ENACTING THEOLOGY, AMERICANISM, AND FRIENDSHIP:
THE 1837 DEBATE ON ROMAN CATHOLICISM BETWEEN
ALEXANDER CAMPBELL AND BISHOP JOHN PURCELL

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ABSTRACT

ENACTING THEOLOGY, AMERICANISM, AND FRIENDSHIP:
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This dissertation is an historical study of the 1837 debate on Roman Catholicism between Bishop John Purcell (1800-1883) and his Protestant challenger Alexander Campbell (1788-1866). Held for one week in Cincinnati, this debate showcased two of the Ohio Valley’s leading religious personalities as they argued about Catholicism in historical, theological, and political terms.

This dissertation offers an account of the origins and events of the weeklong debate. It also makes two constructive arguments. First, for Purcell and Campbell participating in the debate was an exercise in “pastoral apologetics.” That is to say, each man understood his participation in the debate as an expression of his ministerial calling. Second, the form of the debate itself provided the conditions for a friendship that emerged between the men in the years that followed.
The Campbell-Purcell debate has been recognized as an historically significant event. As Margaret DePalma notes, in United States history “it was the only occasion in which an American Catholic bishop held an oral debate with a Protestant minister” (*Dialogue on the Frontier*, 96). Beyond this important fact, the debate and the events that followed offer readers two noteworthy takeaways. First, they provide a counter-narrative to what would become a common storyline of Protestant Nativism in the antebellum period. Second, they are a reminder for contemporary Christian theologians that theological disagreement can be simultaneously robust and civil, while also serving as the starting point for Christian friendship.
For Aimee and the girls
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Writing a dissertation is both a solitary and communal event. The writer is obviously engaging in the solitary activity of wrestling with ideas and struggling to put them on paper; but s/he is supported by a community of friends who energize and sharpen the writing process. As I complete this project, I am reminded of the great debt I owe those friends who have shared this journey with me.

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It should go without saying that I stand on the shoulders of my teachers. But I want to single out a few. The Rev. Jeff Gill who taught a Disciples of Christ History and Polity class in which he set early Stone-Campbell history in a pastoral context; that single insight was incredibly formative for my thinking. Dr. Paul Blowers of Emmanuel Christian Seminary for his early encouragement to take up this topic. W. Dennis Helsabeck, now retired from Milligan College, who never formally taught me in a classroom, but was nonetheless my teacher in a great many things related to the Stone-Campbell Movement. To all the members of my committee, I owe a great deal of thanks. Drs. Brad Kallenberg and Vincent Miller offered keen philosophical questions that have sharpened my thinking about the debate. Dr. William Portier, whose Modernism seminar and book project, *Divided Friends*, probably influenced my theological frame of reference in ways I have not yet come to fully appreciate. Dr. Susan Trollinger, who,
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INTRODUCTION

The Debate Propositions

On January 13th, 1837, the Catholic Bishop John Purcell (1800-1883) walked into a small Protestant church a block south of his cathedral in Cincinnati. There he met Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), the founder of a major new American religious movement known as the Disciples of Christ. The crowd that surrounded them was about to witness the only time in U.S. history when “an American Catholic bishop held an oral debate with a Protestant minister.”¹

Campbell and Purcell met three months earlier at a conference on education and clashed over a disagreement about the Protestant Reformation. Now, in a climate of intensifying anti-Catholicism, they were going to set the record straight about the Catholic Church. Campbell believed Roman Catholicism was both a theological heresy and a threat to the political well-being of the United States. In the debate, he intended to examine the Catholic Church, and lay it bare before the citizens of Cincinnati. Purcell was unshaken and seized the debate as an opportunity to present Catholicism for what he knew it truly was—the faith once delivered to the saints and a wholesome participant in American society

¹ Margaret DePalma, Dialogue on the Frontier: Catholic and Protestant Relations, 1793-1883 (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2004), 96. DePalma also points out, that “the event gained national attention and was reported in newspapers throughout the country” (96-97).
To organize their discussion, Campbell drafted seven propositions that he and Purcell were to debate. Purcell agreed to them and both men decided that a stenographer should be hired so a printed version could eventually be sold to the wider reading public. Crystallizing the major concerns of Protestants at the time, Campbell’s propositions were designed to establish a cumulative historical, theological, and political case against Catholicism. Each proposition, along with a brief explanation of it, is listed below:²

1. The Roman Catholic Institution, sometimes called the ‘Holy, Apostolic, Catholic, Church,’ is not now, nor was she ever, catholic, apostolic, or holy; but is a sect in the fair import of that word, older than any other sect now existing, not the ‘Mother and Mistress of all Churches,’ but an apostacy [sic] from the only true, holy, apostolic, and catholic church of Christ. As we will see in chapter one’s discussion of his career, Campbell worked to bring about the full visible unity of the church through a restoration of New Testament Christianity. By demonstrating that the Catholic Church did not exhibit the traditional “four marks” of the church (unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity), he hoped to position Catholicism alongside every other Protestant denomination as an object of church reform. This move gave Campbell the argumentative space to contest any claim Purcell would make about the antiquity of the Catholic Church’s claims to embody the four marks.

2. Her notion of apostolic succession is without any foundation in the Bible, in reason, or in fact; an imposition of the most injurious consequences, built upon unscriptural and anti-scriptural traditions, resting wholly upon the opinions of

² Alexander Campbell and Rt. Rev. John B. Purcell, A Debate on the Roman Catholic Religion (Cincinnati: J.A. James & Co., 1837), vii-viii. In subsequent references to the printed text of the debate, I use the last name of the speaker, followed by “Debate,” and the page number.
interested and fallible men. In arguing that Catholicism’s claim of apostolic succession has no biblical justification, Campbell was attempting to take away her ability to claim that she preserved the Apostles’ teaching. What the Catholic Church had done was corrupt this teaching by adding to it “unscriptural and anti-scriptural traditions,” such as auricular confession. For Campbell, these traditions did not have a precedent in the Bible, but were introduced into the Christian tradition after the period of the New Testament by men who were biased and liable to error, that is “interested and fallible.”

3. She is not uniform in her faith, or united in her members; but mutable and fallible, as any other sect of philosophy or religion—Jewish, Turkish, or Christian—a confederation of sects, under a politico-ecclesiastic head. Here Campbell repeats in some ways his claim from proposition one, namely that the Catholic Church is one religious sect among many. As such, she has no right to claim that she is the standard bearer of Christian unity.

4. She is the “Babylon” of John, the “Man of Sin” of Paul, and the Empire of the “Youngest Horn” of Daniel’s Sea Monster. Like many Protestants, Campbell understood the Catholic Church to manifest features that were described in the prophetic sections of the Bible. The goal of this line of argument, it seems, was to call into question the morality of the Catholic Church. By demonstrating that she was the “Babylon” from the Book of Revelation, Campbell thought the biblical argument for the Catholic Church’s immorality would override claims Purcell would make to the contrary. It is important to note that Campbell’s Common Sense Realism and inductive method of bible study, which were common at the time, gave students of the Bible confidence that even
its most obscure sections—like prophecy—could be reliably understood by applying the correct methods of interpretation to the text.\(^3\)

5. **Her notions of purgatory, indulgences, auricular confession, remission of sins, transubstantiation, supererogation, &c, essential elements of her system, are immoral in their tendency, and injurious to the well-being of society, religious and political.** This proposition illustrates what Campbell had been arguing about the immorality of the Catholic Church in the fourth proposition; but here Campbell adds that there are deleterious social implications of that depravity. In the debate, Campbell does not address concretely what he thinks these social implications might be. Fundamentally, Campbell believes that Catholics are not critical thinkers in the way Protestants are.\(^4\)

6. **Notwithstanding her pretensions to have given us the Bible, and faith in it, we are perfectly independent of her for our knowledge of that book, and its evidences of a divine original.** In this section, Campbell makes a creative historical argument that Protestants do not need to rely on the Catholic Church for having canonized the books of the Bible. For the purpose of his overall argument against Catholicism, his aim is to use the Bible as a source with which to challenge the Church’s theological claims without having to recognize the Church for providing that book in the first place.

7. **The Roman Catholic religion, if infallible and unsusceptible of reformation, as alleged, is essentially anti-American, being opposed to the genius of all free institutions, and positively subversive of them, opposing the general reading of the scriptures, and the diffusion of useful knowledge among the whole community, so**

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\(^3\) I deal with Common Sense Realism and the inductive method in chapter one.

\(^4\) Campbell, *Debate*, 134-135.
essential to liberty and the permanency of good government. Campbell’s argument that the Catholic Church was anti-American was anything but novel. What is interesting is that he places it at the end of his list of propositions. Rather than opening with this point, Campbell decided to make the tedious and methodical case against Catholicism on historical and theological grounds first. Only after he had done all that work did he attempt to show that the Catholic Church was “essentially anti-American.” It is almost as if he thought that by successfully demonstrating the first six propositions the audience would accept the seventh as a foregone conclusion.

Historiography

The secondary literature on the debate falls into one of two categories: encomia and critical analyses. The encomia include press accounts from the time immediately following the debate, as well as denominational histories, biographies, and articles from the twentieth century. Beginning in the twentieth century, the debate became a topic of critical analysis and began to be studied in theses, dissertations, articles, and scholarly books dealing with the broader U.S. religious history. The following historiography provides a sampling of these two categories.

Almost as soon as the debate concluded, encomia began to be printed about Campbell and Purcell. In his periodical, the Millennial Harbinger, Campbell reprinted an article by one of his supporters, J.G. Birney, who noted:

[s]o far as Mr. Campbell was concerned we can speak with unalloyed pleasure. His facts were judiciously selected . . . Every point on which we heard him fully, we thought he fully sustained.5

5 J.G. Birney, From the Philanthropist, in The Millennial Harbinger, April 1837, 183.
Likewise, the editor the Cincinnati’s *The Catholic Telegraph*, reprinted an article from another paper, in which the author wrote,

> [i]t may be presumed, therefore, that we have no approbation to bestow upon . . . those who, like Mr. Campbell, have entered upon a crusade against the Catholic religion, to gratify their malice or a vain desire for distinction; or commiseration to award, if, in their attempts to demolish the Catholics, they get demolished themselves.\(^6\)

The reaction of the secular press at the time reflected a mixture of opinion. The editor of the non-religious *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, Charles Hammond, who was an Episcopalian and admittedly seemed to be annoyed by Campbell’s pretense in claiming to represent Protestantism, gave the debate substantial coverage in his paper. On the last day of the debate, Hammond printed the following:

> Mr. Campbell’s ‘defense of Protestantism’ has turned out to be a very considerable failure, so far as rendering Catholicism odious was a part of his effort. Most of those who heard the debate, with the least prejudice, think better of Catholics than they had previously thought.\(^7\)

Yet, nine days later Hammond seemed to balance his critique with some praise from a Protestant contributor, Asa Shinn, who spoke highly of Campbell, but was not affiliated with the Disciples of Christ. Shinn observed,

> Mr. Campbell . . . sustained the cause of Protestantism, with candor, and with great ability . . . [and] [t]he Bishop also exhibited a degree of mildness and liberality of sentiment, that was not anticipated.\(^8\)

In addition to the post-debate press coverage, encomia were present in early twentieth century denominational histories of the debate. Within the span of a year, two books were published that illustrate this tendency, one by an author from the Disciples of

\(^6\) From the *Republican*, in *The Catholic Telegraph*, January 26, 1837.


Christ and another by a Catholic. J.J. Haley, from the Disciples of Christ, wrote *Debates that Made History* in 1920. While the title implies a much broader coverage, Haley only dealt with Campbell’s debates and presents him glowingly as an erudite and civil defender of Christianity. In the book’s first epigraph, Haley cites a quote that Purcell gave toward the end of his life: “Campbell was decidedly the fairest man in debate I ever saw, as fair as you can possibly conceive.”  

Haley also referred to

Campbell [as] a man of great capacity and personality in many directions . . . but in nothing did he reach up to such heights of sheer mastership as he did in those intellectual tournaments called debates . . . He was a dialectic genius.

In 1921, John Lamott published the *History of the Archdiocese in Cincinnati*. His account was the opposite of Haley’s, describing Purcell’s defense of the Catholicism as “brilliant” and resulting in a number of conversions to the Catholic Church which, according to Lamott, could not satisfy Purcell’s “demands for growth.” Lamott uses the debate with Campbell to illustrate Purcell’s superlative abilities as a defender of the Catholic Church in a hostile religious context. Commenting on the growth of Catholicism in Ohio, Lamott observes, “[a] great proportion of the credit for this must be given to the bishop’s able defense of the Catholic doctrines, which were maligned by Alexander Campbell.” Examples of these encomia could be multiplied, but that is not necessary.

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10 Ibid., 21.


12 Ibid., 79.

13 Ibid., 78.
What they all share is the fundamental desire to use the debate as a way of bolstering their protagonist’s standing in their narratives.

Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, critical analyses of the debate began to emerge in graduate student theses, scholarly articles, and treatments in histories of religion in the United States. The theses generally single out one aspect of the debate and provide an analysis from that perspective. Two notable theses are Carroll Ellis’s rhetorical analysis of the debate, and Jacob Wilson’s examination of its press coverage.\(^\text{14}\)

While Ellis spends the bulk of his time summarizing the debate, his brief rhetorical analysis provides a helpful overview of how the men enacted classical rhetorical devices. Wilson’s study of the debate’s press coverage brings together an extensive library of secondary sources to give readers a starting point for understanding how the public reacted to the event.

