DANGER on the DOORSTEP

ANTI-CATHOLICISM AND AMERICAN PRINT CULTURE IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

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In January 1916, two opposing groups squared off in the U.S. District Courtroom in Joplin, Missouri. On one side of the room sat the defendants, members of the Menace Publishing Company who had waged a five-year journalistic war against America’s Roman Catholic hierarchy, proclaiming it “the greatest menace to our liberties and our civilization.” In the pages of their landmark newspaper The Menace, writers and editors called upon their hundreds of thousands of loyal readers to recognize, challenge, and attack the dangers posed by Catholic conspiracy and duplicity. On the opposite side of the room were their accusers, members of the U.S. District Attorney’s Office alongside high-ranking members of the Catholic fraternal organization, the Knights of Columbus, and heads of other prominent Catholic agencies. Wary that the paper’s resounding popularity might trigger long-standing anti-Catholic animosities, lay and clerical Catholic leaders had spent months scouring the pages of The Menace and similar periodicals, providing clippings for federal prosecutors to use as evidence.¹

This legal clash had been coming for some time. Catholic officials had attacked The Menace for years, arguing that its vituperative articles misrepresented Catholics’ true loyalty and patriotism. The real danger to national unity and American society, the plaintiffs believed, were not the nation’s Catholic parishioners, but their critics, who divided America with unfounded and bitter attacks. In effect, the adversaries on either side of

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the courtroom were engaged in two trials at once. At its most factual level, the case accused *The Menace* and its editors of violating federal law by printing lewd descriptions of priestly immorality in their exposés of Catholic confessional booths. Evoking the type of sexualized anti-Catholic rhetoric popular since the 1800s, *Menace* writers had insisted that priests posed suggestive and titillating questions to female penitents in order to seduce and humiliate innocent women and children within the confines of confessional booths (abuses that, anti-Catholic writers would also maintain, occurred in convents, rectories, and other Catholic circles with appalling regularity). On the legal merits of the case, anti-Catholics clearly won the day, as the paper was acquitted of all seven charges of sending obscene material through the mail, and the editors went on to print weekly diatribes against their accusers for several years.

But everyone in the room knew that the case wasn’t strictly about the minutia of “obscenity” charges, their ambiguity in federal law, or even the application of First Amendment freedoms (though this latter point was often evoked by the defendants). On a more crucial level, members of the *Menace* Publishing Company and their Catholic opponents were debating several fundamental issues: Which posed a greater danger to the American public—Catholicism, or its converse, anti-Catholicism? Was the Catholic Church in need of governmental protection, or did it simply manipulate the national government to squash opposition and serve its own sinister ends? What (if anything) could plaintiffs or defendants do to illustrate the sincerity of their convictions or the importance of their position? With these debates formulating the background of the Joplin trial, one thing was clear: in the minds (and weekly diatribes) of the anti-Catholic press, the wrong group was on trial—the real criminals, xenophobic writers loudly maintained, were the legions of foreign-minded priests intent on undermining the nation’s ideals.

Ultimately, though, the legal clash between Catholic apologists and anti-papal crusaders in 1916 was simply one facet of a more pervasive and drawn-out war during the years leading up to America’s entry into World War I and continuing until the dawn of the 1920s. For the most part, the battle between defenders and critics of American Catholicism was fought not in courtrooms, but in the pages of the burgeoning periodicals industry. Each side churned out dozens of publications and spilled oceans of ink to argue their position on one critical question: could Catholics be loyal Americans? Thus, despite their vindication in the Joplin trial, *Menace*
writers continued to face off against Catholic foes in the more important battle for readership in the arena of Americans’ own consciousness. And acquittal on the legal indictment did not translate into enduring national acceptance—shortly after winning their court case, *The Menace* faced financial burdens and a shrinking circulation base. By 1919, the paper, and dozens of anti-Catholic sheets like it, had ceased publication.

This book examines the enormous rise of anti-Catholic literature in the years leading up to, and immediately following, the Joplin trial, as well as the foundational issues and motivations that informed anti-Catholic writers and their “Romanist” opponents. As *The Menace* case illustrates, from 1910 to the end of World War I, American society witnessed a tremendous outpouring of books, pamphlets, journals, and, especially, newspapers espousing virulently anti-Catholic themes and calling on readers to emerge from their myopic state and recognize Catholicism’s danger to the American republic. Using the rhetoric of patriotic militarism, anti-Catholic writers, editors, and publishers lambasted their Romanist opponents as disloyal, backward-thinking, and intellectually stunted conspirators whose dedication to a corrupt priestly hierarchy rendered them unable to grasp or appreciate the tenets of American liberties and, thus, unworthy of national belonging or citizenship. During a decade in which Catholics themselves began to enumerate their significant sacrifices for and positive contributions toward the nation’s well-being, anti-Romanist writers scoffed at Catholic claims, branding their “papist” counterparts as naïve at best or, more often, incipient agents intent on dismantling America’s traditions and undermining the government itself.

