

Catholics and Jews in the Antebellum American Mind:

A Study of Reactions to the Mortara Case¹

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The Mortara Case in Europe

One evening, the police knocked on the door of a residence in Bologna. The next day, a young boy was forcibly removed from the house, brought to Rome, and placed in the care of the Inquisition. The child would never again be in the custody of his parents. This is a stark, nightmarish tale, reminiscent, perhaps, of the bedtime stories parents tell to frighten their children. But this was no fairy tale. On June 23rd, 1858, the police of Bologna entered the house of Momolo Mortara, a Jewish merchant, with instructions to take away one of Mortara's eight children, six-year-old Edgardo. As Marianna, the boy's mother, threw herself in front of her sleeping son, the police marshal explained to Momolo Mortara that Edgardo had been baptized and could no longer remain in a Jewish home. The pleas of the Mortara parents managed to stay Edgardo's removal for that night. But the next day, in spite of Momolo's attempts to convince

¹ I owe my deepest thanks to James Walston for first bringing the Mortara case to my attention and encouraging my further interest in it. This paper would not exist in this form if Dale Jennings had not suggested that I become a history major. I also must thank the periodical staff at the Free Library of Philadelphia, Seth Jerchow of the Center for Advanced Judaic Study at the University of Pennsylvania, and Shawn Weldon and the kind staff of the Philadelphia Archdiocesan Historical Research Center. Alexis Williams read a draft of this paper and offered useful comments. Thanks are also due to Brienne Brown for her extensive remarks on a late draft. I am grateful to Bruce Dorsey and Robert Weinberg for their fruitful suggestions throughout the research and writing process.

the local Inquisitor that his son had never been baptized, Edgardo was placed in a carriage and driven to Rome.²

The details soon emerged of the alleged baptism that made Edgardo's natural parents, in the eyes of the Catholic Church, unfit to raise him. Secret baptisms were not unheard of, and suspicion fell immediately upon the Christians who had worked in the Mortara household. Though Jews were forbidden by law from employing Christian servants, the practice was quite common. Five years after the alleged baptism, which would have occurred while Edgardo was still an infant, an Inquisitor interrogated Anna Morisi, a young woman the Mortaras had employed in the Bolognese convent of San Domenico. Morisi's story set into motion the chain of events that led to Edgardo's removal from his family:

A few years ago I was in Bologna, in the service of the Mortaras, when a son of theirs, named Edgardo, about a year old at the time, got sick. One day when he got much worse, and I thought he might die, [...] I went back to the house with a glass, filled with some water that I got out of a bucket, and, coming up to the sick boy, I threw some on him, saying, 'I baptize you in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.'³

After discovering this admission, the Mortaras tried to regain custody of Edgardo. Over the next several months, they made several trips to Rome, succeeding on one occasion in obtaining an audience with Pope Pius IX to plead their case. But the Vatican was not swayed, declaring in October 1858 that baptisms of young children that followed the proper formula were valid without parental consent, that "God has given the Church the power and right to take possession of the baptized children of infidels, and that parental rights were subordinate to those

² David I. Kertzer, *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 3-12. Kertzer provides the only English account of the Mortara case based on primary sources.

³ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

of the Church.”⁴ As far as the Pope and the Vatican were concerned, the case was closed.

Edgardo remained in the custody of the Church (his parents did have limited visitation rights) for the rest of his youth. At the age of 21, he was ordained a priest and began a long clerical career of some renown that did not end until his death in 1940.⁵

A fascinating story, to be sure, but seemingly significant only to Edgardo, his family, and the Jews in the Papal States who were at risk to a similar fate. It turned out, however, that Edgardo’s parents were not alone in their fight to regain custody of their son. Edgardo became a *cause célèbre* in Europe. The governments of France and the Netherlands officially urged the Vatican to return Edgardo to his family. The British government expressed full support for the efforts of the Board of Deputies of British Jews with respect to the case. Camillo di Cavour, prime minister of Piedmont, kept close tabs on the affair from Turin with the hope that outrage directed at the Catholic Church would weaken the political power of the Papal States and allow the unification of Italy.⁶ Their concern was not merely rhetorical, but represented a real unease with papal policies. Some historians have gone so far as to suggest that the Pope’s actions in the Mortara affair helped lead to Napoleon III’s decision to withdraw military support of the Papal States.⁷

The American Reaction

Reactions to the Mortara case were not, however, limited to European states with political interest in the Papal States. On October 28, 1858, Sir Moses Montefiore, president of

⁴ Ibid., 149.

⁵ Ibid., 295-298.

⁶ Ibid., 119-124.

⁷ See, for example J. Derek Holmes, The Triumph of the Holy See: A Short History of the Papacy in the Nineteenth Century (London: Burns & Oates, 1978), 126, Roger Aubert, Le Pontificat de Pie IX (1846-1878), Histoire de l’Église depuis les Origines jusqu’à nos Jours, eds. Augustin Fliche and Eugène Jarry (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1952), 87.

the Board of Deputies of British Jews, sent a circular to American synagogues providing the details of the case as it then stood.⁸ While news of the affair had apparently reached the United States before the communication from Montefiore, the initial reaction was muted, especially when compared to the burst of activity that followed soon after the Montefiore circular.⁹

Discussion of the Mortara case continued in the United States for months after the arrival of the Montefiore circular that provided the details of the case. Since the primary actors in the Mortara case were the Catholic Church and a Jewish family, it provides a unique opportunity to compare directly American Protestants' attitudes towards Catholics and Jews at a moment in time when nativism was near its peak. American reactions to the Mortara case reveal a deep-seated fear of Catholics and an overwhelmingly tolerant attitude towards Jews in antebellum America.

Within three months of the distribution of the Montefiore circular, both Jews and Protestants held protest meetings in over a dozen cities, including New York, Philadelphia, and San Francisco. The meetings typically opened with an account of the abduction of Edgardo (often taken directly from the Montefiore circular). Discussion followed, and the meetings passed resolutions protesting the actions of the Roman Catholic Church in the affair. Virtually all of these resolutions called on the U.S. government to take some action on behalf of the Mortaras and to intervene with the Pope to restore Edgardo to his parents' custody.¹⁰ These pleas generally took the form of petitions directed to Secretary of State Lewis Cass or President James Buchanan to put pressure on Pius IX. Bertram Korn has argued that the lack of co-

⁸ "The Outrage at Bologna," Occident and American Jewish Advocate December 1858: 451.

⁹ Bertram Wallace Korn, The American Reaction to the Mortara Case: 1858-1859, Publications of the American Jewish Archives, ed. Jacob B. Marcus (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1957), 32.