In the 1990s, three scholarly articles were published that offered focused, critical study of the debate. Edward Hicks’s article on Alexander Campbell and anti-Catholicism addresses Campbell’s participation in the debate.\(^\text{15}\) Relevant to our interests is Hicks’s observation that “[w]hile Campbell never participated in formal nativist politics . . . he was nonetheless a strident and influential anti-Catholic spokesman.”\(^\text{16}\) Hick’s provides a nuanced understanding of Campbell’s anti-Catholicism, which at first glance looks much


\(^{16}\) Ibid., 43.
like traditional Nativism, suggesting that Campbell would not think his anti-Catholic sentiments should be inscribed in law. In the same journal, six years later, Mark Weedman addresses how history functioned in the debate as a source of authority for both Campbell and Purcell.\textsuperscript{17} Contrasting Campbell’s “primitivist view of history” with Purcell’s “documentary view,” Weedman provides a useful framework for understanding why the men could not recognize each other’s historical sources as authoritative.\textsuperscript{18} Then, in 2008, E. Brooks Holifield wrote a fascinating article entitled, “Theology as Entertainment: Oral Debate in American Religion.”\textsuperscript{19} Holifield’s article only deals with the Campbell-Purcell debate minimally, but what it contributes is an unprecedented lens for looking at the meaning of the debate. Instead of focusing primarily on the participants’ ideas or attitudes, Holifield shifts the focus onto the audience and investigates the ways the debate was meaningful for them. Summarizing this point, he observes, “[w]hat debates accomplished was to validate group identity. They were not impartial quests for truth; they were exercises in group self-definition and pride.”\textsuperscript{20}

Several histories of religion in the United States have addressed the debate, of which three are outstanding. In Mark Noll’s 2002 book, \textit{America’s God}, he describes

\textsuperscript{17} Mark Weedman, “History as Authority in Alexander Campbell’s 1837 Debate with Bishop Purcell,” \textit{Fides et Historia} 28 (1996): 17-34.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 23. Weedman explains the difference between Campbell and Purcell: “Campbell advocated a primitivist view of history, believing that God’s ultimate, once-for-all self disclosure is recorded in the New Testament. All history since that time was an aberration from the plan initially revealed in the person of Christ. The task of the church, therefore, is to restore the purity of this ancient system. Purcell, by contrast, held a documentary view of history. For Purcell, the authentic revelation of God is contained in the documents of the church, documents which guard against development and change. The church’s task, accordingly, is to ‘conserve’ this tradition against such development.”


\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 516.
how Campbell fused republican political language and biblical themes to make a compelling case against Catholicism. Additionally, Noll emphasizes Campbell’s astute appropriation of “Baconian biblicism in the language of antiformalist and republican common sense.”

In 2004, William Shea goes into more detail about Campbell’s and Purcell’s seeming inability to understand each other’s point of view. In The Lion and the Lamb: Evangelicals and Catholics in America, he describes how the debate is an illustration of how both men were so blinded by their own ecclesial assumptions that they could not appreciate what the other was arguing. He notes, “[n]ot only was there no agreement reached even on small issues but also there was no curiosity and no sympathy.” That same year, Margaret DePalma published Dialogue on the Frontier: Catholic and Protestant Relations, 1793-1883, in which she underscores the debate’s importance for two reasons: “it was the only occasion in which an American Catholic bishop held an oral debate with a Protestant minister . . . [and it] signaled a shift from a reactive to an active defense of the church by the Catholic hierarchy.”

Taken together, these critical analyses lay a solid scholarly foundation for this dissertation. My central argument here is that Campbell and Purcell both understood their participation in the debate as an exercise in “pastoral apologetics,” and that attention to the form of the debate itself is a necessary part of understanding the event’s

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23 DePalma, 96-97.
significance. As I elaborate on this argument in the pages to come, I am offering a book-length analysis of the debate that is distinct from what has been written before. In this, I hope to enrich in some small way our understanding of this significant event in particular, and antebellum Protestant-Catholic relations in general.

Method and Outline

In writing this dissertation, I chose to focus on two important themes from the debate—theological authority and the role of the Catholic Church in America. These themes capture what I believe to be Campbell and Purcell’s central disagreements, and by looking at them we are able to have a more focused discussion of the debate. Employing an historical method, this debate has five chapters.

In chapter one, I give a short introduction to the general context of Protestant and Catholic relations from the colonial period to the time of the debate. I spend the bulk and remainder of the chapter giving biographies of Campbell and Purcell, in which I pay special attention to their ecclesial and intellectual backgrounds.

In chapter two, I provide an historical overview of Cincinnati prior to the Civil War and discuss Campbell and Purcell’s first meeting there in October 1836, just three months before the debate. This chapter outlines the major factors that motivated Campbell and Purcell to participate in the debate.

24 Patrick Carey, American Catholic Religious Thought: The Shaping of a Theological & Social Tradition, 2nd ed. (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2004), 13. Though he does not use the phrase “pastoral apologetics,” I am indebted to Carey for it. In his discussion of how American Catholics understood their faith and how they could relate to American Protestants in the nineteenth century, Carey notes, “American Catholic religious thought became primarily pastoral and apologetic (sometimes irenic and sometimes polemical). It was pastoral in the sense that it was chiefly concerned with identifying, defining and preserving for Catholics their religious identity in the midst of a voluntary and pluralistic religious country. It was apologetic in the sense that it tried to vindicate Catholicism in relation to the republican and Protestant tradition.” I will make the case in chapter three that the activity of “pastoral apologetics” applied to Campbell, as well.
In chapter three, I discuss the theme of theological authority in the debate. I describe the setting of the debate in Cincinnati, picking up where the historical description left off in chapter two. I then move on to discuss the broader American intellectual context, in which I highlight two competing and simultaneous trends—the quest for certainty and the presence of doubt. It is against this backdrop that I argue that Campbell and Purcell were enacting their “pastoral apologetics” by mobilizing distinct arguments for theological authority, specifically their conflicting conceptions of infallibility.

In chapter four, I discuss the role of the Catholic Church in America. I continue the discussion of Campbell and Purcell’s “pastoral apologetics” by moving from theological dispute into political debate about the Catholic Church’s presence in America. Chapter four will present Campbell’s argument that America can reform the Catholic Church, and Purcell’s response that the Catholic Church was truly American and did not have to prove her Americanism.

In chapter five, I discuss the close of the debate and its public reception. I follow this by describing two significant characteristics of the debate as a public event: namely, that it was a site of “boundary crossing” and “productive friction.” I then examine Campbell and Purcell’s post-debate friendship, concluding the dissertation with a brief discussion of how intra-Christian disagreement (like what we see between Campbell and Purcell) can function constructively in the context of Christian friendship.

I believe this debate is an important topic of study because it challenges us to concretize the issue of anti-Catholicism into a specific event—of which we (thankfully) have a literary account. That Protestants and Catholics were speaking and writing about
each other is no surprise. But what I think is important about this particular instance is that the Catholic question brought these men into the same room, in front of an audience, for a week. This experience forced each participant—and the audience—to engage the religious other as a person, and not a caricature.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{25} “Meet Research Travel Grant recipient Herbie Miller,” Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism, November 4, 2014, \url{http://cushwa.nd.edu/news/53553-meet-research-travel-grant-recipient-herbie-miller/}. Most of this paragraph is taken from an interview I gave for the Cushwa Center at the University of Notre Dame.
CHAPTER I:
INTRODUCING ALEXANDER CAMPBELL AND BISHOP JOHN PURCELL

Introduction

The lives of Alexander Campbell and John Baptist Purcell are not quite “rags to riches” stories, but they come close. Both men immigrated to America from Ireland, became naturalized citizens, and ascended to the top of their professions. Their success as church leaders in the nineteenth century Ohio Valley can be attributed to personal charisma as well as a cultural setting that smiled on men who were “self-starters.” This chapter provides an overview of their backgrounds and the American context that was the setting for their success. Chapter one provides an overview of the lives and ministries of Alexander Campbell and John Baptist Purcell in their shared American context. While these introductions cannot be exhaustive, they nevertheless examine the important topics in the men’s biographies that are relevant to what will be discussed in chapters two through five.

This chapter is divided into two uneven sections. The first and shortest is an overview of the Protestant-Catholic context in America from the colonial period to the time of the debate in 1837. This section orients the reader to American anti-Catholicism, and provides the background for the debate. The second section contains the overviews of Campbell and Purcell. Each introduction has two parts: the first is a standard personal
and professional biography; the second is a discussion of the intellectual commitments that undergirded their ecclesial work. By knowing their histories and intellectual dispositions, we have a helpful background for understanding why Campbell and Purcell might have been so eager to debate in the first place.

Section 1: Protestant-Catholic Relations in Antebellum America

From the early colonial period in British North America to Campbell and Purcell’s first meeting in 1836, social and political expressions of anti-Catholicism were a mainstay in American public life. Anti-Catholicism was a deeply ingrained characteristic of colonial identity\(^1\) and bequeathed to the young nation a pronounced sense of Protestant self-understanding that enabled it to define itself over and against Roman Catholicism.\(^2\) Even though Catholic France aided the colonists, this prejudice stayed with them long after George Washington had defeated the British at the Battle of Yorktown.

The anti-Catholicism that had been present in the colonies intensified in the first half of the nineteenth century as large numbers of European Catholic immigrants started coming to America. These immigrants, often speaking a foreign language, confirmed for Protestants what they already suspected even about their fellow American-born Catholic

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\(^1\) While there are problems in talking about a “colonial identity” that encompasses the diverse regional and cultural expressions of colonial self-understanding in the period, I think it is fair to assert that across the colonies anti-Catholicism was an important component in their construction of their identities.

citizens: Catholics were “outsiders” in the United States. More than differences in language, Protestant Nativists were quick to remind Americans that Catholics were a threat to American liberty for a host of reasons, not the least of which was their deference to a monarchical religious leader. By the 1830s, anti-Catholicism in the United States was expressed in several prominent events: the mob burning of the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts in 1834; the publication of Lyman Beecher’s infamous *A Plea for the West* in 1835; and the publication of the purportedly factual, yet fictional, account of a nun who escaped a convent where she was forced to serve the sexual needs of priests. Combined with a rise in Catholic immigration, these events made the 1830s an important precursor to the 1840s and 1850s when political manifestations of anti-Catholicism, like Nativism and the Know-Nothing Movement, gained national attention. These movements represent, in Ray Allen Billington’s words, the culmination of a “[h]atred of Catholics and foreigners [that] had been steadily growing in the United States for more than two centuries.”

Nonetheless, Catholics were able to adapt to this hostile social context because of two significant reasons. First, the dramatic rise in immigration created a critical mass of Catholics in the country, enabling them to have the confidence that they were a growing

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5 Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938), 1. On the same page, he goes on: “These upheavals could never have occurred had not the American people been so steeped in antipapal prejudice that they were unable to resist the nativistic forces of their day. This prejudice had been well grounded before the first English settlement and was fostered by the events of the entire colonial period.”
religious presence in America. Between the 1830s-1860s, Mark Noll notes, “the Catholic population leaped nearly tenfold,” making an astounding jump from 300,000 to 3,100,000; contrast this with the sluggish rise in U.S. population, which “increased only two and half times from 13,000,000 to 31,500,000.” What this rise in Catholic population helped accomplish was the beginning of a renegotiation of the term “outsider” as it applied to American Catholics. Hinting at Catholicism’s change in status from an “outsider” religion to an “insider” one, Noll observes,

[w]hat could be said even then [1860] . . . was that the Catholic Church was destined to make an ever-increasing impact on its new environment, just as that new environment was bound in some measure to make an impression upon the Church.

By increasing its size, the Catholic Church in America laid the groundwork for its Americanization.

Second, Catholic priests adapted their pastoral practice to the rural contexts of the Midwest and South, appropriating the Methodist circuit rider model to care for Catholics who were spread across the country. Illustrating this adaptation/Americanization, Noll describes how missionary priests would travel throughout the country ministering to far-flung Catholic communities in a manner much like their Protestant counterparts. “Traveling Catholic missioners,” he writes, “even copied a page or two from evangelical itinerants by adopting strategies to energize nominal Catholics and inspire the committed.” Catholicism spread throughout America partly because of the successful

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7 Ibid., 212.
8 Ibid., 210.
circuit rider model the Methodists had already mastered. Ironically, these “Catholics put to use styles of outreach that they were learning from the very ones who most resented their presence in America.”

The story of Catholic American assimilation is complex and multilayered, and much more nuanced than what I have outlined here. What my narrative attempts to show is that Catholics became American not so much because of the country’s progressive political ideals of religious toleration, but because Catholics were politically useful during the Revolution and too numerous to ignore in the nineteenth century. The Protestant majority in America simply (albeit slowly) had to adjust. But in order to be accepted, these Catholics understood the need to “Americanize,” a process that was by no means monolithic or straightforward. Whatever it looked like to be “American,” Catholics knew that they had to elbow their way into that category. We see this happening in the engagement between Alexander Campbell and Bishop John Purcell.

**Section 2: Introductions to Campbell and Purcell**

Against the backdrop of American anti-Catholicism, Campbell and Purcell each knew he had an apologetic responsibility to defend the Christian faith as he understood it, engaging in “ecclesial apologetics,” a defense of the positive claims of his particular church tradition vis-à-vis a rival tradition. While both were actively defending the claims of their traditions, they were executing these apologetics in two very different ways. Understanding these dramatically different ecclesial apologetics is an important first step for appreciating how their biographies contribute to their eventual clash over Roman Catholicism in the debate.

