American Patriots and the Role of Catholicism

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The American Revolution was a war for a variety of liberties, chief among them being economic, political, and social in nature. Perhaps often overlooked, however, is religious liberty and the right to practice freely one's faith without facing persecution. The First Amendment of the Constitution guarantees that right today, but colonial America was, by present-day standards, bigoted and prejudiced, despite the fact that many Europeans came to America for religious freedom. Chief among these prejudices was a disdain for Catholicism, or "popery," as colonists called it.[1] On the eve of the Revolution, Catholics only accounted for about one percent of the entire colonial population. However, they faced legal discrimination throughout the Thirteen Colonies, especially in Maryland, where the vast majority lived and represented eight percent of the colony's population.[2] Maryland, in particular, was a contradictory colony. It was originally founded as a Catholic colony, but later came under Protestant control, which resulted in the loss of liberties for the Catholic population. Despite these obstacles, Maryland Catholics overwhelmingly supported the Revolution for its ideal of religious toleration that they had been seeking for almost a century, contributing to the creation of a new American identity based in liberties.

Leading up to the Revolution, Maryland was hesitant to engage fully in revolutionary activity and only did so based on the colony's economic circumstances at the time. As Professor of History Maura J. Farrelly describes it,

> When times were bad, as they were in 1765 […] the Patriots' complicated polemics about revenue generation

> and internal taxation found fertile ground in Maryland. When times were good, however, as they were in 1768 […] the arguments about parliamentary taxation had little effect.[3]

For example, when British Parliament passed the Stamp Act in 1765, a bad year economically, Maryland vehemently opposed it. The American colonies did not have elected representatives in Parliament; rather, they had virtual representation, and it was through this virtual representation that Parliament claimed to have the right to tax the colonies. Additionally, people in Maryland saw the Act as a tax for the purpose of revenue, as opposed to the regulation of trade by duties. In response to this, Daniel Dulany of Maryland circulated his pamphlet, in which he said, "A Right to impose an internal Tax on the Colonies, without their Consent for the single Purpose of Revenue, is denied."[4] Dulany's pamphlet became widely popular and established the prevailing political belief of no taxation without representation.

However, just two years later in 1767, Parliament passed the Revenue Act, which, according to John Dickinson, was "not for the regulation of trade […] but for the single purpose of levying money upon us."[5] Maryland lawmakers, Dulany in particular, were silent towards this Act because economic conditions were better for them and they could afford to pay the imposed taxes. Baltimore merchants eventually did participate in the American boycott in response to the Revenue Act in 1769, not because of any anger they held towards Parliament and the Crown; rather, they were giving in to the demands of their counterparts in Philadelphia, whose port they depended on to conduct their business because Baltimore's harbor was not suitable for large ships at that time.[6]

Because of this, Anglican minister and Maryland resident Jonathan Boucher believed the Catholics of the colony were indecisive in choosing whether to join the patriots or loyalists, which seems logical because they faced persecution both in Great Britain and in America. Boucher wrote,

> [T]he Catholics of Maryland […] seemed to hesitate and to be unresolved what part they should take in the great commotions of their country, which were then beginning […]. [B]ut it soon became easy to foresee that neither

> they, nor any others, would long be permitted to enjoy a neutrality.[7]

After the publication of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, Boucher started a campaign to rally the colony's Catholics to the loyalist side. He believed the anti-Catholic sentiment instigated by the passing of the Quebec Act in 1774 had been enough to sway Catholics, but instead, they reported him to colonial authorities. As Boucher recounted it,

> [S]oon after the delivery of this Sermon, a parishioner of his, who was a Catholic, officiously and eagerly stepped forward as a witness against him, before a committee at Annapolis, where, with great virulence, he preferred a charge, by which it was hoped the Author's inimicality to America might have been proved.[8]

Despite Boucher's attempt, the Catholics of Prince George's County sided with the patriots.

Another factor in why Maryland hesitated to participate in the Revolution was because their legislature had a history of deferring to Parliament. As Maura Farrelly explains it, other colonies, like Massachusetts and New York, gave precedence to their own constitutions over that of Great Britain's. The Maryland legislature purposely did not create a "constitutional separation" between themselves and their mother country to prevent the "growth of popery in Maryland and, in so doing, preserve the colony's English identity." Dulany and the legislature argued that their rights derived from Common Law, which had its foundations in the "British Constitution" or "Constitution of England."[9] The event that broke this mentality took place in 1773, when an exchange of editorial letters in the *Maryland Gazette* argued Maryland did indeed have a constitution with its own legal traditions that superseded any established by Great Britain. This editorial conversation sparked by a partial government shutdown in 1770 occurred because the colonial assembly was unable to decide on the amount of pay to certain colonial officials, causing Governor Robert Eden to issue a proclamation that reinstated the original pay rate prior to the shutdown. This angered the Assembly's Lower House, who believed the governor's action was illegal. Daniel Dulany, one of the affected officials that benefited from Governor Eden's proclamation, defended the governor in the *Maryland Gazette* in 1773 by writing an

editorial conversation between two fictional characters. However, the public was not on Dulany's side this time.[10]