Moreover, this book explores the critical overlap between anti-Catholicism and nationalism during the 1910s, demonstrating that an understanding of the former is incomplete if not rooted in the latter. In what follows, I argue that the anti-Catholic literature that enjoyed such a prominent place in the American cultural landscape in the early twentieth century derived its popularity by infusing the emerging themes of progressivism, masculinity, and nationalism, central to print culture immediately prior to and during World War I, within the broader framework of America’s long-standing anti-Catholic traditions. In several respects, the anti-Catholic statements of the early twentieth century were far from unique. Warnings of Catholic depravity, deception, and rebellion have found resonance within nearly every episode in American history—from the Colonial Era, through the antebellum years, and into the Gilded Age—although it was in
the Progressive Era that these voices received the broadest circulation and loudest pitch, with the largest and most powerful anti-Catholic newspapers reaching thousands, even millions, of American readers every week.

Despite references and similarities to earlier epochs, anti-Catholicism in the Progressive Era also embodied significant differences from its predecessors, particularly its exclusively rural character that sought to locate small-town values at the center of America’s democratic tradition and feared encroachment by Catholic agents emanating from distant cities. Alongside claims of unpatriotic Romanism, anti-Catholic print culture in the years surrounding World War I revealed a recognition of and abiding concern for fundamental changes confronting American society. Within the pages of anti-Catholic texts, Catholicism emerged as the manifestation and, to a large degree, scapegoat for the excesses of modernity—including rampant urbanization, political corruption, and the proliferation of “trusts” or illicit power conglomerates. Root out Catholic conspirators, dismantle priestly authority, expose the stockpiles of weapons and subversive literature, these journalists promised to readers, and the dangers of modern life would evaporate. Thus, anti-Catholic writers embody a paradox—employing metaphors, accusations, and symbols of Catholic corruption that resembled those of prior generations, but updating and revising these anti-Catholic clichés to resonate with a new, twentieth-century audience. This blending of familiar anti-Catholic diatribes with new accusations that speak directly to Progressive-Era concerns is what made anti-Catholic literature such a prevalent cultural force in the mid 1910s, and is the focus of the chapters that follow.

As I began to write this book, I was struck by two contemporary events that both captivated the popular media and reflected critical aspects of this project. The first was the growing sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church, which revealed dozens of cases of pedophilia that were kept out of the public eye by Catholic leaders and raised serious questions about priestly transgression, misconduct, and criminality. The second was the recent publication of the book *The Death of the West*, a scathing indictment of current demographic and cultural trends put forward by archconservative Pat Buchanan, bemoaning a perceived loss of “western” values and “civilization” in America. Hitting the talk-show circuit as his book hit the shelves, Buchanan called for such diverse policies as massive reductions in immigration, economic and political isolationism, new governmental incentives for higher marriage and birthrates, and improved his-
tory teaching—steps necessary, Buchanan argued, to counteract the effects of “un-American” immigrants from outside Western Europe, whose nonwhite, non-Christian culture threatens to supplant America’s “traditional” values.

These recent events underscore two central and interrelated themes critical to the study of early twentieth-century anti-Catholicism. First, both contemporary reporters and their Progressive-Era counterparts faced the alarming discovery (and its promulgation in public media) that Catholics constituted a threat to America’s safety because of misused clerical power, conspiratorial cover-ups, and attacks on the most vulnerable members of American society, particularly children. Second, Buchanan’s words demonstrate how an illiberal vision of American citizenship can seek to depict segments of the nation’s population as out of sync with American culture and traditions and, therefore, unfit for national belonging. Of course, ironies abound in these comparisons—anti-Catholicism in the 1910s, for instance, was generally the product of extensive exaggeration if not outright fabrication, while contemporary reports of priestly abuse seem frighteningly germane. And Buchanan’s remarks derive not from xenophobic anti-Catholicism, but from his own conservative Catholic beliefs. Such a comparison of contemporary and Progressive-Era media offers few direct parallels, but it does illustrate that the issues of Catholic authority and restrictive visions of nationalism were as central a century ago as they are today.

