

ISAAC HECKER: AMERICAN CATHOLIC REVIVALIST & TRIUMPHALIST

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Introduction

Today, Roman Catholicism represents the largest religious body in the United States, when calculated by reported adherents. In 2010, there were nearly 60 million self-identified Roman Catholics in the nation.¹ This is three times the size of the Southern Baptists, the next largest group with about 20 million. American Catholicism has a unique character born of a unique history.

The first Roman Catholics in America were English, and they were fleeing the persecution and suppression they experienced as recusants in Britain. The granting of religious freedom in the United States after the American Revolution was a boon to Catholics, who migrated in greater numbers. The Catholic population grew from about 25,000 in 1789, to 160,000 in 1820, concentrated in and around Baltimore, Maryland.² Between 1830 and 1860, American Roman Catholicism took off, with the denomination swelling to somewhere between 1.5 and 3.1 million adherents, living mostly in the large cities. Catholicism became the nation's largest Christian denomination.³

Although some of this growth can be attributed to immigrants from Europe, especially Ireland, most of the immigrants were only nominally Catholic. American priests lamented the irreligious ways of these immigrants when they arrived. The surge in fervent Catholicism was due not to immigration but to the efforts of a generation of American converts who abandoned their parents' Protestant beliefs and embraced the Roman rites. Although founded in the missionary efforts from continental Europe, this new generation of American Catholics brought the new nation's vigor and attitude to the institution of the Church.

Catholic revivalists took to the streets of the largest city in the United States, New York. There, a small group of devout, American-born, and sometimes radical Catholic evangelists

¹ Association of Statistics of American Religious Bodies, "U.S. Religious Census 1952 to 2010," <http://rcms2010.org>.

² Jay P. Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14.

³ Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism*, 58.

brought their New World sensibilities to bear on the populace. At least initially trained in Europe, they formed their own mission fraternity, the Paulist Fathers, and they developed uniquely American approaches to their work. At their head was their founder, the somewhat paradoxically traditionalist and innovative thinker Isaac Thomas Hecker.

Hecker's philosophy of ministry fully embraced American revivalism with its fiery preaching, mobile meetings, calls to action. To this he adapted an anti-transcendentalist ontologism which he fused with Roman Catholic tradition. Catholicism is not often associated with innovative, pragmatic approaches to ministry, but American Catholics like Hecker made advances that were, despite attempts to stifle them, later adopted by the Church in the Second Vatican Council, almost a century after Hecker's death because they became integral to Catholic evangelistic efforts.

Biographical Sketch

Early Life

Isaac Thomas Hecker was the son of Lutheran immigrants. He was born in New York City on December 18, 1819. While he was little, his mother converted to Methodism. Although receiving only a basic education and going to work while relatively young, Isaac was an inquisitive young man who became engaged in both religion and politics. In his early adult years, he embraced teachings of Orestes Brownson, a mystical spiritualism who made a living as a traveling lecturer.⁴ His association with Brownson took him down a path of spiritual discovery that lasted for most of his late teens and early twenties.

At the age of twenty-one, Isaac began to have mystical experiences which he faithfully recorded in his journals and eventually discussed with Brownson. In Boston in 1842, Brownson encouraged him to pursue his mystical experiences and join the transcendental commune at Brook Farm, which was under the leadership of George Ripley.⁵ During his short time at Brook Farm and another more ascetic commune called Fruitlands, Hecker experienced even more intense visions. He both relished and feared these experiences, eventually becoming convinced that his experiences were a guiding spirit, which he later came to understand as the Holy Spirit of Scripture.⁶

Journey Toward Catholicism

The 1840's were a time of spiritual exploration in America. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, the Transcendental Club counted a number of influential and intelligent men including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Frederic Henry Hedge. Hecker fairly devoured the writings of both prominent and

⁴ Isaac Thomas Hecker, "Dr. Brownson in Boston," *Catholic World* 45, no. 268 (July 1887): 466.

⁵ Henry D. Sedgwick, *Father Hecker* (Boston, MA: Small, Maynard & Company, 1900), 10–11.

