Apologetics of Harmony: 
Mathew Carey and the Rhetoric of Religious Liberty

While visiting Philadelphia, the respectable Mr. Fitzwhylsonn of Richmond observed Catholic Mass at St. Augustine’s Church, following in the footsteps of numerous other curious Protestant spectators who attended Catholic ceremonies in the early nineteenth century. The Protestant found the event to be a magnificent but hollow spectacle. Dining later with Mathew Carey, he declared that “there is no religion in it. It is nothing but parade.” Mischievously, Carey allowed Fitzwhylsonn to continue before explaining that he and the others were Catholics. Thunderstruck, Fitzwhylsonn exclaimed, “I had always fancied myself one of the most liberal of men on the score of religion, and behold I have made a most miserable display of illiberal prejudice.” Carey, ever delighting in turning “illiberal prejudice” on its head, joined Fitzwhylsonn in a hearty laugh. Indeed, he made it a
standing joke that still tickled him many years later when he wrote his autobiography.¹

But laughter served a serious purpose. Snickering at “illiberal prejudice” undermined the respectability of the anti-Catholicism that Carey spent much time, energy, and printer’s ink combating. An Irish immigrant, Carey arrived in Philadelphia in 1784, a time when Americans were rethinking the meaning of toleration, the role of religion in the public sphere, and the place of Catholics in the new republic. The revolution, which succeeded only with the help of Catholic France, had loosened the hold of centuries of anti-Catholicism, but it left lingering mistrust about Catholic morality, religiosity, and republicanism. Catholics would at least be grudgingly tolerated in the new nation, but what, precisely, would religious liberty mean in practice? In Carey’s Philadelphia, the situation looked unusually promising; colonial Pennsylvania had no established church and boasted a long history of toleration, which extended even to Catholics. Philadelphia even housed the oldest legally functioning Catholic parish in British America, dating back to 1733. Yet, Catholics—like Jews, Atheists, Deists, and (later) Mormons—tested the limits of religious liberty; after 1705, Pennsylvania’s Catholics had to abjure their faith to hold office, and Jews had always been barred from public service. After 1790, Catholics enjoyed the same legal rights as their Protestant neighbors; elsewhere, restrictions on Catholics slowly weakened or even disappeared in the decades after the Revolution. But the status of Catholics in the republic was more than a matter of nominal rights or disestablishment; legal toleration and cultural acceptance were very different matters. By the late eighteenth century, a growing number of Protestants frowned on “illiberal prejudice” and insisted that religious liberty included polite respect for—or even cooperation with—Protestants in other denominations. They often blanched, however, at extending respect to Catholics. In fighting against “illiberal prejudice,” Carey tried to form a broader culture of religious liberty—extending across the Protestant–Catholic divide—that went beyond mere legalities or grudging tolerance.²


Drawing on a legacy of Enlightenment and revolutionary thinking, Mathew Carey called for a culture of religious harmony and respect. He prided himself on religious cooperation: he published Catholic and Protestant books, he joined with Protestants to form a Sunday school, and a few of his children even married Protestants. Yet Carey also wore his Catholicism on his sleeve and defended Catholics from attacks. But even while engaging in apologetics, Carey showed deep concern for religious harmony. He avoided traditional apologetics that aimed at proving the superiority of Catholic teachings. Rather than arguing over doctrines, he defended Catholicism by linking it to enlightenment, toleration, and religious liberty. Catholicism deserved respect, but as one religion among many. Carey defended Catholicism as a true religion that promoted morality and benevolence, not as the true religion. Carey did not dismiss the value of doctrinal truth within communities. True religion, however, contrasted sharply with a sectarian fixation on the details of difference.

Carey’s commitment to religious liberty exemplifies a broader moment of thawing in Catholic–liberal and Catholic–Protestant relations, a moment often overshadowed by a longer history of tension. As John McGreevy has shown, by the mid-nineteenth century, Catholics and liberals articulated antagonistic notions of freedom, individualism, and community. Antebellum Catholics developed a rich devotional and religious culture that intensified lines of opposition to Protestant culture and its intellectual life. But the lines had not always been so clear. Carey joined a host of early republican Catholics who eagerly demonstrated the compatibility of Catholicism with republicanism and modern ideas. Catholics, especially in Philadelphia, experimented with “republican” church structures. For example, Bishop John England of Charleston wrote a diocesan constitution enhancing the role of the laity.
“English Catholic Enlightenment” developed in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and was led by figures such as John Lingard. Their beliefs, including an emphasis on church councils rather than papal authority, limits on the Church’s temporal authority, and toleration as a natural right, not a concession, struck a more irenic posture. Although rapprochement did not last, it represented a significant, if rejected, possibility that deserves closer attention.

Such possibilities, however, have been neglected by historians, who have tended to focus on hostility between Catholics and Protestants. While anti-Catholicism and anti-Protestantism remain fruitful areas of study, the emphasis on hostility overshadows other kinds of interaction. Hostility was only a part of, not the sum of, Catholic–Protestant relations. Emphasizing hostility, moreover, has led to a neglect of the early republic, seemingly a period of tranquility when juxtaposed with the blazing convents and lurid sex tales of late-antebellum America. The early republic appears primarily as a false calm in the storm of anti-Catholicism, barely worth passing notice. Seeing only the calm blinds us to the swirling complexities of a religious dynamic that was neither violent nor entirely peaceful. Mathew Carey—and his attempts to juggle competing identities and ideas—provides a fascinating window into early republican religious cooperation, but historians know little about his religious role.


This article is a preliminary exploration of an uncharted terrain on which religious devotion and an antisectarian commitment to harmony met and flourished.