**Nationalism and Anti-Catholicism**

Although Roman Catholicism has been America’s single largest religious denomination for well over a century, critics have frequently and openly questioned whether it is possible to be both a devout Catholic and a loyal American—a compatibility question that church leaders have usually (though not always) attempted to answer in the affirmative. As the noted historian Charles Morris states, Catholicism in the United States has “always been defined by its prickly apartness from the broader, secular American culture—in America, usually enthusiastically for America, but never quite of America.” The questions of when and to what extent Catholics have experienced inclusion in American society (if, indeed, they ever have) have underscored most of the historiography of the American
Catholic Church—and dozens of texts in sociology, history, and literary criticism. While putting these often-debated questions to rest goes beyond the scope of this book, the gaps between what might be termed “mainstream” white Protestant America and Roman Catholicism, and attempts to lengthen or transcend them, are critical to an exploration of American xenophobia.

Before delving further into the conflicts between “Romanists” and their opponents, however, I want to draw attention to the arena in which the debates over Catholic inclusion were carried out—particularly theories of American nationalism. For well over a century, historians and other scholars have put forth explanations on the development, spread, and attraction of nationalism—most, though not all, indicating that nationalism emerged alongside modern phenomena of western capitalism and technological innovations, such as printing and industrialization. One of the most salient issues in modern nationalist theory has been how to chart patterns in nations’ development and differentiate criteria nations use to distinguish members of a particular nation from nonmembers. Toward this end, historians have attempted to construct a series of typologies of nationhood, which, despite key differences, indicate that national inclusion or exclusion hinges on either common ideological and institutional traits, shared hereditary (ethnic, racial, linguistic) attributes, or some combination thereof. Ernest Gellner, for instance, suggests that nations tend to identify members either by “cultural” or “voluntaristic” criteria (with the former based on shared ideas and associations and the latter rooted in meaning attached to “shared attributes” of language, geography, or heredity). Miroslav Hroch’s recent study of European nationalism reveals that national identity is rooted in a “collective consciousness” manifested in three “irreplaceable” ties that bind members of a nation together. Two of these—“memory” of some common past” and “a density of linguistic or cultural ties”—might stand in opposition to the third category, “a conception of the equity of all members of the group organized as a civil society.” The first two traits offer a restrictive vision of national membership, in which citizenship is limited to only those descendants of a certain genealogy or speakers of a certain language, while the third embraces all that share a common government and vision of equity.

Likewise, Rogers Brubaker’s study of national minorities presents a distinction between political affinity (citizens’ “legal citizenship”) and their “ethnonational affinity,” and it illustrates how these often conflicting loy-
alties can lead to tension, particularly in newly developing states. Perhaps the most articulate examination of this critical overlap between ethnic and civil strains of nation building is Liah Greenfeld’s influential study *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, which juxtaposes civic nationalism (wherein membership is based on attachments to shared political and legal institutions) against Europe’s more recent arrival, ethnic nationalism (in which membership is limited to a particular ethnic or racial group). Greenfeld’s work indicates that civic nationalism predominated in Britain and, later, the United States, where abundant internal distinctions precluded the restrictive rhetoric of ethnic nationalism, which would find adherents in Germany, central Europe, and elsewhere. Central to Greenfeld’s analysis is an explicit correlation linking inclusion and tolerance with “civic” images of nationalism on the one hand and xenophobia, intolerance, and restrictivism with “ethnic” forms of nationalism on the other. Michael Hechter’s recent volume *Containing Nationalism* echoes this typology—suggesting that scholars have taken pains to “distinguish the liberal, culturally inclusive (Sleeping Beauty) nationalisms characteristic of Western Europe from the illiberal, culturally exclusive (Frankenstein’s Monster) nationalism more often found elsewhere.”