⁶ Isaac Thomas Hecker, *Questions of the Soul* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1855), 73.

less known transcendentalists, especially during his time at Brook Farms and Fruitlands; but in the end, he found them wanting.⁷ It was the individuality of the movement that he found troubling. As Charles Ellis expressed it, “So with our sense of right or beauty, which we feel within us as soon as anything right or beautiful is presented to the organ which God has given us to perceive these.”⁸

This was, to Hecker, unchecked individuality. The movement had only the broadest principles of inner spirituality. With the individual as the ultimate arbiter of spiritual good, what was to prevent someone from pursuing self-centered forms of “spirituality” and others being unable to question them. Hecker desired some kind of faith community which could provide balance.

He longed for what Brownson called, “the Church of the Future.” Brownson envisioned a Church supernaturally formed by those who through transcendentalism discovered universal truth. They would be drawn to each other and would therefore confirm and correct one another. “All men will by this become sacred; each man will be a living shrine of the Godhead, a visible, speaking, loving image of the Father.”⁹

Hecker struck up a correspondence with Brownson. Since Brownson was sixteen years older, he initially served as mentor while Hecker was the eager student. Eventually, this became a friendship they both treasured. They explored this idea of the Church, something idealized and perfect which they did not readily observe in the Protestant traditions of their day.

Connecting his visions with his Christian training, Hecker became convinced that the Spirit of God worked through the Church as the only authoritative medium. He became determined to discover the “true Church” and to receive ministerial training as a part of it. He and Brownson discussed the question of the true Church at some length, but no tradition seemed to satisfy what Hecker would later call, “the deep wants of man’s heart.”¹⁰

In 1843, Hecker attended a Catholic mass for the first time. He wrote in his diary that day, “the Catholic Church alone seems to satisfy my wants, my faith, life, soul...my soul is Catholic.”¹¹ That same year, Brownson wrote to his young friend, “I will enter the Roman Catholic Church, if she will have me.” He encouraged his young friend to make the same step. Both men were baptized into the Roman Catholic Church within a year of each other.

⁷ John Farina, “The Uses of the Early Diary of Isaac Hecker,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 3, no. 4 (Spring 1984): 284–85.

⁸ Charles M. Ellis, *An Essay on Transcendentalism* (Boston, MA: Crocker and Ruggles, 1842), 22.

⁹ Henry F. Brownson, ed. *The Works of Orestes A. Brownson, Collected and Arranged* (Detroit, MI: Thorndike, Nourse Publishers, 1883), 4:65.

¹⁰ Hecker, *Questions of the Soul*, 128.

¹¹ Sedwick, *Father Hecker*, 24.

Ordination as a Priest

In the early 19th century, German Catholics came to America in the first wave of immigration from European Catholic regions. They largely headed to the rural areas of the nation, maintaining their own simple Catholic faith in relative isolation. At the time of Hecker's conversion, another wave of Catholic immigrants was coming ashore, but these Irish Catholics were flooding into the cities. They were driven to America by tragic famines in 1801, 1817–19, 1822, and 1831.¹² Then the decade long Great Irish Famine hit in the 1840's. Over half of the total immigration into the United States during this time was from Ireland.¹³ All told, fifty million European immigrants, both Catholics and Protestants, immigrated to the United States in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁴ This trend would continue well into the twentieth century.

The American churches struggled to deal with them. By 1844, New York alone had over 80,000 Roman Catholic adherents but only seventy priests, mostly inadequately prepared for the demands of their swollen parishes.

- Priests trained in Europe were not equal to the task of leading American parishes. For one thing, these parishes had to be self-sufficient. In Europe, the parishes were financed through involuntary taxation. The United States' First Amendment to the Constitution had disestablished all state support of religion.¹⁵
- Many parishioners were nominal Catholics. They were not dependent upon the church and priests trained on the Continent simply were not equipped to deal with what was emerging in America. The assumption at the time was that the people needed the Church more than the Church needed the people. The Church did not even have a definition of the laity. The European priests had no grasp of the sensibilities of these immigrants in the New World.