¹⁰See, for example, "Proceedings at Philadelphia," Occident and American Jewish Advocate January 1858, "Proceedings at New York," Occident and American Jewish Advocate January 1859, "Proceedings at New Orleans," Occident and American Jewish Advocate March 1858. Korn, The American Reaction to the Mortara Case, also provides descriptions of some protest meetings not found in the Occident.

ordination in these appeals may have damaged the chances of American intervention. That opportunity was forever lost as soon as Cass replied to an early request by Isaac M. Wise and Max Lilienthal to forward a formal request to the Pope via the American Minister at Rome. Though Wise and Lilienthal had not yet requested American intervention, Cass responded with an explicit statement that the “official interference of this government” could not be granted.¹¹ Cass’s position did not, however, prevent further efforts to convince the government to change its mind. The Jews of Philadelphia were particularly determined, and even succeeded in obtaining a meeting with Buchanan in the White House on January 9, 1859. But Buchanan’s opinion was already set, and he had prepared responses to all the arguments put forward by the Philadelphia delegation.¹² Meetings and letters continued, but with no concrete results.

The account just given of the American response is found in Bertram Korn’s *The American Reaction to the Mortara Case* published in 1957. While he provides an excellent narrative of the events, Korn offers relatively little analysis of how the American response fit into larger discourses on religion in general and Catholicism in particular in mid-nineteenth-century America. His sympathies towards the Mortara protest movement are clear and these sympathies cloud his judgment of that movement. Despite his recognition that there was a great deal of anti-Catholic sentiment expressed in Protestant responses to the case, Korn declares that the Mortara movement was not an anti-Catholic movement, as it was concerned with the extension of religious rights, and did not attack the Roman Catholic Church.¹³ In his implicit support of the movement to restore Edgardo to his family and desire to portray that movement as positively as possible, Korn failed to see that, in the eyes of the both Protestant and Jewish protesters, Catholicism was a threat to the religious liberty in which they so firmly believed. As

¹¹ Korn, *The American Reaction to the Mortara Case*, 30-31.

¹² *Ibid.*, 64-67.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 78.

pointed out by Catholic commentators at the time, there was no public outrage at similar cases involving Protestantism being foisted upon Catholic children. Writing under a pseudonym, one American Catholic felt:

tempted to speak of the hundreds of Catholic children, offspring of the brave soldiers who died for England in the Crimea, now being brought up against the wishes of their parents, in her Protestant schools, or, without going so far, of cases ever recurring in our courts of justice, where Catholic parents plead in vain for the restoration of their children, detained in service in Protestant families.¹⁴

In other words, Americans were not consistently and universally shocked at the curtailment of religious freedom. The rights of Catholics were often restricted, but, Catholics argued, there was no American outcry in response. The Mortara case was different; what set it apart was that Catholicism was at fault. To American Protestants and Jews, the Mortara case highlighted the danger posed by Catholicism to the religious freedom and toleration that they saw as central to the progress of the American republic.

One of the chief arguments for the intervention of the American government in the Mortara case was that the United States held a special place in the world with respect to religious freedom and toleration and therefore had the responsibility to extend those rights whenever possible. Samuel Law stated this position most clearly in a speech in the New York State House of Assembly in March 1859. Speaking of the constitution of the state of New York, Law said:

we find this emphatic language: ‘Whereas we are required by the benevolent principles of rational liberty, not only to expel civil tyranny but also to guard against that spiritual oppression and intolerance wherewith the bigotry of weak and wicked priests and princes have scourged mankind, this convention doth, in

¹⁴ "Plures in Unum", "The Alleged Abduction of the Child Mortara," Public Ledger 23 November 1858.

the name and by the authority of the good people of this state, ordain, determine and declare, That the free exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship, without discrimination or preference, shall forever hereafter be allowed within this state to all mankind.’¹⁵

Law went on to generalize this observation to the whole country, asserting that religious liberty and the freedom of conscience were among the founding principles of the republic.

This principle, however, was not seen as being limited to the American past. A resolution adopted at a Jewish protest meeting in Philadelphia spoke of “the Union, where every bosom swells at the thought of liberty, and where the tyranny of a church, whatever may be its name, is no less odious than the worst arbitrary deeds of the most detested crowned heads.”¹⁶ Many American Protestants and Jews shared this view that the love of religious freedom and a commitment to the separation of church and state were essential elements of the American character. They saw the Founding Fathers as having instilled these ideals in the nascent American soul, and believed that it had thrived since then. To trample on religious liberty was to be un-American.

Those who appealed to the American government to act in the Mortara case soon discovered, however, that mere principle would not rouse action. Secretary of State Cass was quick to point out another, far more practical diplomatic principle: non-intervention. A letter from Cass to petitioners in Philadelphia concisely argued that, since the United States would protest if another country sought to intervene in its affairs, it could not afford to be hypocritical

¹⁵ Samuel A. Law, The Mortara Abduction. Speech of Hon. Samuel A. Law, of Delaware, in support of Freedom of Conscience and in opposition to Religious Intolerance: Delivered in the House of Assembly of the State of New York (Albany: Weed, Parsons & Company, 1859), 8-9.

¹⁶ "Proceedings at Philadelphia," 494.

and interfere in the actions of another government. Since no American citizens were involved with the Mortara case, there was no rationale for American intervention.¹⁷

Not to be silenced, the would-be interventionists cited numerous cases in which the United States had acted to secure religious liberty even when none of its own citizens were directly affected. At a protest meeting in San Francisco, a Dr. Scott “read an extract from an article in the treaty which our government had entered into with the Republic of Uruguay [sic], which guaranteed civil and religious liberty to the citizens of both nations in the most comprehensive terms.”¹⁸ Another speaker at the San Francisco meeting recalled the case when the United States sent a warship to Turkey to join English and French forces already there to ensure the security of Christians there after the murder of a Catholic missionary.¹⁹

But the strongest precedent set by the American government was the Damascus Affair eighteen years earlier. Isaac Leeser, an influential Philadelphia rabbi, praised then President Martin Van Buren and Secretary of State John Forsyth for instructing the American officials in Constantinople and Alexandria to intercede on behalf of the Jews of Damascus who were imprisoned and tortured for allegedly murdering a Catholic priest.²⁰ Neither Leeser nor anyone else directly quoted Van Buren or Forsyth, but the spirit the Mortara interventionists sought was perfectly encapsulated by Forsyth in an official letter on the Damascus affair in which he declared the United States, “acknowledging no distinction between the Mohammedan, the Jews and the Christian,” wished to use its “good offices in behalf of an oppressed and persecuted race among whose kindred are found some of the most worthy and patriotic of our citizens.”²¹ Here

¹⁷ “The Mortara Case at Washington,” Daily Evening Bulletin 29 November 1858.

¹⁸ Proceedings in the Relation to the Mortara Abduction, (San Francisco: 1859), 14-15.

¹⁹ Ibid., 25-26.

²⁰ Isaac Leeser, “The Mortara Case - No. 3,” Public Ledger 2 December 1858.