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9 Ibid.
Campbell had a project of *ecclesial purification* and *restoration*. For him, the contemporary church—from Roman Catholics, to Presbyterians, to Baptists—needed to be purified of the alien beliefs and practices that had latched on to its common life since the time of the New Testament (e.g., transubstantiation, infant baptism, oral confession, denominational organization). This purification would happen as contemporary congregations began to restore their beliefs and practices back to the simplicity of the church that was modeled in the book of Acts. For Campbell, purification and restoration were not ends in themselves. They were penultimate steps to a greater eschatological, ecumenical, and missionary goal: realizing a united church that manifested Jesus’ prayer for unity in John 17 that would be a witness to the non-Christian world. Paradoxically, for Campbell to achieve his goal he had to engage in a strategy of intra-Christian polemics to demonstrate the validity of his proposed reforms and the deficiency of the positions of his interlocutors, like Purcell.

Unlike Campbell, Purcell did not think the contemporary church needed to be restored, though it did need to be reunited. He would look to the earliest Christians and martyrs as witnesses to challenge morally lax Catholics in his church, but he did not think the contemporary church needed, or could be, restored to the model in Acts. For Purcell, the cumulative weight of the Christian tradition, both its theological formulae and ecclesial practices, made it impossible for the contemporary church to return to, or “restore,” the beliefs and practices of the church of the first century. Because he assumed that Christ had instituted episcopal succession and papal primacy—signs of the catholicity and apostolicity of the Catholic Church—Purcell believed that the Church’s doctrines and practices, those at which Campbell balked, were legitimate developments
of the deposit of faith. *Ipso facto*, none of these things needed to “purified” from Church’s common life.

Instead of restoring and purifying the Church, Purcell had a project of *ecclesial clarification* and *contextualization*. For him, the Catholic Church was the trans-historical and global communion that preserved and taught the message of faith found in the New Testament. It did not require a seismic ecclesiological shift like the one for which Campbell was calling. So when Purcell clarified and contextualized the Catholic Church, he was primarily making a cultural argument, not an ecclesiological one. In America and elsewhere, Catholicism had been the victim of gross misunderstanding and abuse, and Purcell aimed his ecclesial apologetics at two logically distinct, but historically overlapping constituencies: Protestants and Americans. He wanted to clarify that the Catholic Church was not “immoral” (a claim Campbell would make), and that it was wholesome expression of religiosity in America.¹⁰

**Campbell’s Life and Career**

Alexander Campbell was born into a Presbyterian family on September 12, 1788 thirty miles northwest of Belfast, Ireland. By the time he died on March 4, 1866 in Bethany, West Virginia he was “the unrivaled leader”¹¹ of the Disciples of Christ, a rapidly growing denomination¹² that he started after coming to America in 1809.

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¹⁰ This understanding of the different ecclesial strategies mirrors generally what William Shea presents in *The Lion and the Lamb*, ch. 1.


¹² As we will see, Campbell would not have appreciated his reform movement being called a “denomination.” While a current mainline denomination (the Christian Church [Disciples of Christ]) traces its origins back to Campbell, I use the word more as a sociological label than a theological one.
Regarded by many as one of America’s influential Christian leaders of the time, Campbell received accolades from figures as well regarded as former President James Madison, who said, “[i]t was my pleasure to hear him very often as a preacher of the gospel, and I regard him as the ablest and most original expounder of the Scriptures I have ever heard.”\(^{13}\)

One of the conclusions Campbell drew from his study of the Scriptures was that a Christianity torn apart by denominational division was not only a tragic sociological reality of the church, but it was also a sin. To remedy this, he helped start what he and his colleagues called the “current Reformation,” a movement with the goal of uniting the divided church (both Catholic and Protestant) by restoring it back to the simple beliefs and practices model found in the New Testament. Campbell hoped to bring an end to denominationalism by convincing Christians to unite on and affirm the “facts,” of Scripture rather than dividing over people’s opinions about those facts.\(^{14}\) Campbell understood facts to be “thing[s] said or done”\(^{15}\) and opinions to be “comment[s] on those facts.”\(^{16}\) He believed that the Bible contained the facts of the Christian faith, that is to say, those things God had said or done.\(^{17}\) Campbell contrasted these divine facts found in


\(^{14}\) In the section that follows, I will address in further detail Campbell’s commitment to Scottish Common Sense Realism and Baconian induction, both of which come to the surface in this preliminary discussion.

\(^{15}\) Campbell, Debate, 162.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 38.

the Bible with “human opinions,” which are comments on those facts. For Campbell, these “human opinions” were contained in “modern creeds,” like the Westminster Confession, which were nothing more than “human expositions of doctrines” found in the Bible. The “human expositions” (opinions) were problematic because they added to the facts of Christian doctrine extra, non-biblical beliefs that caused division among Christians (think, for example, of the Calvinist/Arminian controversy). Campbell affirmed the Apostles’ Creed, but only because it was a useful summary of the facts of Christian doctrine. In sum, his reforms were an attempt to disentangle the facts of the “Apostles’ doctrine” (his phrase) from the opinions of people who taught about that doctrine, like Calvin, and created a “compound” of the Apostles’ teaching and their own, which resulted in doctrinal systems like Calvinism. By separating the facts from the opinions, Campbell hoped that “all these parties [denominations] . . . would certainly coalesce and form one community.” Campbell’s goal in the “current Reformation,” then, was to convince churches to drop their denominational affiliations and only endorse the facts of Scripture and refuse to divide over matters of opinion (such as disagreements over predestination).

The motivation for Campbell’s ecumenical-cum-restorative efforts seems to have grown out of his experience of denominational division in his youth, and his investigation

18 Campbell, Debate, 162.

19 Ibid., 77. Emphasis original.

20 Ibid.

21 Alexander Campbell, The Christian System, in Reference to the Union of Christians, and a Restoration of Primitive Christianity, as Plead in the Current Reformation, 3rd ed. (Pittsburg: Forrester & Campbell, 1840), 102. While Campbell would have loathed the description, this was his “systematic theology.”

22 Ibid.
of “primitive Christianity” during his time as a student at the University of Glasgow.

When Alexander was born in Ballymena, Ireland in 1788, his father, Thomas, had completed his university studies at Glasgow two year earlier, and was three years away from finishing seminary training in Whitburn, Scotland. The seminary Thomas attended was part of the Old Light Anti-Burgher Seceder Presbyterian church, a group that formed within the Scottish Presbyterian Church over disagreements about loyalty oaths, church discipline, and patronage. The exceedingly specific identification of Thomas’ church is indicative of the deep disagreement that was present among Scottish Presbyterians at the time. Through his ministerial efforts, Thomas tried to unite these factions, but was ultimately unsuccessful. What he seemed to do well, though, was administer the school he started. Receiving a classical education from his father and eventually teaching in his father’s school, Alexander was well-prepared to take up his studies at the University of Glasgow.

From 1808-1809, Alexander studied at the University of Glasgow where he became committed to Scottish Common Sense Realism through the teaching of George Jardine. During his time at the University, Alexander showed an ecumenical sensibility like his father, and spent time with leaders in the Scottish independent churches, such as

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23 For more on this group, see James O. Duke, “Presbyterians, Presbyterianism,” in The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement, 610. Duke notes, “The Anti-Burghers arose (1733) by secession from the Church of Scotland and a subsequent in-house division (1744ff.) over tolerating (Burghers) or condemning (anti-Burghers) the loyalty oath imposed on three Scottish cities. The original secession related to readings and implications of Westminster standards, not their authority. Seceders also protested arbitrary—typically lax—enforcement of discipline and patronage. They detailed their complaints in ‘testimonies,’ which multiplied at the Burgher-Antiburgher division. Each Secession church required ministers and ruling elders to subscribe to its testimonies as subsidiary standards of Westminster teaching.”

Greville Ewing, John Glas, Robert Sandeman, and James and Robert Haldane. Historian of the Stone-Campbell Movement\textsuperscript{25} Leroy Garrett notes that these churches “had separated from the state [Presbyterian] church mainly over the independence of each congregation and the freedom of private interpretation of Scripture.”\textsuperscript{26} What they had as their goal, and what seemed to attract Alexander to them, was “the restoration of primitive Christianity.”\textsuperscript{27} Among the Scottish independent churches, Alexander found an ecclesial language that gave him a way to describe the frustrations he had experienced with the Old Light Anti-Burgher Seceder Presbyterians, namely divisions over what seemed to be peripheral theological and ecclesiological differences. Moreover, Campbell began to find ways to reimagine the contemporary ecclesial landscape, ways that deemphasized the importance of identifying with a particular denomination and placed greater importance on “primitive” or New Testament Christianity. In this context, Campbell became acutely aware that if he were thoroughly committed to the beliefs of the Old Light Anti-Burgher Seceder Presbyterians, then he would not be able to share the Lord’s Supper with the Scottish independent churches, a network of learning and encouragement that showed him a broader vision of Christian belief and practice. Garrett points out that Campbell

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know that as a faithful Seceder he could not accept Ewing and the other reformers who were not Seceders as equals in the church. Even an
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\textsuperscript{25} The designation “Stone-Campbell Movement” is a contemporary description of the churches who historically locate their origin with the nineteenth century reforms of Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone, a like-minded American reformer who would unite with Campbell in 1832.

\textsuperscript{26} Garrett, 118.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
exemplary Christian like Greville Ewing would not be allowed to break bread in the Seceder church.\textsuperscript{28}

While Alexander was studying at the University of Glasgow and learning from the Scottish independent churches, Thomas had already immigrated to America and was ministering with the Seceder presbytery in western Pennsylvania. However, Thomas soon ran afoul the denominational leadership because at a communion service he broke denominational rules and “suggested that all who felt disposed [not just Seceders] should feel free to share in the Supper without respect to party differences.”\textsuperscript{29} After hearings at the presbytery and synod levels, Campbell “found himself to be a \textit{persona non grata}” at his home presbytery in western Pennsylvania.\textsuperscript{30} So, on September 13, 1808 he resigned and began preaching for whomever would listen. His message of having an “open table” (my phrase) for the Lord’s Supper was so welcome that he eventually formed a para-church organization called the Christian Association of Washington (named after the county in western Pennsylvania) in August 1809. The Christian Association attracted Presbyterians and non-Presbyterians alike and operated as something like “an inter-denominational Bible study group, patterned on British missionary and Bible societies.”\textsuperscript{31}

Building on this success, Thomas penned the \textit{Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington} in September 1809, a fifty-six page document laying out the justification for his vision of a unified New Testament church that would be founded on

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} Webb, 69.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 72.
only on thing: the confession of Jesus as the Christ. A benchmark in early American ecumenical efforts, one of the document’s enduring lines is that

the church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the scriptures, and that manifest the same by their tempers and conduct, and of none else as none else can be truly and properly called Christians.\textsuperscript{32}

Thomas’ aim was not to start a new denomination but to work for unity within existing denominations.\textsuperscript{33} He hoped that the Christian Association would be accepted into the Presbyterian Church USA; however, their petition was rejected and in 1811 the Christian Association organized itself into an independent congregation, the Brush Run church in Brush Run, PA with thirty members.\textsuperscript{34}

In 1809, Alexander and the rest of the Campbell family arrived in western Pennsylvania. Alexander found himself immediately taken by his father’s call for reform, specifically what he said in the \textit{Declaration and Address}. The reasons for Thomas’ departure from the Pennsylvania Seceders resonated with Alexander who felt similar frustrations over a lack of Eucharistic fellowship in Scotland. Seeing this confluence of events as a sign of divine providence, Alexander committed himself to a career in ministry where he would carry out the ecumenical-cum-restorative reforms for which his father was calling and he was longing.


\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 10 (12). Campbell states, “The cause that we advocate is not our own peculiar, nor the cause of any party, considered as such; it is a common cause, the cause of Christ and our brethren of all denominations.”

\textsuperscript{34} Lester G. McAllister, “Campbell, Thomas,” in \textit{The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement}, 141.
Between 1809 and 1812, Alexander underwent several life-changes that seemed to affirm his commitment to ministry: he “preach[ed] his first sermon, [was] ordained to the ministry [by the Brush Run church] . . . and submit[ed] to baptism by immersion.”\textsuperscript{35} It is worth noting that Campbell was baptized as infant, yet he concluded that this baptism was invalid. His re-baptism by immersion on June 12, 1812 was at the hands of the Baptist minister Matthias Luce; this decision set him on a theological and ecclesial trajectory that guaranteed his departure from the Presbyterians and pushed this independent-leaning church leader closer to the Baptists.

At first glance, the Baptists seem like the obvious ecclesial allies for Campbell. They had shared commitments to baptism by immersion and local congregational autonomy, as well as a similar narrative of ecclesial decline from the period of the New Testament to the Reformation. Garrett points out that while Campbell

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never in any official way personally became a Baptist, he had become for all practical purposes a Baptist. The first two Campbell churches, Brush Run and Wellsburg, belonged to Baptist associations, and his people were first known as “Reformed Baptists.”\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

Despite all of this, Campbell’s relationship with the Baptists was always tenuous. Between 1824-1829 Campbell spelled out his programmatic reforms in a series of articles entitled “A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things,” which while allowing him to identify his own views made it clear that he and the Baptists differed on important matters. The differences centered on the fact “that the Campbells did not accept Baptist

\begin{footnotes}
\item[35] Garrett, 119.
\item[36] Ibid.
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beliefs concerning such things as the meaning of baptism and the role of the minister.”

