

Interpretation

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The role of Catholics in shaping early American political thought is often overlooked. The practice of the Catholic faith was illegal most of the time in most of the British American colonies and nearly all of the Founders were Protestant. They were also heavily influenced by the ideas of Enlightenment thinkers, such as John Locke, who had little regard for Catholic thinking. The view that Catholics played at most an insignificant part in laying the foundations of American political life, therefore, long has seemed quite justifiable.

Michael Breidenbach's recent book asks us to seriously reconsider the common tale. True, Protestant and liberal ideas are crucially important to understanding America, but Breidenbach's history of American Catholics' "dear-bought liberty" shows the extent to which Catholic political thought, particularly among those influenced by French and English Jesuits, was not only consistent with the principles of the American Revolution and the US Constitution, but also did some of the intellectual heavy lifting to bring about their implementation. The principles of religious freedom enshrined in the First Amendment, for example, were anticipated by the toleration acts championed by George Claver and his son Cecil, the founders of Maryland. And it was the Catholic Daniel Carroll who joined the push at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 to ban religious tests for office. He was joined by his brother John Carroll, first Catholic bishop in the United States, and their second cousin Charles Carroll of Carrollton, the lone Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence, in defending the American constitutional order as largely consistent with Catholic doctrine.

As Breidenbach shows with great clarity, the Calverts' and Carrolls' defense of America was based on a conciliarist reading of the Church's magisterial authority. With roots in the thirteenth century, conciliarism predates the Protestant Reformation by nearly three centuries. Conciliarists held that the Church's Ecumenical Councils possess greater authority than papal teachings. Popes, conciliarists held, should be checked by a mixed constitutional order within the Church and their teaching power is limited to faith and morals, not temporal matters that are better dealt with by the reigning monarchs of nations. The Calverts, the Carrolls, and other Catholics in America accepted the conciliarist position while simultaneously aligning it with republican principles. Their comfort in America, then, was based not on tacit approval of Protestantism or liberalism, but on acceptance of Catholic conciliarism. They were indebted not to Calvin or Locke, but to John of Paris.

Briedenbach challenges at least two Catholic counter-narratives of the place of the Church in America. For some, the American Founding is quint-essentially Catholic, even if few recognized it at the time. Orestes Brownson, whose *The American Republic* is representative of this view, went so far as to suggest that America's mission was to revitalize the Church in the modern world. Others, however, hold that America's foundations are tied far too tightly to the ideology of liberalism for the Catholic Church to flourish in the United States. The doctrine of separation of church and state is seen in this view to be particularly pernicious, preventing a truly integrated society. For the first group, America cannot help but be Catholic; for the second, the American Founding must be rejected by Catholics as antithetical to the faith.

Breidenbach's history of Catholics in early America provides a much more nuanced and insightful treatment of the relationship between the American constitutional order and the Catholic faith as understood by prominent Catholics who took part in the Founding. The early chapters follow the efforts of the Calverts to establish an English colony in the New World that would tolerate Catholics. The Calverts had to walk a fine line between British law and Vatican decrees. The English were ready to accuse them of being traitors to the Crown while Ultramontane Catholics were critical of their opposition to the pope's power over temporal affairs. The trickiest business they faced was finding an oath of allegiance that would satisfy the demands of the law without violating the consciences of Catholics wishing to live in their new colony. Conciliarist thought proved a useful tool for moving forward. The Calverts' oath upheld royal prerogative over the affairs of state without committing allegiance to the Church of England. The religious toleration that was

opened by the unique oath of Maryland was later matched by the Maryland Toleration Act, which forbade the deliberate provoking of religious quarrels. Maryland thus “allowed [Anglo] Catholics to test arguments and arrangements about which other Catholics had theorized but that they were unable to implement fully in England” (42). And though these experiments were short-lived, they proved invaluable in helping the generation of Americans charged with building the new political edifice after the Revolution to do so with principles in favor of religious liberty.

