

## Americanism

### Introduction

- Name given to describe a set of unorthodox or flatly heretical opinions that arose among a number of American churchmen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century
- Was most specifically addressed by Leo XIII in an encyclical letter directed to James Cardinal Gibbon

### Background

- Brief explanation of American founding and its principles
  - Religious origins
    - Puritans in NE
    - Cavaliers (i.e, Anglicans) in Mid-Atlantic and South
    - Quakers in PA
    - Scotch-Irish in Appalachia (Presbyterian)
  - Philosophic underpinning
    - Main influence will be John Locke, a philosopher whose political program can be simplified as an effort to found politics on principles discerned by unassisted reason. (as an aside, his political project was similar to Dante's as expressed in *De Monarchia*, a book that was on the Index until the 1881 : To establish that there is a source of political right independent of the Church's authority. & To lower the aims of human politics. Dante explicitly states several times – notably in the last chapter of the work –

that there are two purposes for the emperor of all mankind: peace and freedom. By freedom, he means, it seems, the ability of average people to live their lives free from fear of war or from undue interference by overbearing local officials (whom he argues are more likely to be moved by self-interest and thus to oppress their subjects). Dante explicitly states that the state is not responsible for helping men save their souls. (III.iv).

- Locke may be said to fall under what Fr Reuter spoke of as the second class of naturalists.
- His works, together with Montesquieu & Blackstone were formative for many of the American founders, especially Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, etc.
- Principal works
  - 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Treatises on Government
  - Letter Concerning Toleration
  - Reasonableness of Christianity
- As a consequence, to limit influence of revelation – i.e., religious leaders – on practical politics.
  - Cf chapter on enthusiasm in *Essay on Human Understanding*
- Main positions
  - The human political order is concerned only with man's natural ends
    - Peace
    - Property

- Human political authority is ordered to certain limited goals set by natural law, but is derived from consent of governed
  - Political power is not intended to assure salvation or even correct opinion about divine things.
    - Thus, no power to punish religious opinions
    - Locke though explicitly states the state may promote those religious opinions in judges as correct.
- Situation of Catholic Church in US
  - English Catholics a deep minority. Roughly 25k throughout colonies at time of Revolutionary war, though mainly congregated in Maryland. Overall population was roughly 2.5 million
    - This colony was originally founded by the Lord Baltimore as a Catholic haven, but quickly overwhelmed by Protestants
  - Relatively slow growth of Church until the 1840s, when there was large scale immigration from Ireland and Catholic principalities of Germany.
    - At this time, there was a more pronounced and systematic backlash against Catholics. Rise of nativist parties, especially Know-Nothings
  - A second wave of growth came in 1880s and 90s with large influxes from Italy and Eastern Europe, which continued until 1924, with Immigration Act which capped all immigration at 150k, and limited immigrants from any nation to a small percentage of the population they had in US as of 1890 census.
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## Principal Exponents

- Among bishops
  - John Carroll
    - 1<sup>st</sup> Bishop of US
      - chosen by nomination of fellow priests
      - Vatican asked Washington his opinion. US Government said: we don't care.
    - died in 1815
  - John England
    - 1830s
  - Cardinal Gibbons
    - 1890s
    - Cardinal Archbishop of Baltimore
  - John Ireland
    - 1880s
    - Bishop of MSP
- Among priests
  - Fr Isaac Hecker (died in 1888)
    - Founder of Paulists.
    - Converted in 1830s and was ordained priest. Apparently did not follow traditional studies in seminary.
  - Fr John Courtney Murray
    - A Jesuit ordained in Rome in 1937.

- Was a peritus of Cardinal Spellman (NYC) from 2<sup>nd</sup> session of Vatican II on, and was very influential in composition of final form of *Dignitatis Humanae*
- Taught at Woodstock, NY, and there published several writings arguing that the American Constitution and its religious liberty were best arrangement for Catholics.

### 1<sup>st</sup> Feature: Religious/Spiritual Deformation

- Leo XIII: *Testem Benevolentiae*
  - Main principle of Americanists: To attract more easily those who differ from her, the Church should shape her teachings more in accord with spirit of age and relax some of her ancient severity and make some concessions to new opinions.
    - Later spirit of *aggiornamento*. Quote +Chaput: Encouraged by John XXIII, two principles came to guide council life. The first was *aggiornamento*, an Italian word that means “bringing up to date. . . . The council sought to make the church *more fruitful* in her work by reinvigorating the forms and means of Catholic life in the light of new conditions. *Aggiornamento* called for a fresh way of thinking. It required the church to listen to the times. It invited a new openness to---and new engagement with- the world.” P106-7
    - Compare to Fr McFarland’s observation regarding Pope Francis’s statements in *Amoris Laetitia*