During his affiliation with the Mahoning Baptist Association, the Association grew at a rapid rate because of Campbell’s writing, speaking, and travelling. More than a few Baptists ministers who took issue with some of Campbell’s beliefs also started to resent his success. In 1830, Campbell broke off his affiliation with the Baptists which caused a “domino effect” and several Baptist associations dissolved their ties with the denomination. That year “the Mahoning Association dissolved [Campbell’s association]. . . followed by numerous Baptist Associations throughout Virginia, Ohio, and adjacent states that also dissolved or divided, following the lead of the Campbells.” Those churches that left the Baptist associations and affiliated with Campbell were known by a variety of names: “Christian Church,” “Church of Christ,” or simply “Brush Run Church” (for example), but Campbell preferred “Disciples of Christ.”

In 1832, the churches affiliated with Campbell united with a similar reform movement, that of Barton W. Stone (1772-1844) from central Kentucky. Together these two movements united to form what would eventually be called the Stone-Campbell Movement. Campbell would continue to lead the Movement, helping it develop an organizational structure for inter-congregational cooperation and a missionary society. He would continue to be the Movement’s *de facto* authority figure throughout his life, and as one historian notes, “although he had no formal authority, it was almost

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37 Helsabeck, et al., 48-49.
38 Helsabeck, 49.
39 Ibid.
impossible to successfully oppose his opinions in the church."  

Toward the end of his life, Campbell lamented the Baptist split, thinking it a sad matter that did not have to happen. By the time he died on March 4, 1866, the church unity movement he helped start was fissing under the pressure of regional differences caused by the Civil War and was well on its way to realizing the formal splits that would come in the twentieth century.

**Campbell’s Intellectual Background: Common Sense Realism and Baconian Induction**

The philosophical school known as Scottish Common Sense Realism is the primary intellectual framework for understanding Campbell’s theological and ecclesiological work. Growing up, Campbell would have been exposed to the principles of Common Sense through his father’s teaching, but it was not until he went to the University of Glasgow where these commitments solidified for him. Common Sense Realism is often prefaced with the adjective “Scottish” because universities in Scotland, like Glasgow, were the places in which it took recognizable form. Common Sense Realism emerged at a time of profound social discord in Scotland. Sydney Alhstom has

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41 Gary Holloway, “Alexander Campbell as a Publisher,” *Restoration Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (1995): 34. Holloway also notes that “Campbell ruled as a bishop-editor,” which is an interesting description in light of Campbell’s critique of Catholicism.

42 Garrett, 134.

43 David Edwin Harrell, Jr., *Quest for a Christian America: The Disciples of Christ and American Society to 1866* (Nashville, TN: The Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1966). Harrell and others after him have framed the splintering of the Stone-Campbell Movement into three sub-groups using a “regionalism thesis.” This thesis posits that the division between the non-instrumental Churches of Christ (located largely in the South) and the Disciples of Christ (located largely in the North) was predicated in large part by the effects of the Civil War and Reconstruction. An added point of contention for the Movement, was the advent of higher criticism in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By 1906, the simmering social and intellectual tensions became explicit when non-instrumental churches listed themselves in the 1906 U.S. Census as a separate denomination from the Disciples of Christ. Then in the 1960s, the Disciples of Christ split, with one part becoming the mainline denomination known today as the Christians Church (Disciples of Christ) and the other forming a loose network of churches known as the Independent Christian Churches.

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noted that eighteenth century Scotland was anything but a place of quietude; rather, an entire “cultural resurgence [was taking place] against the background of ecclesiastical discord.”\(^{44}\) This discord is illustrated by looking at the effects of Deistic rationalism in the theological and philosophical spheres, which reflected a lack of trust in the Bible’s miraculous accounts, and the great conflict between the State Church and its various dissenters in the ecclesial world, which resulted in the founding of the Free Church in Scotland in 1843.\(^{45}\)

As a philosophical school, Common Sense was a “conservative interpreter”\(^{46}\) of John Locke (1632-1704) that resisted the skepticism of David Hume (1711-1776) and the Enlightenment Deists.\(^{47}\) The philosophy of Common Sense advocated the following points: 1) “Philosophy depends on scientific observation”; 2) “the observation of consciousness establishes principles which are anterior to and independent of experience”; 3) “nothing can be an efficient cause in the proper sense but an intelligent being”; and 4) “the first principles of morals are self-evident intuitions.”\(^{48}\) This philosophy maintained that humans could have reliable knowledge of the external world through their senses, while avoiding the skepticism of philosophers like David Hume\(^{49}\), to

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\(^{45}\) Ibid., 258.

\(^{46}\) Casey, 41.


\(^{48}\) Ahlstrom, 261. In these lines, Ahlstrom is summarizing Reid.

whom Common Sense aimed to be an answer.\textsuperscript{50} In short, the goal of Common Sense Realism was to demonstrate “the reality of the external world, personal identity, other minds, uniformity in nature, and the existence of God.”\textsuperscript{51}

The chief representative for this goal was Thomas Reid (1710-1796) of King’s College in Aberdeen and the University of Glasgow.\textsuperscript{52} Reid claimed to have uncovered and corrected a skepticism that was nascent in Locke’s philosophy of knowledge, a skepticism that Hume would develop fully. Reid affirmed with Locke that a subject can know an object through “sensory experience and the mind’s reflections on its own operations.”\textsuperscript{53} However, Reid believed

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that Locke erred by speaking as though the mind’s ideas merely “represented” objects in the external world. To perceive an object, Locke thought, was to have an “idea” of it. As Reid understood him, Locke was saying that “ideas in the mind are the only immediate objects of thought.”\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

Reid modified Locke by saying that ideas were not “mental objects,” but “mental acts.”\textsuperscript{55}

The nuance between object and act was important for Reid, because it implied that “[t]o have an idea . . . was to perceive an object, not an object that mirrored the object.”\textsuperscript{56}

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\textsuperscript{50}S.A. Grave, \textit{The Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense}, (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1960), 4.

\textsuperscript{51} Wallace Matson, \textit{A New History of Philosophy, Volume Two: From Descartes to Searle}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2000), 435.

\textsuperscript{52} Other important Common Sense Realists were Dugald Stewart (1753-1828) and George Campbell (1719-1796).

\textsuperscript{53} E. Brooks Holifield, \textit{Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War} (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 175.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid. 176.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
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Because Reid’s mental act enabled the subject to perceive the object in itself, Reid’s development of Locke earned the ascription “realist.” For Reid,

[s]ensation and perception were immediately present to consciousness; one could not be derived from the other. The sensation registered an inner state; the perception carried the knower into the world of real objects.  

By saying that a subject could know an object through an action—a “mental act”—Reid believed he was correcting a “skepticism hidden in Locke’s ‘ideal theory.’”

For Reid, the subject’s sensory experience could reliably be trusted to deliver dependable knowledge of the world (contra-Hume); however the “sensory experience” required that the subject know the object as such, and not an idea of that object (contra-Locke).

Relating to sensory knowledge of the world, Holifield summarizes Reid’s position as follows:

[e]very sensation implied judgment that the sensing self existed; every impression presupposed a judgment that it had a cause sufficient to produce it; every perception contained a reference to both a subject and an object, and any claim that the object was inaccessible had no ground in experience. He [Reid] spoke of these implicit judgments as the “first principles” of the mind . . . Just as it made no sense to deny the rule of logic or deny the axioms of mathematics, so also it made no sense to deny the necessary truths implicit in metaphysics: the reality of the self, causation, the external world, as well as the mind’s ability to know it.

Building on this realist epistemology, Reid and others were indebted to the work of Francis Bacon (1561-1626), particularly his scientific method and its relevance for

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57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Nicholas Wolterstorff is suggestive of this idea in Reid, namely that senses convey “dependable” knowledge. See, Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

60 Holifield, Theology in America, 177.
philosophy. In *Protestants in an Age of Science*, Theodore Dwight Bozeman summarizes Baconian philosophy as a pattern generally . . . equated with the ‘inductive’ methodology of current science, which, it was held, was careful to root its depiction of the general laws of nature in a meticulous survey of particulars. Yet it also evoked a cluster of related ideas: a strenuously empiricist approach to all forms of knowledge, a declared greed for the objective fact, and a corresponding distrust of “hypotheses,” of “imagination,” and, indeed of reason itself.61

What Bacon’s method gave Protestant theologians was a scientific vocabulary, using words like “facts,” and method to practice their craft as an inductive science, in contrast to the syllogistic, Aristotelian deduction of Catholicism.62 Bozeman summarizes:

> [t]he main point was that the facts in Scripture, as facts in nature, were irreproachable: “The relation in which we stand to the supernatural disclosures of an authentic revelation is analogous to that which, according to . . . Bacon, we sustain to nature. As the phenomena of the material world are not to be judged, but seen, so the mysteries of heaven are not to be judged, but apprehended.”63

The appropriation of the inductive scientific method for the purposes of philosophical inquiry that sought to validate the inductive method required circular logic, as Bozeman

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61 Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 3. Later in the same chapter, Bozeman summarizes “four principal elements of ‘Baconism’ as elaborated by the Scottish [Common Sense] School: 1. A spirited enthusiasm for natural science. 2. A scrupulous empiricism, grounded upon the confident ‘trust in the senses’ and in the reality of the outer world supplied by the Realist doctrine of ‘judgment.’ 3. A sharp accent upon the limits of scientific method and knowledge, directed to the inductive control of generalizations by continuous reference to ‘facts.’ Abstract concepts not immediately forged from observed data have no place in scientific explanation. 4. A celebratory focus upon ‘Lord Bacon’ as the progenitor of inductive science; a flat identification of Newtonian methods with Bacon’s ‘induction’” (21).

62 Ibid., 7.

63 Ibid., 142. Bozeman is quoting James Henley Thornwell (1812-1862), the nineteenth century Presbyterian minister and teacher.
points out.\textsuperscript{64} Here we see one of the most glaring problems facing the Common Sense philosophers: the appropriation of pure induction to reach their conclusions. As Bozeman has made clear, it was impossible for Reid and his contemporaries to use pure induction to prove induction;\textsuperscript{65} at some point, deductive methods would be needed to argue for their position.

This circularity illustrates what is perhaps the chief problem for Common Sense: it “could not logically demonstrate the common-sense principles”\textsuperscript{66} and when forced to account for them, Reid would say they came from “the inspiration of the Almighty’ and that they constitute ‘common sense.’”\textsuperscript{67} Of Reid’s first principles, Wallace Matson observes that they “cannot be proved, [and] . . . need no proof. Anyone who really doubted them would be mad.”\textsuperscript{68} Matson’s critique is damning for Common Sense. Because the first principles of common sense come from supernatural inspiration, serious philosophical problems arise when two people employing these principles arrive at different conclusions. Are the interlocutors bound to assert that anyone who disagrees with them is “mad,” violating common sense, or being dishonest? While not all proponents of Common Sense would be so brazen as to make these accusations, their philosophical system put them in a position of combativeness; when faced with

\textsuperscript{64}Ibid., 8. Bozeman notes, “[a] certain circularity was involved in the effort to validate the inductive method by means of induction, but the Realists seriously attempted to do so, and their effort amounted finally to an identification of the human mind as a structure ‘designed’ explicitly and solely for an inductive style of knowing.”

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{66} Holifield, \textit{Theology in America}, 177.

\textsuperscript{67} Matson, 435.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.
competing “common sense” conclusions, *ad hominem* attack seemed to be the last argumentative resort. In this way Common Sense was very much a defensive philosophy. 69

The defensive nature of Common Sense seems to have been one of its appealing aspects for the theologians who appropriated it. Common Sense Realism took root in late-eighteenth century American theology through the work of John Witherspoon (1723-1794), “who used Reid’s ideas to overcome [Jonathan Edwards’] idealism.” 70 Flowing outward from schools like Princeton, Common Sense “became the reigning philosophy of every Protestant seminary of note.” 71 In addition to the Presbyterian Princeton, Common Sense also took root in populist traditions like the Baptists, Methodists, and Campbell’s Disciples of Christ. 72 What seems to have been most appealing to all of these denominations was that it appeared to be an anti-philosophy that broke from the skepticism of modern philosophy, while still equipping the common person with the ability to practice a legitimate form of philosophical reasoning. 73 It was this anti-philosophical philosophy that was so welcomed by Campbell and other American

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69 I borrow the description of Common Sense as a defensive philosophy from Henry F. May, *The Divided Heart: Essays on Protestantism and the Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 186. May uses the word “defensive” to describe the “Didactic Enlightenment,” which can be used synonymously with Common Sense Realism, but for the sake of consistency and not ascribing to May something he did not say, I chose to make the statement my own.

70 Holifield, *Theology in America*, 175.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Marsden, 82-83.
“Protestants who wanted to preserve traditional forms of Christianity without having to appeal to traditional religious authorities.”