This work required native-born priests, and Hecker was the ideal candidate. Having already sought a ministerial education, it was only logical to his Catholic confessors that Hecker seek ordination as a priest. At first, Hecker was resistant to the idea because he did not feel called to the ministry. This changed in 1845 when he met a member of the Congregation of the Holy Redeemer, or the Redemptorists as they were known.¹⁶ The Redemptorists were attractive to Hecker with his mysticism and education. They were a relatively new, vibrant missionary agency founded in 1732. Their passion for the faith mirrored his own.

¹² Patrick J. Fitzpatrick and Brian Lambkin, *Migration in Irish History, 1607–2007* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 158–60.

¹³ Edward Wakin and Joseph F. Sheuer, *The De-Romanization of the American Catholic Church* (New York: New American Library, 1966), 26–28.

¹⁴ Fitzpatrick and Lambkin, *Migration in Irish History*, 182.

¹⁵ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Church of America, 1776–1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 116.

¹⁶ Sedgwick, *Father Hecker*, 50–51.

In July 1845, Hecker went to Europe for training. There his mysticism was a bit of a challenge for his teachers, who found Hecker and the two other American novices to be quite different from their European counterparts. In the end, Hecker's passion won his teachers over.¹⁷ Hecker later recounted the experience: "After about nine or ten months he [the novice master] appeared to recognize the hand of God in my direction in a special manner."¹⁸ He was initiated into the Redemptorists in 1846, ordained a priest in 1849, and returned to his native land in spring of 1851 to begin mission work in Greenwich Village, New York.

The Paulist Fathers

Hecker arrived in the midst of a resurgence of interest in Catholicism. Prominent British Protestant clergymen such as John Henry Neuman and Levi S. Ives had converted to Catholicism.¹⁹ In the United States, Brownson's conversion was almost as widely publicized. Public opinion was softening toward Catholicism. In 1844, when they were discussing conversion, Hecker had expressed concerns to Brownson that Catholicism was "the most despised."²⁰ Just a little more than a decade later, Brownson wrote to Hecker, "the dispositions of the American people are much less unfavorable to the Church than is generally supposed."²¹ Hecker, now a Redemptorist preacher, took the message to the people in the pews and the streets. Rather than railing on the errors of the opposition, he preached a single, united Church. This appealed to nominal Catholics and lapsed Protestants.

Unfortunately, the people were more willing to listen to him than the leadership of his own order. His vision was too vast for the Redemptorists. In the winter of 1857, he traveled to Rome to resolve some disputes between the Redemptorists and the local bishops. The Redemptorists expelled him from their order *in absentia*, throwing his entire mission to Rome in turmoil. Hearing of his expulsion while he was in Rome, Hecker proposed that the pope release him from his Redemptorist vows to form a new community. Pope Pius IX was a strong advocate of papal authority, but he was dealing with losses in power as liberalism and modernism began to take hold in Europe.²² On March 5, 1858, the Holy See authorized the formation of this new community – the first American missionary community.²³

The new community was formerly called the Congregation of Missionary Priests of Saint Paul the Apostle. The missionaries soon became known as simply the Paulist Fathers. Hecker

¹⁷ Sedgwick, *Father Hecker*, 53–54.

¹⁸ Walter Elliott, *The Life of Father Hecker*, 4th ed. (New York: The Columbia Press, 1898), 209.

¹⁹ Dolan, *Catholic Revivalism*, 34–35.

²⁰ Glen M. Johnson, "Ralph Waldo Emerson on Isaac Hecker: A Manuscript with Commentary," *The Catholic Historical Review* 79, no. 1 (January 1993): 56.

²¹ Orestes Brownson to Isaac Hecker, New York, August 5, 1857, quoted in Jay P. Dolan, *Catholic Revivalism: The American Experience 1830–1900* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 34.

²² This would reach its nadir in 1870, when he lost control of the Papal States.