- This is furthermore accentuated by the Pope's recent statements in an interview recorded in the documentary *Francesco* and aired on 20 October 2020
- Underlying assumptions:
  - Religious doctrines and moral teachings are not adequate expressions of unchanging reality.
  - Thus, to some extent they may be adapted so as better to appeal to men, rather than working to have men adapt to them.
- In American context, this entailed several adaptations
  - Democratization of Church
    - Quote top of page 3
    - Authority of decisions ultimately rests on submission of faithful.
      - John England: "If the Pope were to issue a decision, from which the majority of bishops were to dissent, or to which they refused their concurrence, such decision would not be an act of the church, and of course would not bind persons to obedience."
      - This is also linked to vestiges of trusteeism in early history of American Church. Cf. incident at Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia under John Carroll, where congregation removed a pastor and appointed another. John Carroll ultimately excommunicated the renegade priest.
  - Lesser need for external guidance
    - In matters of spiritual life

- Why? To give freer range to Holy Ghost
      - Fr Isaac Hecker “The form of government of the United States is preferable for Catholics above other forms [because it] leaves man a larger margin for liberty of action, and hence for cooperation with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, than any other government under the sun.”
    - Compatible with Charismatism. Cf. +Lefebvre on danger of these movements, which downplay hierarchy, doctrine and the sacraments. Furthermore, tends to equate divine will with man’s will.
    - Also compatible with independence willed by liberals, as well as sola gratia; i.e., that God works directly on soul without intermediary of external hierarchy.
  - Depreciation of “passive” virtues in favor of “active” virtues
    - Reflects understanding of reason not serving to contemplate reality, but to act to conquer nature.
    - More fundamentally, this is a species of naturalism inasmuch as it downplays those virtues which dispose the soul to be docile to the action of God in the soul. Instead, a man strives to act according to his natural powers.
      - Obedience
      - Mortification
      - Humility
    - John Ireland “An honest ballot and social decorum among Catholics will do more for God’s glory than midnight flagellations and Compostellan pilgrimages.”

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### American experiment represents future for Catholic Church

- This is more fundamental and defining aspect of Americanism, both because more formative and because more directly opposed to the rights of Our Lord Jesus Christ as King. Ultimately dealt with in encyclical *Longinqua*
- John Ireland
  - Speech on Centenary of American Hierarchy: “We cannot but believe that a singular mission is assigned to America, glorious for itself and beneficent to the whole race, the mission of bringing a new social and political order, based more than any other upon the common brotherhood of man, and more than any other securing to the multitude of the people social happiness and equality of rights. “In all truth, the greatest epoch of human history, if we except that which witnessed the coming of God upon earth, is upon us; and of this epoch our wisdom and our energy will make the Church supreme mistress.”
  - 10 November 1884: 3<sup>rd</sup> Plenary Council of Baltimore
    - “Thou (America) bearest in thy hands the brightest hopes of the human race. God’s mission to thee is to show to nations that man is capable of the highest liberty. Oh! Be ever free and prosperous that liberty triumph over the earth from the rising to the setting sun. *Esto perpetua!*
  - enjoyed the favor of the laws and the patronage of the public authority.
- In what ways was it the hope?



- Partly by the civil liberty it represented.
- More fundamentally, by redefining relationship between Church and state and by assuring religious liberty.
- Civil Religious liberty is good & is distinct from indifferentism
  - John Carroll to Rev Charles Plowden: “I am glad, however, to inform you that the fullest and largest system of toleration is adopted in almost all of the American states: public protection and encouragement are extended alike to all denominations and Roman Catholics are members of Congress, assemblies, and hold civil and military posts as well as others.
    - In a letter to John Troy about Plowden: “he does not distinguish enough between theological or religious intolerance, which is essential to true religion, and civil intolerance.”
    - Charles Chaput: The Catholic Faith does not hold, and Vatican II did not teach [in DH] that respect for conscience means that individuals have absolute sovereignty in determining their own truth, or that anyone’s choice of beliefs is as good as any other. Whatever we may tolerate, every person has duties to seek and serve the truth: “Religious freedom in turn, which men demand as necessary to fulfill their duty to worship God, has to do with immunity with coercion in civil society. Therefore it leaves untouched traditional Catholic doctrine on the moral duty of men and societies toward the true religion and toward the one Church of Christ.” DH 1
- Civil Religious liberty assures freedom for truth.