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Mathew Carey was born in Dublin in 1760, and it was in Ireland where he gained an abiding interest in religious tolerance. Growing up under the Penal Laws, the hot-tempered youth became increasingly involved in radical politics. The Irish Penal Laws denied Carey and his fellow Catholics many rights of citizenship, including the right to vote, hold public office, join the legal profession, and attend Trinity College, and seriously limited Catholics’ ability to acquire property or build schools. Political exclusion taught Carey (and others like John England, the future Bishop of Charleston) to be wary of religious disabilities and to link republicanism and religious freedom. At nineteen, Carey penned *The Urgent Necessity of an Immediate Repeal of the Whole Penal Code against the Roman Catholics* (1779), which denounced all religious intolerance, especially toward Catholics. Few people read the pamphlet because his advertisement warned of “the VERY GREAT Danger” of penal laws. His fiery rhetoric alarmed the aristocratic Catholic Committee, which sought accommodation with the British government (and disavowed political loyalty to Rome). The committee offered a forty pound reward to find the unnamed author, so Carey fled to France for a year until the furor quieted. He returned unrepentant, and two years later he began a radical newspaper and demanded democracy, religious equality, and, by 1784, revolution. With a “superabundance of zeal [sic] and ardour,” but less prudence, Carey lashed out at the Irish Parliament. His ardor forced him to sneak, disguised as a woman, onto a ship bound for Philadelphia.10

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American History (Louisville, KY, 2003), 38. After completing this article, except for final revisions, I learned that Michael Carter recently finished a dissertation on an earlier (1780s–early 1790s) stage of Carey’s republican Catholicism; this article focuses on the early nineteenth century. Michael Steven Carter, “Mathew Carey and the Public Emergence of Catholicism in the Early Republic” (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2006).

9 Carey, Advertisement to the Roman Catholics of Ireland, in Miscellanies, 69; Carey, *The Urgent Necessity of the Immediate Repeal of the Whole Penal Code against the Roman Catholics*, Candidly Considered, in Miscellanies, 70–143.

Carey chose his ship well; Pennsylvania had a long history of religious freedom, and his anti-British radicalism found a congenial home in postrevolutionary American politics. There, Carey's interest in the fate of Catholics and Ireland continued unabated; he pushed for Catholic Emancipation until it succeeded in 1828, and he even dueled with a competitor who had accused immigrants of base ingratitude. He joined the American Society of United Irishmen, a cross-denominational group of emigré radicals—both Catholics and Protestants—seeking Irish political reform, the elimination of the Penal Laws, and, eventually, Catholic Emancipation (which restored Catholics’ rights to hold most public offices). In the early decades of the nineteenth century, Catholics, despite their reputation for supporting the Federalists, allied with transatlantic radicals to push for full political and religious rights in the neighboring state of New York. Carey firmly linked political freedom, religious toleration, and Catholic rights.

Carey quickly built a reputation in both politics and publishing. He hurled himself into American affairs, publishing the Pennsylvania Herald within three months of arriving, followed quickly by the American Museum, a literary and political magazine, which he published until 1792. By 1794, he focused his efforts on publishing and selling books, printing almost 1,100 books between 1785 and 1821; he cornered the southern book market with the aid of his Protestant traveling salesman, Mason Weems. In politics and publishing, as in religion, Carey claimed to place harmony and the common good over political loyalties or parties. He printed anti-Constitutional views in his Museum, rather than


12 Carey, Autobiography, 6–9; Wilson, United Irishmen, United States, 11, 18. Wilson notes that while Carey later denied being involved, he did so during the Alien and Sedition Acts furor; such denials should not be credited. For Catholic-radical alliances in New York, see Jason Duncan, Citizens or Papists? The Politics of Anti-Catholicism in New York, 1685–1821 (New York, 2005), 129.


only those “on the right side,” as “zealots” might wish. He was a political maverick, breaking ranks with the Democratic-Republicans to advocate the American System and protective tariffs.15 His most famous political piece was his Olive Branch, or, Faults on Both Sides, Federal and Democratic (1814), which responded to divisions sparked by the war—and again, staked a position ostensibly above partisanship.16 Even while defending his positions, Carey exalted harmony over party.

Carey’s calls for harmony in politics and religion sprang from his belief that the public good transcended the divisions of party or denomination. He depicted his policies as springing from compassion, not partisanship; he believed that relying on foreign manufactures created poverty and misery. A concern for suffering was a crucial part of being a moral, religious person in the early republic, and Carey eagerly proved his humanity. In 1793, he founded a society to alleviate the “sufferings and wretchedness” of Irish immigrants; in 1830, he headed a society to aid poor Catholics.17 Carey also preached what he practiced, and he wrote prolifically on poverty, rebutting claims that benevolence created “idleness and improvidence.” Low wages, not dissipation, drove women to prostitution.18 Carey’s interest in promoting and practicing benevolence extended into retirement.19 When he died in 1839, his concern for “suffering humanity” found mention in even the shortest of over thirty obituaries, which appeared as far away as Pensacola. His funeral was the best attended in living memory in Philadelphia, drawing thousands of mourners.20

15 Mathew Carey, “Preface,” American Museum 3 (Jan. 1788): xvi; Earl L. Bradsher, Mathew Carey, Editor, Author and Publisher: A Study in American Literary Development (New York, 1912), 54; Kenneth Rowe, Mathew Carey: A Study in American Economic Development (Baltimore, 1933).


17 Carey, Autobiography, 29; Constitution of the Society for Bettering the Condition of Indigent Roman Catholics of the City and Liberties of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 1830), Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Notre Dame.

18 Carey, Essays on the Public Charities of Philadelphia (1828), in Miscellaneous Essays (Philadelphia, 1830), 155, 190–93; many essays are printed in Miscellaneous Essays, 266–90.