²³ Elliott, *The Life of Father Hecker*, 280.

and the Paulists were interested in appealing to lapsed Protestants, making converts by striving to “win the allegiance of free and aspiring spirits.”²⁴ To put it simply, they were Catholic evangelists. Working almost exclusively in New York City for their first three years, they obtained land and constructed a church which they dubbed St. Paul’s. In their first decade, they had become a significant force in New York City, and they expanded into publishing. The Paulists became and still are the most prolific Catholic publishers in the country.²⁵

Unlike other Catholic missionaries, Hecker recognized the value of the popular American innovation of lecture circuit. The Paulists spread out across the nation, speaking to gathered crowds who shared their views on vice, particularly drunkenness and saloons. “Non-Catholics of all classes were drawn to hear the convert missionaries, and the exercises usually received flattering notices from the secular press.”²⁶

Hecker spoke extemporaneously and dynamically. He was charismatic and intelligent. Asked why he preached for the conversion of Protestants, he remarked, “I am a Catholic, and I know that I am right. I can prove that I am right. What more do I want than this, and honest men and women who will listen to me?”²⁷ His own story of conversion made an impression on young men and women who had been raised in Protestantism but had become either disinterested or disillusioned, and the Church seemed to offer a connection they felt was missing.²⁸

The First Vatican Council

Upon hearing that a new church council would assemble at the Vatican in 1868, Hecker determined to go. He believed he could share the vibrant American Catholicism the Paulists were encouraging and it would be a help to the somewhat troubled European Church which was going through upheaval thanks to the nationalism that was dividing the continent. The European Church was on the defensive while the American Church was winning victory after victory.²⁹ Eventually, he won a place in the American delegation.

On his way to Rome, Hecker stopped in England to meet with Richard Simpson, whom he had met years before while ministering in England as a Redemptorist. Simpson, along with a number of other thinkers like Lord John Acton and the German historian Ignaz von Döllinger, were concerned that the ultramontanist majority might dominate the council. The ultramontanists did not see the growing Church outside of Europe as a priority. They wished to

²⁴ Elliott, *The Life of Father Hecker*, 285–87.

²⁵ Wakin and Scheuer, *The De-Romanization of the American Catholic Church*, 152.

²⁶ Elliott, *The Life of Father Hecker*, 327.

²⁷ Elliott, *The Life of Father Hecker*, 334.

²⁸ Lincoln A. Mullen, “The Contours of Conversion to Catholicism in the Nineteenth Century,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 32.2 (2014): 8–9.

²⁹ Lawrence V. McDonnell, “Walter Elliott and the Hecker Tradition in the Americanist Era,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 3.2 (1983): 130.

keep the Church's focus, and financial interests, in Italy. To this end, they had been pushing papal infallibility as a way of centralizing power in the Curia. Hecker, perhaps naively, believed that such a movement would be defeated. He joined with Simpson and his faction in the opposition of the ultramontanists.³⁰

Leaving Simpson, Hecker journeyed to Rome where he joined the American delegation. He tried to mediate the situation, but within weeks, Hecker was writing to Simpson that it was inevitable that the council would endorse the feared declaration.³¹ He worked hard to prevent it, and for a time, the council did not address the matter. The narrow-minded, ideological focus of the continental Europeans troubled Hecker. His beloved Church was moving retrograde, and he began to develop a sense that this was an indication of a shift in the center of the Church. Increasingly, he became convinced that America was destined to be the new center of the Roman Catholic Church, just as the center had once shifted from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Romans and then to the Franks.³² Disillusioned, he left Rome in April, 1870, returning to New York in June, after nearly two years away.

Once he returned to the United States, Hecker radically changed the thrust of his ministry. Years before, he had believed that the "Future Church" would emerge from individuals moved by God to the same beliefs and goals. Now, this vision became fixed on the American Roman Catholic Church. Americans, the greatest people in the world in his estimation, would inevitably conclude that the Catholic Church was the one true faith. They would therefore emerge as the new center of the Church, replacing the decaying European hierarchy. He devoted the remaining two decades of his life to this goal. He wrote, "the dogmatic definition of the Vatican Council is therefore the axis on which turn the new course of the Church, the renewal of religion, and the entire restoration of society."³³

Closing Chapters of His Life

In many ways, 1868–1870 was the height of Hecker's life and ministry. By 1871, he began to suffer from major headaches that had no explanation or cure.³⁴ He spent a great deal of time traveling, seeking some relief for increasingly difficult physical times. He continued to write and work as he could, but it was a dark time for him. He struggled along. "Death invited, alas will not come! What a relief it would be from a continuous and prolonged death!"³⁵

³⁰ William S. Portier, "Isaac Hecker and the First Vatican Council," *The Catholic Historical Review* 71 (1985): 209–10.