Campbell was interested in “preserv[ing] traditional forms of Christianity,” namely the standard doctrines like those found in the Apostles’ Creed. Because he was a restorationist, Campbell would only affirm the Apostles’ Creed because it was a summary of biblical facts; there was no room in his hermeneutic to affirm the development of doctrine. For him, these biblical facts were the same as “historical ‘facts’ [which] did not differ essentially from the physical facts of the natural world.” What this assumption enabled Campbell to do was take the Bible as an “empirical baseline of inductive science.” Drawing on Locke and Reid, Campbell and others believed the biblical writers all had “direct sensory experience” of those biblical facts and recorded them, making those writings akin to “journalistic observations and results kept by an experimental chemist.” For Campbell, these facts were the baseline for faith. He believed that “faith . . . [was] a belief in testimony, divine or human.” He contends that the act of faith has five parts, or five “golden links, in that divine chain, which binds our hearts to God.” These five links are as follows: 1) something is said or done, and this is a fact; 2) someone makes a testimony about what they saw or heard; 3) another person believes the testimony; 4) that person has a feeling that is “consentaneous with that faith”

74 Noll, America’s God, 103.
75 Bozeman, 140.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
78 Campbell, Debate, 162.
79 Ibid.
(confusingly, faith and belief seem interchangeable here); and 5) the person acts in accordance “with that feeling.”\textsuperscript{80} For Campbell, identifying a fact was a necessary part of having faith; but faith could not be reduced to believing a fact or a testimony about that fact; faith required feeling and action, as well. According to Campbell, “[t]he gospel facts, as Paul sums them up . . . which engross the whole, are the death, the burial and resurrection of Jesus.”\textsuperscript{81} These facts seem to be the central ones Campbell believes should unite Christians, as he proclaims “the whole Protestant world believes” them.\textsuperscript{82}

Campbell’s ecumenical project was predicated on the Common Sense notion that one could easily identify the facts of Scripture without disagreement about what they were. He was also trapped in a hermeneutical problem that was just beginning to emerge with the rise of historical criticism. If, for example, a “fact” like the resurrection is challenged as not being historical, can a person have faith according to Campbell’s definition of faith? Under Campbell’s 5-step definition it does not seem so, because he assumed that a fact and a testimony about that fact were identical. In his study of Campbell’s hermeneutic, Michael Casey observes that for Campbell “[t]he verses of the Scripture were individual historical facts, and the verses were to be gleaned from the Scripture in an inductive manner to construct biblical doctrine.”\textsuperscript{83} While Campbell is willing to admit that the Bible was written by human authors under divine inspiration, his

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{83} Casey, 49.
hermeneutic does not give him the room to assert that there was any discrepancy between what the author said happened and what actually happened.

What Common Sense Realism and Baconian induction gave Campbell was a philosophical vocabulary to talk about knowing the facts of God’s actions in history, and not simply his (or the biblical writer’s) perception of them; additionally, the Baconian method gave him a way to inductively study the text and come away with a conclusion that was not dependent (allegedly) on any form of deduction. In his book *The Christian System*, Campbell outlined seven rules for interpretation that would equip students to inductively study the Bible and come away with an understanding of its facts. 84

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84 See, Campbell, *The Christian System*, 16-17. “We have written frequently and largely upon the principles and rules of interpretation, as of essential importance and utility in this generation of remaining mysticising [sic] and allegorizing. From our former writings we shall here only extract the naked rules of interpretation, deduced from extensive and well digested premises; fully sustained, too, by the leading translators and most distinguished critics and commentators of the last and present century.

**RULE 1.** On opening any book in the sacred Scriptures, consider first the historical circumstances of the book. These are the order, the title, the author, the date, the place, and the occasion of it. The order in historical compositions is of much importance; as, for instance, whether the first, second, or third, of the five books of Moses, or of any other series of narrative, or of even epistolary communications. The title is also of importance, as it sometimes expresses the design of the book. As *Exodus*—the departure of Israel from Egypt; *Acts of Apostles*, &c. The peculiarities of the author; the age in which he lived; his style; mode of expression, illustrate his writings. The date, place, and occasion of it, are obviously necessary to a right application of any thing in the book.

**RULE 2.** In examining the contents of any book, as respects precepts, promises, exhortations, &c., observe who it is that speaks, and under what dispensation he officiates. Is he a Patriarch, a Jew, or a Christian? Consider also the persons addressed; their prejudices, characters, and religious relations. Are they Jews or Christians—believers or unbelievers—approved or disapproved? This rule is essential to proper application of every command, promise, threatening, admonition, or exhortation, in Old Testament or New.

**RULE 3.** To understand what the meaning of what is commanded, promises, taught, &c., the same philological principles, deduced from the nature of language; or the same laws of interpretation which are applied to the language of other books, are to be applied to the language of the Bible.

**RULE 4.** Common usage, which can only be ascertained by testimony, must always decide the meaning of any word which had but one signification; but when words have according to testimony, (i.e. the Dictionary,) more meanings than one, whether literal or figurative, the scope, the context, or parallel passages must decide the meaning: for if common usage, the design of the writer, the context, and parallel passages fails, there can be no certainty in the interpretation of language.

**RULE 5.** In all tropical language ascertain the point of resemblance, and judge of the nature of the trope, and its kind, from the point of resemblance.
six were the standard grammatical-historical methods common to mid-level biblical critics at the time, such as paying attention to the historical and linguistic context of the passage and defining key terms. The seventh was the interesting claim that a person could accurately employ all six previous rules but miss the meaning of the text, because the reader did not have the proper, humble attitude toward the text. The reader needed to have a humble and teachable spirit, or in Campbell’s words, come within the “understanding distance” of the text. What this meant for Campbell was that a student could, in principle, follow all of the standard rules of biblical studies, but still not have the faith that was undergirded by the facts they had discovered. (Here we see clear overlap between Campbell’s understanding of the Bible and Common Sense Realism, in that built into both projects was a way to discredit those with whom one disagreed.)

Michael Casey summarizes Campbell’s method as follows: “[t]o obtain a biblical doctrine on a topic, (baptism, for example) one would inductively glean all the Scripture references on baptism and then generalize a conclusion from the particular verses.”

When Campbell applied this method to a particular doctrine, he would employ the following method:

RULE 6. In the interpretation of symbols, types, allegories, and parable, this rule is supreme:—*Ascertain the point to be illustrated; for comparison is never to be extended beyond that point—to all the attributes, qualities, or circumstances of the symbol, type, allegory, or parable.*

RULE 7. For the salutary and sanctifying intelligence of the Oracles of God, the following rule is indispensable—*We must come within the understanding distance.* There is a distance which is properly called the speaking distance, or the hearing distance; beyond which the voice reaches not, and the ear hears not. To hear another, we must come within that circle which the voice audibly fills. Now we may with propriety say, that as it respects God, there is an understanding distance. All beyond that distance, cannot understand God; all within it, can easily understand him in all matters of piety and morality. God himself is the centre of that circle, and humility is the circumference.”

85 Casey, 42.
[t]he doctrine of the Bible, on any particular subject of inquiry, can be clearly and satisfactorily ascertained only by a full induction of all that is found in it upon that subject. When the induction is perfect and complete and fully comprehended on any one point, we can never have any more divine light upon that subject. This is our method of learning and of teaching what the Holy Spirit has taught on any given subject.⁸⁶

This illustration about Campbell’s doctrine of baptism is indicative of how he approached other topics, such as the nature of the church. So when he proposed his ecclesial reforms, such as restoring the New Testament church, he was making an argument built on the two pillars of Common Sense Realism and Baconian induction. In his reforms, Campbell relied on the Realist assumptions of Common Sense epistemology, which allowed him to take for granted that the Bible was an historically accurate testimony to God’s actions in history.⁸⁷ And he also applied the Baconian method of induction to the Bible, seeing it as a source of data that he could study and classify, and then use to construct a doctrine on a certain topic.⁸⁸ With this Realist foundation and hermeneutic method, he could be confident he was teaching the “monovalent truth” of God’s message to humanity.⁸⁹

**Purcell’s Life and Career**

Known as the “Patriarch of the West” in the American hierarchy because of his lengthy tenure, Purcell was the bishop, and later archbishop, of Cincinnati for a

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⁸⁷ Boring, 66. Boring notes that “Campbell was not arguing for the historical factuality of the biblical record—something hardly doubted either by Campbell or those with whom he was in conversation.”

⁸⁸ Casey, 49.

⁸⁹ G. Richard Phillips, “Rationalism,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, 627. I borrow the idea of “monovalent truth” and its connection to Campbell’s intellectual assumptions from Phillips’ article, even though the author is not making the precise point about Campbell that I am: “The Movement’s profound embrace of ‘Common Sense’ philosophy, with its conviction of the monovalence of truth, led to the assumption that all properly thinking people think alike, so that those who reach theological conclusions different from the Movement’s own were either ignorant, stupid, or deliberately perverse.”
remarkable fifty-year period (1833-1883) in the heart of the nineteenth century. During that time, he led the Catholic Church through a period of growth marked by some of the most defining issues in U.S. Catholic history, such as Nativism, the Civil War, and the American reception of papal infallibility. As a bishop in a mission territory, he carried the canonical label of “missionary bishop,” but this title was more than a line from his job description: it was reflective of a charismatic vocation that fueled his drive to enculturate Catholicism into an American context where views on the Catholic Church ranged from ambivalence to outright violence. Purcell knew that if his fellow citizens were going to accept Catholicism into the nation’s social fabric, then he was going to have to show that the Catholic Church could flourish as an organic outgrowth of American society. One way he sought to accomplish this goal was by demonstrating that he, as an Irish immigrant, could assimilate and constructively participate in American civil society with Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

John Baptist Purcell was born on February 26, 1800 in Mallow, Ireland. His parents had three other surviving children, one of whom was Edward (1808-1881) who would enter the priesthood and later minister with John in Cincinnati. In his youth, John received a classical education and hoped to study for the priesthood. However, he was unable to secure the financial assistance to pursue this goal in Ireland, so he put off seminary and traveled to America in 1818. Settling in Maryland that year, he obtained certification from the Asbury Methodist College to teach Latin, Greek, and arithmetic. In 1820, Purcell continued his teaching at Mount Saint Mary’s in Emmitsburg, MD, where

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90 Unless I make a point that warrants using the title archbishop, I will refer to Purcell as a bishop since his debate with Campbell happened before he was elevated to the archbishopric.

he also began his own education for the priesthood. He received his minor orders in 1823, and in 1824 left Maryland for Paris where he would finish his studies at the Sulpician seminary. In 1826, Purcell was ordained in the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, and concluded his time with the Sulpicians in 1827. That year he returned to Mount Saint Mary’s where he taught and later became the school’s president in 1829. His tenure as president would be short-lived, because in 1833 he was called to be the second bishop of Cincinnati, after Bishop Edward Fenwick’s death.

Some of the earliest records we have of Purcell’s first days in Cincinnati come from his personal journal, dating from 1833-1836, which reveal an important tension that remained with him throughout his career: namely, how he could be a constructive pastoral voice in a context of cultural controversy. In early January 1834, Purcell told a story about his interaction with a prominent Cincinnati attorney named “Mr. Cassily,” who either was a Catholic or was friendly toward Catholics but was unfortunately married to a “bitter Protestant.” Apparently, part of what made Mrs. Cassily bitter was that her husband allowed the Sisters of Charity to live for free in a rental house they owned; she was flabbergasted that her husband would “squander 5000 [dollars] on Lazy nuns.” Purcell notes that because of this “persecution at home,” Mr. Cassily took back his originally generous donation to the Church and put Purcell in the position of

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92 Later in the chapter, I will address Purcell’s intellectual formation during his time in seminary.


94 Ibid., 244.

95 Ibid.
having to find the sisters a new place to live. Although he was frustrated by Mr. Cassily’s equivocation, Purcell was not going to fight with him about it. Purcell wrote in his journal, “I have made up my mind not to quarrel with him, nor with anyone.” The next line in Purcell’s journal reads, “Servum Dei non oportet litigare”—God’s servant must not quarrel.

It seems Purcell struggled to follow his own advice. Later in the same month, Purcell wrote the following in his journal:

[b]igots growing fierce in their opposition to Popery—Brownler’s [sic, William Craig Brownlee]99 Letter to the R.C. Bishops of the U. States! In. Journal—Why do not Catholics awake?—Such apathy in the ranks of our own Clergy is inconceivable—I know that prayer & Study & visiting the Sick is more meritorious and Commendable, but we must descend into the Plain & fight the Philistines with their own arms.100

“Descend[ing] into the Plain & fight[ing] the Philistines” was Purcell’s way of saying that he was not going to have a reactive posture when Protestants provoked controversy.

In her important book, Dialogue on the Frontier, Margaret DePalma makes this observation when she notes that in agreeing to debate Campbell, Purcell was “signal[ing]
a shift from a reactive to an active defense of the church by the Catholic hierarchy.”

But what Purcell’s “Philistine” comments show is that the Campbell debate was not so much a shift in disposition (from reactive to active) for Purcell, but an amplification of an already-active attitude. Purcell was always in an “active” mode of engagement, but it took a noteworthy social event, like a debate, to make that temperament clear. As much as Purcell may have wanted to be irenic, he could not extract himself from the culture of religious controversy that surrounded him in Cincinnati. This culture was of course fueled by Protestant animosity from the outside, but also intra-Catholic ethnic differences between the Irish and Germans that made managing a diverse diocese a challenging task and called for a great deal of prudential judgment. Two examples from his ministry illustrate how Purcell exercised this prudential judgment in knowing when and with whom it was appropriate to quarrel: his publishing in *The Catholic Telegraph*, and his handling of German Catholic immigrants in a diocese that had a significant Irish population.

