"Our Enemy, Who for Our Religion… Abhorred Us": The Establishment and Maintenance of 18th-Century Anti-Catholicism in North America

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Abstract

In the centuries following the Protestant Reformation, religion was a point of contention between Catholic and Protestant nations. These contentions are reflected in literature that was produced during colonial disputes between opposing Catholic and Protestant imperial regimes. Academics including Johnathan Clark have described the significance of religion in times of warfare, in spurring the support of the masses and providing a rallying cry for troops. Scholars that study 18th-century conflicts in North America, including the Seven Years' War, often do not consider the significance of religious affiliations in this age of empire. Despite this lack of attention, in the years leading up to and including the Seven Years' War, British North American settlers employed anti-Catholic rhetoric to demonize their French Catholic neighbours to the north. This article considers published letters, sermons, and legislation from the mid- to late-18th century in order to describe how terms including "papist" and "catholic" became synonymous with "French" in the North American context. These texts suggest that the Seven Years' War was conceived as divinely ordained and justified by British settlers as the defense of Protestantism in North America. Protestant denominations overlooked the differences that had historically divided them in the face of this common French Catholic "enemy."

Keywords: Anti-Catholicism, Seven Years' War, popery, North America, New England, Quebec, French Canadian

In 1760, David Hall gave a political sermon that denounced 'bloodthirsty' French Canadian enemies "who for [the British colonists' Protestant] religion… abhorred [them]."[1]

1. David Hall, *Israel's Triumph: A Sermon Preached at Sutton on a Public Thanksgiving, October 9, 1760, For the Entire Reduction of Canada* (Boston: J. Draper, 1761), 12.

Throughout sixteenth-century Europe, violent conflicts erupted between Christian denominations, dividing Catholic from Protestant in what became known as the Reformation.[2] The ensuing religious discord of the

2. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009),11-44.

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Reformation, Wars of Religion, and Counter-Reformation, shaped the character of European empires in the Americas. New Spain, New France, and the Portuguese colonies represented Catholic imperialism in North America, while English colonies were overwhelmingly Protestant.[3] When the Seven Years' War broke out between Catholic French and Protestant English imperial powers in 1754, pre-existing anti-Catholic sentiments that had developed in England during this earlier period of religious discord were evident in North American discourses about the conflict. Reactions to the *Quebec Act* demonstrate anti-Catholicism's continuance in North America. British colonists applied the anti-papist rhetoric that had emerged in English Protestantism over previous centuries to their Catholic opponents in the Seven Years' War—their French neighbours.

The Seven Years' War, known as the French and Indian War in the United States, lasted from 1754-1763.[4] The war was the final conflict in the Second Hundred Years' War, a period spanning nearly one hundred years of on-again, off-again, violence between England and France. The North American theatre of war primarily involved the French, British, Spanish, and their respective Indigenous allies, including the French-allied Wendat, Shawnee, Ottawa, and Pottawami and the British-allied Mohawk, Cherokee, and Mohicans, among other groups. British victory in 1763 forced France to cede their North American colonies to Britain and Spain. The Seven Years' War, as a result, is responsible for incorporating 60,000 French-speaking Catholics into the British Empire and the creation of a French minority within British North America.

Most explanations of the Seven Years' War emphasize the military, imperial, economic, or demographic components of the war. Historians rarely consider the role that religion played in the conflict. Eighteenth-century anti-papist texts were widely produced in England, typically in

the wake of Jacobite rebellions against the British Crown. [5] These Jacobite uprisings sought to reestablish the Catholic Stuart line of succession on the Protestant English throne, a line that had been cast off in the Glorious Revolution of 1688.[6] Literature produced in response to the supposed 'Catholic threat' in North America reflects the rhetoric established in these English instances. References to massacres committed against French Protestants (Huguenots) during the French Wars of Religion are common in both English and North American writings, such as in Hall's sermon where he references "our perfidious and barbarous Enemies… patronized by their Nation; noted for massacres, and famed for shedding the blood of Protestants."[7] However, the North American and British theatres of religious conflict were different in that the papist threat to the monarchy was legitimate in the Jacobite conflicts, whereas the religious impetus for battle in North America was negligible. Rather, the Seven Years' War was an imperial conflict of competing colonial settler expansion between the English and French for possession and economic dominion of the 'New World.' Despite the clear economic motivation for the war, North American Protestants moralized their role in it by using rhetoric from past religious conflicts to justify their support for the violence.