Each of these typologies, at their most fundamental level, states that nationalism can be based on two features—how people look (their ethnic and racial features) or how people think (their civic or ideological similarities). Greenfeld maintains that the United States, among all western countries, went furthest to promote civic nationalism and demonstrates how America (along with France and Britain) modeled citizenship on common understandings of “liberty” as opposed to narrow definitions of race. Other scholars, however, are less convinced. As Eric Foner has pointed out, “Nationalism, in America at least, is the child of both of these beliefs. . . . American nationalism has long combined both civic and ethnic definitions. For most of our history, American citizenship has been defined by blood as well as political allegiance.” And as Rogers Smith’s study of citizenship law makes clear, America has exhibited not only conflicting civic and ethnic understandings of nationhood but differing degrees of tolerance and openness. For Smith, previous generations of scholars (particularly Louis Hartz, who saw American nationalism as the outgrowth of English liberal philosophy) have failed to take into account the influence of political philosophies that saw citizenship rooted in gender and hereditary factors (and occasionally other factors such as religion). These illiberal
voices, which Smith terms “inegalitarian ascriptive traditions of American-ism” clashed with broader, more fully democratic ones over the legal, political, and cultural questions of citizenship from the Revolution through the early twentieth century, with each side occasionally winning an upper hand, until the inegalitarian ascriptive forces began to coalesce and predominate in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.12

American nationalism has occupied a protean place on the two overlapping dichotomies most used by scholars—civic versus ethnic forms of nationalism on one hand and the often concomitant scales of liberal/democratic versus illiberal/inegalitarian ascriptive on the other. Since civic and liberal visions of nationalism often go hand in hand and ethnic and inegalitarian conceptions of citizenship likewise concur on scholarly typologies, twentieth-century anti-Catholicism, predicated on a staunchly exclusivist and inegalitarian scope of nationalism, seeking to deny membership to millions of citizens who, collectively, made up the country’s largest and most visible religious body, would therefore seem to follow an ethnic approach toward Catholic persecution. Under this logic, we should expect to see anti-Catholic writers using eugenicist or racially charged arguments to brand their opponents as physically or genealogically unfit for full citizenship. We would expect to see arguments for a “pure” Anglo-Saxon, Protestant vision of national belonging in which all “true” (i.e., racially pure) Americans shared similar ancestry (or at least appeared outwardly to do so) and that challenged Catholics on the basis of impure bloodlines, racial characteristics, or adherence to European languages.

Indeed, when I began my research on twentieth-century anti-Catholic literature, I anticipated finding these arguments, and scores of ethnic and racial caricatures, portraying Catholics as dangerous to America because their “mongrelized” racial stock put them at odds with Protestants, who were intent on presenting themselves and their nation as ethnically “pure.” Instead, what I found is that anti-Catholic writers virtually never refer to racial stereotypes or ethnic slurs and were remarkably reserved in criticizing Catholicism’s multilingual and multinational population. What writers were denouncing, however, was Catholics’ perceived inability to embrace American civic virtues—insisting that their adherence to priestly hierarchies made Catholics unable to accept American values of egalitarianism, individualism, and tolerance. This approach is extremely significant for a number of reasons. First, it illustrates a significant limitation in the prevailing typologies of nationalism, which generally equate
civic forms of nationalism with libertarianism, not xenophobia. While the
dichotomies put forth by Greenfeld, Foner, Smith, and others allow for
this form of “civic” xenophobia, it seems far more common for “ascriptive”
or illiberal advocates to take a racial or eugenic approach. Furth-
more, the ideological bent of the early twentieth century distinguishes
that generation’s anti-Catholicism from variations that prevailed prior and
since, which generally pursued an anti-immigrant, eugenicist, or racial-
purity agenda concomitant to their anti-Romanist crusade. In contrast,
writers during the 1910s were far more concerned with Catholics’ per-
ceived inability to comprehend American dogma and traditions and their
alleged threats to subvert civic institutions from within. Finally, the ideo-
logical and civic motives of anti-Catholic writers reveals a fundamental
irony in their approach: by questioning Catholics’ capacity to abide by
the American ethos of toleration, open-mindedness, and democracy, anti-
Catholic writers gave themselves license to abridge these values. In ex-
posing Catholics’ lack of open-mindedness, anti-Catholic writers were re-
markably intolerant; accusing Catholics citizens of threatening American
democracy, anti-Catholic writers truncated the boundaries of democracy
itself.

