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A Tempest in Trenton: The Great Controversy upon Catholicism and Protestantism

Eighteen seventy-five saw the United States into the third year of a recession sparked by the Panic of 1873 and also saw a revival of nativist sentiment throughout much of the nation. The nativist tide generally rose and ebbed in tandem with the economy: when times were good and jobs available, opposition to immigrants subsided, but when times were hard, the specter of joblessness led many to support limitations on immigration and restraints on the immigrants already here. Fears of “Popery,” usually muted, became strident, and organized opposition to Catholics and the Catholic Church became more noisy.

In Trenton, Catholics were becoming much more visible. St. Francis Hospital had opened its doors in 1874, and in 1875 St. John’s Church opened a large new school, with some 700 students that September. The Catholic Union vocally opposed several proposed amendments to the state constitution for fear of harmful effects on Catholic institutions. And the approach of the 1876 presidential electoral campaign saw the suggestion in some quarters that President Grant should be nominated for a third term, on a nativist platform. The pot was aboil.

On Sunday evening, November 14, the Reverend Elijah Lucas, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Trenton, preached “to the American Protestant Association and an immense congregation” a discourse which the *Evening Journal* of November 15 characterized as “masterly” and “of that kind that must be heard to be fully appreciated.”

The newspaper carried an extensive summary of the sermon, which characterized the Catholic Church as a “Great Apostacy,” anti-Biblical, despotic and ever anxious to subject the human spirit, as Protestantism was constantly fighting to free it. “There is great danger to our country” the Reverend Lucas continued; “it is swarming with Jesuits, a class worse than the lice of Egypt, whose agents already infect American school boards.”

Reverend Lucas, according to Thomas S. Griffiths, *A History of Baptists in New Jersey* (1904) served as pastor of First Baptist from 1873 to 1894 and was a terror to “corrupt politicians, rum sellers and saloon keepers,” but failed to cooperate with Christian ministers of his own or other denominations.

On Saturday, April 25, 1998, the New Jersey Catholic Historical Records Commission will host a conference at Seton Hall University on aspects of Catholic primary and secondary education in the state. Part of the purpose of the Commission is to make known the activities of Catholics in New Jersey and these frequent public conferences are one of the ways it attempts to fulfill that purpose. Previous programs have dealt with European immigrant groups into the state, Caribbean immigrants, various roles that women religious have played, and the process of writing parish history.
A Tempest in Trenton
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On the day after the summary of the sermon appeared, the Evening Journal carried a letter from Reverend Patrick Byrne, pastor of St. John’s Church, asking that Reverend Lucas’ entire manuscript be published, since he did not want to misjudge the sermon from a perhaps inaccurate representation. The Journal’s editor, L. Field Whitbeck, responded that Lucas had no manuscript, but the clergyman vouched for the accuracy of the newspaper’s coverage of his sermon. In an accompanying editorial Whitfield asked “Can any intelligent person deny that Mr. Lucas was historically correct?”

Father Byrne responded with a letter attacking the sermon as ignorant and malevolent and promising rebuttal. Lucas replied that he had preached “in the kindest spirit, and with no intention of wounding anyone’s feelings.” In speaking of “Popery,” he was “careful to confine myself to well-established facts,” and then continued for several paragraphs with some of them, such as that the whole history of Popery is a history of malevolence.

At this point the duel became a melee, with several others joining in. Byrne largely confined his comments to consideration of theological issues, often in a hard-hitting, personal tone that does not sit well today. “Protestant” asked what Catholics objected to in Lucas’ allegations from history and “A Catholic Layman” responded with careful explanation and reference to non-Catholic sources. Charles W. Jay, a peripatetic newspaperman then editing the Trenton Free Press, first proclaimed that he had read no book about either Catholicism or Protestantism and was not theologically trained, then joyfully jumped into the fray to challenge the place of St. Peter in the Church.

A later historian said of Jay that “he never failed to keep his readers awake either by the merciless virulence of his political attacks or the savage merriment evoked at the expense of whoever happened to be his target for the moment.” This time may have been the exception. “Semper” compared his contribution to the effusions of a gas meter and asserted his opinions changed far faster than the “movements of a worn-out weather vane.” Mary E. Doran and “J.C.M.” also laid into Jay.