According to historian Johnathan Clark, religious ideas are the most widely and deeply shared sentiments. [8] This was especially true in colonial times, when the religion of the mother country became integral to its imperial identity. As a result, appealing to religious sentiments was a powerful and generically appealing method for individuals seeking to motivate large audiences. North American anti-papist writings, including letters, pamphlets, published sermons, and legislation, contributed to compromises between Protestant denominations on the grounds of a shared anti-Catholicism in the eighteenth-century. The diverse types of anti-Catholic writings suggests that the war promoted a sense of Protestant solidarity in the British North American colonies. Each of the thirteen colonies has a distinct religious history and the extent that each colony related to a common Protestant identity was not uniform. Rhode Island, for instance, had historically maintained a

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3. Peter Moogk, "Reluctant Exiles: Emigrants from France in Canada before 1760," *William and Mary Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (1989): 467-8.

French colonists were overwhelmingly Catholic. This was partially due to the French Empire's preference for Catholic colonists, and it was official policy to recruit Catholic settlers though it has been shown that this was not strictly enforced and there was a small Hugenot (French Protestant) population in New France. Furthermore, most British colonies were Protestant, either Anglican (Church of England) or dissenters from it. There was a Catholic minority within the 13 colonies, notably Maryland.

For further discussion see Peter Moogk, "Reluctant Exiles: Emigrants from France in Canada before 1760," *William and Mary Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (1989): 463-505.

4. Johnathan R. Dull, "Great Power Confrontation or Clash of Cultures? France's War against Britain and Its Antecedents," in *Cultures in Conflict: The Seven Years' War in North America*, ed. Warren R. Hofstra (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2007): 61-62.

5. Michael S. Carter, "A 'Traiterous Religion': Indulgence and the Anti-Catholic Imagination in Eighteenth Century New England," *The Catholic Historical Review* 99 no. 1 (2013): 70.

6. Colley, *Britons*, 24.

7. Hall, *Israel's Triumph*, 6.

8. J. C. D. Clark, *English Society 1660-1832: Religion, Ideology and Politics During the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 17.

policy of religious tolerance.[9] This tolerance made the colony a sanctuary for Protestant denominations including the Quakers and Baptists who were unwelcome in stricter settlements. Maryland was also established under an official policy of religious tolerance. However, it was the intention of the colony's founders for Maryland to be a sanctuary for Roman Catholic colonists who were unwelcome in Protestant communities.[10] Massachusetts Bay and Virginia were comparatively intolerant to Christian sects outside of their official denomination.[11] The unique histories and policies regarding religion in these colonies complicate perceptions of a 'common Protestantism' in North America. While nuance exists between Protestant identities in North America based on the diverse religious experiences and denominations of each colony, 'Protestantism,' appears to refer collectively to all non-Catholics in the anti-papist literature that was produced in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

Protestant elites used this religious binary to garner support from British colonists for the Seven Years' War.[12] By the mid-eighteenth century imperial regimes had linked ethnicity to faith, making religious affiliation a hereditary trait. Individuals assigned French or Spanish imperial identities were assumed to be Catholic. By the same logic, England, with a Protestant majority, became a Protestant nation, and 'true' English were born and bred under the banner of the Church of England – or at the very least one of the many dissenting Protestant denominations. The British colonists saw the French, on the other hand, as overwhelmingly Catholic, despite pockets of Protestantism (Huguenots).[13] For example, David Hall assumed that the Bishop of Quebec had control over all Frenchmen in North America, including the "French People of Nova Scotia."[14] These perceptions explain how the term "anti-papist" became synonymous with "anti-French" sentiment in the eighteenth century.