- Many Americanists compared state of Church in America to state of Church in many militantly secular European countries, especially France & Italy.
  - Fr Isaac Hecker: “In our country, where the church exists in her entire independence from State control, yet all her rights acknowledged and protected by the laws of the country, where her right to hold property, of establishing colleges ... and to govern and to administer her affairs according to her own laws and customs; it is here she is putting forth an energy and making conquests which vie with the zeal and success of the early ages of Christianity.”
  - Bishop John England: “I do not know any system more favorable to the security of religious rights than that of American law. I prefer it to the law of almost every Catholic country with which I am acquainted.”
  - Charles Chaput: Murray also saw that because of its prosperity, its religious founding, its different political heritage (through the Scottish rather than the French enlightenment) and the lack of religious warfare in its past, America was different [than Europe]. In practice, American freedom meant freedom *for* belief. Continental freedom implied freedom *from* religion. Murray grasped that Leo XIII’s fears about separating church and state were not, at their root, a reactionary defense of church privilege. Rather, they derived from Leo’s very real struggle against European laicism – a belligerent, antireligious secularism that swallowed all opposition by identifying society and the public good exclusively with the state.

- Assumption was that in Europe, separation meant political subordination of Church to State
  - Example: French Law of Separation in 1905.
    - Outlawed religious orders & forbade them to have a part in education
      - Dominican sisters
    - Nationalized all church property.
    - Strove to dictate the internal government of parish churches by creating “associations” of lay people
- Respects initiative of individual Catholics
  - Allows untrammelled growth. Was true before Vatican II.
  - From being 1% of population in 1776, Catholics were single largest religion in US by 1850, and had become approximately 25% of the population on the eve of Vatican II (even now, about 20% of population is nominally Catholic), with a huge and outsized influence in society
    - Schools (reference CARA)
    - Hospitals
  - However, this growth was more superficial than profound. No nation saw a greater collapse in priestly and religious life after VII than US.
- Religious liberty prevents corruption of Church in political process.
  - John Carroll (on whether or not to accompany mission to Quebec)
    - I have observed that when the ministers of religion leave the duties of their profession to take a busy part in political matters, they generally fall into contempt; and sometimes bring discredit to the cause, in whose service they are engaged.

- John England: “I do not know any system more favorable to the security of religious rights than that of American law. I prefer it to the law of almost every Catholic country with which I am acquainted.”
- John England: “My belief is that God never gave to any pope, nor to any other bishop, nor to any other clergyman, nor to any state, nor to any human tribunal, any power, directly or indirectly, to inflict any corporal or temporal punishment upon man for heresy or religious error.”
- Charles Chaput: For Murray, the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment created room for American Catholics to thrive. He saw that by confirming religious authority and civil authority as distinct, the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment served religious communities as well as it did the state. Catholics could look to Europe, with its legacy of incestuous links between religion and the state, to see that the church was usually the loser in such bargains.
- Longinqua Oceani
  - But, moreover (a fact which it gives pleasure to acknowledge), thanks are due to the equity of the laws which obtain in America and to the customs of the well-ordered Republic. For the Church amongst you, unopposed by the Constitution and government of your nation, fettered by no hostile legislation, protected against violence by the common laws and the impartiality of the tribunals, is free to live and act without hindrance. Yet, though all this is true, it would be very erroneous to draw the conclusion that in America is to be sought the type of the most desirable status of the Church, or that it would be universally lawful or expedient for State and Church to be, as in America, dissevered and divorced. The fact that Catholicity with you

is in good condition, nay, is even enjoying a prosperous growth, is by all means to be attributed to the fecundity with which God has endowed His Church, in virtue of which unless men or circumstances interfere, she spontaneously expands and propagates herself; but she would bring forth more abundant fruits if, in addition to liberty, she enjoyed the favor of the laws and the patronage of the public authority.

### Conclusion

- Americanism is part of the liberal project which we saw with Reuter
  - In part, it reflects the denial of an unchanging revealed truth that can be known, as manifested in its extreme expression discussed by Leo XIII. Thus, religion can and must be updated to appeal to men who are not drawn to her timeless truths.
  - In part, it is a reflection of naturalism, as discussed by Leo XIII in *Libertas*
    - There are others, somewhat more moderate though not more consistent, who affirm that the morality of individuals is to be guided by the divine law, but not the morality of the State, for that in public affairs the commands of God may be passed over, and may be entirely disregarded in the framing of laws. Hence follows the fatal theory of the need of separation between Church and State. But the absurdity of such a position is manifest. Nature herself proclaims the necessity of the State providing means and opportunities whereby the community may be enabled to live properly, that is to say, according to the laws of God. For, since God is the source of all goodness and justice, it is absolutely ridiculous that the State should pay no attention to these laws or render them abortive by contrary enactments.
  - Leo XIII: This kind of liberty, if considered in relation to the State, clearly implies that there is no reason why the State should offer any homage to God, or should desire any public recognition of Him; that no

one form of worship is to be preferred to another, but that all stand on an equal footing, no account being taken of the religion of the people, even if they profess the Catholic faith. But, to justify this, it must needs be taken as true that the State has no duties toward God, or that such duties, if they exist, can be abandoned with impunity, both of which assertions are manifestly false.

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