The first issue of *The Catholic Telegraph* was published on October 22, 1831, and except for short periods in 1832 (because of the cholera epidemic) and 1833 (because of the search for a new bishop), it has been distributed weekly ever since. The paper has an important place in U.S. Catholic history as being “the first Catholic journal published west of the Allegheny Mountains, and . . . the first diocesan organ in the United

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101 DePalma, 97.

As a diocesan paper, *The Catholic Telegraph* would have had Purcell’s *de facto* authorization, even if he was not its editor.

Two years before Purcell came to Cincinnati, the editor of the *Telegraph* laid out the paper’s aims in its first issue:

The primary object, in issuing the Catholic Telegraph, is to aid in diffusing a correct knowledge of the Roman Catholic faith. By doing this, we are conscious of discharging a two-fold duty; namely, “of contending earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints;” and of removing some of the difficulties which prevent our dissenting brethren from rendering that justice to the ancient faith, which a correct knowledge of its tenets would, generally, lead them to concede.

The apologetic mission of the paper was speaking to two constituencies simultaneously. First, it was offering a defense of Catholicism for Catholics in Cincinnati, making sure they had a “correct knowledge” of it in the midst of a Protestant society. Second, the paper was attempting to expose and falsify the erroneous beliefs that Protestants had about Catholicism, which would surely irritate the editors of Protestant papers in the city. The *Telegraph* editor seemed to know this and tried to soften the blow of the paper’s mission by saying that Protestants with “a correct knowledge” of Catholicism would be more amenable to the faith, giving them the benefit of the doubt. But even with that positive remark, in the same issue, the editor was aware of the Protestant opposition to the paper’s presence when he said,

[w]e expect their opposition, and are prepared to meet it in a firm and temperate manner. We do not wish to provoke controversy; but we shall

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103 Ibid. 1.
never shrink from it, when our silence would be detrimental to the cause of religion and truth.\textsuperscript{105}

As a religious paper that wanted to make positive claims about theology, \textit{The Catholic Telegraph} was by its very existence setting itself up as an opponent of other papers who held opposite beliefs about Christian theology. By defending Catholicism, \textit{The Catholic Telegraph} was necessarily challenging the assumptions of Protestantism, even though it tried to be “temperate” in its tone.

When Purcell wrote his first pastoral letter to the Catholics and clergy of Cincinnati in December 1833, just weeks after arriving, he addressed the accusations that Protestants typically brought against Catholics, and encouraged his flock to remain faithful:

To rob you of this inheritance of your ancestors, the solace of your afflictions and the only hope of your eternal safety, how many deceitful forms has not error assumed to seduce if possible, even the elect? When argument fails they have recourse to abuse; when truth refuses to lend its sanction to their exhibition of our doctrine, they hesitate not to impute to it blasphemies which it has an hundred times disavowed and solemnly anathematized.\textsuperscript{106}

Purcell cites idolatry and indulgences as two examples of how Protestants malign Catholics, and gives his readers a short response to their accusers.\textsuperscript{107} And then Purcell notes that \textit{ad hominem} attacks go along with the doctrinal ones: “[w]hen our doctrines are placed beyond their reach, they turn to the vices of a few of the great number honoured

\textsuperscript{105} \textit{The Catholic Telegraph}, October 22, 1831, in Paluszak. 4. Emphasis in Paluszak.

\textsuperscript{106} John Baptist Purcell, “Pastoral Letter,” \textit{The Catholic Telegraph}, December 6, 1833. Bold emphasis mine, italics original.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
with exalted station in the church.” Purcell closes out his comments to the laity by reminding them of the early Christians, with whom they can identify as having to make great sacrifices for the faith. Purcell observes,

[w]e profess the same faith, we hope for the same recompense, we partake of the same sacraments, we have received the same spirit as the early christians, why then, should we not resolve to imitate them? They had obstacles to surmount and passions to subdue as well as we have—nor was the yoke of Jesus Christ lighter for them than it is for us.¹⁰⁹

Purcell’s pastoral letter is important for three reasons. First, he is offering Cincinnati Catholics concrete responses to the accusations they may receive on a regular basis from Protestants they may know, or from the Protestant press. Second, he shows an astute awareness of how his Protestant opposition—especially restorationists like Campbell—attack the Catholic Church, and turns the tables on them. Purcell identifies the persecution contemporary Catholics undergo with the sufferings of the earliest Christians, in the process coopting Campbell’s first century Christian type. Third, Purcell’s recommendations show that he knows how to quarrel in a way that is “firm” and “temperate,” to use the language of the first issue of The Catholic Telegraph. Purcell’s pastoral counsel is isomorphic with the mission of the paper in which he is offering it.

As important as it was for Purcell to speak to and for Catholics as a whole, he needed to have a sensitivity to the ethnic differences in his diocese that were becoming more clear as immigrants made their way to Cincinnati. In the 1830s, one of Purcell’s pressing challenges was to assimilate the German Catholic immigrants who came to

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.
Cincinnati. The 1830s were a period of remarkable growth for Cincinnati, with “the local population nearly doubl[ing], from 24,831 to 46,382” during that ten-year span.\footnote{Walter Stix Glazer, \textit{Cincinnati in 1840: The Social and Functional Organization of an Urban Community During the Pre-Civil War Period} (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 1999), 49.} Walter Galzer’s study of Cincinnati notes that “[d]uring the 1830s the annual rate of population increase jumped from approximately one thousand to nearly four thousand, but many of the newcomers who arrived after 1835 were Germans.”\footnote{Ibid.} By 1840, Cincinnati began to have a pronounced German accent; that year “native Germans in Cincinnati numbered 14,163 or 31\% of the city’s 46,382 population.”\footnote{M. Edmund Hussey, \textit{Archbishop Purcell of Cincinnati} (N.p.: n.p., 2011), 61.} And of those Germans, “[i]t was estimated that three fourths of these Germans were Catholics.”\footnote{Ibid.}

In the face of the increasing German-ization of Cincinnati, Purcell gave German Catholics the freedom to retain certain aspects of their culture that were important to them in their parishes, namely allowing them to have their own church where they could maintain their language. In 1834, he announced that the German Catholics should have their own church.\footnote{Ibid.} In eight months, they built their building, Holy Trinity, which turned out to be “the first German Catholic church west of the Allegheny Mountains.”\footnote{Ibid., 62.} The speed with which the German Catholics funded and built their church is indicative of their enthusiasm about having a church in which to maintain their culture. Knowing how important it was for them to maintain their language and culture, Purcell also allowed the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \footnote{Walter Stix Glazer, \textit{Cincinnati in 1840: The Social and Functional Organization of an Urban Community During the Pre-Civil War Period} (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 1999), 49.}
  \item \footnote{Ibid.}
  \item \footnote{M. Edmund Hussey, \textit{Archbishop Purcell of Cincinnati} (N.p.: n.p., 2011), 61.}
  \item \footnote{Ibid.}
  \item \footnote{Ibid.}
  \item \footnote{Ibid., 62.}
\end{itemize}
Germans to launch a newspaper, the *Der Wahrheitsfreund* (The Friend of Truth) in 1837.\(^{116}\)

Purcell’s deft handling of the German Catholics did not stop with church buildings and newspapers. He grabbed the “third rail” of U.S. Catholicism at the time and allowed German Catholics to exercise in a limited form a trustee system of governance in their parishes.\(^{117}\) Knowing that “[t]he German Catholics were an independent lot,”\(^{118}\) Purcell allowed them to have the following arrangement:

> each German parish was to have six elected wardens, at least thirty years of age, of exemplary character, active in the practice of their faith and listed on the membership roster of the parish. Their responsibilities concerned temporal affairs of the parish but did not extend to the areas of worship and doctrine. They were to provide funds to meet the debts of the parish, establish the amount of the pew rent, ensure that buildings remained in good repair, and deposit surplus funds “in some safe public institution.” Large and unusual expenditures were to be submitted to the congregation at a public meeting.\(^{119}\)

Aside from being allowed to choose their pastor and have liturgical oversight, the German Catholics had the same authority as their Protestant congregational neighbors. In

\(^{116}\) Ibid.

\(^{117}\) M. Edmund Hussey, “John Baptist Purcell: First Archbishop of Cincinnati,” in *Patterns of Episcopal Leadership*, Gerald P. Fogarty, S.J., ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), 96-97. The “trustee issue” was a contentious one for U.S. Catholics because it manifested in very concrete ways the problems that came along with Americanization, namely the clash between republican political assumptions on the part of the laity and clerically-centered models of church governance that were customary in the Catholic Church. In the Midwest and South, Catholic laypeople who were without a regular priest had to oversee the property and financial management of their parishes. This administrative oversight, much like what their Protestant neighbors did for their churches, gave these laypersons a sense of ownership of their parishes, although the properties were legally under the bishop’s name. The “trustees,” as they would be called, thought that in addition to managing the parish properties they should also have a voice about who would serve as their parish priest—again with clear similarities to their Protestant neighbors and their church experiences, as well as the general republican ethos of American politics. While some bishops may have had a guarded openness to the trustee system, many saw the system as a threat to their ability to effectively govern the parishes under their care.

\(^{118}\) Ibid., 96.

\(^{119}\) Ibid.
giving them this freedom, Purcell was perhaps earning German loyalty that could help maintain peaceful ethnic relations within the diocese. This accommodation may have been Purcell’s only viable option as a leader, given the large numbers of Germans coming to the city. Roger Fortin, an historian of Cincinnati Catholicism, notes that “[n]otwithstanding the few conflicts between German trustees and Purcell, overall relations between the Cincinnati ordinary and German Catholics were positive.”

Purcell’s ability to work with the German Catholics is indicative of his ability to choose wisely what battles he wanted to fight. In his discussion of Purcell’s handling of the German trustees, Edmund Hussey, a Purcell biographer, made the following telling comment: “In a circular letter to the clergy in 1864, Purcell expressed his satisfaction with the wardens [trustees] but showed no inclination to extend this system to the Irish parishes.” Hussey does not say more about Purcell’s rationale, though Fortin suggests that “Irish parishes . . . generally accepted the hierarchical concept of the church.” Whether or not Fortin’s assessment is entirely accurate, it is revealing that Purcell felt comfortable allowing the Germans to use a system of church governance that he did not also offer to the Irish parishes. Whatever his justifications for doing this were, we know that Purcell’s decision enabled him to maintain positive relations with the German Catholics of Cincinnati and avoid major quarrels with them.

The Vatican recognized Purcell’s skill as a leader of an ethnically diverse diocese in the predominantly Protestant Ohio Valley in 1850. That year he was elevated to the

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122 Fortin, 97.
status of archbishop and oversaw the archdiocese until 1880, when he handed over its day-to-day operations to his coadjutor, William Henry Elder. Purcell spent the last three and a half years of his life living in unofficial retirement at the Ursuline convent in Saint Martin, OH. These last years of Purcell’s life, however, were marked by heartache because of the fallout from the disastrous financial failure in 1878 of the private “Purcell bank” that was run by his brother, Edward.¹²³ On July 4th, 1883, Archbishop John Purcell died.

**Purcell’s Intellectual Background: Enlightenment Catholicism**

Purcell’s apologetic strategy seems to have had its roots in his French seminary education. When he attended the Sulpician seminary in Paris from 1824 to 1827, the infrastructure of French Catholic intellectual life was in a rebuilding period. The social and ecclesial shifts in the French Church between the Revolution and 1820s were seismic, with the deteriorating relationship between Napoleon and the Holy See being a

¹²³ Hussey, “John Baptist Purcell: First Archbishop of Cincinnati,” and Hussey, *Archbishop John Purcell of Cincinnati*, passim. In 1837, a financial panic caused a general mistrust of the banking system, and people began asking the church to hold their savings, a practice which continued up until the financial failure of 1878 (*Archbishop, 118-119*). Edward, a lawyer turned priest and trusted advisor to John, was at first reluctant to take the money, but he eventually showed his aptitude for managing this private bank, weathering several financial scares. Confidence in Edward and the Purcell bank soared, and he even paid upward of 6% interest (*Cincinnati Enquirer, in Archbishop, 119*). John obviously let the bank continue, but seems to have delegated authority for its oversight almost exclusively to Edward. It appeared that the private bank, run by a priest and given *de facto* authorization by a bishop, had the backing of the Catholic Church. This appearance gave a deep and widespread, but ultimately false sense of confidence. It turned out that even though he was lawyer, Edward was a very poor record keeper, and as one historian has noted, the bank was “a house of cards” (Hussey, “John Baptist Purcell,” 124). The Purcell bank could not withstand a rush in 1878, when claims on the bank totaled close to $3.7 million from nearly 3,500 creditors, while the bank only had around $1.1 million in assets, though it’s not entirely clear they were worth that much (“John Baptist Purcell,” 104). Unable to pay its creditors, the bank went under and the archdiocese spent the next twenty years in court and in the end creditors received back only 7 1/8% on their deposits (*Archbishop, 132*). As a result, “[h]undreds of families [had] been reduced to destitution,” and in some cases lost their faith in the church (Letter from creditors to Pope Leo XIII, August 24, 1880, in *Archbishop, 132*). While his brother was primarily in charge of the bank, John knew that the ultimate responsibility for the failure rested with him (*Cincinnati Daily Enquirer, May 23, 1880, in Archbishop, 128*). It was for this reason that Elder was called in to manage the archdiocese and sort out the financial and legal mess that happened under Purcell’s watch.
prime example. Interwoven in these shifts was the underlying French Catholic intellectual uncertainty about how to address Kant’s critiques. The French Church in general and the Sulpician seminary specifically were reconsidering how they would teach theology in an intellectual context that had changed so dramatically over the last forty years; and Pope Leo XIII’s late nineteenth century Neo-Thomism was not yet the clear choice. As Gerald McCool notes, the basic, yet profoundly challenging, goal for the Catholic intellectual at the time was “to show how, in the light of Kant’s critique of human knowledge, an act of faith, in the Catholic meaning of the term, remained possible.”