Anti-papistry was central to North American Protestantism as it became a rallying cry for British colonists.[15] In *Israel's Triumph*, David Hall said that it was "in the name of our God we will set up our banners."[16] Hall's

sermon distinguishes the British God from the French God, the Protestant from the Catholic, defining British victory on the Plains of Abraham as "providence."[17] Anti-papist publications cited the threat of French Catholics to convince the British that it was not only desirable to remove the French claim on North America, but fundamental to the security of the colonies. The French were targeted by anti-papist writings because, unlike the Spanish or Portuguese, they were in direct competition with the British colonies due to their proximity in both Europe and North America.

Publications that promoted the superiority of one denomination and the baseness of another often followed political disturbances in England. Most anti-papal literature was published in London, then reprinted in North America and Ireland.[18] Therefore it is useful to consider texts that were printed in London when considering literature that circulated around North America throughout the eighteenth century, as these publications were redistributed there.

In 1739 an anonymous author published a broadside entitled *Some Thoughts upon America, and upon the Danger from Roman Catholicks there* in London. The author suggested that the British Catholics in North America would become vulnerable to the influence of French Catholics. Protestants declared that Catholics were easily compelled to commit immoral acts, just as they had been susceptible to their inferior beliefs.[19] They also claimed that indulgences permitted Catholics to commit sin without penalty. Even murder or regicide went without punishment because a Catholic Priest could forgive a sinner in advance of the act.[20] In North America, Protestants feared that French Catholics would guiltlessly enact cruelties upon British colonists.

In his consideration of what might happen if French Catholics took control of the British colonies, the author of *Some Thoughts upon America* expressed concern for the security of British Protestants. The anonymous author of the broadside made it clear that the threat of Catholics in North America was imminent because there were "great numbers of French Roman Catholics on the back of all [the] Colonys [sic]." He reminded his readers that Catholics had been known to be cruel to "heretics" when in power.[21] This supposed Catholic threat was overstated because the author failed to recognize that the British had a larger settler population than the French in North America.[22] The

9. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale UniversityPress, 2004): 108.

10. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 109.

11. John Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation? A Historical Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003) 81-5.

12. Robert Emmett Curran, *Papist Devils: Catholics in British America, 1574-1783* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 203.

13. Clark, *English Society*, 26.

14. Hall, *Israel's Triumph*, 12.

15. Carter, "A 'Traiterous Religion,'" 53.

16. Hall, *Israel's Triumph*, 14.

17. Hall, *Israel's Triumph*, 6.

18. Cater, "A 'Traiterous Religion,'" 61.

19. Carter, "A 'Traiterous Religion,'" 64-5.

20. Carter, "A 'Traiterous Religion,'" 59.

21. *Some Thoughts upon America and upon the Danger from Roman Catholicks There* (London: n. p., 1739).

22. *Some Thoughts upon America.*

author presented Catholics as people who "believe[d] it their Duty to cut [Protestant] Throats," and who thought it was "meritous [sic]…, Honour[able] and [a] Service to the All-merciful God" to do so.[23] The anonymous author argued that it was not a Christian practice to persecute others based on matters of faith, yet he asserted that Catholics had chosen a faith that would, if not opposed, interfere with Protestantism. He presented Catholicism as potentially destructive to Protestantism in the colonies, which opposes Christian messages of love, patience, and understanding.[24]

Meanwhile, in England, the Tudor era of religious reformation from Catholicism to Protestantism, was followed by a series of holy wars that involved most of Europe. Most societies kept their own nation from internal destruction by privileging one Christian denomination above the others.[25] England promoted Anglicanism in order to prevent other Christian denominations from conspiring with one another. Anglicanism's dominance over Catholicism in England was confirmed through the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and quelling of the Jacobite Rebellions. By the mid-eighteenth-century, as long as religious minorities did not seek political power, they were allowed to practice their faith.[26]

