery that was at once highly religious and highly incendiary, Hughes went on to point out the futility of this policy:

But–though he could chain the neck and manacle the hands of Ireland he could never stultify her understanding . . . Though he could press her blood from the wounds he had inflicted, and try to cover the livid marks of his cruelty with the ink of calumny, yet he could neither destroy her character nor reduce her people into a nation of serfs.

For Hughes, England failed to stamp out the Irish character because religion was nationalism, nationalism religion. And so it had always been throughout the course of Ireland's troubled history, he concluded. For there had always been "two principles which she cherished in the secret of her heart beyond the tyrants reach; the one is the love of freedom, the other, unbroken attachment to the faith of the first apostle."[31]

The practical impact of all this highly effective Catholic propaganda was to foster a sense of nationalist grievance against Protestant oppression, primarily English, but also American. This process was central to the formation of Irish-American group consciousness in the pre-Famine years. The Catholic religion, and the nationalism which was central to its propaganda, were the cohesive ideological bonds which held the community together and gave it a coherent sense of identity. They served to re-inforce that sense of identity at a time when the Irish community was coming under increasingly severe criticism from native-born Americans.

Throughout the antebellum period, the religious and ethnic heritage of the immigrants served as barriers to assimilation, preventing the formation of a common identity with other Americans of similar classes and interests. Nowhere is this more evident than in the history of labor. Throughout the 1830s, religious demands served to fragment the precarious unity of the working classes. Middle-class evangelical Protestants who, as capitalists, financiers and employers had a pervasive influence in workers' lives, spread the message that every social and religious reform they fought for was solidly opposed by the Irish Catholic community. The success of Bible reading, temperance, thrift and industriousness, not to mention abolition, must not be hindered by this idolatrous horde.

This message bore violent fruit in the Kensington suburb of Philadelphia in 1844. There, the previously radical workingmen, now imbued with fierce nativist hostility and the crusading spirit of evangelical Protesantism, unleased wholesale violence on the predominantly Catholic Irish weaver community. One peculiar, and at first sight contradictory, aspect of this riot needs to be explained.

The mob attacked not only the Catholic weavers, but also the substantial minority of the weaving community who were Irish and Protestant. An optimistic interpretation of this points to the "resilience of the eighteenth century Irish heritage of Catholic-Dissenter cooperation against the Anglican Establishment."[32] This is a comforting speculation, but there is little in antebellum Irish-American experience to sustain it. A more realistic explanation might well be that the Protestant Irish weavers had not properly succeeded in marking themselves off as different from their Catholic fellow-countrymen. Labor rioters, rather than being irrationally destructive, were usually very discriminating in their choice of target. In 1844 the target was the Irish, and the Irish, of course, were Catholics. Some Irish-Americans disagreed. Had the Protestant Irish weavers been clearly identifiable as "Scotch-Irish" they would probably not have been attacked.. . .

The story of pre-Famine Irish immigration is the story of the attempt by the Catholic Church to define and control the ethnic identity of the newcomers. By 1840, in a highly successful strategy, the Church had established tremendous authority within the immigrant community. Its hegemony was immediately challenged by other nationalist movements. The Young Irelanders in the 1840s, the Fenians in the 1860s, and the labor and land reformers in the 1870s and 1880s, all incurred the formidable wrath of the hierarchy. They were denounced as subversive and atheistic; they in turn denounced the Church as meddlesome and reactionary. Paradoxically, the Catholic Church faced the least challenge to its hegemony at the time when it was institutionally weakest. For the pre-Famine years it was indispensable to the needs of an impoverished immigrant society seeking to establish itself in a new country.. . .

FOOTNOTES

1 Copies of these letters are in my possession, and they have also been published in Peadar Bates, *Donabate and Portrane, A History*, (Dublin: 1988), 131-134.

2 Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 192-205.

3 Of all the countries which populated America, Ireland was the only one to sustain a net loss of population in the process. Today the population of the divided island stands at roughly four and a half million.

4 Miller, *Emigrants*, 197-199.

5 In the antebellum period of land settlement, lands were surveyed and allocated for settlement by the federal government in "townships" of six miles square.

6 In October, 1839, Fr. Varela founded a second newspaper, *The Catholic Register*, devoted almost exclusively to Catholic and religious affairs, which in 1841 was incorporated into *The Freeman's Journal*, an organ of the American Catholic Church founded by Bishop Hughes himself. *The Truth Teller* declined rapidly with the advent of Hughes' paper and was itself absorbed in 1855. In the period 1825 to 1840, however, it operated as the major forum for Irish-American Catholic opinion, and it is a key source of primary evidence in the subsequent themes of this paper.