**The Anti-Catholic Genre**

With an eye toward elaborating on this historiography by ex-
amining an under-studied episode of anti-Catholic radicalism, this book
presents a textual and historical criticism of ten anti-Catholic newspapers
active from 1910 to 1919, all of which articulated nearly identical por-
trayals of the Roman Catholic Church and its membership. Wary that the
church had become more numerous, attained more political power, and
above all had begun to establish itself as a prominent, respectable, and
contributing aspect of American social life during the Gilded Age and Pro-
gressive Era, each of these anti-Catholic papers condemned the church
as hurtful and destructive to American civilization itself. These papers ex-
hibited significant differences in longevity, duration of their anti-Catholic
focus, and circulation. The smallest anti-Catholic printing enterprises had
a parochial and limited circulation, reaching less than two thousand nearby
subscribers, while more successful anti-Catholic sheets boasted national
circulations in the hundreds of thousands, vastly exceeding mainstream
newspapers more familiar to historians of the Progressive Era. By 1915, the most successful anti-Catholic newspaper of this decade, aptly named *The Menace*, boasted over 1.6 million weekly readers, a circulation three times greater than the largest daily papers in Chicago and New York City combined, while others lagged far behind. As I demonstrate in chapter 2, existing publication directories support the circulation figures reported in the most successful anti-Catholic periodicals. Anti-Catholic papers of the Progressive Era were strikingly similar in their location, content, rhetoric, and tone. Based in rural hamlets and small towns, predominantly in the Midwest and upper South, the anti-Catholic editors and writers who produced these sources looked to distant cities as the seat of Romanism’s power and the center of anti-American attitudes and threats. Anti-Romanist newspapers shared an inflammatory, even militaristic tone reflective of the “investigative” and exposé-minded journalists of the early twentieth century.

This Progressive-Era emphasis on uncovering destructive secrets and uprooting corruption was conveyed throughout anti-Catholic columns and in the publications’ titles themselves. Newspapers with names such as *The Peril, The Crusader, The Liberator,* and *The Menace* conjured images of anti-Catholic writers and editors as heroic defenders against sinister enemies. Not mere scribblers or paper pushers, writers who warned of impending Catholic attacks positioned themselves as courageous, masculine defenders of the nation’s precious institutions and vulnerable citizens, and they called on a galvanized “army” of determined readers to do the same. The mastheads and headlines of these papers—blaring messages such as “Roman Catholicism, the Deadliest Menace to Our Liberties and Our Civilization,” “Cry for Help from Convent Walls,” “Rome’s Inquisition at Work Again,” “Roman Catholic Designs on the American Nation,” and “Military Maneuvers Start” reveal significant fears by early twentieth-century writers that America was under attack—literally and figuratively—from Catholic forces, a claim that seems paranoiac and pushes the envelope of credibility for contemporary readers. Indeed, many of the sensationalized exposés of Catholic corruption that flooded the American literary landscape seem to have been complete fabrications, gross exaggerations, or deliberately skewed portrayals of Catholic activities and motivations. But as large circulation figures demonstrate, these claims also found credence with an American public relying on the power of information to make
sense of a changing world around them and willing to extend America’s legacy of anti-Catholic hostility well into the twentieth century.

Yet while several of the most prolific anti-Catholic papers had tremendous public appeal and staggering circulations during the mid 1910s, all prominently anti-Catholic periodicals of that decade rapidly disintegrated as the decade came to a close, abruptly suspending circulation or fading into obscurity by the dawn of the 1920s. In many respects, this rapid decline illustrates the effectiveness of Catholic mobilization, as clerical and lay spokespeople nationwide wrote rebuttals to anti-Catholic attacks, waged legal battles charging publishers with civil and criminal charges for defamatory remarks, generated large sums of money to counteract anti-Catholic propaganda, and wrote a torrent of letters to secular and even anti-Catholic papers themselves, vocally upholding Catholics’ loyalty to and prominent place within American society. However, anti-Catholicism’s rapid, albeit temporary, relegation to literary obscurity had more to do with developing wartime conditions than Catholic agitation. America’s entry into World War I increased paper and printing costs and, more importantly, shifted readers’ attention from internal Catholic threats to external tensions overseas. Following 1919, anti-Catholicism took a remarkably different direction, vested in the vigilante actions and pageantry of the Second Ku Klux Klan on one hand and, increasingly as the twentieth century wore on, in literary intellectuals on the other.

One of the most unfortunate commonalities among all Progressive-Era anti-Catholic newspapers is a frustrating lack of any extant business records or correspondence within or between papers. Since anti-Catholic newspapers quickly went out of business by the late 1910s or shortly thereafter, leaving behind no subscription lists, I’ve had to rely purely on some scattered published letters, nearly all of which were glowing endorsements of anti-Catholic journalists and their crusading efforts. Nevertheless, limited source material prevents me from following a “reader-response” approach to the study of Progressive-Era xenophobia in print culture or to draw firm conclusions about the locations, professions, or identities of subscribers who filled circulation rolls. Furthermore, available copies of anti-Catholic newspapers themselves fluctuate widely—ranging from several hundred extant copies of The Mountain Advocate, Watson’s Magazine, The Yellow Jacket, and others, to a few dozen issues of The Jeffersonian, The Crusader, and The Peril, and only a couple scattered issues of The Woman’s Witness, The

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Rail Splitter, or The Liberator. Over a dozen Progressive-Era anti-Catholic papers are completely lost from the historical record. For this reason, I’ve been forced, in some cases, to sketch patterns in anti-Catholic periodicals based on fragmented and imperfect documentary sources.