³¹ Portier, "Isaac Hecker and the First Vatican Council," 214.

³² Portier, "Isaac Hecker and the First Vatican Council," 220–21.

³³ Isaac Thomas Hecker, *The Church and the Age: An Exposition of the Catholic Church in View of the Needs and Aspirations of the Present Age* (New York: Office of the Catholic World, 1887), 29.

³⁴ Elliott, *The Life of Father Hecker*, 371.

³⁵ Elliott, *The Life of Father Hecker*, 377.

He was in Rome again in 1875 when Archbishop McCloskey was created the first American cardinal, but his travels in Europe convinced him more assuredly that the hope of the Church was the United States. That winter, he penned *An Exposition of the Church in View of Recent Difficulties and Controversies in the Present Needs of the Age* which was ultimately combined with several of his other major works and published as *The Church and the Age* in 1887. This brief document summarized both his conviction of the authority of the Roman Catholic Church and the need for the United States to be converted as the new center. His maladies made Hecker increasingly feeble and on December 20, he died. Walter Elliott summarized his life this way:

The life of Father Hecker is a strong invitation to the men of these times to become followers of God the Holy Ghost, to fit their souls by prayer and penance in union with Christ and his Church, for the consecration of liberty and intelligence to the elevation of the human race to union with God...As God guides His Church to seek her Apostolate mainly in developing man's aspirations for better things into the fullness of Catholic truth and virtue, Isaac Hecker will be found to have taught the principles and given methods which will most surely lead to success.³⁶

Triumphalism Begets Americanism

By the end of his life, Father Hecker was advocating a truly American, triumphalist approach to Roman Catholicism. The Church had been invigorated through the application of American revivalism.³⁷ As such, the American Church had a unique character. He embraced a peculiar iteration of the Catholic Church which became the foundation for Catholicism in the United States for quite some time and has seen a resurgence in Catholic thought in more recent years.³⁸

The Church as the Spiritual Authority

Although in his youth, Hecker was enamored with transcendentalism, once he converted to Catholicism, Hecker rejected it as meaningless pursuit of experience. Instead, he wrote, "The end and ground of all seeking is God, and the soul finds no rest till it finds God."³⁹ The religious quest for a better or more spiritual experience which characterized the America Hecker lived in was void.⁴⁰ Their quest for spiritual reality was real, but their method was wrong. Hecker substituted in the place of such a pursuits a modified form of Brownson's ontologism.⁴¹ He held that the thought of God would lead one to the one true God, the true object of longing.

³⁶ Elliott, *The Life of Father Hecker*, 420–21.

³⁷ Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 122–23.

³⁸ William S. Portier, "Inculturation as Transformation: The Case of Americanism Revisited," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 11.3 (1993): 110–11.

³⁹ Hecker, *Questions of the Soul*, 28.

⁴⁰ Hecker, *Questions of the Soul*, 55–57.

⁴¹ Patrick W. Carey, "Ontologism in American Catholic Thought," *Revue d'Histoire Ecclesiastique* 91 (1996): 838–39.

Therefore, transcendentalism was a frustrated anthropocentrism masquerading as the divine whereas the truly diligent searcher would see God, the true object, and thereby be drawn into community and unity rather individuality.⁴² It is therefore no surprise that Hecker concluded that Protestantism, which had been led by individual dissent against the organized Church, was “private judgment” and therefore invalid.⁴³

God could be known through individual spiritual practices, but Hecker believed these must be tempered. He was deeply convicted that Christ must be revealed in the present. He wrote, “If Christ is to be to us a Saviour, we must find him here; otherwise he is no Christ, no Saviour, no Immanuel, no ‘God with us’.”⁴⁴ True spirituality could be found only in the Church. The function of the Church must be authoritarian and unerring.