Dulany's defense of Eden was based on English legal precedent and maintained Maryland's laws derived from British legal tradition. Charles Carroll, a well-known Maryland resident and the only Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence, engaged Dulany in his editorial and argued Eden's actions were illegal because they violated the constitution of Maryland, which comprised of "precedents and practices that [were] complimentary to, but different from the precedents and practices of England."[11] According to Carroll,

> Government was instituted for the general good, but Officers entrusted with its powers, have most commonly perverted them to the selfish views of avarice and ambition […] a wicked minister has endeavoured, and is now endeavouring in this free government, to set the power of the supreme magistrate above the laws; in our mother country such ministers have been punished for the attempt with infamy, death, or exile. I am surprised that he who imitates their example, should not dread their fate.[12]

The main point of Carroll's argument was that constitutions could be corrupted by officials who were appointed, rather than elected by the people. These officials, by Carroll's rationale, acted only in their own self-interests at the expense of the public. King George III was not the problem, but his advisors were. In the case of Governor Eden, men like Daniel Dulany were the problem.[13]

Carroll's argument rallied the Protestants of Maryland, but it was, in essence, an argument that Catholics had been making since 1692 with the repealing of the Toleration Act of 1649. Catholics could not vote, hold public office, own arms, or serve in the militia simply because Protestants believed Catholicism was dangerous, and they wanted to maintain their English identity. Yet three Catholics participated in the drafting of a new state constitution at the Maryland convention, those being Ignatius Fenwick of St. Mary's County, Thomas Semmes of Charles County, and Charles Carroll of Frederick County. Maryland delegates invited Carroll to attend the First Continental Congress because of his legal expertise, even though he had not been elected as a delegate. While this seems contradictory, it

makes sense because Maryland's Protestants were disconnecting from their English identity, an identity that now represented the popery they despised. Popery was synonymous with tyranny, and it was certainly not something practiced by good Catholic men like Fenwick, Semmes, and Carroll.[14]

Based on writings before and after the Revolution, Maryland Catholics set a precedent of religious toleration. Like Pennsylvania half a century later, Maryland existed as a haven for different Christian sects to practice freely without persecution, seen in the laws passed by the colonial legislature. The Toleration Act of 1649, also known as An Act Concerning Religion, stated,

> [N]o Person or Persons whatsoever within this Province […] thereunto professing to believe in Jesus Christ shall from henceforth be in any ways troubled molested or discountenanced for or in respect of his or her Religion nor in the free exercise thereof within this Province.[15]

This Act, later repealed in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution in England, opened the door for the persecution of Catholics in Maryland. In a letter written in 1827 to Reverend John Standford of New York, Charles Carroll explains why he joined the Revolution. The letter highlights how the new American identity was important in intersecting with Carroll's Catholic identity, stating "[t]o obtain religious, as well as civil liberty, I entered zealously into the Revolution […]. God grant that this religious liberty may be preserved in these States to the end of time."[16] In another letter in 1829 to George Custis, the step-grandson of George Washington, Carroll reiterates these same sentiments again:

> When I signed the Declaration of Independence, I had in view not only our independence of England but the toleration of all Sects professing the Christian Religion, and communicating to them all great rights. Happily this wise and salutary measure has taken place for eradicating religious feuds and persecution, and become a useful lesson to all governments.[17]

While Carroll's reasons for joining the Revolution were uniquely his own, it would be a safe assumption that there were others who felt similarly. A significant amount of Maryland's Catholics supported the Revolution. Farrelly notes that in St. Mary's County, which had the largest concentration of Maryland's Catholics, support

for the Revolution was greater among Catholics than it was among Protestants. An analysis done of over 2,000 men from St. Mary's County who aided the Revolution in some way revealed that more than half were likely Catholic. Additionally, one of the largest pockets of loyalists originated in Maryland, which reveals that the colony's Protestants were less sure about independence, whereas Catholics held no such reservations. Even when France joined the war in 1778, there was no drastic change in the amount of Catholic participation on the patriots' side, indicating that Maryland Catholics were committed from the beginning and, if there were loyalists among them, they were not active.[18]