Carey’s obituaries testified to his public importance, but they fell oddly silent on his religiosity. In 1839, religious relations in Philadelphia and the nation were tense, and his calls for religious cooperation no longer fit the public mood. By the 1830s, Catholics increasingly stressed their differences with Protestants and asserted a distinctively Catholic identity; Protestants, wary of the dangers of Catholic expansion, proved no more eager to compromise. The antisectarian world in which Carey had operated—and in which his Catholic devotion played out in his commitment to religious harmony—was fading rapidly, giving way to a world in which lines between Catholics and Protestants were both clear and growing clearer. In 1834, a Protestant mob burned down a Catholic convent school in Charlestown, Massachusetts, and in 1844, the Bible Riots exploded in Philadelphia, precipitated in part by a debate over the exclusive use of Protestant Bibles in schools.

The riots were only one flare-up in a huge firestorm sweeping through American cities over Bible reading and religious teaching and practices in schools. The spark was a stridently sectarian sensibility among Catholics and Protestants, which stressed points of divergence. Rather than seeing the Bible as a unifying text, Philadelphia Protestants refused Bishop Kenrick’s 1842 request that Catholics be permitted to read Catholic Bibles, rather than the Protestant King James Version, in public schools. Such stridency over differences echoed across the nation. Nineteenth-century Catholics debated among themselves whether they should assimilate into the public system or form separate schools; Protestant hostility strengthened the hand of those calling for separate Catholic schools. In 1859, a ten-year-old Bostonian refused a teacher’s order to recite the Protestant, rather than Catholic, Ten Commandments. Despite similarities between the versions, the teacher tolerated no deviations from the Protestant wording, forbidding the Catholic students to even mumble over the points of difference—such differences in wording trumped a shared belief in the Commandments. As the conflict escalated, hundreds

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of Catholics abandoned the public schools and created alternative, but stridently Catholic, schools.22

This late-antebellum sectarianism in religious education—both in Philadelphia and across the nation—stood in stark contrast to a world of religious cooperation in the early republic. In 1791, Mathew Carey and several prominent Philadelphia Protestants, including Benjamin Rush and Episcopal Bishop William White, had formed a society for “First Day or Sunday Schools.” Even the name—using both “Sunday” and the Quaker “First Day”—emphasized religious cooperation.23 The society’s schools excluded divisive doctrines and focused on instilling the moral values shared by all Christians. The school served as common ground to supplement, but not replace, individual religious beliefs; students attended worship, but in their own churches. Excepting the years 1792 to 1801, the society taught reading and writing through the Bible, since, Rush noted, each sect “finds its peculiar doctrines in it.”24 Carey likewise stressed convergence. In 1785, he warned that such schools risked abuses “from party, civil or religious”; religious education should focus on points of agreement and leave differences to “the various pastors.”25 Carey and the society placed denominational differences in a context of broader agreement. They aimed to instill morality and religiosity in Philadelphia’s poor. For the school’s elite organizers, the threat of a growing population of irreligious, immoral, and uneducated Philadelphians mattered far more than reinforcing the boundaries separating Christians. Carey turned to sectarian Sunday schools only in 1816—after Protestants began stressing denominational specifics rather than morality and broad religion.26

Significantly, when a Charlestown, Massachusetts, mob torched the Ursuline convent school, they attacked not only Catholics, but also the

22 McGreevy, Catholicism and American Freedom, 7–11, 42.
ecumenical spirit among elites. Many wealthy Protestants sent children to
the convent school; the pupils prayed together and received religious
instruction, but did so using prayers “common to all Christians” and
learning the “practical truths, and religious duties which are peculiar to no
sect.” Religious differences mattered, but they did not preclude the
search for a common religious goal.

That sectarian warfare erupted over Bibles also shows that much had
changed. In Carey’s Philadelphia, Catholics and Protestants read differ-
ent Bibles, but Carey published both. He had made his name publishing
Bibles and religious books, and he published Protestant works so prolifi-
cally that he was once mistaken for “some d—d methodist [sic] parson.”
After Carey’s first King James Bible appeared in 1801, he regularly pro-
duced editions until 1820. Although the Bible proved profitable (no small
matter for a father of eight), Carey’s publishing was rooted in a vision of
religious harmony and cooperation. He denounced the “contemptible
prejudice which confines its benevolence within the narrow pale of one
religious denomination.” Not all Philadelphians agreed. Carey contrasted
his benevolence to Protestants with his competitors’ treatment of
Catholics, including one “ultra puritan” who “would rather print the
Woman of Pleasure, than such a pestiferous, idolatrous book” as a
Catholic Catechism. Publishing Protestant books affirmed the value of
religious cooperation.

Carey lived in a world in which he and others, though not all, believed
that the goal of advancing religion and morality extended beyond denom-
inational identities. In 1788, Carey’s friend Benjamin Rush reminded
Americans that, in the matter of morality, “you are neither catholic nor
protestants. . . . One spirit actuates you all.” Rush proposed a convention
of Christians to reform America, as it would show “that it is possible for
Christians of different denominations to love each other, and to unite in

28 Carey, Autobiography, 87. See also Carey, “Memoirs,” 137.
30 [Matthew Carey], Address to the Subscribers for the Doway Translation of the Vulgate Bible [Philadelphia, 1790], 2–3.
the advancement of their common interests.” Presbyterians and Congregationalists even put aside their differences in their 1801 Plan of Union to evangelize the West together. Divisions between Catholics and Protestants loomed larger than those between the Presbyterians and Congregationalists, but Catholics benefited in smaller ways from the spirit of cooperation. The forces of infidelity and immorality seemed more dangerous than Catholics. Protestants even donated money to construct Catholic churches. In 1796, the Protestant George Washington and Catholic Mathew Carey both donated money to build Philadelphia’s St. Augustine’s Catholic Church (which ironically was destroyed in the 1844 Bible Riots).