²¹ Quoted in Jonathan Frankel, The Damascus Affair: “Ritual Murder,” Politics, and the Jews in 1840 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 226.

was a case entirely parallel to the Mortara affair: Jews being persecuted by a sovereign government for being Jews. If the United States had intervened in the Damascus affair, the interventionists' argument went, how could it not intervene in the Mortara affair? To these interventionists, the evidence seemed irrefutable that the American government had shown in the past an eager willingness to secure religious liberty all over the world, and not solely for American citizens.

Those who urged U.S. government intervention in the Mortara case missed a key tenet of American diplomacy in the nineteenth century: the Monroe Doctrine. Articulated to Congress on December 2nd, 1823, the Monroe Doctrine declared that European powers should not impose their ideologies or political power in the New World. In return the United States would refrain from interfering in European affairs.²² It is telling that none of the examples cited by supporters of American intervention in the Mortara case concerned European nations. The United States had a standing policy of non-intervention with respect to European powers, and it was not about to break from that policy for a six-year-old boy in Rome.

Images of Catholics in Responses to the Mortara Case

The timing of the Mortara case contributed to the vehemence of the anti-Catholic sentiment expressed in its aftermath. The 1850s had been a period of large-scale immigration of Irish Catholics to the United States that contributed to the rise of nativism in the decade. The virulently anti-immigrant Know Nothing Party still held considerable political clout towards the end of the decade. Former president Milliard Fillmore, running on the Know Nothing ticket in the 1856 presidential election, received 21% of the popular vote. Even the nascent Republican

²² Ernest R. May, The Making of the Monroe Doctrine (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1975), viii.

party, often seen as displacing the Know Nothings as the primary opposition to the Democratic party following the demise of the Whigs, relied on nativist anti-Catholic rhetoric in its rise to power.²³ Opposition to Catholics was a key feature of political discourse in the United States during the late 1850s.

Anti-Catholicism in antebellum America has been seen as the typical manifestation of American nativism. John Higham's classic definition of nativism, "intense opposition to an internal minority on the ground of its foreign (i.e. 'un-American') connections," allows multiple interpretations of the phenomenon.²⁴ Higham's own view on nativism has been characterized as emphasizing material conflict between "native" groups (i.e. Protestants of predominantly British descent) and foreigners (largely Irish Catholics).²⁵ A similar approach was taken by Robert Hueston, who argued that "[a]ggressiveness on the part of Irish and Catholics, particularly where it involved attempts to control politics for their own ends, was an essential ingredient in the nativist mix" and found that nativist attacks subsided when Catholics withdrew from conflict.²⁶ Higham's (though not Hueston's) account is considerably more nuanced than the materialistic caricature discussed by his critics, but it is fair to say that his thesis places a greater importance on material conflict than the account of later scholars. One explanation of American nativism, then, looks to conflict over tangible policies (such as the question over which version of the bible

²³ William E. Gienapp, "Nativism and the Creation of a Republican Majority in the North before the Civil War," *Journal of American History* 72 (1985): 544-548.

²⁴ John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 4.

²⁵ See, for example, David Brion Davis, "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47.2 (1960): 206. and Dale T. Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), 167, 172.

²⁶ Robert Francis Hueston, *The Catholic Press and Nativism, 1840-1860*, *The Irish-Americans*, eds. Lawrence J. McCaffrey, Margaret E. Conners, David N. Doyle and James P. Walsh (New York: Arno Press, 1976), 327-333.

to use in public schools) as the primary cause of anti-Catholic sentiment in antebellum America.²⁷

While not ignoring the effects of “actual conflicts in status and self-interest,” David Brion Davis looked to the social and psychological tensions of American society to explain the virulence of nativist sentiment. In other words, the psychic needs and desires of mainstream American society were played out in nativist attacks on foreigners. In particular, Davis highlighted the mainstream American concern with secrecy in a supposedly open society, the legitimacy of American institutions, and illicit sexuality unavailable within the traditional framework of marriage.²⁸ Other scholars have subsequently used Davis’s framework to explore themes of anti-Catholicism in nineteenth-century America. Marie Anne Pagliarini has seen the critiques of priestly celibacy prominent in anti-Catholic literature in the antebellum period as defining “the limits of normative sexuality for the ‘True Man.’” She also finds the emphasis placed on the seductive abilities of Catholic priests as a key component of the fear of a Catholic takeover of America.²⁹ The work of Jenny Franchot explored themes of confinement and captivity in anti-Catholic literature, finding that the “confessional – as a mysterious architectural interior closed off from public surveillance, a place where secret dialogue transpired beyond the alleged democratizing influences of print – attracted enormous political and sexual anxiety.”³⁰ In short, the Davis interpretation of nativism and anti-Catholicism looks to the internal workings of the Protestant mind to find the causes of anti-immigrant sentiment in the antebellum period.

²⁷ For a summary of some of these conflicts, see Ray Allen Billington, The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938), John J. Kane, Catholic-Protestant Conflicts in America (Chicago: Regnery, 1955).

²⁸ Davis, "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion," 211, 216, 219.

²⁹ Marie Anne Pagliarini, "The Pure American Woman and the Wicked Catholic Priest: An Analysis of Anti-Catholic Literature in Antebellum America," Religion and American Culture 9 (1999): 98-128.

³⁰ Jenny Franchot, Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 100.

Davis is not without his critics. In his careful study of depictions of the Irish in typical American “conversation” (i.e. outside the virulence of explicitly nativist writings and speeches), Dale Knobel urges scholars to be “cautious against relating anti-immigrant attitudes to self-serving invention designed to salve social and psychic anxieties.” Whereas the Davis thesis (which, to be fair, was initially proposed with respect to anti-Catholic, anti-Mason, and anti-Mormon nativism) would expect a change in attitudes towards the Irish over time as the psychological needs of Protestant society changed, Knobel found that “there were underlying dispositions towards the Irish [...] through the waxing and waning of the business cycle [...] and] through periods of social and political anxiety.”³¹ In other words, Knobel argued, a certain degree of American nativism can be attributed not to the circumstances of a given period but rather to underlying prejudices and stereotypes directed towards certain groups.

The picture of America painted by those who supported the restoration of Edgardo to his parents, had as a key characteristic the love of religious liberty, both in theory and in practice. Catholicism was a threat to that America, and the Mortara case exemplified that threat. Critics of the Church’s actions in the Mortara case saw them as an attack on three fronts: personal liberty, religious freedom, and familial ties. Edgardo was removed from his home and “hurried away three hundred miles over the mountains.”³² The Church seemingly had no concern for the rights of individuals to make decisions regarding their own lives, exercising its power instead to take children into custody without the consent of the children or their parents. Just as dangerously, the Catholic Church was seen as intolerant of religious difference, going so far as to take Edgardo away from his parents to ensure that he would not be raised Jewish. In the words of a Unitarian minister in San Francisco, “a more daring and impudent act of religious intolerance

³¹ Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic*, 167-168.