Another important caveat is that this book focuses on “anti-Catholicism” in its political, social, cultural, and literary manifestations and not on the theological arguments surrounding Catholic religiosity. The journalists who wrote anti-Catholic articles vehemently denied criticizing Catholicism’s “strictly religious” tenets; rather, they asserted that they were attacking the hierarchical, oligarchical, and politicized clerical structure that undermined America’s traditional ideals. In fact, while anti-Catholic publishers expressed proudly that their papers were well received by Protestant ministers throughout the nation, the rhetoric of anti-Catholic xenophobia was meant to appeal to readers as concerned citizens and patriotic Americans—not dyed-in-the-wool Protestants.

Danger on the Doorstep?

This book’s title plays on a double entendre that highlights the fierce debate between anti-Catholic writers, lecturers, and publishers on the one hand and Catholics and their supporters on the other. From anti-Romanists’ perspective, the “danger on the doorstep” through the early twentieth century was the growing presence, population, influence, and power of the American Catholic Church and its agents, parish priests, nuns, the Jesuit order, and individual Catholic parishioners themselves. Anti-Catholic writers and printers insisted that these sinister forces were infiltrating and corrupting American homes, particularly by threatening vulnerable women and children, and served as a hazard to the nation as a whole. Catholics countered that the “danger” appearing, quite literally, on America’s doorsteps was in fact anti-Catholic papers themselves. Such papers, Catholics contended, were dangerous because they divided Americans against each other, misrepresented Catholic loyalties, and poisoned readers with ignorance and unfounded slander.

At stake in this debate, which raged in newspapers and courtrooms until the 1920s, was whether Catholics had made sufficient contributions and sacrifices to American social development to be considered patriotic citizens or whether their activities were actually a conspiratorial plot to mask
their antipathy for American values and institutions. One of the most striking aspects of Progressive-Era anti-Catholic literature, repeated on an almost weekly basis, is its condemnation of Catholic historical figures (whom the church praised as patriotic role models) and the denunciation of Catholic charitable work, which anti-Catholics dismissed as merely a front for child slavery. “Sham” charity and insincere patriotism, asserted Catholic opponents, siphoned money out of the public treasury and into papal coffers and, worse yet, duped Americans into believing that Romanists were a benign, even beneficial force in daily life. Not coincidentally, the intense outburst of anti-Catholic hostility that emerged in the 1910s coincided with Catholics’ earliest concerted attempts to assert and demonstrate full membership in American society—a process that continued unevenly through the late twentieth century.

Denying and denouncing Catholics’ overt claims to national belonging became one of the primary goals of anti-papal writers in the early twentieth century, a task they carried out with an intensity that would have been unnecessary and irrelevant in previous manifestations of American anti-Catholicism. Because they argued that Catholic historical figures had helped secure America’s progress in the past and that selfless charity allowed Catholic lay and clerical workers to contribute to its well-being in the present, Catholics were viewed as infringing on what their opponents considered critical ideological territory. In some respects, this makes anti-Catholics’ newspapers appear as if their priorities are out of sync, since some papers dedicated more attention to seemingly trivial issues—such as Catholic celebrations of Columbus Day—than more severe issues such as a priest’s cold-blooded murder of his illicit lover, accounts of torture in convents, or the Knights of Columbus’s immanent overthrow of the American government itself.