7 In Boston, *The Jesuit* (1829), and in Charleston *The United States Catholic Miscellany* (1822) were established, like *The Truth Teller*, to defend Catholicism from its detractors and to rebut Protestant attacks. In addition to *The Shamrock* and *The Truth Teller* there were three other Irish-American newspapers of some significance in New York City between 1810 and 1840. The very briefly lived *Irish Shield* copied the format and was a direct competitor of *The Truth Teller*. Fr. Thomas C. Levins, who features in this essay as a participant in the theological disputes of the 1830s and as *The Truth Teller*'s correspondent "Fergus Mac Alpine," published *The Green Banner* between 1835 and 1837. Levins, suspended by Bishop Dubois, intended the paper as a competitor to *The Truth Teller* but his main target remained nativists and bigoted Protestants. *The Green Banner* denounced Brownlee's *The Protestant* for its publication of Maria Monk's scurrilous disclosures in 1836 and 1837. *The New York Weekly Register*, which included distinct secular and religious sections, was founded by Rev. Joseph Schneller in 1833. Under the editorship of Patrick Casserly it emphasized Irish news and strenuously defended Irish immigrants from nativist attack. James Kelly assumed control of the newspaper early in 1836 and changed the name to *The Catholic Diary*, but by October, 1836, it had ceased publication.

9 Old St. Patrick's was dedicated in 1809 and opened in 1815; Dubois was appointed Bishop of New York in 1825.

10 Dolan *Immigrant Church*, 2, 13.

11 *Freeman's Journal*, Dublin, December 12, 1861.

12 Quoted in David Bennett, *The Party of Fear: From Nativist Movements to the New Right* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 88.

13 Quoted in Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade* (1938; Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964), 58.

14 In 1836 it would become the official organ of the nationwide Protestant Reformation Society.

15 Such funding, of course, was grist to the nativist mill. Appeals like this one were seen as tangible evidence of a Catholic plot to undermine free democratic institutions. *The Complete Works of Most Rev. John Hughes* contains a similar letter, dated April 16, 1840, written by Hughes in the course of a whirlwind fund-raising tour of Europe. Significantly, it was an appeal for aid to The Leopoldine Society-the organization identified by Samuel F.B. Morse as the force behind a conspiracy to send Jesuits to the Mississippi Valley in order to marshall the Catholic immigrants and lead them in a plot to overthrow the Republic, paving the way for the removal of the Vatican to Washington, D.C. Dubois' report is reproduced in Volume X (January 1917) of *Historical Records and Studies*, the Journal of the U.S. Catholic Historical Society.

16 Dubois, *Historical Records and Studies*, 125.

17 Dolan, *Immigrant Church*, 47; Dubois, *Historical Records and Studies*, passim.

18 Dubois, op. cit., 125. In the first half of this 19th century, sacraments like communion and confession were taken annually rather than weekly. Hence the low figure for communion. But why the significantly higher rate for confession? Is there a connection between feelings of guilt, inferiority and shame, and a long history of persecution and oppression? This propensity to confess was uniquely Irish Catholic. German, French, English and Italian Catholics did not confess so frequently, nor so earnestly.

19 Dolan, *Immigrant Church*, 56.

20 Dolan, *Immigrant Church*, passim.

21 An established figure in today's pantheon of Cuban nationalist heroes, Varela remains unknown in this country, even to most historians: see Dolan, op. cit., 46-47, 65-66 and 129.

22 Dolan, 136.

23 *The Truth Teller*, April 16, 1825. Through Irish Catholicism runs a marked strain of Puritan moralism, manifested often in prudishness, particularly in regard to sex. That this Puritanism is more Irish than Catholic is clear if we remember that Northern Irish Protestants share it with Irish Catholics, while both are very different from Mediterranean Catholicism.

24 Lawrence Kehoe, ed., *The Complete Works of Most Reverend John Hughes, D.D., Archbishop of New York* (New York: Catholic Publication House, 1864), Volume 2, 380-81.

25 That antebellum temperance reform was not exclusively Protestant is also indicated by the striking successes of Dublin's Fr. Matthew Theobald when he visited New York in 1849.

26 See Miller, *Emigrants*, especially Chapter 6.

27 Oliver McDonagh *The Hereditary Bondsman: Daniel O'Connell, 1775-1829* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 93. This is the first half of a biography of O'Connell, taking the story from 1775 to the achievement of Catholic Emancipation in 1829. The second half, which is now under preparation and is eagerly awaited, will treat the period from 1829 to 1847, during which O'Connell fought valiantly and vainly for repeal of the Act of Union, and the restoration of Irish self-government *within* the Empire.

28 McDonagh, *Bondsman*, 246, 260.

29 The *Truth Teller*, editorial, April 9, 1825.

30 The quotations in this and the previous paragraph are taken from a sermon delivered by Hughes in the Church of St. Augustine, Philadelphia (May 31, 1829), on the subject of Catholic Emancipation. The sermon was reproduced in Kehoe, op. cit., Volume 1, 30-40.

31 Sermon delivered on St. Patrick's Day 1835 at St. John's Church, Philadelphia, in Kehoe, op. cit., Volume 2, 164-69.

32 See David Montgomery, "The Shuttle and the Cross: Weavers and Artisans in the Kensington riots of 1844," in Peter M. Stearns and Daniel J. Walkowitz, ed., *Workers in the Industrial Revolution: Recent Studies of Labor in the United States and Europe*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1974), 63