Carey aimed for similar cross-denominational cooperation in his publishing. Though by 1842 Protestants refused to allow children to use Catholic Bibles in school, in 1789, Carey had hoped that Protestants might use his Catholic Douay edition themselves. He pitched an advertisement to Protestants, boasting that the Douay Bible could serve as a corrective to the “various important errors” in the King James Version; he even printed a Protestant’s assessment of its usefulness. Most subscribers were Catholic, but at least one Protestant—Benjamin Rush—purchased it. Carey’s hope—even if a vain one—signals a remarkably different mindset than that which prevailed by the mid-nineteenth century.

Carey’s goal of attracting a cross-confessional readership extended well beyond the Bible. He happily published Protestant works, such as prayer books for Episcopalians and Jonathan Edwards’s Treatise Concerning Religious Affections. But Carey also produced Protestant-friendly editions of Catholic works, including an 1816 edition of Chateaubriand’s Beauties of Christianity; a Protestant wrote the preface and notes and

33 Each donated $50 (a substantial donation); the entire subscription raised $8,679. John Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, History of Philadelphia: 1609–1884 (Philadelphia, 1884), 1376; Protestants in the West donated land and money to build Catholic churches. Dichtl, Frontiers of Faith, 95.
34 [Carey], Address to the Subscribers, 2–3; Mathew Carey, To the Roman Catholics of America, Mathew Carey Respectfully Submits the Following Proposals . . . [Philadelphia, 1789], 4; Michael S. Carter, “Under the Benign Sun of Toleration: Mathew Carey, the Douai Bible, and Catholic Print Culture, 1789–91,” Journal of the Early Republic 27 (2007): 457. However, Carey ensured that Protestants did not buy it mistakenly. Mathew Carey to Isaiah Thomas, Feb. 19, 1789, Letterbook, 1788–1794, Lea and Fèbiger Records 227b, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; Miscellanies, 244.
excised its most Catholic remarks. His Protestant traveling salesman, Mason Locke Weems, saw their venture in publishing as a boon to morality and religion, helping “bring back the golden age of Light, Liberty, and Love.”

Yet Carey’s cooperation with Protestants sprang from a devotion to Catholicism, not from a sense of indifference about religion. He sought harmony and cross-confessional cooperation precisely because he wanted to be accepted as a Catholic citizen. His 1787 diary began “In nomine domine amen”; using Latin signaled the Catholic core of his invocation.

Carey dined with bishops and priests, and he attended Mass most Sundays, occasionally noting the quality of sermons. He threw himself into St. Mary’s parish politics. When his daughter Frances married the Quaker Isaac Lea, she did so in a Catholic church and only after Lea promised not to influence her religion. (“Mixed” marriages were common, despite clerical wariness; even Bishop John Carroll presided at the marriage of a relative to a Protestant).

Most significantly, Carey began his Bible-publishing career by printing the first Catholic Bible in America, despite his well-grounded fears about the financial risks, given the scarcity of Catholics. Carey would know that it had only been ten years since the first domestic—and financially disastrous—New Testament. In 1789, with the personal aid of Bishop John Carroll, Carey solicited subscriptions for the Bible. Even without enough subscribers


38 Ibid., Apr. 4, 1820, Apr. 1, Apr. 29, Oct. 17, and Oct. 21, 1821; for politics, see e.g., A Catholic Layman, Review of Three Pamphlets Lately Published by the Rev. W. V. Harold (Philadelphia, 1822).


to defray his expenses, Carey printed it, and he did so again in 1805.43

For both men, publishing the Catholic Bible—and other religious works—was crucial both to defining Catholicism in the early republic and to defeating anti-Catholic prejudice. The Bible and religious works, they predicted, would not only nurture the moral and spiritual development of Catholics but also reform Catholics into respectable people who deserved the esteem of their Protestant neighbors. In 1791, when Carey solicited funds for a Catholic publication society, he hoped that such a project would instill morality in the Catholic population; he fretted that many Catholics could not easily explain doctrines and lacked moral formation.44 Such lack of doctrinal or moral training undermined Catholics’ public standing. For the printer and the bishop, sincere religious concern for moral and religious education blended with a desire to instill respectability. The Bible project also promised to challenge anti-Catholic prejudice in broader ways.45 Protestants, as Carey noted, incorrectly, but commonly, believed that Catholics were neither interested in reading the Bible nor allowed to do so; he encouraged Catholics to support his Bible to disprove such criticisms. Both men feared it would be a “disgrace” if they could not get at least 400 subscribers (they ultimately got 471).46 Publishing Bibles and other Catholic works was crucial to defeating anti-Catholicism.

The concern about Catholics’ public standing mattered so much because the new opportunities for harmony and cooperation existed alongside enduring prejudice and mutual suspicion, both in Pennsylvania and the nation as a whole. The growing toleration of Catholics unnerved some Protestants who viewed the republic as a de facto Protestant nation. But if anti-Catholic prejudice had not disappeared, the world of
Catholic-Protestant relations had still changed significantly. What is striking is not just that anti-Catholicism had relatively weakened but that Catholics defended themselves in new ways, drawing upon religious freedom, harmony, and Enlightenment ideals. Carey abandoned the traditional claims of apologetical literature, which aimed at convincing nonbelievers of the truth of one’s positions. He instead tried to convince others of the value of harmony and religious liberty. Staking his ground on harmony and pluralism, Carey forced anti-Catholics into a sectarian mold. It was their bigotry—not Catholicism—that did not belong in an enlightened society.