In what follows I attempt to explore this contested ground of national respectability, outlining the efforts Catholics took to secure it, and the arguments their opponents made to keep the mantle of full citizenship at arm’s length from their foes. In chapter 1 I delve into competing understandings of nativism to explore the historiographical debates surrounding this term and position Progressive-Era anti-Catholicism within the long tradition of American anti-Romanism. While early twentieth-century forms of anti-Catholicism borrowed heavily from their antecedents, I argue that Progressive-Era xenophobia was unique in its reliance on civic or ideological forms of nationalism to motivate its anti-Romanist agenda. Anti-Catholic
print culture of this era was steeped in the language and symbolism of a glorified American past and conjured a pantheon of historical figures to represent and demonstrate its commitment toward American loyalty and patriotism. I develop these connections with prominent historical figures and explore how anti-Catholic writers not only focused on the nation’s founders to substantiate their own movement but consistently undermined Catholic efforts to do the same. While Catholic leaders pointed to Christopher Columbus, Commodore John Barry, and other figures in America’s historical development as proof of Catholicism’s compatibility with American values and dedication to the American nation, their opponents sneered, attempting to demonstrate that these figures were either disreputable and insincerely patriotic or not Catholic at all.

The second chapter explores the distinct rural character of early twentieth-century anti-Catholicism, which likewise distanced it from its predecessors. While previous episodes of American anti-Catholic agitation grew out of urban environments, in which nativists frequently encountered their Catholic foes, Progressive-Era anti-Romanism emerged from predominantly rural areas with negligible Catholic populations. As outposts in America’s rural heartland, anti-Catholic writers could freely expound on the dangers of Catholicism, while newspapers in America’s urban centers, anti-Catholic writers maintained, had been corrupted by Catholic populations and an oppressive Church hierarchy, making mainstream newspapers unable or unwilling to speak the “truth” about papist corruption. As Robert Wiebe illustrates in his landmark study The Search for Order, the decade leading up to the U.S. entry into World War I marked the end of a transition of power away from America’s relatively isolated small towns (or so-called island communities) to bureaucratized, industrialized urban centers. Much of the anti-Catholic literature of the 1910s can be seen as a belated response to this shift, as journalists reacted to the marginalization of small-town communities and lashed out at the power of urban influence.

Moreover, this chapter positions anti-Catholic literature within the broader context of Progressive-Era investigative or so-called muckraking journalism, arguing that anti-Catholic journalists demonstrated the same exposé style and the same faith in the power of information to rectify social ills that characterize more familiar Progressive-Era writers. Despite its crusading rhetoric of reform, historians have frequently shown that progressivism was a somewhat conservative movement that attempted to mol-
lify more radical reforms while pursuing an agenda that entrenched the status quo, albeit in a slightly altered form. Like other Progressive-Era writers, anti-Catholic journalists sought to use an agenda of reform to assert and galvanize their own influence, control and moderate the explosive changes surrounding them, and counteract the most egregious aspects of modern life. Setting anti-Catholic literature within this context suggests that the papers emanating from rural towns in the 1910s saw Catholics as emblematic of and even responsible for the decline of small-town American life, as well as the prestige and influence of anti-Catholic editors and the communities they hoped to lead.

In chapter 3 I explore how anti-Romanists rebutted Catholic philanthropic and charitable efforts. Though initially lagging behind their Protestant counterparts, Catholic benevolent associations blossomed in the early twentieth century, prompting a flood of challenges alleging that this “sham” charity deluded an ignorant public into accepting Catholic advances. Rather than accepting their opponents’ claims that they were contributing to the nation’s public welfare, anti-Catholic writers asserted that their enemies targeted the “weakest” members of society—women, the elderly, the sick, the insane, and children—for graft, corruption, and violence, urging male readers to wage a crusade against the defilers of innocence and American virtue. Arguing that their Catholic opponents were unmasculine and uncharitable, nativist writers could, in turn, label Catholics as enemies of the nation’s common good and exclude them from the ranks of respectable citizenship. Conversely, nativist journalists depicted their own movement as thoroughly masculine—and invested their papers and their subscription drives with a militaristic flair, insisting that anti-Catholicism both protected women and femininity and provided an outlet for expressions of manly responsibility and duty.

Taken together, these three initial chapters attempt to explain the dramatic rise of anti-Catholic print culture in the 1910s by illustrating how xenophobic texts tapped into several of the decade’s most salient themes—the rise of patriotism, Americana, and public memory; progressivism and anxieties surrounding encroaching modernity; and fluctuating masculine gender conventions. Anti-Catholic texts proved popular in the 1910s because their writers both evoked traditional anti-Catholic tropes that had a proven track record of notoriety and financial success and used these popular tropes to address pressing social and cultural concerns in the early twentieth century. At the height of the anti-Romanist movement,
American readers purchased over two million anti-Catholic periodicals every week. Much of this circulation, I argue, stems from anti-Catholicism’s ability to fuse several prominent but divergent cultural streams into a single text.