Put more concretely, McCool observes that

the Catholic theologian who set out to defend the possibility of the act of Christian faith against the objections raised by Kant’s critique of knowledge would have to vindicate its status as an authentic and distinctive act of intellectual cognition which could neither be invalidated by Kant’s critical philosophy nor equated with an act of purely philosophical reasoning.

In effect, Kant’s critique had forced French theologians to reprioritize their intellectual and pedagogical goals, making apologetics a more important part of seminary curricula.

Speaking about the early years of nineteenth century French Catholic thought, Bernard Reardon offers a comment that is equally descriptive of Purcell’s education in the 1820s with the Sulpicians: “what was most vital in French Catholic thinking . . . was not its presentation of church teaching, which was mediocre, but its free-lance apologetic,

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125 Ibid., 33-34.
shaped with an eye to contemporary needs and conditions.”126 Reardon’s observation can be corroborated by what we know about the curriculum of the Sulpician seminary at the time, which was conducted mainly in French and “characterized by the general absence of dogma in favor of apologetics and morals.”127 The apologetic disposition of the French Catholic intellectual culture seems to have stuck with Purcell. Speaking of Purcell’s time with the Sulpicians, one of his biographers notes, “Purcell had a quick mind and was interested in study – at least for apologetic purposes.”128 Purcell’s French education laid a foundation for his subsequent intellectual growth that prized apologetics, a basis that served him well when he returned to America.

When Purcell left France for America in 1827, U.S. Catholics inhabited an intellectual matrix best described by Patrick Carey as “Enlightenment Catholicism.”129 Lasting from roughly 1784 to 1842, Enlightenment Catholicism had as its most public representatives John Carroll (1735-1815) and John England (1786-1842). In addition to advocating for the harmony between American political convictions and Catholicism, these Enlightenment Catholics made a qualified embrace of a “Cartesian-influenced Gallican apologetic,” which in Carey’s words, postured “Catholic apologetics . . . [to become] increasingly characterized by the Cartesian turn to the subject and by its use of


reason to provide grounds for the acceptance of supernatural faith.”

While neither elevating reason over faith, nor suggesting that reason was an autonomous mental faculty, Enlightenment Catholics made unrelenting attempts to convince (mainly Protestant) critics that Catholic belief was conducive with a “mind open to conviction” and that faith “[was] not folly, . . . not abject slavery of the mind, . . . not visionary fanaticism, . . . not irrational assent to unintelligible propositions.”

Enlightenment Catholics like Carroll, England, and (as we will see) Purcell, were not attempting to reinvent Catholicism, as it were; they were trying to show that Catholicism was a missionary faith that could take root in the American context and be harmonious with the best convictions of the country’s political and intellectual life. But more specifically, these apologists were presenting Catholicism as a reasonable and public faith, one open to the critical scrutiny that their Protestant interlocutors had been claiming it could not withstand.

While Enlightenment Catholics wanted to present Catholicism as thoroughly harmonious with American political and intellectual assumptions, they were equally committed to the goal of defending the faith as such and evangelizing those inquirers who were open to converting. Enlightenment Catholics were confident that a fair examination of the faith would show an inquirer that Catholicism could offer them both an infallible revelation and a reliable way to understand it. Carey summarizes the confidence Enlightenment Catholics had that reason could lead inquirers to affirm the theological claims of the Catholic Church: “[o]nce reason discovered the fact of an infallible revelation, it was bound to submit to the authority of the revealer or to the authority of

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those who infallibly proposed those propositions for belief.” For Enlightenment Catholics, apologetics was an ostensibly simple, two-step process: *first, a person argued that God had made an infallible revelation; and second, s/he showed that the Catholic Church was its legitimate interpreter.* While this strategy was easier to talk about than execute, it seems to have served as Purcell’s preferred template.

In the debate with Campbell, Purcell offered a hypothetical scenario in which he described how he would present the faith to someone who was not yet a Christian (the headers and numbers are mine):

**[Step 1: Argue that God made an infallible revelation]**

1) What, I am asked, is the course I would pursue with one who is not yet a christian [*sic*], but anxious to be instructed in the evidence of Christianity?

2) Why, the course I would pursue is this: *I would address his reason alone*, as long as he has no better guide—convince him that the bible [*sic*] is, at least, authentic history—and that he can rely upon the truth of the facts recorded in it, as he would on human testimony.

3) I would introduce him to Jesus Christ, whose character is there portrayed, whose miracles are there recorded.

**[Step 2: Show that the Catholic Church is its legitimate interpreter]**

4) I would tell him why he came on earth; how he founded a church to explain whatever was difficult in the bible, after having collected all its books together, what no man could do for himself;

5) how he established that church as the pillar and ground of the truth, and said of its pastors, ‘He that heareth you, heareth me;’

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132 Carey, “American Catholicism and the Enlightenment ethos,” 132. Carey is here summarizing the thought of another important Enlightenment Catholic, Anthony Kohlmann (1771-1836).
6) and when I had convinced him of the authority of the church, I
would not require of him to abjure reason, but I would consign
him to a higher and safer guide, that church, herself the
immaculate bride of Christ.\textsuperscript{133}

Purcell’s hypothetical scenario lines up clearly with Carey’s summary of the
Enlightenment Catholic confidence in reason to lead a person to reliable theological
conclusions. Specifically, Purcell’s apologetic strategy bears the marks of a pronounced
historicism characteristic of Gallicanism.\textsuperscript{134} He begins by laying out the Bible’s historical
facts, and moves on to present the Catholic Church as the historical body that has
canonized and taught those facts.\textsuperscript{135} After a person understands through reason that
revelation is historically reliable, s/he can confidently and rationally submit to the
Church’s authority to teach that revelation. Purcell’s apologetic goal was to present to
Catholics and Protestants a rational faith, though not one reducible to reason, that
accentuated the inquirer’s role in critically analyzing the historical and theological claims
of the Catholic Church.

Conclusion

By 1836, Campbell and Purcell were developing their reputations as church
leaders in the Ohio Valley. While Campbell had already accepted his identity as a
controversialist, it was not until the two met in October 1836 at the annual meeting of

\textsuperscript{133} Purcell, \textit{Debate}, 192-193. In the debate, Purcell’s speech was one block of text. I numbered and divided
the lines for clarity, and added Step 1/Step 2 as headers.

\textsuperscript{134} For more on Purcell, history, and Gallicanism, see Weedman, “History as Authority in Alexander
Campbell’s 1837 Debate with Bishop Purcell.”

\textsuperscript{135} Enlightenment Catholicism’s emphasis on facts is an important conceptual overlap with Common Sense
Realism, of which Campbell is a quintessential mouthpiece. Carey references the Enlightenment
Catholic/Common Sense connection in, “American Catholicism and the Enlightenment Ethos,” 134, and
\textit{American Catholic Religious Thought}, 26-27.
The College of Teachers in Cincinnati that Purcell did as well. There the two clashed, setting in motion the events that led to the historic January 1837 debate.
CHAPTER II:
THE 1836 EVENTS LEADING UP TO THE DEBATE

Introduction

Chapter two builds on what I presented in chapter one when I discussed Campbell only be and Purcell’s biographies. The goal of this chapter is to provide a focused historical background to the January 1837 debate by specifically looking at the October 1836 meeting of the College of Teachers in Cincinnati, where Campbell and Purcell met for the first time. This chapter argues that Campbell was responsible for starting the debate, although Purcell was a willing participant that helped make the controversy a reality.

Part of the challenge in assessing the events that led up to the debate is answering the very basic question, “What happened?” to precipitate a weeklong oral debate. Both Campbell and Purcell present themselves as victims, and the other as the aggressor. This is reflected in their periodicals, The Catholic Telegraph and the Millennial Harbinger. In reconstructing this timeline, I have tried to use neutral language to describe the events in question, so as not to favor one man over the other, because as we will see the language each uses is loaded. One of the challenges in making this timeline is that no one secondary source has done what I have in this chapter. While other scholars begin their story with the 1836 College of Teachers meeting, I begin mine earlier that year in March,
with Campbell’s article in the *Millennial Harbinger* challenging any Catholic to have a
discussion on Roman Catholicism. That is to say, by the time Campbell and Purcell met
at the *College of Teachers* meeting, Campbell had already been calling for a public
“discussion” (a debate) on Catholicism. Interestingly, Purcell knew about Campbell’s
challenge about a month after it came out, which means that, before Purcell ever met
Campbell, he was aware of his reputation and desire to debate Catholicism.

This chapter is divided in two sections. First, I provide an overview of the
historical setting in Cincinnati prior to the Civil War. Second, I provide an in-depth
account of the events from March to December 1836 that are the backdrop to the January
1837 debate. Regarding this latter section, I focus on four events: 1) Campbell’s opening
salvo in the March *Millennial Harbinger*; 2) Campbell and Purcell’s interaction at the
*College of Teachers* meeting in October; 3) Campbell and Purcell’s actions in the week
following the *College of Teachers* meeting; 4) the public announcement in the Cincinnati
press about the upcoming event¹ in January.

Section 1: The Historical Setting of Cincinnati Before the Civil War

Situated on the Ohio River in the southwest corner of the state, Cincinnati was
settled in 1788 and grew into an important hub for trade and commerce in the subsequent
decades. In 1789, the town, then called “Losantiville,” had only 500 people. In 1794 an
important event happened that helped spur the city’s growth: General Anthony Wayne
won the Battle of Fallen Timbers in northwest Ohio, effectively eliminating the threat of

¹ To be clear, I am not using the word “debate” at this point because Campbell and Purcell do not use it
explicitly in their press releases. While it is probably assumed by both that what will happen in January is a
debate, it was not until the two met the week before the debate to go over the details of the event that the
event would officially be a debate—as opposed to a series of lectures like what happened the previous
October.
attacks from Native Americans on white settlers in the region that would become a state in 1803. Because of this victory, “more settlers arrived in the community,” among them “a French pastry chef and a hairdresser.”2 Odd as it may sound, the arrival of a pastry chef and hairdresser mark an important shift in the settler’s attitudes about their community and its safety. They now felt comfortable and affluent enough to support luxury goods and services, and understood their community to have more going for it than survival and trade.

Between 1810 and 1820, Cincinnati’s population more than tripled, going from 2,540 to 9,642. And the growth continued in the antebellum period. By 1830, Cincinnati’s population was 24,831 and then 46,338 by 1840, nearly doubling 1830’s numbers.3 The surge in population was accompanied by an increasing and diversifying economy in the city, which included, among other things, meatpacking (the city was nicknamed “Porkopolis”), farming, hotels and restaurants, and education.4 Glazer notes the importance of Cincinnati prior to the Civil War when he said it “was one of the largest and most rapidly growing urban centers in the United States.”5

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4 Two excellent sources for Cincinnati at the time are: Daniel Aaron, Cincinnati, Queen City of the West, 1819-1838 (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1992) and Glazer, Cincinnati in 1840.

5 Glazer, 7.
By the time of the debate in 1837, Cincinnati’s could rightly be called a “religious marketplace,” as well as a commercial one. Expectedly, Christianity had the lion’s share of that market, but alongside the standard denominations like the Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and Catholics there were Jews, “free-thinkers, deists, and atheists.” In 1829, Campbell even held a debate in the city with Robert Owen (1771-1858), an early socialist and skeptic from Great Britain who relocated to America and formed a utopian community in New Harmony, IN. And while Jews, free-thinkers, deists, and atheists were certainly a minority in Cincinnati, their presence reveals the multiplicity of religious and philosophical communities in the city. In his book *Cincinnati in 1840*, Walter Glazer notes Cincinnati was a “virtual microcosm of American society” and this is reflected partly in “the frequency of religious lectures and debates” held there. The demand that Cincinnatians had for these religious commodities was part of a larger American appetite for these spectacles.

In his article “Theology as Entertainment: Oral Debate in American Religion,” E. Brooks Holifield makes an important observation about the readiness of ordinary people to consume public religious debate:

> we highlight an institution [public oral debates] that reveals a striking degree of interest in matters theological on the part of lay people in

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7 Aaron, 171, 173.


9 Glazer, 7.

10 Aaron, 173.
nineteenth-century communities. Whenever theological questions appeared in a format that featured the drama of public contest and conflict, people could listen—for hours, days, sometimes weeks—to disputes over relatively abstract ideas, biblical commentary, theological distinctions, and sometimes even the findings of biblical critics. What the debates suggest is that ordinary folk could get excited about the kinds of questions theologians wrote about and the kinds of answers they proposed.\textsuperscript{11}

Holifield rightly points out that theological debates were interesting for “ordinary” people, that is to say, those individuals who were non-specialists in theological education but had an abiding interest in religious issues. Whatever motivated the curiosity of these ordinary Cincinnatians, those reasons were shared by other Americans who placed a high value on religious contest and were ready to consume the event (by attending) and the product (by purchasing the printed versions of the debate when available). The College of Teachers in Cincinnati, where Campbell and Purcell met for the first time in 1836, was the setting in which they clashed over their divergent religious convictions, thus creating more demand for religious controversy in Cincinnati.