If Christ has failed to establish a Church which is adequate to meet all these wants of the soul, then Christ has failed as the Saviour of mankind, and we look forward to the redemption of man, to “The new Teacher,” “The Church of the Future,” or by all that in us lies, we will, “Out of our own Bosom this lost world restore.”⁴⁵

Hecker’s conclusion was plain. Protestantism argued that the Church had failed in its divinely appointed task. If the Church had failed, then Christ had failed. This was simply unacceptable to him, and so Hecker argued that the Roman Catholic Church must be held to be the unfailing Church.

Protestantism and the Composition of the Church

Hecker saw the divisions in Protestantism as further evidence of this. The underlying motivation for Protestantism was questionable in his mind. He composed several arguments against the core Protestant concept of *sola scriptura*. These, in his opinion, validated his rejection of Protestantism in favor of a single Church.

First, he argued that not all men can read, therefore the argument that access to the Scriptures was required for salvation meant a large number would be barred from salvation. Second, the Protestant canon of the Bible is itself decided not by God but by man, which accounts for the exclusion of books the Catholics accepted as inspired. Third, the development of sectarianism within Protestantism was based on “private judgment” and he postulated that if one accepts Martin Luther and other Protestant interpreters, one must continue to accept new theses and variations which would ultimately result in anarchy, something that was incompatible with his belief that Christ’s Church cannot fail.⁴⁶

⁴² Johnson, “Ralph Waldo Emerson on Isaac Hecker,” 57.

⁴³ Hecker, *Questions of the Soul*, 129.

⁴⁴ Hecker, *Questions of the Soul*, 110–11.

⁴⁵ Hecker, *Questions of the Soul*, 125–26.

⁴⁶ Hecker, *The Church and the Age*, 234–46.

Hecker concluded that there must be one Church, not constituted by Christians themselves, as Protestant ecclesiology argued, but rather established by Christ. “Christ alone is the inward reality of the Church, of her sacraments, of her discipline, of her worship, and the Church exists solely for her inward reality – Christ.”⁴⁷ It must have him as its sole authority, and that authority must be maintained in a hierarchy as a safeguard against anarchy. In 1844 just after his conversion, Hecker definitively stated, “Protestantism is no more nor less than a denial of God’s promises.”⁴⁸

The Authority of the Church as a Whole

How could this reconcile with Hecker’s American, democratic leanings? In his mind, the Church was instituted by Christ in the hearts of each believer. It was not imposed from above, but rather realized from below. He could view his loyalty to the Church and the pope as absolute and yet hold that the pope, just like any man, could be fallible. The Spirit only spoke through the pope when the pope spoke in unity with the Church. In this way, he foreshadowed the decisions of the Second Vatican Council which concluded this same point.⁴⁹

It was a curiously American formulation, but as Sandra Mize pointed out in her analysis of American views of the pope, Hecker and other American Catholic thinkers “used an admixture of historical facts and triumphalist assertions to make the acceptance of the traditional formulations of papal authority credible within the American context.”⁵⁰

This credibility came out of Hecker’s sense of democracy and community. It allowed him to disprove of the idea of the infallibility of the pope, as promulgated by Pius IX in 1854 and formalized in *Pastor Aeternus* in 1870, but to uphold the Church that the pope led. He questioned the very idea utilizing the same reasoning that had led him to reject transcendentalism and Protestantism. “How can the bishops define on infallibility, unless they be by divine right, judges of what is of faith? And if so, how can the Pope be declared to be alone unerring?”⁵¹

He could depart the First Vatican Council over what he saw as an assertion of “Absolute Monarchy” and still be a faithful Catholic. It was contrary to his view of the Church. The bishops could be the judges of the faith, but one pope could not be infallible at the price of the authority of the bishops. The Church, and not the Bishop of Rome, was the authority he bowed

⁴⁷ Hecker, *The Church and the Age*, 253.

⁴⁸ Isaac Thomas Hecker, “A Brief Encounter with Isaac Hecker’s Spirituality in the Centennial Year of His Death,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 8 (1989): 111.

⁴⁹ Vatican II Council and Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Ecumenical Decree* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964), 1:25.