³² *Proceedings in the Relation to the Mortara Abduction*, 16.

and tyranny has not, for a long time, transpired to shock the general sentiment of the Protestant world.”³³ But even this was not the worst of it in the eyes of Church critics. Speaker after speaker, writer after writer, condemned the Church for breaking the connection between Edgardo and his family. In doing so, the Church trespassed upon “the rights of family, the rights of parents - the very corner-stone of the social fabric.”³⁴

The danger of child abduction was not the only perceived threat to the American family posed by the Catholic Church in this period. Convent tales were wildly popular. The most famous of them, *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, sold three hundred thousand copies before the Civil War, failing to outsell only *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.³⁵ These convent tales centered on the defilement of young women at the hands of lecherous Catholic priests. The confession booth in particular was seen as a dangerous space in which women were helpless in resisting the seductive powers of priests who asked them probing questions that led inevitably to sexual awareness and falling into sin. The key feature of the confession booth was its secrecy. Those who entered its confines effectively ceded their freedom of will to the Catholic Church.³⁶ Catholic space, then, was space devoid of religious freedom. In his speech to the New York House of Assembly, Law recalled a recent application by the American government to the Vatican that resulted in the release of a young American woman “from the obligations of the black veil, and lifted out from the unnatural and living grave of the nunnery to sit down again in the home-circle.”³⁷ Bruce Dorsey has shown how Protestant images of Catholicism reveal a fear that the Catholic Church challenged the ideal roles of “the passionless, dependent and domestic

³³ R.P. Cutler, "Sermon on Religious Intolerance," Proceedings in Relation to the Mortara Abduction (San Francisco: 1859) 40.

³⁴ "The Mortara Abduction Case," National Era 2 December 1858.

³⁵ Franchot, Roads to Rome, 154.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

³⁷ Law, The Mortara Abduction, 13.

woman [... and] the sexually restrained entrepreneurial, and independent man” that served as the foundation of the bourgeois Protestant family.³⁸

In short, Catholicism posed a dire threat to the American family. The sentimental literature popular in the antebellum period, exemplified by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, succeeded in legitimating the experience of children as a full part of the human existence and even assigning a key role to children in the redemption of society, thus helping to explain the outpouring of American concern for the welfare of Edgardo Mortara. But even more tellingly the sentimental literature of the period emphasized the importance of family as, in the words of Philip Fisher, “the only social model for the relations between non-equal members of society, relations based on dramatically different and incomparable acts.” In a country grappling with the question of slavery and the grossly unequal power relationships therein, the family served as a metaphor for the country itself.³⁹ The removal of Edgardo from his family would have had implications in the American psyche far beyond the immediacy of the Mortara family.

Edgardo Mortara, placed in the House of the Catechumens and given a steady diet of Catholic education, provided the perfect example of the dangers of entering a confined Catholic space. After few short weeks, according to the Vatican organ *Civiltà Cattolica*, Edgardo insisted that he did not want to return to his parents unless they too converted to Catholicism.⁴⁰

Americans were quick to point to his captivity as the cause of his apparent conversion, citing his seclusion from his family and the diverse means through which the priests could convince him to

³⁸ Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 234-240.

³⁹ The quotation is found in Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 102. See also Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 128-145, Fisher, *Hard Facts*, 99-102.

⁴⁰ Kertzer, *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara*, 113-114.

renounce both his Judaism and his family.⁴¹ The *Daily Evening Bulletin* of Philadelphia went as far as to compare the Church to “certain wild Indian tribes of our Western wilderness, who are in the habit of stealing children from white settlers on the frontier, and forcibly making them members of their community.”⁴² Interestingly, tales of Indian captivity, which were quite popular in this period, posited an affinity between Catholics and Indians in their eagerness to obtain control over Protestants.⁴³ The Church, then, was seen as a destructive force in society, circumscribing individual rights, restricting freedom of conscience, and disrupting the domestic sphere.

In arguing for the invalidity of Edgardo’s alleged baptism, both Protestant and Jewish Americans had occasion to point out that the very theology of Catholicism made it incompatible with freedom of conscience and religious liberty. A virulently anti-Catholic writer in the *Philadelphia Presbyterian* re-stated what he thought was the absurdity of the Catholic position: “That by the decree of a sacrament, and that administered by an ignorant girl, the child is a Christian, and no power on earth can make him any thing else!”⁴⁴ This was a reopening of the centuries-old debate on whether salvation was obtained through works or faith. The *Presbyterian* writer caricatured the Catholic position that salvation is achieved through a combination of faith and sacraments as the belief that actions, even those performed on someone without their consent, are themselves sufficient for salvation. This was seen as patently absurd by a Protestant writer who, no doubt, believed in salvation through faith alone and as standing in

⁴¹ See, for example, "Proceedings at Rochester," *Occident and American Jewish Advocate* March 1859: 561, "The Mortara Affair," *Daily Evening Bulletin* 10 November 1858.

⁴² "The Mortara Affair Again," *Daily Evening Bulletin* 30 November 1858.

⁴³ Franchot, *Roads to Rome*, 88-89, William Henry Foster, *The Captors' Narrative: Catholic Women and their Puritan Men on the Early American Frontier* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

⁴⁴ "The Mortara Case," *Presbyterian* 11 December 1858.

direct opposition to freedom of conscience; how could people choose their religion if they were bound to a particular faith based on actions of which they had no knowledge?

A slightly different critique, offered by Isaac Leeser, argued that the Catholic Church had no regard for freedom of will. Leeser appeared willing to accept the possibility that baptism was in fact a necessary step in becoming Catholic and therefore attaining salvation. However, if baptism was to be understood as a contract (as Leeser's pseudonymous ideological opponent "Plures in Unum" suggested), the baptism of Edgardo failed to meet the requirements of an enforceable contract. "Consent, therefore, and mutual agreement, constitute in common sense [...] the elements of a contract. [...] I demand, what assent have they given to the sprinkling of water on their faces, or heads, or hands, no matter as to the parts reached by the limpid element of salvation [...]?"⁴⁵ Edgardo never gave and, indeed, was not capable of giving consent to baptism, and could not be held to the responsibilities that came with becoming Catholic. Leeser argued that Edgardo could not, therefore, be considered Catholic, and that there remained no cause for him to be kept from his family. Both these viewpoints on baptism in general and the alleged baptism of Edgardo Mortara in particular underscored the anti-Catholic belief that Catholic theology stood in direct conflict with freedom of conscience and therefore with one of the key principles of the American republic.