Chapter 4 takes a somewhat different tact, focusing on Catholics’ vigorous and highly organized counterresponse to journalistic attacks in the 1910s, ranging from lawsuits and indictments to widespread public relations campaigns in parochial and popular media. Just as anti-Catholic writers addressed themes of nationalism, masculinity, and progressivism in mounting attacks against Romanists’ opponents, Catholics and their supporters relied on remarkably similar tropes in challenging the anti-Catholic agenda. As anti-Catholic periodicals became increasingly popular and vocal, clerical and lay leaders within the American church developed a series of strategies and bankrolled an extraordinarily expensive campaign to combat their opponents’ efforts, leading to the establishment of a Committee on Religious Prejudices by the Knights of Columbus in 1914. Ironically, the chief weapon used in this counterresponse was a thorough exegesis of anti-Catholic newspapers themselves, which anti-defamation leaders within the church combed for inconsistencies, inaccuracies, and misinformation. This allowed Catholics both to discredit their opponents in print and to wage successful legal battles to enforce criminal penalties and punitive damages on rival journalists. Anti-Catholic writers, however, adopted the same tactics, scouring parochial papers for evidence of Romanists’ wrongdoing and using information gleaned from Catholic texts to bolster their legal defense. The war of words carried out by Catholic writers and their opponents hinged on circular and almost paranoiac readings of rivals’ texts, using opponents’ words against them in courtroom and propaganda battles that waged throughout the 1910s.

While these battles stunted the growth of some of the largest anti-Catholic newspapers, America’s involvement in World War I signaled a rapid though temporary decline in anti-Catholicism’s authoritative voice in American print culture. While Catholics pointed to wartime service and sacrifice as illustrations of national belonging and sincere patriotism, chapter 5 concludes the project by describing journalistic efforts to denounce these claims. Anti-Catholics insisted that their opponents served as spies for enemy forces, sabotaged wartime operations, and formed a mysterious fifth column, seeking to overthrow the American government while the nation was distracted by campaigns overseas. The unraveling of anti-
Catholic print literature by the decade’s end and the growing public presence of American Catholicism as the twentieth century wore on suggest that Catholic claims to national belonging and full citizenship had trumped opponents’ assertions of conspiracy. Yet Catholic progress toward full national acceptance did not proceed unchecked, as revivals of anti-Catholic print culture continued to gain in popularity, as evidenced by the persistence of anti-Catholic thought by such prominent twentieth-century intellectuals as John Dewey and the tremendous success of writers like Paul Blanshard, who continued to rail against the encroachment of “Catholic Power” and its attacks on American democracy well into the Cold War era, a topic I address at the close of chapter 5.17

Nativists’ persistent and ongoing efforts to denounce and discredit Catholics’ Americanism, along with contrary claims to Catholics’ patriotism and loyalty, demonstrate an aspect of what sociologist Benedict Anderson has termed “imagined communities,” in which national identity is based less on geographic residency than shared ideologies and myths disseminated through print culture. Anderson’s understanding of nationalism fits well into studies of cultural or religious conflict, as he demonstrates that the advent of widespread literacy and vernacular printing sparked the spread of anti-clericalism in Reformation Europe.18 But Anderson’s theory of nationalism is perhaps most important in suggesting that nationalisms are inherently subjective and malleable phenomena that are continually contested and reinvented. The “imagined” and subjective nature of nationalism allows for divergent, even competing explanations of who belongs to a nation and deserves the enfranchisement, rights, or status awarded to citizens. Critics have contended that Anderson’s definition of nationalism is far too broad, but for my purposes, its generality is critical, illustrating how various factions of early twentieth-century Americans could imagine their country in vastly divergent—even contradictory—forms.19

Twentieth-century claims of Catholic subversion, immorality, and danger to the nation can thus be understood as illustrating an “imagined” community of rural Anglo-Saxon Protestants valiantly defending the nation from threats by an internal, foreign, and sinister force invading American cities. Romanist attempts to win the American public’s support and respect were extremely dangerous because they threatened this idyllic imagined depiction of American nationalism. Yet Catholics and their supporters likewise held a vision of America, one in which loyal, hard-working,
and patriotic citizens had contributed to American progress only to be attacked by ignorant and vicious opponents. Wartime sacrifice, philanthropic service, and the actions of historical figures became invested with heightened meaning through their attempts to support this imagined representation of national belonging. Exploring these competing understandings, or imagined representations, of Americanism and their corresponding influence on American print culture and social views will form the foundation of my successive chapters.