Faithful Americans:
Catholic Reconciliations of Identity in Early America

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This essay is a slightly adapted version of a talk given at the "Dual Allegiances in America: Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Perspectives on Civil and Religious Identities" event at the University of Pennsylvania Law School in February 2020. It is meant to complement Rogers Smith's overview of contested religious identities in America with the perspective of a specialist on the history of American Catholic political thought. Michael D. Breidenbach, Ph.D., is Visiting Faculty Fellow at Collegium Institute, Research Associate at the McNeil Center for Early American Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, and Associate Professor of History at Ave Maria University.

The problem of dual allegiances often arises when religious minorities live under a government that publicly recognizes and supports a different religion, as when Jews and Muslims lived in the Christian kingdoms of medieval Europe. Yet the difficulty of dual allegiances has also occurred in societies that broadly recognized the same religion but sustained sharp denominational divisions. This problem was especially pronounced in early America. In particular, many early American Protestants distrusted the political allegiances of Catholics. In most American colonies, Catholics were prohibited from holding public office, worshiping in public, sending their children to Catholic schools, and other injunctions. Catholicism was considered a great threat to American society because, on this view, Catholics pledged their ultimate allegiance to the pope. Boston revolutionary Samuel Adams explained that "Papists" bring "subversion of Government, by introducing … that solecism in politicks, Imperium in imperio [a state within a state] leading directly to the worst anarchy and confusion, civil discord, war and blood shed."[1] What made Catholicism so odious were two claims concerning papal authority: that the pope held authority over all civil rulers, including even the right to depose them, and that the pope claimed infallible teaching authority in matters of faith and morals. These two beliefs were considered fatal for one's civil allegiance. If Catholics believed that the pope could depose a civil ruler or authorize resistance against civil laws, then Catholics were traitors-in-waiting. As John Locke argued, they should not be tolerated.[2] To answer these charges, American Catholics developed three often overlapping strategies: avoiding the controversy altogether, denying these two beliefs about papal authority, and emphasizing their public service to their country.

Catholics employed the first strategy in the seventeenth century, when English kings required their subjects to swear the Oath of Allegiance. This oath demanded that subjects bear allegiance to the king. It also required subjects to reject the beliefs that the pope could depose the king, or absolve oaths to him, or incite rebellion against him.[3] Anyone sailing to the English colonies had to take this oath. For the vast majority of settlers, this posed no problem. But for Catholics sailing to America, this presented a challenge: The pope decreed that any Catholic who swore the Oath of Allegiance would be automatically excommunicated from the Church. Catholics were therefore presented

[1] Samuel Adams, "The Rights of the Colonists …," November 20, 1772, in Harry Alonzo Cushing, ed., *The Writings of Samuel Adams* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), 2:350-59 at 2:353.

[2] John Locke, "A Letter Concerning Toleration," 1685, in Mark Goldie, ed., *John Locke: A Letter Concerning Toleration and Other Writing* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2010), 7-67.

[3] Oath of Allegiance (An Act for the Better Discovering and Repressing of Popish Recusants on Rejecting Papal Authority to Depose the King), January 1, 1606, 3 Jac. 1, c. 4.

with the irreconcilable options of disloyalty or heresy.

Finding a solution to the Oath of Allegiance controversy was all the more urgent for the founder of Maryland, Cecil Calvert. Calvert was a Catholic convert who desired Catholic settlers for his new colony. Calvert's strategy was to revise the Oath of Allegiance. In his new oath, he erased all the controversial clauses about papal authority. His oath required a simple pledge of fidelity to the king and avoided the questions about Catholics' dual loyalties altogether. Of course, Cecil Calvert had not resolved the underlying tensions between civil and religious authorities. But he had created a space for Catholics and Protestants to coexist in relative freedom.[4]

The second strategy that Catholics used was to deny the papal powers that made Catholics civilly suspect. This strategy was used by the first Catholic bishop in the United States, John Carroll. Like many other Anglophone Catholics of his time, Bishop Carroll believed that the pope was the center of ecclesiastical unity for Catholics, but that he could not teach infallibly by himself. According to this tradition, only the authoritative teachings of a general council—in which all the bishops convened together—could be infallible. Furthermore, Bishop Carroll believed that the only authority a pope had was, in his words, "purely spiritual," and that this authority could not in any way contradict what citizens owed to their country.[5] He even demanded that the first bishop should be elected by his fellow clergy, not appointed by the pope, for fear that a papal appointment would be seen to interfere in American affairs.[6]

Yet some Protestants remained suspicious of Catholics who denied this papal authority. They argued that such Catholics were, in the words of John Locke, "false" and "fallacious" for thinking that they could separate the pope's spiritual and temporal powers.[7] Catholics therefore attempted to show their loyalty through public service to their country. Charles Carroll of Carrollton employed this third strategy. Like his second cousin Bishop Carroll, Charles Carroll denied these two claims about papal authority. But he also showed his loyalty to the American republic as a member of the Continental Congress, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, an emissary seeking Canadian support for the Revolutionary War, and a senator in the First Federal Congress.[8] When one congressman in 1795 began to "ridicule … certain tenets in the Roman Catholic religion" during Congress's immigration debates, James Madison replied that "Americans had no right to ridicule Catholics. They had … proved good citizens during the Revolution."[9] James Madison's personal friendship with John and Charles Carroll, as well as the sacrifices of Catholics in the Revolutionary War, seemed to impress upon Madison the compatibility of Catholics' dual allegiances.

Yet the specter of papal interference in American affairs continued to fuel anti-Catholicism throughout the centuries, from the nineteenth-century riots in Philadelphia to the questions about John F. Kennedy's fitness for the presidency as a Catholic. So while these three strategies proved relatively successful in early America, the fact that Catholics had to use them indicates that America is a jealous sovereign, requiring, as the U.S. Naturalization Oath states, the renunciation of "all allegiance … to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty."[10]

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[4] *Catholic Liberties: Dual Allegiances in Early America* (Harvard University Press, under contract).

[5] John Carroll to the Congregation of Holy Trinity Church, February 22, 1797, in Thomas O'Brien Hanley, ed., *The John Carroll Papers* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 2:202.

[6] On John Carroll's view of papal authority, see Michael D. Breidenbach, "Conciliarism and the American Founding," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 72, no. 3 (July 2016): 481-88, 495-97.

[7] Locke, "A Letter Concerning Toleration," in Goldie, ed., *John Locke*, 50-52.

[8] On Charles Carroll's efforts in the American founding, see Breidenbach, "Conciliarism and the American Founding," 490-96.

[9] January 1, 1795, *Annals of Congress*, 3rd Cong., 2nd sess., p. 1035.

[10] "Naturalization Oath of Allegiance to the United States of America," accessed online April 23, 2020, https://www.uscis.gov/us-citizenship/naturalizati

That oath is the same today as it was in the beginning of the republic, and its challenge for dual allegiances continues.

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