It was not Catholic theology alone, however that was viewed as a threat, no matter how absurd American anti-Catholics considered its implications. Rather, it was the petrification of theology into canon law that posed a danger to American religious plurality and progress. One Dr. Eckman, speaking at a protest meeting in San Francisco, spoke of how canon law had been "repudiated by the unanimous consent of the whole religious and intellectual world [...] and was now] deadly opposed to all the rights sacred to republicans [...] and] antagonistic to civilization,

⁴⁵ Isaac Leeser, "The Mortara Case - No. 2," Public Ledger 26 November 1858.

progress and religious toleration all over the world.”⁴⁶ Canon law was seen as a relic of a past era when the Catholic Church was actually catholic (i.e. universal) in Europe. That time had long since passed, and canon law was no longer applicable, least of all in the United States, home of religious freedom. Even the power of the pope was subject to the restraints of canon law, for some newspapers reported that Pius IX expressed personal regret at the abduction of Edgardo but insisted that he had no choice but to uphold “what has been long received as a ‘spiritual principle of the universal Church.’”⁴⁷ For anti-Catholic Americans, this was damning evidence indeed. As has already been discussed, American Protestants saw religious freedom and the separation of secular and ecclesiastical power as key features of the American republic. Canon law and its seemingly mindless enforcement by Pius IX, the embodiment of joint secular and ecclesiastical power, represented the antithesis of the key American values of freedom of conscience and separation of church and state. The Mortara case frightened many Americans, for if canon law could be applied to a Jewish child, they saw no reason why it could not also be imposed on any American.

In a related critique of the Church’s actions in the Mortara case, many Americans pointed to the Church’s maintenance of temporal power as outdated and dangerous to American society. The *Pacific Methodist*, a San Francisco newspaper, stated this case most explicitly, claiming that incidents like the Mortara case were inevitable whenever there was a union of church and state, regardless of whether the church in question was Catholic or Protestant. In fact, argued the *Pacific Methodist*, “tyranny and corruption of church establishments, are usually in the exact ratio of the extent to which they can use secular power to enforce obedience to their dogmas and

⁴⁶ Proceedings in the Relation to the Mortara Abduction, 8.

⁴⁷ "Churchman", "Proselytism by Force," American Presbyterian and Genessee Evangelist 25 November 1858.

decrees."⁴⁸ In one sense, then, Catholicism itself was not to blame, since abuse of power inexorably followed from the aggregation of ecclesiastical and temporal authority.⁴⁹

Isaac Leeser further argued that any institution that had gained power would never willingly yield that power:

Circumstances may counsel the Church to use different means from the fagot and the gibbet to enforce universal acquiescence; but it has not yielded, and will never yield its right to coerce the conscience, any more than it has formally renounced its right to depose kings and to place whole countries under interdict.⁵⁰

The temporal power of the Catholic Church was dangerous, therefore, in two respects. First, it was seen as the quintessence of the linkage between temporal and clerical power, a combination that had always led to tyranny and restriction of religious freedom. Second, the Church had no interest in limiting its own power. In fact, Leeser thought, the Church would do everything it could to extend its power beyond its current boundaries.

Anti-Catholic critics were quick to point out that the Mortara case would never have occurred if the Catholic Church lacked the temporal power to enforce its canon law. It was of utmost importance, then, that the Church's power not extend to the United States where it would, in the eyes of antebellum anti-Catholics, necessarily infringe on the religious rights of non-Catholics.

The imagined mechanism for this inevitable religious tyranny was the priestly nature of the Catholic Church. Along with the aforementioned canon law and temporal power of the

⁴⁸ "From the Pacific Methodist," Proceedings in Relation to the Mortara Abduction (San Francisco: 1859) 32-33.

⁴⁹ In fact, widespread and emphatic support for the separation of church and state (as opposed to the more limited anti-establishment view that predominated earlier) only emerged during this period in tandem with growing Protestant concerns about Catholics. See Philip Hamburger, Separation of Church and State (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 191-193.

⁵⁰ Isaac Leeser, "Fanaticism and its Victims," Occident and American Jewish Advocate November 1858: 376.

Church, Catholic priests were widely depicted as the personal agents of the removal of Edgardo Mortara from his family and his conversion to Catholicism. This view was held even when it became clear that the alleged baptism of Edgardo was not performed by a priest but rather by a servant girl. The Philadelphia *Presbyterian* admitted the direct action of baptism was performed by Anna Morisi but called her a “priest-ridden girl,” thus shifting the ultimate responsibility away from Morisi to the coercive abilities of Catholic priests.⁵¹ As discussed above, Catholic priests were seen as capable of controlling the actions of those in their pastoral care.

Yet it was not only the power priests held over their parishioners that was seen as dangerous. The priestly hierarchy itself was viewed as antithetical to freedom of religious choice. Leeser wrote of the “Church of Rome [which] knows of but one head, one will, which governs and shapes all the vast machinery composed by its countless hierarchy.” He contrasted the Catholic Church with “all other religious societies [which] are comparatively small, and governed by deliberative bodies, more or less independent.”⁵² In other words, other religions provided their adherents with the freedom to make their own decisions in many matters. Catholicism was a giant operation that allowed no dissent. Its priests were mere cogs in the machine that was the Catholic Church. They could, therefore, have only the interests of the Church in mind. Whenever those interests conflicted with secular concerns of the society in which they resided, priests would inevitably support the cause of the Church.

That single-mindedness was seen not solely as prioritizing Church interests above all others, but also as an eager willingness to act immorally in the promotion of the Church. The Washington, D.C. *National Era*, for example, wrote of how “Calumny [...] is always a favorite

⁵¹ "The Mortara Case."

⁵² Isaac Leeser, "The Mortara Case - To the American Public," Public Ledger 25 November 1858.

weapon with the priests.”⁵³ The anti-Catholic Philadelphia *Presbyterian* claimed that Catholic priests were “taught to believe that they may falsify without sin, provided they do it for the glory of the Church.”⁵⁴ The Mortara case provided ample evidence for this claim, for, as the *Occident and American Jewish Advocate* was eager to point out, “various Catholic writers, both here and elsewhere, have thought proper to undertake a defence [sic] of what is not capable of the least extenuation [... and] fully approv[e] the whole outrage, as justly deducible from the rules of *the Church*.”⁵⁵ To the rest of the world, the abduction of Edgardo was an attack on religious freedom and parental rights, yet Catholics (under the influence of their priests, no doubt in the eyes of anti-Catholic writers) were vocal in their support of the Church’s actions, with apparent (to Protestants) disregard for the facts of Edgardo’s alleged baptism or the rights of his parents to raise him as they saw fit. Priests, then, were viewed as concerning themselves solely with the status and prestige of the Church, dismissing any regard they might have for truth or individual rights. As discussed above, priests already were viewed as a threat to families through their ability to seduce women and thus undermine the gender roles seen as central to the American family. Therefore, priests’ unyielding support of the Church at all costs, coupled with their supposed control of the thoughts and actions of Catholic laymen, was viewed as a direct threat to American conceptions of liberty.

The theme of secrecy crops up repeatedly in critiques on the Church’s actions in the Mortara case. A typical article on the case stated that Edgardo was placed in the custody of the Church “under the plea that he had been baptized, when sick, by a female Roman Catholic nurse, though this act must have been performed, if at all, in secret, without the presence of any

⁵³ "The Mortara Abduction - The Truth Coming Out," *National Era* 9 December 1858.