In contrast to the revolutionary enthusiasm displayed in Maryland, the next largest population of Catholics was in Pennsylvania, where these sentiments were not as strong. One explanation offered for this relates to cultural identity. Many of Pennsylvania's Catholics were German and spoke German, and, as such, had more in common with German Protestants than with the English Catholics. When General William Howe occupied Philadelphia in 1777, he authorized the raising of a regiment that consisted of German and Irish Catholic volunteers. For the Irish, their loyalism may have originated from a religious condemnation of the Revolution from men like Reverend Arthur O'Leary.[19]

When it became known that France, a Catholic nation, was willing to help the predominantly Protestant and British American colonies gain independence, the idea began to circulate in Ireland that maybe France could help their fellow Catholics do the same. O'Leary, however, publicly denounced this line of reasoning and warned his countrymen that the French would not provide them with salvation from British rule.[20] In O'Leary's *An Address to the Common People of the Roman Catholic Religion*, in regard to French aid, he says, "When the French joined the Americans, it was not from a love for the Presbyterian religion. If they landed here, it would not be with a design to promote the Catholic cause."[21] O'Leary also argued that engaging in rebellion against the king, like the Americans, would result in damnation. He preached,

> But above all save your souls, which would be lost without resource, for among the crimes that exclude from the kingdom of Heaven, St. Paul reckons sedition. And what greater sedition than to rise up against your king and

country, and to defile your hands with the blood of your fellow subjects.[22]

Farrelly offers another explanation for Catholic loyalism in Pennsylvania that is just as plausible. In terms of religious toleration in the Thirteen Colonies, Pennsylvania's foundation on toleration maintained its course, unlike Maryland. English law prohibited the public celebration of Catholic Mass, and, in 1734, Pennsylvania Governor Thomas Penn worried that the newly founded St. Joseph's Church in Philadelphia would face closure as a result. However, the Quakers who made up Penn's provincial council were not worried and allowed the church to remain open.[23] Experiences in Maryland, however, offer a stark contrast. Father James Beadnall was arrested in 1756 in Talbot County, Maryland, for performing Mass in a private home despite the colonial legislature legalizing private Masses in 1707. More interesting, Father Beadnall was not incarcerated for breaking colonial law, but rather for breaking an English law that prohibited Catholic officiates from performing their duties.[24] For men who served in the Catholic volunteer regiment raised by General Howe, like Cornelius Leary, their experiences in Pennsylvania were ones of religious toleration. It was what they knew, and so it may have seemed better to them that Pennsylvania remained a British colony simply because they had no experience of religious intolerance.[25]

Examining the complicated history and culture of colonial Maryland reveals that what the American Revolution meant to its Catholic population and their ideals influenced the emergence of the American identity. Maryland Catholics were intimately familiar with the concept of a tyrannical government taking away liberty from the people, and so they were predisposed to becoming patriots when the Revolution arrived. However, their circumstances were not universal, as shown with Catholics in Pennsylvania. Regardless, the outbreak of the Revolution brought about a shift in the public perception of American Catholics. Being Catholic no longer meant one was guilty of popery and American Protestants had no problem utilizing the skills of their Catholic neighbors in service to independence. Prominent Catholics, like Charles Carroll, proved invaluable in helping to guide the future of the colony and the United States, especially to establish a country built on liberty and religious toleration.

Notes

[1] Farrelly, *Papist Patriots*, 241.
[2] Tentler, *American Catholics*, 47, 50.
[3] Farrelly, *Papist Patriots*, 223.
[4] Dulany, *Consideration on the Propriety of Imposing Taxes*, 34.
[5] Dickinson, *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*, 19.
[6] Farrelly, *Papist Patriots*, 222-225.
[7] Boucher, *A View of the Causes and Consequences of the American Revolution*, 241.
[8] Ibid., 243.
[9] Farrelly, *Papist Patriots*, 226-227.
[10] Ibid., 227-229.
[11] Ibid., 231-233.
[12] "The First Citizen to the Editor of the Dialogue Between Two Citizens."
[13] Farrelly, *Papist Patriots*, 233-234.
[14] Ibid., 240-241.
[15] "An Act Concerning Religion, 1649, April 21."
[16] "Charles Carroll of Carrollton on Religious Liberty," 131.
[17] "Why Charles Carroll of Carrollton Signed the Declaration of Independence," 27.
[18] Farrelly, *Papist Patriots*, 242-243.
[19] Ibid., 244-245.
[20] Ibid., 243-245.
[21] O'Leary, *An Address to the Common People of the Roman Catholic Religion,* 7.
[22] Ibid., 9.
[23] Farrelly, *Papist Patriots*, 244.
[24] Ibid., 214.
[25] Ibid., 245-246.

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