Carey showed a life-long willingness to defend Catholics; in 1826, when he bound his earlier pamphlets and published works into seven volumes, he filled an entire volume with works related to Catholicism. He began defending Catholics in Ireland in 1779 against the penal laws. In 1792, he leapt to Catholics’ defense when a Philadelphia Quaker compared lotteries to indulgences as “forgiving and permitting sins, to raise money.” In 1808, he fumed when John Mason, editor of the Christian’s Magazine in New York, accused present-day Catholics of claiming divine sanction for cruelty and murdering Protestants. Mason denounced Catholic doctrines as being “calculated to gratify those sensual passions and desires” of wicked hearts. Likewise, the struggle for Catholic Emancipation in the United Kingdom inspired Carey’s pen. When, in 1817, William Godwin resurrected charges that Irish Catholics had massacred Protestants in the 1641 rebellion, Carey wrote Vindiciae Hibernicae (1818). It not only challenged Godwin’s account, but it also blamed the insurrection on Protestant persecution of Catholics. Carey’s Letters on Religious Persecution (1826) refuted warnings that Catholic emancipation would endanger Protestants. In 1828, Carey helped cre-
ate an association of “Vindicators of the Catholic Religion from Calumny and Abuse,” which rebutted claims that persecution was “almost exclusively perpetrated by Roman Catholics.”52 Eleven days after a Protestant mob torched the Charlestown Ursuline Convent in 1834—forcing the sisters and pupils to flee into the night—Carey’s Address to the Public responded to Samuel Miller, a Presbyterian cleric, who had dubbed Catholics “FOES OF GOD AND MAN.”53

Carey’s geographic scope of concern was broad; he fought anti-Catholicism across the Atlantic and across America, especially in Massachusetts, New York, and Philadelphia. Despite such geographic breadth, his work showed clear patterns: he selectively responded to charges that struck at Catholic claims to morality and true religion or that denied their right to participate in the civic life of the republic. Critics of Catholicism drew on a legacy of linking republicanism to anti-Catholicism. As Mark Noll argues, during the Seven Years’ War, republicanism took on a distinctively Christian character when it fused with longstanding anti-Catholic ideologies and suspicions of Catholics’ loyalty.54 Protestants viewed Catholics as enemies of liberty, especially religious freedom. When Protestants denounced Catholics as uniquely intolerant—or accused them of supporting the murdering of Protestants—they rhetorically banished Catholics from the republic. Even arguments against Catholic Emancipation in Ireland, Carey recognized, bore ideological weight in America.

Accusations of unique Catholic immorality undermined the possibility of a Catholic republicanism; Catholics were either moral contaminants or moral monsters, preying on their neighbors. This charge—and Carey’s response—reflected a growing emphasis on morality as the foundation of the republic. Rather than defining morality in religious terms (such as limiting true virtue to the elect), Americans increasingly saw morality as common ground, distinct from issues of salvation and accessible through the laws of nature. Morality took root in human reason or the broad principles of Christianity; a moral common ground provided a foundation for

a religiously pluralistic republic. Pennsylvania’s 1790 constitution offered broad tolerance, but it linked political rights to a belief that an afterlife would reward virtue and punish vice. But if Catholics thought—as their critics claimed—that “the Pope can change the essential nature of moral good and evil,” then Catholics believed in an inverted moral government in which God rewarded vice. As such, they could not be trusted. Carey combatted such claims by insisting on Catholics’ morality: “Are they worse husbands, worse wives, worse parents, worse children, worse friends, worse neighbors, worse citizens, than the protestants, presbyterians, quakers, or methodists?”

Carey also fought accusations of Catholic immorality because such charges undermined Catholicism’s claims to be a true religion. He tapped into broad shifts in conceptions of religion: true religion resided in the hearts and behavior of practitioners rather than in an adherence to doctrines. Carey drew on a tradition, growing since the late seventeenth century, of stressing human happiness and morality as key aims of religion. Indeed, by the late eighteenth century, benevolence stood at the core of Christian virtue, and Carey prided himself—and his religion—on it. He began one work by quoting: “if we see our fellow-beings suffering with cold, or hunger, or destitute of covering, and do not relieve them, WE HAVE NO FAIR CLAIM TO THE CHARACTER OF CHRISTIANS.” The Catholic philanthropist insisted that Catholics showed just as much humanity as Protestants; Catholics’ morality and sympathy for sufferers vindicated their claims to be true Christians. True religion, rooted in the heart and flowering in morality and humanity, contrasted sharply with a sectarian focus on divisive doctrines.

Carey’s stress on morality contrasted with doctrinally oriented apologetics, and, with few exceptions, he refused to debate doctrines with Protestants. He explained that “those who dispute most about forms, modes, and creeds of religion, have frequently the least of it in their
Americans could disagree about doctrinal specifics if they shared a commitment to morality and religion. But while Carey claimed to “most cordially abhor religious controversy,” his distaste for controversy did not mean distaste for doctrine itself. He debated with other Catholics and delighted in John Milner’s works that defended Catholic beliefs. Yet Carey’s primary aim was not to convince Protestants of Catholic truth; rather, he sought to convince them that Catholics were moral and respectable people with whom Protestants could and should live in harmony. His “Vindicators of the Catholic Religion from Calumny and Abuse” likewise declined to publish books “merely of religion,” of which there was an “abundant supply.”

In the rare cases that Carey ventured into doctrines, he engaged in an “apologetics of convergence” that downplayed what was unique about Catholicism and stressed shared values and ideas across denominations. Anglicans could not be “fastidious” about Catholic doctrines of infallibility when Queen Elizabeth had “enforced submission” more rigidly than any pope or council. Echoing a point made by Bishop John Carroll in 1784, Carey argued that Protestants who denounced the Eucharist as idolatrous should also condemn the Calvinist who “FEEDS ON THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST” and Lutherans who believed in consubstantiation and Christ’s presence in the host. Rather than defending the uniquely Catholic transubstantiation, Carey emphasized the more broadly held belief in the Real Presence—and defined that as capaciously as possible. Carey hoped to convince Protestants that Catholicism resembled their beliefs and belonged to the realm of reasonable, moral, and respectable religion.