While the appearance of religious freedom successfully restrained large scale religious conflicts within the borders of England, where the political authority of the Anglican Church was strong, contentions between Christian denominations abroad remained. Sentiments similar to those expressed in *Some Thoughts upon America* excused violence but did not create legitimate reasons for conflict. This created an atmosphere in North America that witnessed the culmination of anti-French-papist sentiment during the Seven Years' War, with a push to remove the French population from North America.[27] The drive to expel the French originated in London, where anti-papal policies were meant to protect the monarchy from Catholic claimants, whereas the threat to British colonists in North America was considered direct, or immediate.[28] These anti-papal ideologies influenced what Philip Lawson called a "common Francophobia" among British colonists.[29] Anti-papist policies during the Seven Years' War created a

phobia by targeting both French and anyone considered susceptible to French influence.[30] 'Susceptible' North Americans were defined by their religion—anyone who was Catholic could also be a French sympathizer. Simply put, British Protestants perceived a direct correlation between the religious and political identities of North Americans during the Seven Years' War, regardless of the extent to which this perception was accurate. By casting the Seven Years' War as a holy war, or a continuation of European Wars of Religion, participation in the fighting became the divine responsibility of British Protestants. This perception was created in the decades prior to the war, and continued to be evident in publications produced during and after the Seven Years' War.

These distinctions are addressed by the anonymous author of the 1745 publication, *A Letter from a Catholic Gentleman to His Protestant Friend.* The Roman Catholic gentleman who wrote the letter acknowledged that a large body of anti-papal publications had been recently distributed in England.[31] He wrote that Catholics in England, being friends with British Protestants, were not the intended targets of these writings.[32] The author argued that it was unfair to condemn British Catholics with anti-papal publications because they were not a threat to the sovereign monarch. He felt it was necessary to distinguish that he was neither a "*Frenchman* nor a *Spaniard*, but a true sincere *Englishman*," in order to distinguish British Catholics from Catholics abroad.[33] The letter was written just before a Jacobite Uprising, which was brewing in this period (1745-6).[34] The author made his loyalties clear: it fell first to the Crown, then to the Pope. He suggested that if the Pope himself invaded England, he would "kneel down to kiss his Toe… then rise up and shoot him through the Head."[35]

In Britain the primary concern of anti-papists was Catholic claimants to the English throne. In the colonies, the main concern was that Catholics "condemned all Protestants as heretics and thus would not honor [sic] their [Protestant] neighbours."[36] Settlers in the British colonies were concerned that their French neighbours would behave dishonourably, or try to take over Protestant dominion. This French threat was unrealistic at best—the North American French population was small, around 90,000 inhabitants in 1775, when compared to the British settler population,

23. *Some Thoughts upon America.*

24. *Some Thoughts upon America.*

25. Clark, *English Society*, 17.

26. Clark, *English Society*, 31-6.

27. Philip Lawson, "A Perspective on British History and the Treatment of Quebec," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 3 no. 3 (1990): 259.

28. Lawson, "A Perspective on British History and the Treatment of Quebec," 259.

29. Lawson, "A Perspective on British History and the Treatment of Quebec," 259.

30. Curran, *Papist Devils*, 200-25.

31. *A Letter from a Catholic Gentleman to His Protestant Friend* (London: n. p., 1745), 3-5.

32. *A Letter from a Catholic Gentleman to His Protestant Friend*, 4.

33. *A Letter from a Catholic Gentleman to His Protestant Friend*, 8.

34. Colley, *Britons*, 13.

35. *A Letter from a Catholic Gentleman to His Protestant Friend*, 8.