⁵⁴ "The Mortara Case."

⁵⁵ "The Mortara Case," *Occident and American Jewish Advocate* January 1859: 478.

one but the child and the nurse herself.”⁵⁶ The implication was clear. The Church needed to resort to treachery and secrecy to obtain converts and was, furthermore, entirely willing to do so. The Unitarian minister R.P. Cutler, misstating the details of the case, claimed that the entire substance of Edgardo’s alleged conversion consisted of “getting the child, clandestinely and treacherously, and, by some back-door process, baptized by a Roman Catholic priest.”⁵⁷ The image of Catholicism that emerges from these writings is a religion whose principles and rituals are so dubious in quality that if they were placed out in the open, their failings would cause them to collapse immediately. Only through secret activity could the Church maintain its power.

Critics of the Church insisted that this was not a new phenomenon, but rather one that had been going on for centuries. The Church was the same institution that “authorized to arm monks and other ecclesiastics with the terrors of the inquisition to sit in secret to try the absent by witness, unknown and unseen by them, for differing from what the Church had decreed to be the faith which alone it would tolerate.”⁵⁸ The Inquisition, the same institution that had removed Edgardo from the custody of his parents, had a long history of restricting personal liberty (and, through the seductive nature of Catholic space, religious freedom) through concealed actions. Besides serving as a prime example of the outdated nature of the Church’s action, the Inquisition was also widely seen as an illustration of the dangers of temporal and clerical power invested in the same organization. The Inquisition, however, was not seen as the full extent of secret Catholic activity. A resolution adopted at a protest meeting held in Rochester, New York alleged that the entire “Church of Rome sanctions deception.”⁵⁹

⁵⁶ "The Outrage at Bologna," 451.

⁵⁷ Cutler, "Sermon on Religious Intolerance," 41.

⁵⁸ "The Outrage at Bologna," Occident and American Jewish Advocate March 1859: 560.

⁵⁹ "Proceedings at Albany, New York," Occident and American Jewish Advocate March 1859: 570.

The preamble of the resolution adopted at the protest meeting held in Charleston, South Carolina was careful to point out that it was not only Catholic secrecy that represented a threat to religious freedom but rather that “[b]igotry [...] often takes refuge in secret [sic] counsels, and practices, and popular superstition, the offspring of a perverted religious sentiment that openly assails sects and individuals.”⁶⁰ It was not that the secrecy of Catholic institutions was somehow more dangerous to religious freedom than other instances of secrecy. Secrecy in all religious institutions was seen (at least by those attending the meeting in Charleston) as a threat to freedom of conscience. However, in the context of antebellum America, the only religious group whose secret activity was overt enough to arouse concern was the Catholic Church. That secrecy threatened the religious freedom that was one of the founding principles of the United States. David Brion Davis pointed out that the key feature of the anti-American conspiracies imagined by American nativists was their secrecy. The exposure of that secrecy “served to clarify [the] national values” of the United States, namely religious freedom and popular sovereignty. Davis also pointed out the irony of these anti-Catholic organizations resorting to secrecy themselves.⁶¹

Americans had no lack of imagination in predicting the consequences of the establishment of a precedent in the Mortara case. These predictions typically envisioned an expansion of the technique used in “converting” Edgardo Mortara to the entire United States. Many played on parental fears of losing one’s children. Among the more restrained concerns was the one expressed by the Philadelphia *Daily Evening Bulletin*. In chastising President Buchanan and Secretary of State Cass for refusing to intervene in the Mortara case, it warned that the “children of Protestant Americans in Rome are liable to be carried off in the same way

⁶⁰ "Proceedings at Charleston, S.C.," *Occident and American Jewish Advocate* January 1859: 501.

⁶¹ Davis, "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion," 211-215.

that the Mortara child was carried off.”⁶² Others pictured the extension of secret baptism to the United States itself. The San Francisco *Times* cautioned that “A given number of chambermaids might follow the example thus set to the world, and within a year, succeed in baptizing and abducting half the infants in the United States, especially if supported by the powerful influence of the Papal See.”⁶³ Many evangelical Protestants in the United States saw children as particularly impressionable and malleable. This view of childhood strongly contributed to the rise of American Sunday schools that sought to instill the seeds of piety in America’s youth.⁶⁴ More excitable writers saw not just infants but all Americans in danger of being surreptitiously baptized and made Catholics.⁶⁵ The warning issued by Isaac Leeser was most severe of all. He insisted that if the arguments put forth by the Church with respect to the Mortara case were accepted, “*the* Church might make any act of barbarity legal, provided it be safe to enforce it, so only that its power and numbers may be thereby extended.”⁶⁶ The protest meeting held in Memphis, Tennessee, stated a similar fear, “deeming the late Catholic theft of the Mortara child as fraught with danger to the political interests of this great Republic,” but failed to make explicit just what those dangers entailed.⁶⁷ All these fears presumed, as discussed above, that 1) anyone in the clutches of the Roman Catholic Church and, in particular, its priests, was susceptible to falling under the Church’s control and 2) the Catholic Church was bent on aggrandizing its own power at all costs.

⁶² "The Mortara Case at Washington."

⁶³ *Proceedings in the Relation to the Mortara Abduction*, 29.

⁶⁴ Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of An American Institution, 1790-1880* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 140-144.

⁶⁵ This fear was widely expressed. See "Proceedings at Philadelphia," 493, "Proceedings at Boston," *Occident and American Jewish Advocate* January 1859: 498.

⁶⁶ Leeser, "The Mortara Case - No. 2."

⁶⁷ "Proceedings at Memphis," *Occident and American Jewish Advocate* March 1859: 566.

Yet not all non-Catholics looked upon the Mortara case with real terror. Some found levity in the possibility of Catholic baptism converting even the unwitting or unwilling. The *Sunday Dispatch* of Philadelphia reprinted the following humor piece from a British newspaper:

“It is finally decided by the Pope, the Emperor, and the *Universe*, *in re* the little Jew boy, Mortara, baptised surreptitiously by his nursery-maid, that baptism into the Church of Rome, ‘even when administered without the knowledge or consent’ of the victim, renders him a Catholic, and no power can do away with the efficacy of the process. *Mr. Punch* understands that in consequence, the eminent missionary, Cardinal Wiseman, has succeeded in corrupting the proprietors of Exeter Hall into allowing him to place in their gallery a fire engine charged with consecrated water, and that at the next meeting of the Protestant Association, the Cardinal, aided by some stout-limbed priests, means to play upon the crowd, and declaim the baptismal service of Rome. As there is no doubt this will quite fulfill the conditions required by the Church, *Mr. Punch* advises all True Protestants to take their umbrellas.”⁶⁸

Some critics of the Catholic Church’s actions in the Mortara case claimed not to be anti-Catholic. Two speakers at the protest meeting in San Francisco held this position. Dr. Eckman insisted that, “We must not identify *Catholics* with *Catholicism*.”⁶⁹ A Rev. Henry concurred, explaining that “[h]e did not come to the meeting to denounce Catholicism, but to denounce an act of outrageous cruelty.”⁷⁰ There were, therefore, those who claimed to isolate the Church’s actions with respect to Edgardo Mortara from the Church as a whole and from Catholics in the United States. However, these views represented a small minority of printed opinion. Most

⁶⁸ "Warning to Protestants," *Sunday Dispatch* 5 December 1858.