The controversy continued until early December, and according to the editor interest was “widespread and astonishing.” The paper was eagerly bought up “even before its immense editions were off the press.” Clamor for copies of the letters proved so great that all the articles were compiled into The Great Controversy upon Catholicism and Protestantism, published in December 1875, by the Evening Journal’s editor.

Did anyone win? Byrne and “A Catholic Layman” possibly showed non-Catholics that there was evidence to challenge long-held assumptions about Catholics and the Catholic Church. Although the tenor of the argument today seems as likely to put off inquiry as to encourage it, the Gilded Age newspaper reader was accustomed to the style and could probably profit from the instruction couched in hard-hitting prose.

Norman H. Maring, Baptists in New Jersey: A Study in Transition (1964) says Lucas in his sermon “denounced the Catholics in scurrilous language” and identifies some other preachers who also did. “In so doing, however, they were simply expressing the typical Protestant fear and dislike of Roman Catholicism, which had been inherited from Reformation times.” If Father Byrne and others eventually forced a muting of that dislike and opened the way to a better understanding, they did win in the long run.

Conference on Catholic Education
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Education has been a concern of the Catholic Church in the United States since the establishment of the diocese of Baltimore in November 1789, to embrace the whole of the new nation. Even before that, leading clergymen had met in May 1789 and drawn up the prospectus for what became Georgetown Academy and eventually Georgetown University.

“The object of the proposed institution,” they declared, “is to unite the means of communicating science with an effectual provision for guarding and preserving the Morals of Youth.” Bishop John Carroll made Catholic education an important concern of his pastoral letter of May 28, 1792, and the topic formed a significant consideration in every synod and national council held. Bishops addressed the question in their own dioceses, sometimes quarreling with each other over the “how” but always agreed that “the object,” as Carroll and his colleagues had described it, had to be attained.

The Commission proposes to examine some portions of the epic story of Catholic education in New Jersey on Saturday, April 25, 1998, and invites all to join us that day. The schedule on page 3 indicates the topics and times of presentation. The cost for registration and lunch is $25. Those interested in attending are asked to register by April 15.

Reverend Patrick Byrne

Speakers at the conference on Writing Parish History
Raymond Kupke, Ruth Paci and Reverend Michael C...
Registration Form

Catholic Education in New Jersey Some Chapters of the Story

Please register the following for the conference on April 28, 1998.

NAME ____________________________________________

ADDRESS _________________________________________

CITY________________________ STATE_________ ZIP____

I enclose check(s) in the amount of $______ for _____person(s), payable to: New Jersey Catholic Historical Records Commission.

For multiple registrations, please attach names of all attendees.

Please return by April 15, 1998, to: Professor J.F. Mahoney, Department of History, Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ 07079-2696.
Meet the Commission

Allan Nelson completed his baccalaureate degree at Rutgers, the State University and then continued graduate study of history at Fordham University, where he received both the master’s degree and the doctorate.

After a short time at Marymount Manhattan College, he joined the faculty of Caldwell College and rose to the rank of Professor of History and Political Science. A popular instructor, he taught a variety of courses, his background having prepared him in both European and American history.

Professor Nelson was also instrumental in introducing to Caldwell College the national history honor society, Phi Alpha Theta. He retired from teaching after 34 years at Caldwell in 1997.

Professor Nelson’s doctoral dissertation dealt with English politics during the reign of George III, and his research interests gradually expanded into the ramifications of English Catholicism in the late eighteenth century, into the development of Catholicism in the British colonies along the Atlantic seaboard and then in the early national period of American history, and into Catholicism in New Jersey.

Over the years he was written articles and delivered numerous papers on these subjects and their intertwinings. He has also contributed numerous entries to scholarly reference works on these and other topics. When not pursuing Clio, the Muse of history, he enjoys travel and nature study.

Professor Nelson’s expertise will prove a great resource for the Commission and we look forward to the contributions he will make to our work.