36. Carter, "A 'Traiterous Religion,'" 64.

about 2,150,000 in 1770.[37] However, the French had Indigenous allies that extended French influence in North America considerably.[38]

British colonies in North America attempted to secure themselves against the perceived French-Catholic threat by passing anti-papal legislation. An example of this anti-papal legislation exists in Maryland's 1754 bill, "An Act for the Security of his Majesty's Dominion, and to prevent the Growth of Popery within this Province," which called for the restriction of the Catholic faith in the colony. Under the bill, Catholics were not allowed to practice their faith publicly because Catholicism had the potential to pervert "many of his Majesty's dutiful Protestant subjects to Popery" if practiced openly.[39] If "Popery" were allowed to spread, Protestants feared "the Danger of [Catholics] being joined and assisted by these... domestic Enemies."[40] Popish priests and Jesuits were forced to swear "Oaths of Allegiance, Abhorancy [sic] and Abjuration," and "repeat and subscribe to the Test [Act]," which prevented Roman Catholics from holding public office.[41] This bill is significant because it suggests that the British thought they might be overwhelmed by a Catholic uprising from within the colonies, despite the fact that by this period there was a Protestant majority in Maryland.

The moral obligation of Protestants to defend the British colonies from French influence was also articulated in Thomas Gibbons's *The Cruel Oppressions of the Protestants in France*, printed in 1755. This text recounted Protestant testimonies about Catholic brutalities toward other denominations. Thomas Gibbons (1720-1785) was an English clergyman who headed his own congregation at Haberdasher's Hall in London. He published over forty articles in the *Protestant Dissenters Magazine* and his work was featured in Walter Wilson's *Dissenting Churches*.

Gibbons's *The Cruel Oppressions of the Protestants in France* speculated that the atrocities of the French Wars of Religion would repeat in North America if the French won the Seven Years' War. In the foreword to the text, the editor presented the narratives contained within as "tragical, yet authentic, accounts of the sufferings of our *Protestant* Brethren in *France*."[42] Gibbons's notion of kinship between Protestants in France and in North America was used in order to demonstrate the "miseries [that] would break in upon our Land was *France* to plant her triumphant Standard among us."[43] Simply put, Gibbons used his consideration on the treatment of Huguenots in France to fan fears about prospective French conquest and the treatment of Protestants in the British colonies. Gibbons went on to argue that the result of the war would be God's will, as a means to justify Protestant participation in the conflict. Gibbons alleviated British Protestants of any guilt for their actions in the Seven Years' War by reducing the violent confrontations between British and French forces to a matter of providence.

These attitudes are also evident in writings about the British victory of 1759 and the fall of Quebec. David Hall's Thanksgiving sermon, *Israel's Triumph*, presented the victory on the Plains of Abraham as divinely ordained. In *Israel's Triumph*, Hall, pastor of the First Congregational Church of Sutton for over six decades, explicitly compared the battle at the Plains of Abraham to the Exodus narrative. He cast the British Protestants as the escaping Israelites and the French as the nefarious Pharaoh. Hall offered a romantic history of the Protestant forefathers coming to North America to worship in purity, away from Catholic corruption.[44] In doing so, Hall ignored the non-Puritan colonists who also occupied North America, not to mention the diverse Indigenous spiritualties and beliefs that sprawled across the continent. In Hall's retelling, North America was the British 'promised land.' British Generals were the 'instruments of God,' and the French commanders were villains.[45] According to Hall the "Terrors of God were upon [the French], perceiving the Lord had fought for [British] Armies."[46] Hall's fantastical tale makes it clear that he believed the results of the war were directly related to Britain's state religion and God's favour.[47] This sermon reflects a religious interpretation of the war that British Protestants used to justify ongoing participation in the conflict against France.

37. "Becoming American: The British Atlantic Colonies, 1690-1763," National Humanities Center: Toolbox Library: Primary Resources in U.S. History & Literature, accessed March 24, 2018, http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/growth/text1/text1read.htm.