⁵⁰ Sandra Ann Yocum Mize, “The Papacy in Mid-Nineteenth Century American Catholic Imagination,” PhD. diss., Marquette University, 1987, 7.

⁵¹ Portier, “Isaac Hecker and the First Vatican Council,” 214.

to. Therefore, if the bishops were undermining their own authority, they were themselves corrupt.

The Church and America

As noted before, concerns over the direction of the Church led Hecker to see a shift in the center of the Catholic faith – away from Europe and toward America. The European Church was politicized and divided. His idealized Church, to which he had devoted his life, revealed fissures.⁵² Was not America the place of the greatest growth of the Church? Rather than leaving the Catholic Church, which the Protestants had done, Hecker idealized a new form of the Church which was imbued with the American vigor and revivalism.

Even before his fateful trip to Rome for the First Vatican Council, Hecker was exploring the idea of a Catholic America.⁵³ By the time his life was drawing to a close, he had begun to maintain that the Spirit was drawing Americans back to the Roman Catholic Church. He believed the mind of the believer would be uneasy in Protestantism and would eventually return to the “true church” through stages, as he had.⁵⁴ Since the Roman Catholic Church was divinely ordained, it only made sense that spiritually motivated people would eventually embrace Catholicism.

What is more, only the Roman Catholic Church aligned with human reason and a republican form of government. He adopted the position that America’s conversion to Catholicism would instruct and inform the divided Church in Europe. After all, the Europeans were clamoring for democratic governments, an Americanizing influence that he saw as a clear indicator that America was the new beacon of hope for the Church and state.⁵⁵ In other words, America was destined to become Roman Catholic.⁵⁶

This theme was dubbed “Americanism” in later generations, but it resonated strongly with the growing number of Catholics in the United States. “The Americanist tradition has always included an unabashed sense of the true but yet to be fully realized fit between American institutions and a Catholic natural law worldview.”⁵⁷

52 Portier, “Isaac Hecker and the First Vatican Council,” 217.

53 William S. Portier, “Providential Nation: An Historical-Theological Study of Isaac Hecker’s Americanism,” PhD. diss., University of St. Michael’s College, 1980, 249–250.

54 Isaac Thomas Hecker, *The Catholic Church in the United States: Its Rise, Relations with the Republic, Growth and Further Prospects* (New York: The Catholic Publication Society, Co. 1879), 7.

55 Portier, “Isaac Hecker and the First Vatican Council,” 220–21.

56 Hecker, *The Catholic Church in the United States*, 10–11.

57 Portier, “Inculturation as Transformation,” 110.

The Appeal and Rejection of Triumphalism

There were numerous religious orders engaged in revivals, what the Catholics called “parish missions.”⁵⁸ Hecker, however, so intermingled American exceptionalism with Catholic doctrine that they two were seen as one. America’s greatness was accepted *ipso facto* by most of the immigrants who arrived in the United States in the nineteenth century. Their static, irrelevant faith in their former homes was reinvigorated in their new homeland, and the appeal of this was irresistible. The ranks of American Catholics were swelled with those who saw their new homeland as the center of faith rather than the distant European Church. By the time Hecker died in 1887, there were over seven million Catholics in the United States – 12% of the population.⁵⁹

This caused a backlash from the European hierarchy, especially as the nineteenth century came to a close. When Walter Elliott’s biography of Hecker was translated into French, it stirred controversy.⁶⁰ The ultimate question was over the separation of church and state, something that Europe was struggling to understand. In 1898, as French Catholics tried to decide what to do with Hecker’s views, the United States fought and won the Spanish-American War, expanding its domain over worldwide holdings. Hecker’s ideas looked dangerous, and the ultramontanist parties prevailed upon Pope Leo XIII to censure Americanism.⁶¹ He did so in *Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae* in 1899, but Leo wisely chose to phrase his censure in such a way that it indicates he believed no one actually held the views he rejected. Still, he rejected the Paulist revivalist approach:

The way and method hitherto in use among Catholics for bringing back those who have fallen away from the Church should be left aside and another one chosen, in which matter it will suffice to note that it is not the part of prudence to neglect that which antiquity in its long experience has approved and which is also taught by apostolic authority.⁶²

Prominent American bishops including John Cardinal Gibbons submitted to the decree but made it clear they believed no one in their nation held to the views rejected. They defended Hecker’s fidelity to the faith and justified his methods as appropriate to the audience he was reaching. Still, the papacy’s rejection of the methodology placed a stigma on the use of the revivalist methodologies. The Paulists shifted their focus to publication and other ventures, although they never truly abandoned Hecker’s vision.