Carey cast himself as an apologist for religious harmony, rather than a controversialist, and his commitment to harmony limited and structured his responses. It meant avoiding any hint that Catholics’ rights sprang from the truth of their creeds. In the rare cases that he praised Catholics,

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60 [Carey], Address to the Public, 3, 7.
61 Ibid., 7.
63 For apologetics of convergence, see Chinnici, “American Catholics and Religious Pluralism,” 736.
64 [Carey], Letters on Religious Persecution, 10.
65 [John Carroll], An Address to the Roman Catholics of the United States of America by a Catholic Clergyman (Annapolis, MD, 1784), 92; [Carey], Letters on Religious Persecution, 12.
it was for their liberality. In 1808, he convinced Benjamin Rush that William Penn had learned the “sublime lesson of religious toleration” from the Catholic Lord Baltimore.66 Instead of defending Catholics on Catholic terms, Carey used neutral or even Protestant terms—he cited Protestant sources, even when he could have made a stronger case using Catholic ones.67

Likewise, Carey was loathe to appear a sectarian who picked fights, and he placed the “blame” on “those who provoke a warfare, from which no possible good can arise.”68 Religious bigotry demanded a response—for the sake of harmony and Catholicism.69 But Carey insisted that he acted only to “repel gross and outrageous assault” and responded only when it would be “criminal to be silent; thus leaving the ignorant and unwary to infer our acquiescence in the odious accusations.”70 Indeed, while his works showed remarkable consistency over time (he never used a new argument when an old one would do), he responded to specific events—whether the burning of the Ursuline convent in 1834 or the 1820s campaigns against Catholic Emancipation in Ireland. In 1808, he fumed when a New York paper delayed printing his response to John Mason for ten weeks, complaining that “the very extraordinary delay of the essays has totally destroyed the Connexion” between the response and provocation. Printing so late “would be raking up the ashes of the dead,” effectively instigating a new controversy.71

Especially after 1808, a commitment to religious liberty formed the conceptual core of Carey’s apologetics. Religious liberty could be denied to none; he condemned persecution of Jews and Muslims, including the “odious restrictions” still afflicting British Jews in 1834.72 For Carey, persecution’s “ill-fated victims are either hypocrites or martyrs” and its practition-


68 Carey, “To the Rev. John M. Mason.”


70 Carey, Address to the Public, 26, 3; see also [Carey], Letters on Religious Persecution, 21, 32.


72 Carey, Address to the Public, 5–6.
ers tyrants, robbers, or murderers.73 Carey defended religious liberty on principle and not merely as a necessity for maintaining peace in a pluralistic society. Humanity, he insisted, had no right to control religious belief; persecution was “blasphemous” and “the genuine Antichrist.”74 In 1826, Carey boasted that Americans did not speak of “toleration,” which “means, that a miserable worm, who worships God in one particular form, permits his fellow worm to do the same.” Carey echoed George Washington, who insisted on the language of “liberty of conscience,” instead of “toleration,” which implied indulgence rather than “inherent natural rights.”75

Stressing religious liberty, not rights based on creedal truth, led Carey to the startling demand that both Catholics and Protestants forgive and forget the wrongs of the past. Protestant “men of glass should throw no stones” at Catholics; Protestants had not only engaged in just as much persecution as Catholics but also bore the added inconsistency of invoking the right of private judgment while doing so.76 Carey intended his never-published “Religious Olive Branch” to encourage cross-confessional charity and forgiveness, and he described his 1826 essays as a “religious olive branch to inculcate the divine doctrine of mutual forgiveness and forgetfulness of the crimes of ages.”77 Forgiveness was needed all around, and he aimed to show that the “dire insanity and atrocious wickedness of punishing the body by stripes, cropping, hanging, drawing, quartering, tortures, drowning and flames, for the errors of the mind, real or supposed, have been confined to no denomination.” Even outspoken critics of such “injustice and cruelty” persecuted when given power.78 Just as he stressed the convergence of doctrines, he emphasized the convergence of errors. Carey denounced his church’s use of persecution, even when

73 Carey, “Dedication of the Religious Olive Branch” (1817), in Miscellaneous Essays, 291; see also Miscellaneous, 527.
76 [Carey], Letters on Religious Persecution, 16–17, 28; Carey, Address to the Public, 13, 14.
77 In 1830, the “Religious Olive Branch” remained incomplete, and I find no indication that he ever published more than its dedication and preface; Carey, Miscellaneous Essays, 291.
mocked for it. His point had never been to deny Catholic wrongs but only to deny their uniqueness. The olive branch demanded reciprocity; Protestants should admit their errors.

Few images more aptly encapsulate Carey’s views than the olive branch, which appeared frequently in his works. He exhorted Catholics and Protestants, northerners and southerners, Federalists and Democrats alike to accept olive branches and put animosity aside. He could portray this positively by appealing to a desire to reject the religious bigotry behind the convent blaze or the fight against Catholic Emancipation. He praised a Protestant supporter for “soaring above the influence of sectarian prejudices.” But the rhetoric had a sharper edge. By depicting his opponents’ positions as extremist, divisive, and sectarian, he could engage in a fierce defense of harmony. He believed he could “force conviction on all but the willfully blind.” The olive branch made a convenient stick for beating those who refused it.