38. Catherine M. Desbarats, "The Cost of Early Canada's Native Alliances: Reality and Scarcity's Rhetoric," *William and Mary Quarterly* 52 no. 4 (1995): 609-10.

39. Archives of Maryland Online, "An Act for the Security of his Majesty's Dominion, and to prevent the Growth of Popery within this Province," *Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly* vol. 50 (1752-1754): 514.

40. Archives of Maryland Online, "An Act for the Security of his Majesty's Dominion," 514.

41. Archives of Maryland Online, "An Act for the Security of his Majesty's Dominion," 518 .

42. Thomas Gibbons, *forward to In Two Discourses; Occasioned by the Cruel Oppressions of the Protestants in France, and Enlarged with a Recent and Particular Account of the State of the Persecution in that Kingdom* (London: J. Buckland, J. Ward, T. Field, and M. King, 1755), ii.

43. Thomas Gibbons, *forward to In Two Discourses*, ii.

44. Hall, *Israel's Triumph*, 11.

45. Hall, *Israel's Triumph*, 14.

46. Hall, *Israel's Triumph*, 19.

47. Hall, *Israel's Triumph*, 23.

Following the British victory in 1763, the negative impressions of French Catholics that flourished during the Seven Years' War continued in North America. Perceptions of Catholic cruelties committed against heretics created the impression that toleration of Catholicism in Quebec was dangerous.[48] Protestants believed that the acceptance of French Catholicism in newly-conquered Quebec would negatively impact British Protestantism, both in Quebec and throughout British North America. Tensions between Catholics and Protestants were evident in the following centuries. The government implemented laws that barred Catholics from holding state office in seven of fourteen state constitutions ratified between the American Revolution (1776-83) and the signing of the U.S. constitution (1787).[49] Following the end of the Seven Years' War and the 1763 Royal Proclamation's instructions for the Anglicization and Protestantization of Quebec, religion was certainly a government concern.[50] The *Quebec Act* demonstrates British desire to gain firmer control over the predominantly French population of Quebec.[51] However, British officials were hesitant to allow Catholics into government positions for fear of aggravating British Colonists.[52] This fear of papist cruelties may help explain why American revolutionaries named the *Quebec Act*, which granted French Catholics the right to practice their religion, an intolerable act.

It was in Britain's interest to frame the imperial conflicts of 1739-1763 as necessary for the defense of Protestantism because it made British participation in the war a divine obligation rather than a moral contradiction. *Some Thoughts Upon America, and upon the Danger from Roman Catholicks There* (1739) and Thomas Gibbons's *The Cruel Oppressions of the Protestants in France* (1755) articulate British hesitation about the influence of French Catholics over the British colonies. *A Letter from a Catholic Gentleman to His Protestant Friend* (1745) demonstrated that there was tolerance for Catholics in England that did not exist for French Catholics in North America. North American Protestant denominations were bound by a common 'anti-papistry' in the period preluding and during the Seven Years' War. In North America, Catholics were feared to be French-allies working against their British neighbours from within their own colonies, as articulated in

Maryland's 1754 bill "An Act to Restrict the Growth of Popery." David Hall's *Israel's Triumph* provides insight into the construction of the Seven Years' War as God's will. While most historians emphasize the military, imperial, economic, or demographic motivations for imperial warfare in North America, these sources demonstrate that religious contexts are vital to understanding how British Protestants justified and interpreted the Seven Years' War.

Acknowledgements

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48. Carter, "A 'Traiterous Religion,'" 58-76.

49. Carter, "A 'Traiterous Religion,'" 58.

50. Donald Fyson, "The Royal Proclamation and the Canadiens," Active History, October 1, 2013, http://activehistory.ca/2013/10/the-royal-proclamation-and-the-canadiens/.

51. Lawson, "A Perspective on British History and the Treatment of Quebec," 256-64.

52. Lawson, "A Perspective on British History and the Treatment of Quebec," 265.

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