Despite the official rejection of Americanist triumphalism by the Vatican, the strand of thought continued long after Hecker’s death. Consider the words of Lawrence F. Flick in 1925.

⁵⁸ Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 121–23.

⁵⁹ Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Church of America*, 113.

⁶⁰ Philip Gleason, “The New Americanism in Catholic Historiography,” *U. S. Catholic Historian* 11 (1993): 4.

⁶¹ James M. Woods, “Americanism,” *Encyclopedia of Religious Controversies in the United States*, Bill J. Leonard and Jill Y. Crainshaw, eds. 2nd ed. Vol. 1. (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 23–24.

⁶² Leo XIII and the Roman Catholic Church, *Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae: Concerning New Opinions, Virtue, Nature and Grace, with Regard to Americanism*, Encyclical, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013).

“If America is to remain Christian it will have to be through the Catholic.”⁶³ Flick’s sentiment, in a somewhat naïve article, reflects the influence of Americanism. There is an element of triumphalism which saw the Roman Catholic Church as synonymous with the greatness of America.

The condemnation of Americanism was revived during the Second World War, with a number of academics sifting through Hecker and other American Catholic writers’ works to find “a phantom heresy” which threatened Catholicism.⁶⁴ Interest in the triumphalist themes was revived in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, however. The themes were somewhat lifted out of the American context and made a broader concept of triumphalism, at least in part as a method for injecting life into the post-Vatican II Church.⁶⁵ Less emphasis is placed on the problems with Americanism and more upon the positive contributions. In this sense, Hecker’s prophetic visions have become something of a guiding light, but in a global sense rather than a nationalistic sense.

Conclusion

Triumphalism was present in virtually every American revivalist movement that developed at the time, with the most extreme case being the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints which viewed the United States generally, and Utah specifically, as the New Jerusalem – the eschatological endpoint of history. What made Hecker’s views unique was the abandonment of restorationism in favor of traditionalism. He looked back to the Roman Catholic Church rather than forward to some new eschatological identity. While other movements were moving further and further to the fringe of Protestantism, Hecker and the Paulists were pushing for a return to the “mother church.”

In time, many of Hecker’s ideals and methods were justified by the decisions of the Second Vatican Council. He was a man of his times, who perceived the needs of the American people and invited them to a deeper spiritual journey within the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church. At the same time, Hecker’s leanings toward Americanism, while attractive to his audience, were detrimental to the development of the Church globally. The Church was not prepared to allow a shift of the axis of their power, and as a result, Hecker’s efforts were absorbed back into the mainstream of the Church after his death.

If Hecker made no other contribution to the development of the Catholic Church in America, his polemic for acceptance of the Church as the only true denomination was the first broadly distributed articulation of the view. He justified the continuance of the Catholic Church in America, even if this required extraordinary means, and thereby helped sustain Catholicism as the largest Christian denomination in the nation. His use of revivalist methodology infused

⁶³ Lawrence F. Flick, “What the American Has Got out of the Melting Pot from the Catholic,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 11 (1925): 428.

⁶⁴ Gleason, “The New Americanism,” 3.

⁶⁵ Gleason, “The New Americanism,” 10–11.

new life into stagnant Catholics who had immigrated far from home. Even if it did not bring about the changes he expected, his work laid the groundwork for Roman Catholic communities for the next century.

Today, his modernized triumphalism has become something of a hallmark of the post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church. Seen in a global context rather than a national one, the papacies of John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis I could be seen as reflecting aspects of his philosophy, if not his conclusions. Hecker foresaw the shifting of the global center of the Roman Catholic Church, even if he misunderstood where that center would shift to, and much of what he observed has come to pass, if in altered form.

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