For all his talk of harmony, Carey left little room for opposition—intolerance was an unenlightened vestige of a former age. In 1808, he wrote to John Mason that while reading his magazine, he “fancied myself transported to distant periods” rather than a tolerant, enlightened age. While both men denounced persecution, Mason saw it as inherent in Catholic doctrine, while Carey saw persecution in chronological terms, as a nondenominational “epidemical disorder” of a bygone era to be eradicated in an enlightened age. Yet, intolerance did not disappear; Carey’s frustration grew as the march of time failed to yield expected results. In 1808, Carey counted on enlightenment to destroy bigotry, which did not belong in an enlightened age. By 1834, in the wake of the convent fire, his confidence had waned, and he described the “fiendish spirit” of persecution thriving in a “soi-disant enlightened age” and hinting darkly at future “horrors.” While in 1792 Carey had seen attacks on Catholicism as “the offspring of ignorance or illiberality,” by 1817 he described them as “the mark of the beast,” and in 1834 he attributed such attacks to “the
Fiery rhetoric aside, Carey correctly perceived a chilling of Catholic-Protestant relations. By 1834, religious harmony was fading fast. Carey's insistence on Catholics' right to respect, rather than the rightness of Catholicism, represented a set of possibilities in the early republic. Catholic reactions suggest both the promise of and the limitations on such possibilities. Carey was only one man, but he was not alone. Indeed, John Thayer—a priest and ex-Protestant who was best known for his attempts to convert Protestants—even defended Christianity in decidedly ecumenical tones in the 1790s rather than uphold peculiarly Catholic doctrines. Carey exemplified a pattern in early republican Catholicism—represented in the hierarchy by Bishops John Carroll and John England—of merging traditional Catholicism and Enlightenment ideals, especially religious liberty. Bishop John England—a fellow Irish immigrant, bishop of Charleston, and one of Carey's supporters—described religious liberty as a divine gift and inalienable right as opposed to a state's prerogative. England praised American religious liberty as a model for the world and denounced persecution. Religious liberty meant not only legal toleration but also “security of the feelings from insult”—in short, the right to respect that Carey advocated. Bishop England was “pleased and instructed” by Carey's Vindiciae Hibernicae, commiserating with him over his difficulties reprinting it in 1823. Bishop Carroll similarly praised Carey's efforts to defend religious liberty. Like Carey, Carroll was wary of religious controversy. Carroll insisted that Catholicism would pass the tests of reason, morality, and free inquiry. Carey’s approach was not identical to the bishops’ methods. Carroll's affirmation of religious liberty rested, in part, on his belief that it paved the way for the triumph of Catholic truth. In contrast, if Carey dreamed

84 A Catholic, American Daily Advertiser, Jan. 6, 1792; in Calumnies, 7; Proposal for Publishing, by Subscription, The Religious Olive Branch, in Miscellanies, 5; Carey, Address to the Public, 2–3.
86 P. Carey, Immigrant Bishop, 49, 89, 91.
88 John Carroll to Mathew Carey, Jan. 30, 1789, in Carroll Papers, 1:348.
89 [Carroll], Address to the Roman Catholics, 114, 7, 10, 22, 28; Jodziewicz, “Wharton-Carroll Controversy,” 147.
of converting people, he was quiet about it. Yet all three shared a common
tone: they emphasized cross-confessional harmony and the right of all
religious groups to be respected.

Carey’s views found a welcoming audience in the Catholic community.
Despite his avoidance of doctrinal disputes, many early republican
Catholics found Carey a staunch defender of their religion. In 1808,
Robert Walsh dubbed Carey “the old, able, and prompt defender of the
faith.” Others offered to reprint and circulate his pamphlets. As late as
1826, Carey’s “Vindicators of the Catholic Religion from Calumny and
Abuse” enlisted 179 members, including Bishop Henry Conwell and the
future bishop John Hughes. The society even sponsored a reprinting of
Carey’s Letters on Religious Persecution. In 1808, Charles Kenny gushed
that Carey’s responses to anti-Catholic attacks “must endear you to every
sincere professor of the Catholic religion.”

Perhaps not every professor; in 1808 Carey faced few criticisms, but as
the decades wore on an increasing number of detractors worried that
Carey’s focus on defending Catholics’ rights, rather than their beliefs,
flirted dangerously with indifference. This fear reflected a broader shift in
the attitudes of the laity, clergy, and episcopacy. In 1816, Bishop Simon
Bruté of Vincennes fumed when Carey let a Protestant edit
Chateaubriand’s Beauties of Christianity to make it more appealing to
Protestant readers. Baltimore’s new archbishop, James Whitfield, refused
to subscribe to Letters on Religious Persecution in 1829. He griped that
Carey turned “toleration, persecution, humanity” into “the ground of con-
troversy—It is bringing Religion to a human test” in which “Protestants
were as well off as Catholics.”

Indeed, Carey had significantly narrowed the grounds of debate by focusing on religious liberty, not truth claims.
When the Catholic Herald printed Carey’s 1834 Address to the Public,
it silently omitted the second and third letters; the second linked all intol-
erance to the “infernal spirit” of the Inquisition, thus equating Catholic
and Protestant intolerance. Carey voiced surprise at the objection, but not

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91 Robert Walsh to Mathew Carey, Oct. 3, 1808, and Charles Kenny to Mathew Carey, Nov. 4,
1808, in “Selections from the Correspondence of the Deceased Mathew Carey,” Records of the
William Taylor to Mathew Carey, Dec. 20, 1821, box 25, Edward Carey Gardiner Collection;

92 Simon Bruté to Mathew Carey, Feb. 13, 1816, in “Selections from the Correspondence of the
Deceased Mathew Carey,” Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia 12
(1901): 98–100; James Whitfield to Mathew Carey, Aug. 22, 1829, Archdiocese of Philadelphia
Collection (CAPH) 1/03.05, Archives of the University of Notre Dame.
all Catholics appreciated a call for mutual admissions of error. The *Herald* likewise objected to Carey’s criticisms of polemics as useless; apologetics *did* lead to conversions.93 In 1833, Philadelphians pored over the heated apologetical battles waged between John Hughes and John Breckinridge in the newspapers. Like Carey, Hughes defended religious liberty and argued that Protestants were no more tolerant than Catholics, but Hughes’s primary point was to “prove the truth of the Catholic religion”—in doctrinal detail.94 Increasingly, many Catholics found Carey’s avoidance of Catholic truth claims troubling. The early wariness of conflict, exemplified by Carroll and England as well as Carey, gave way to an eagerness for controversies in Philadelphia and across the nation.