⁶⁹ *Proceedings in the Relation to the Mortara Abduction*, 8.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

Americans who criticized the Church's abduction of Edgardo saw it as evidence of the typical behavior of Catholics and the Church as a whole.

These two exceptions aside, antebellum non-Catholics in the United States consistently viewed Catholics as a real threat to the religious and civil freedoms that were central to American principles. Anti-Catholic writers portrayed Catholics as intolerant of religious difference, disdainful of familial ties, secretive, proponents of a union of secular and ecclesiastical power, and mindlessly devoted to an institution whose principles were becoming increasingly outdated in the modern world. In short, Catholics and Catholicism represented the antithesis of the ideal America envisioned by many in the antebellum period, an America that respected religious diversity, valued the family as the basic unit of American society, and thrived on the separation of church and state.

Images of Jews in Responses to the Mortara Case

Surprisingly, given that the central character in the Mortara case was Jewish, gentile Americans had little to say about Jews in their responses to the affair, especially compared to the mass of anti-Catholic sentiment expressed in critiques of the Catholic Church's role in the case. Jews were not, however, completely ignored. In striking contrast to the dangerous Catholics pictured by many critics of the Church, the two images of Jews that do emerge reflect the larger American ambivalence towards Jews. Jews were simultaneously seen in both positive and negative lights, though positive portrayals predominated.

The image of Jews in antebellum America has been studied by many scholars. Frederic Cople Jaher, for example, has argued that "animosity embedded in Christian doctrine... has

exerted a primary influence [on antisemitism] since the early days of Christianity.”⁷¹ In other words, the United States, as a predominantly Christian nation, has inevitably had moments of antisemitism in its history. Such claims of inevitability are, however, a bit hard to swallow; surely there must have been specific triggers for the cases of antisemitism that arose in the United States. The work of Jaher seems largely to be a response to those scholars who found nineteenth-century America to be overwhelmingly tolerant of Jews. This earlier position is best expressed by Nathan Belth who claimed that “[r]eligiously based antipathy to Jews, cruelly expressed in all of European history, remained muted and was felt [...] infrequently in violence.”⁷² There are those, however, who support Jaher’s “lachrymose” position.⁷³ Most notably, Robert Rockaway and Arnon Gutfeld have argued that Jews were depicted demonically throughout the nineteenth century, first as Christ-killers and later as members of a worldwide financial conspiracy.⁷⁴

These two positions are not necessarily as contradictory as they might appear, for the position of Rockaway and Gutfeld deals with perceptions of Jews while that of Belth and others describes the actual treatment of Jews, regardless of how they were perceived. A few scholars have dealt with this distinction, most notably Louise Mayo, who explored the contradictory depictions of Jews in the nineteenth century, and Jonathan Sarna, who described the attempts of American Christians to reconcile their ideological conceptions of Jews with their everyday

⁷¹ Frederic Cople Jaher, *A Scapegoat in the New Wilderness: The Origins and Rise of Anti-Semitism in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 9.

⁷² Nathan C. Belth, *A Promise to Keep: A Narrative of the American Encounter with Anti-Semitism* (New York: Times Books, 1979), xiii. For other “anti-lachrymose” accounts of nineteenth-century perceptions of Jews, see Oscar Handlin, “American Views of the Jew at the Opening of the Twentieth Century,” *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 40 (1951): 320-344, Hasia R. Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration, 1820-1880, The Jewish People in America*, ed. Henry L. Feingold, vol. 2 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁷³ For a discussion of the “lachrymose” and “anti-lachrymose” strands of historiography in Jewish history (in a slightly unexpected place, see the introduction of Robert Bonfil, *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Anthony Oldcorn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

⁷⁴ Robert Rockaway and Arnon Gutfeld, “Demonic Images of the Jew in the Nineteenth Century United States,” *American Jewish History* 89 (2001): 355-381.

encounters with Jews.⁷⁵ What remains largely unexplored, however, is why antisemitic sentiments, which undoubtedly existed, were so rarely the impetus for nativist action. Belth attributes the relative lack of antisemitic action to the small number of Jews present in America compared to the more rapidly growing Catholic population.⁷⁶

The majority of depictions of Jews in reactions to the Mortara case were favorable. Samuel Law, for example, called upon the New York House of Assembly to defend “a remarkable people, every where but here the victims of partial legislative restrictions, [...] a people that, in every clime, amid all the changes of time, and opinion, and law and tyranny, have retained their ancient records, their national character and their untiring faith.” This emphasis on Jews’ penchant for preservation of the past is curious, especially considering Law’s attack on the Catholic Church for engaging in “an act of ecclesiastical tyranny worthy only of the dark ages.”⁷⁷ Whereas he took the Church to task for repeating its actions of the past, he praised Jews for doing the very same thing. The difference for Law, of course, was that the Catholic Church had always represented an intolerant force in the world, while the traditions of Jews were admirable. Regrettably, Law did not elaborate on just what he thought was admirable about Jewish traditions. Instead, what seemed important to Law was the very fact that Jews had survived through centuries of persecution.

A Rev. Dr. Scott, speaking in San Francisco, had an explanation for Jews’ abilities to survive the challenges they had faced: “Wherever you find an Israelite... there a gracious Providence watches over him, and the hand that touches him should be wary. They are God’s

⁷⁵ See Louise Mayo, *The Ambivalent Image: Nineteenth-century America's Perception of the Jew* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988), Jonathan D. Sarna, "The "Mythical Jew" and the "Jew Next Door" in Nineteenth-Century America," *Anti-Semitism in American History*, ed. David A. Gerber (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986) 57-78.

⁷⁶ Belth, *A Promise to Keep*, 14.

⁷⁷ Law, *The Mortara Abduction*, 12, 10.

people still.”⁷⁸ Such a statement moves beyond mere religious tolerance into the realm of genuine philosemitism.⁷⁹ While the exact motives for this admiration of Jews are unclear, it is certain that there were some antebellum Americans who saw Jews as worthy of respect and support. It is worthwhile to point out that this image of Jews is not the same as the “Jew Next Door” described by Sarna who was also viewed positively. Law and Scott were not speaking well of Jews based on their personal experiences with them, though that may have played a role in shaping their opinion of Jews. Rather, in praising members of the Jewish faith they engaged in some mythologizing of their own, picturing the Jews as a long-suffering people who have survived hardships they had faced throughout their entire existence. One possible explanation for this philosemitism is the special place Jews held in the Christian tradition as witnesses to the truth of the Old Testament. Furthermore, following the book of Revelation, many Christians believed that the Second Coming would not occur until the Jews were restored to the Holy Land.⁸⁰ Another possible motivation is that many American Protestants saw the people of the United States as God’s New Israel, chosen and destined for greatness after struggles to escape persecution.⁸¹ With that identification came a feeling of affinity for the original Israel, the Jews. In any case, reactions to the Mortara demonstrate that, for many Americans, Jews represented an admirable group who had faced persecution for centuries and continued to face discrimination at the hands of the Catholic Church.