As noted, among the members of the Founding generation are the Carrolls. The chapters of Breidenbach’s book that follow their careers are among the most penetrating exegeses of their thought to be found. Breidenbach chronicles their education at Saint Omer’s, a Jesuit college in France, which included heavy doses of conciliarist thinking that helped them make sense of their political circumstances. It simultaneously provided them with reasons to reject attempts at Parliamentary usurpation of colonial rights and papal claims to temporal power. Their education was among the finest that any American received in the mid-eighteenth century, and they were more than prepared to assist their Protestant brethren in responding to the escalating political tensions of the 1770s and the subsequent tasks of building a nation in the 1780s.

Among the highlights of the book is Breidenbach’s depiction of the debates in Congress over the language of what would become the First Amendment to the US Constitution. The proposal was James Madison’s but the account of the debates as recorded in the *Congressional Register* shows the leading role that Daniel Carroll played in supporting and defending the concept of religious freedom. In fact, Carroll’s efforts appear to be deliberately coordinated with Madison’s to preempt anticipated Anti-Federalist objections. This at least is the impression one gets from reading the *Congressional Register*, the author of which was Thomas Lloyd, a Catholic who had also attended school at Saint Omer’s. Breidenbach makes much of the fact that almost “all of what we know about the congressional debates, including the discussion of the First Amendment, comes from a Catholic” (181). That the Carrolls and Lloyd would support the two religious clauses of the amendment is not surprising. Having lived under an established church that was hostile to the practice of the Catholic faith, they had good reasons for supporting the Establishment Clause. Likewise, freedom from impediments to worship would have been attractive given the hostility that they had previously faced. The Catholic Church had much to gain from the First Amendment. And

American Catholics like the Carrolls and Lloyd saw this more clearly than many of their counterparts in Rome.

Reconciling the new situation of Catholics in the United States to promulgated policies of the Church of Rome fell on the shoulders of John Carroll, who quickly rose to a position of prominence after the Revolution. He both promoted the faith in his homeland and explained to Rome the delicate situation the Church faced in America. The potential for growth existed, but the way forward required a new approach. The persecution of heretics and schismatics would do little but confirm to Protestants the political ambitions of the Church. Carroll had to find a way to give the flock of the New World the full authenticity of the faith without being offensive to the republican presumptions of the people. Again, conciliarist ideas were helpful, but only to a point. Taken to an extreme, conciliarism undermines all apostolic authority. Carroll thus “sought a middle path between the radical periphery of conciliarist ecclesiology and the ultramontane vision of the Catholic Church” (201). This middle way proved effective. Rome agreed to create a diocese in the United States, the first to be established in a nonconfessional state since the Protestant Reformation. And Rome’s appointment of Carroll as the first bishop of the new See of Baltimore was made without any official recommendation of the United States government, though it did allow, as a one-time concession, the American clergy to elect Carroll. It was a happy coincidence that the clergy and Rome agreed on the desired outcome.

Breidenbach’s documentation of the Calverts and Carrolls in America is exceptional. The notes are full of primary source references, and one is left wondering why much of this material is not more widely known, such as the Maryland Toleration Act. The one disappointment in this regard, at least for me, is the relatively short shrift given to Suarez and Bellarmine, two Jesuit thinkers with whose works the Carrolls would have been familiar from their time at Saint Omer’s. They are mentioned in passing, but usually as foils for the conciliarist position. One gets the impression that the Carrolls would have rejected their ideas. My own reading of their works leads me to think that the Carrolls would have found much to like in the political thought of Suarez and Bellarmine. Indeed, the so-called middle path established by Bishop John Carroll seems to owe much to the relatively sober writings of the Spanish Scholastics. One can work out a case for religious toleration from their works that would not be as controversial as the more conciliarist positions.

But whether their debt is to Suarez and Bellarmine with the conciliarists or to the conciliarists alone, Breidenbach makes a strong case for showing that

the early American Catholics could celebrate the Revolution, Constitution, and First Amendment not in spite of their faith but because of it. Their arguments are drawn not from Protestant or liberal traditions, but from their own Catholic tradition. They made contributions, not concessions. Breidenbach has opened up a major channel for enlarging our understanding these contributions.