Such reactions hinted at a deeper debate within the Catholic community over the direction of American Catholicism. In addition to defending Catholic doctrine, a growing group of Catholic leaders worried that the willingness to join with Protestants—both in marriage and in moral reform societies—threatened the coherence of the Catholic community. Carey had imagined Catholics and Protestants working together to advance morality and religion, and he tore down social and cultural barriers between the groups. In his drive to convince Protestants that Catholicism merited respect, he defined Catholicism in terms that would make his elite Protestant neighbors comfortable. Even as Carey fought intolerance by arguing that Catholicism was a moral and enlightened religion, he aimed—through publishing religious works and creating benevolent societies—to shape the Catholic community into a moral population that would assimilate peacefully into the broader population. As Carey denounced Protestants who fixated on divisive doctrines, he also implicitly condemned Catholics who emphasized creeds at the expense of religious cooperation, benevolence, or morality.

A new generation of Catholic leaders and reformers perceived such extensive cross-confessional cooperation as a threat to Catholic distinctiveness and religiosity. Bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick—who assumed leadership of the Philadelphia Diocese in 1830—aimed to instill morality and religiosity in Philadelphia by building Catholic benevolent associa-

93 Carey, *Address to the Public*, 5, 8, 20, 3; *Catholic Herald* (Philadelphia), Sept. 4, 1834, and see also Sept. 25, Oct. 2, Oct. 9, 1834.
tions, societies, and institutions, which also served as protective walls around the Catholic community. Drawing on a broader transatlantic Catholic revival, Kenrick aimed to make the parish the center of Catholic social and religious life. The reformers of this new generation directed their efforts at molding Philadelphians into not just moral people but also moral Catholics. Catholics and Protestants both took temperance pledges, but for Catholics, a priest administered the pledge before the altar.  

Kenrick and other reformers also worried that the Catholic community had too readily embraced the principles of republicanism and liberalism. During the 1810s and 1820s, Philadelphia's Catholic community had been torn apart—to the point of a schism that provoked Vatican intervention—over the roles of lay trustees, priests, and bishops in governing parishes, particularly over who could appoint priests. As the lay trustees argued for the right to appoint and dismiss priests (a right enjoyed by their Protestant counterparts), they appealed to the languages of republicanism and liberalism. Kenrick and other bishops asserted episcopal control over parishes and strengthened ties with the Roman hierarchy, and they showed growing wariness of liberalism, which they associated with the trustee crisis and European revolution; in the coming decades, revolutions similarly strengthened the Vatican's hostility to liberalism.

Carey articulated one set of possibilities for Catholics in the new republic, but as he aged, the possibilities of religious cooperation were fading. New pressures limited the eagerness of both sides to cooperate, and the lines dividing Catholicism and Protestantism hardened. Invigorated by the Second Great Awakening, evangelicals dreamed of converting the nation to Protestantism; they watched in alarm as the Catholic Church grew rapidly in institutional strength and numbers. Increasing numbers of immigrants, especially lower-class ones (who, unlike Carey, were more likely to need than provide financial assistance), poured into the nation. Not only did immigration pose a demographic challenge to any hopes of a de facto Protestant nation, the expansion of white male suffrage across class lines also meant that the rapidly exploding Catholic population posed a political challenge to Protestant domi-


96 For the Philadelphia lay trustee controversy, see Light, Rome and the New Republic; for the new tone, see also McGreevy, Catholicism and American Freedom, 7–42.
rnance. Growing numbers of priests and religious orders—especially female religious orders full of unmarried women—challenged Protestant gender roles and ideals of domesticity.97

The institutional strength of Catholicism—and the threat it posed to Protestant dreams—coincided with a shift of tone in American and European Catholicism. A new generation of Catholics stridently asserted their Catholic identity and eagerly leapt into the religious controversies that a previous generation had reluctantly accepted.98 Where Carey had understood cultural and intellectual assimilation as the key to Catholic respectability in the new republic, a substantial constituency of antebellum Catholic leaders grew wary of the dangers that such assimilation might pose to Catholic identity and belief. Catholics, worried about Protestant teachers proselytizing, constructed their own schools as alternatives to public or Protestant institutions, creating a rich, but decidedly sectarian, Catholic culture. Catholic piety increasingly emphasized precisely those beliefs and practices that many Protestants found jarring, such as miracles and Eucharistic or Marian devotions. By midcentury, the rapprochement had given way to straightforward sectarianism, unabashed avowals of Catholic superiority, and an antagonistic relationship with Protestantism. Liberals and evangelicals, for their part, fought fiercely against a newly confident and assertive Catholicism. By the mid-nineteenth century, American Catholics and liberals stood at odds, invoking competing and antagonistic notions of freedom and the individual.99 Neither group cared to downplay differences in the name of harmony.

Carey’s case suggests that, however briefly, the early republic offered new opportunities for merging Catholicism, antisectarianism, liberalism, and Enlightenment attitudes. Defending Catholicism through religious harmony and religious liberty, and meshing Catholic and Enlightenment thought, Carey articulated one set of possibilities for Catholicism in the early republic. The rhetoric of liberalism, rather than undermining Catholicism, served Catholic ends, and religious cooperation was premised on individual religious devotion and a shared vision of a moral, religious, and harmonious nation. Traditional polemical models, though

98 For the growth of apologetical debates in the West, see Dichtl, Frontiers of Faith, 175.
99 See McGreevy, Catholicism and American Freedom, esp. 7–42.
never entirely abandoned, made room for an apologetics of harmony that
relied upon religious cooperation and respect as well as religious devotion.
The early republican vision of harmony gave way to fiery sectarian
polemics in the nineteenth century, but that vision of harmony echoed
into the twentieth century. The ideal of harmony proved, in the long run,
to be more lasting, but it would be a long road.

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