⁷⁸ Proceedings in the Relation to the Mortara Abduction, 14.

⁷⁹ Little scholarly work has been done on the phenomenon of philosemitism. One recent example is William D. Rubinstein and Hilary L. Rubinstein, Philosemitism: Admiration and Support in the English-Speaking World for Jews, 1840-1939, Studies in Modern History, ed. J.C.D. Clark (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999). Unfortunately, while the Rubinsteins address philosemitism and the Mortara case, they focus on the response in Britain and mention the American response only in passing.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 126-148.

⁸¹ Conrad Cherry, God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 21-24.

There were also Americans, however, who showed no sympathy for the plight of the Mortara family or for Jews in general. Writing under the pseudonym “Plures in Unum,” one American Catholic placed the blame for the entire affair not at the foot of the Church but rather on Edgardo’s father for his failure to obey the law that prohibited Jews from employing Christian servants. “If M. Mortara had obeyed [this law,] [...] passed expressly in order to prevent anything like what has just happened, he would not have undergone this loss.”⁸² In fact, argued “Plures in Unum,” the Jews’ eagerness to criticize the Church should be viewed as an attack on Christ himself, thus proving the statement in the Bible that “the Jews remain the same until the end of time; that cry ‘Crucify Him,’ ‘Crucify Him,’ we are ever to hear. [...] [T]his cry is ever being heard against Jesus Christ, from the Jews.”⁸³ In the eyes of “Plures in Unum,” the Jews represented an evil force in the world, intent on attacking Jesus Christ, Christianity, and, by association, Christians. This corroborates the recent argument of Arnon and Gutfeld that images of Jews as Christ-killers existed in nineteenth-century American culture.⁸⁴ However, considering that this passage is the only instance of slandering Jews with this charge found in the sources examined, it appears that this thread of antisemitism was weak, though certainly present, at this period of American history.

It is important to note, however, that the claims made about the dangers of Jews were not made by the same people who saw Catholics as a threat. Anti-Jewish themes in American responses to the Mortara case are present almost exclusively in Catholic writings; Protestant and secular newspapers almost unanimously criticized the Church and supported the Jewish position

⁸² “Plures in Unum”, “The Alleged Abduction of the Child Mortara.”

⁸³ “Plures in Unum”, *Occident and American Jewish Advocate* February 1859: 521.

⁸⁴ Rockaway and Gutfeld, “Demonic Images of the Jew in the Nineteenth Century United States.”

in the Mortara case.⁸⁵ In another criticism of the Jews with respect to the Mortara case, the *United States Catholic Miscellany* insisted that Edgardo's father was not upset about his son being placed in the custody of the Catholic Church and that the case gained notoriety only through "the zeal of some officious Jews" who had heard of the abduction and fomented international protests.⁸⁶ Some American Catholics, then, saw Jews as troublemakers intent on destroying the Church. In making this claim, the *Miscellany* also implied that Jews in the United States had a similar interest in damaging the social and political order of the day.

The details of the Mortara case, then, provided Americans with evidence to reinforce multiple images of Jews. Jews were alternately seen as a people favored by God and persecuted by man, Christ-killers who continued to attack Christianity, and agitators bent on disrupting the status quo. This ambivalence can be construed as reflecting the tension between the American commitment to religious freedom and a popular belief that the American "democratic system grew out of Christianity and that the two were inextricably bound to each other."⁸⁷ But it is important to note that this ambivalence was expressed, at least with respect to the Mortara case, along religious lines. Protestant Americans consistently viewed Jews in a favorable light. It is only in Catholic responses to the Mortara case that attacks on Jews are found. Based on the evidence presented above, antebellum Americans were largely tolerant of Jews.

Conclusion

Without a close analysis of American representations of Catholics and Jews in the years leading up to the Mortara case and a careful comparison of those representations to the ones

⁸⁵ The one exception, the *Boston Semi-Weekly Courier*, took offense at the Jews' "extraordinary assumption [...] that the private wrong of Jews in every foreign country is to be redressed by the Government of the United States. See Mayo, *The Ambivalent Image*, 140.

⁸⁶ "An Underground Railroad in Italy," *United States Catholic Miscellany* 27 November 1858.

⁸⁷ Diner, *A Time for Gathering*, 172.

discussed above, it is impossible to gauge whether and to what extent the details of the abduction of Edgardo Mortara changed American conceptions of Catholics and Jews. At the very least, the Mortara case reinforced visions of Catholics as a threat to the United States. Catholics were consistently seen as dangerous intruders to the American republic. Jews, despite the fact that there was a large influx of German Jews in the 1850s that, in some ways, paralleled the immigration of Irish Catholics, were typically viewed with tolerance and even respect.

This conclusion leaves open the question of why Catholics felt the brunt of nativist sentiment in the 1850s. To return to Higham's definition discussed above, nativism is the "intense opposition to an internal minority on the ground of its foreign (i.e. 'un-American') connections." Catholics and Jews both stood outside mainstream (i.e. Protestant) American society, yet attacks against Jews were minimal when compared to those against Catholics. One explanation, mentioned in passing above, is that Catholics greatly outnumbered Jews in antebellum America and were thus seen as a greater threat. The large number of Catholics present in the United States during this period certainly contributed to the rise of anti-Catholic sentiment. But American reactions to the Mortara case also suggest that American anti-Catholicism was also a largely ideological movement. The dangers associated with Catholics (secrecy, excessive loyalty to the Church, disregard for religious freedom) were a direct attack on American ideals of freedom of conscience and separation of church and state. The presence of *any* Catholics in the United States, regardless of their number, would have triggered these fears. Jews, on the other hand, having long been subjected to religious persecution (just like American Protestants' forebears, the Puritans), were largely seen as harmless members of society who would likely be devoted to the American commitment to religious freedom. In other words, Jewish practices and tenets were not seen as being in conflict with American ideals.

Catholicism, on the other hand, was seen as a threat to the foundations of the United States and its growing presence initiated a spirited defense in the form of nativism. It is dangerous, of course, to draw far-reaching conclusions on a phenomenon as complex as nativism from a single case study. This paper makes no such attempt, but rather shows that nativist feeling was not directed equally at all outsiders in American society. Nativists targeted Catholics based on the perceived threat that Catholic traditions and beliefs posed to the American republic and paid little attention to Jews who held a place of respect in the Protestant American psyche.

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