Section 2: The Events of 1836 that Led to the Debate in 1837

\textit{Stage 1: Campbell’s opening salvo in the March Millennial Harbinger (March and April 1836)}

While most historians who have studied the debate have located its origins in the October meeting of the College of Teachers, I contend that its beginnings are with Campbell’s March 1836 statements in the Millennial Harbinger. That month, Campbell printed an article written by a lay-Catholic in Springfield, IL, “W.A.,” who offered a defense of Roman Catholicism.\textsuperscript{12} Campbell followed this article with his own analysis of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Holifield, “Theology as Entertainment,” 500. Emphasis mine.
\item \textsuperscript{12} W.A., “Romanism---No. 3,” Millennial Harbinger, March, 1836, 112-114.
\end{itemize}
the author’s argument, which he unsurprisingly found wanting.\textsuperscript{13} While Campbell applauds W.A.’s efforts, he wishes to have “a \textit{man, a full grown man}, with whom to discuss” Catholicism.\textsuperscript{14} This should be a person, in Campbell’s words, “whose judgment the Romanists themselves, inferior clergy and people, have confidence.”\textsuperscript{15} (At this point, Campbell had not met Purcell and we don’t know if and how much he knew about him.) What is clear is that Campbell is aiming for a high-ranking Catholic interlocutor, not a layperson like “W.A.,” with whom to have a discussion on this important subject. Campbell notes that he “will contend with him by one of two weapons . . . the \textit{tongue} or the \textit{pen}.”\textsuperscript{16}

When Campbell wrote these provocative words about Catholicism in March 1836, he was already on his fifth public religious controversy. By 1836, he had already established himself as a willing controversialist in the Ohio Valley: he had debated a Baptist (John Walker, 1820), a Presbyterian (William Macalla, 1823), an agnostic (Robert Owen, 1829), another Presbyterian (Obadiah Jennings, 1830), and a Universalist (G.W. Montgomery, 1835, written). In 1835, he tried to have a printed debate with the Episcopalian Bishop James Otey, but Campbell’s writings went unanswered.\textsuperscript{17} It seems that Campbell created controversy wherever he went. Historian Bill Humble notes

\begin{enumerate}
\item Editor [Alexander Campbell], “Editorial Remarks on W.A.’s Communication,” \textit{Millennial Harbinger}, March, 1836, 115-117.
\item Ibid., 117. Emphasis original.
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid.
\item After the Purcell debate in January 1837, Campbell would debate another Universalist (Dolphus Skinner, 1837-1839, written). In 1843 he would have his last debate, this time with one last Presbyterian (Nathan Rice). Two works explore this important dimension of Campbell’s professional life: Bill Humble,
[t]he great religious debates in which Campbell met the Goliaths of atheism, Catholicism and Presbyterianism portray vividly this controversial background of the Restoration Movement . . . the entire Restoration Movement was born of controversy and had to defend itself to survive. Campbell’s debates are, therefore, but a reflection of this fundamental spirit which characterized the Restoration Movement.\textsuperscript{18}

Interestingly, Purcell learned about Campbell’s comments about Catholicism in the March \textit{Millennial Harbinger} shortly after they came out, because they were reprinted in the \textit{Christian Preacher}, a paper edited by a Cincinnati minister and friend of Campbell, D.S. Burnet. As Purcell tells it, Burnet passed along a copy of the \textit{Christian Preacher} with the following words written on the wrapper: “See page 48.”\textsuperscript{19} Wasting no time, Purcell turned to the page and read the following headline:

Who Will Try? Mr. Alexander Campbell . . . declares his willingness to meet any respectable friend of the Pope, who will engage to defend the claims of “his holiness,” with either the pen or the tongue.\textsuperscript{20}

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\textsuperscript{18} Humble, 21.

\textsuperscript{19} John B. Purcell, “Letter 1—No Title,” \textit{Catholic Telegraph}, December 22, 1836. In this article, Purcell alludes to two instances when Burnet published notices from Campbell about being willing engage a Catholic representative “with either the pen or the tongue.” The first was in February, which seems to have simply been an announcement from Burnet stating that Campbell had made it public that he was willing “to meet any respectable friend of the Pope . . . with either the pen or the tongue.” Purcell said he ignored this because did not want “to disturb the peace of the religious community, by stirring up the bitter waters of controversy.” The second was in April, in which a portion of Campbell’s March \textit{Millennial Harbinger} article was printed, containing the line about the “pen or the tongue.” There are two confusing and contradictory statements in Purcell’s narrative and in Burnet’s editorial remarks. First, Purcell could not have received in February an article that was published by Campbell in March. We know that it is the March issue Burnet is referring to because the headline says, “Who Will Try? Mr. Alexander Campbell, in Harbinger, Vol. VII, No. 3,” which is the March issue. Second, in Burnet’s April editorial comments in the \textit{Christian Preacher} introducing the Campbell article, he says, “We ask again, who will try to sustain the claims of the Pope and Popery”? (emphasis mine) The use of “again” indicates that Burnet had asked this before in print, suggesting that there was an earlier edition with a challenge to Catholics. Whether or not Purcell received one or two notices from Burnet, we know that by April 1836 he was aware of Campbell’s open invitation from the month prior.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
Saying he did not want “to disturb the peace of the religious community, by stirring up the bitter waters of controversy,” Purcell “took no further notice af [sic] this ‘bold and wanton’ challenge.” Purcell tells this story in the December 22, 1836 issue of *The Catholic Telegraph* as a way of providing his own background for his decision to have a public discussion with Campbell in January. But before he does, Purcell reprints the text from the March *Millennial Harbinger* in which Campbell talks about wanting to meet a “full grown man”:

That view of the passage I stand ready to sustain against the Pope himself, or any Bishop under his jurisdiction, in the old world or new . . . It is high time that the American people should be enlightened upon this subject, and every drop of oil in my lamp is at their service whenever a trust-worthy son of the modern St. Peter appears ready for the discussion.

‘If I can prove to any Jew that Jesus of Nazareth is the true Messiah—if I can prove to any sceptic, [sic] Greek or Roman, French or English philosopher, that he is the son of God and only Saviour of the world, and the author of an eternal salvation to all who obey him—then can I prove to any impartial jury that the Pope of Rome is “the man of sin” foretold by Paul, and the “son of perdition” whose ruin is predicted by St. John.

But I must have a man, and full grown man, with whom to discuss the proposition submitted, and one in whose judgment the Romanists themselves, inferior clergy and people, have confidence. I will contend with him by one of two weapons—he may choose—the tongue or the pen.'

While Campbell probably did not anticipate Burnet’s actions in reprinting and passing along his words, the important point to note from this exchange is that Purcell had registered Campbell’s comments long before the two met in October.

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21 Ibid. It’s not clear from *The Catholic Telegraph* if Purcell is referring to Campbell, Burnet, or both.

Campbell and Purcell’s shared commitment to public education is what brought them face-to-face seventh months after Campbell announced his desire to debate a “full grown” Catholic. In October, both men were in Cincinnati for the annual meeting of the Western Literary Institute and College of Teachers, generally just referred to as the College of Teachers. This was Purcell’s first time attending the meeting, which was held from Monday, October 3rd to Saturday, the 8th. Each day began at 9am and adjourned in the evening, with breaks in between. In 1836, the College had 222 members. One spectator said there were close to 70 delegates present on the first day, though he estimated over 100 would be there by Tuesday. Over six days of meetings, twenty-three addresses, lectures, or reports were given.

Organized in 1829, the College of Teachers held annual meetings from 1831 to 1845, however the organization reached its apex of “vitality and influence” around 1840. Like other educational organizations in the East, the College of Teachers was a clearing-house for Ohio Valley educators and interested laypersons to reflect on and strategize about public education. R.H. Eckelberry notes that many of the College’s

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23 My information about the College of Teachers is taken from the Transactions of the Sixth Annual Meeting of the Western Literary Institute and College of Professional Teachers, Oct. 1836, ed. D.L. Talbott (Cincinnati, OH: published by the Executive Committee, 1837). Subsequent footnotes will begin with “Transactions” and be followed by a page number, without a proper name, if the reference is to an editorial comment, or the minutes of the meeting.


“most active members were men who had been in contact with educational leaders in the East or who had been educated under eastern influences.”

The College—both the actual meeting and its periodical—was an intellectual conduit for disseminating theories of education and attitudes about its execution from the Eastern United States throughout the Ohio Valley. It would be a mistake to view the College of Teachers as a provincial organization disconnected from the national conversation about education. The College was also a laboratory for presenting, discussing, and refining concrete strategies for education. While they would discuss theory, the College would also address very basic pedagogical questions like how to best administer exams.

As one of the liveliest intellectual centers in the Midwest, it should be no surprise that Campbell and Purcell came ready to engage critically the topic of education.

Monday, October 3—Joshua Wilson’s lecture

At 11am on Monday, October 3, Rev. Joshua Lacy Wilson (1774-1846) of Cincinnati delivered a lecture on the Bible and education that set off a sequence of events that would lead to Purcell and Campbell’s clash. Wilson’s lecture was titled, “On the

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27 Ibid., 338. Some of these members were Albert Picket, the College’s founder and president for a number of years, who was a school administrator in Manhattan and the president of the New York Teachers’ Society; and Dr. R. H. Bishop, a graduate of the University of Edinburgh, who was the founding president of Miami University (337). Both Picket and Bishop spoke at the 1836 meeting. We cannot fail to note that Lyman Beecher was a member of the College, though the 1836 Transactions show that he was either absent from, or didn’t participate in, that meeting.


29 For more on Wilson, see: William B. Sprague, Annals of the American Pulpit; or Commemorative Notices of Distinguished American Clergymen of Various Denominations, From the Early Settlement of the Country to the Close of the Year Eighteen Hundred and Fifty-Five. With Historical Introductions, vol. IV (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1858), 308-313.
proposition that a system of universal education is not only desirable but practicable.”

Wilson had been the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Cincinnati from 1813-1819 and the founder of Lancaster Seminary, which was actually a business college in the city. He began by giving a definition of the word “instruction,” which he said, “means the impartation of elementary knowledge to children, from the first dawn of reason till they arrive at a state of maturity.” “A thorough system [of instruction] is that plan which lays a complete foundation for future improvement, and useful application of cultivated talents.” Not surprisingly, Wilson believed the English-language Bible “contain[ed] the best system of universal instruction.” Believing the English-language translation would provide the most accurate rendering of the ancient language, he had “serious regret” that the British and American Bible Societies “lent their aid to the publication of books in any other language.” Wilson sketched out one of his goals: “[I]et us never forget that all nations must be brought to a state of amity—to full, free, and confidential intercourse, by being brought back to one language and one religion, by means of one system of instruction.”


32 Wilson, 53.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 62.

35 Ibid., 63.

36 Ibid.
like this would not have attracted any negative attention. However, Wilson’s audience was not entirely composed of Protestants.

Monday, October 3—John Purcell’s lecture

At 7pm that same day, Purcell rose to give his speech, “On the philosophy of the human mind,” which is best analyzed by breaking it into three parts: A) Purcell’s remarks before the speech; B) his speech; and C) the post-speech discussion between Purcell and others. 37

A) Purcell’s Remarks Before The Speech

Before Purcell made his formal remarks on the philosophy of the mind, he made some introductory comments before the assembly. He expressed his hope that the College of Teachers could be a positive influence for the cause of education in the West:

[G]entlemen, in my judgment no plan has been suggested, no theory devised, or scheme originated, more intimately connected with the prosperity of the Great West, than the attainment of the objects contemplated by the “Western Literary Institute and College of Professional Teachers.” Let this be our “normal school,” under the auspices of all the friends of science and letters; and may its influence “grow with our growth, and strengthen our strength.” To this great common treasury we should all contribute, each according to the fullest measure with which Heaven has endowed, and learning, reflection and experience have enriched his intellect. 39


38 A remarkable dimension of Purcell’s personality stands out in this episode. Namely, it becomes clear that Purcell is practicing a forward-leaning, public Catholicism. Margaret DePalma has noted that the Campbell-Purcell debate demonstrates an important shift in the Catholic hierarchy’s social engagement; they moved from a reactive to an active engagement with civil society. In deconstructing Wilson’s speech, Purcell shows that even before the January debate he was displaying the qualities animating the hierarchy’s shift.

Purcell’s comments reflect his fundamental concern for well-being of Cincinnati, specifically with regard to the education of its citizens. He knew he would have to live and work with a lot of the people sitting in this room. “My lot,” he said, is cast for life in the West: and I must necessarily feel the same ardor with which you are impelled, for the development and improvement of its great physical, moral, and intellectual resources. 40

In his introductory remarks, Purcell also spent a good deal of time critiquing Wilson’s address from that morning. In the printed record of the proceedings, there is a footnote in Purcell’s speech that reads:

Before commencing his address, the Bishop commented at considerable length on some parts of Dr. Wilson’s Lecture, particularly what was the “one religion” which it was said the College of Teachers aspired to establish, and what version of the Bible it contemplated to introduce as a text book into our schools. 41

Unfortunately, the Transactions don’t record the content of Purcell’s comments. But what’s important to note is that Purcell apparently took issue with Wilson’s casual reference to “one religion,” which Wilson would clarify as the “Christian religion,” and his assertion that the language of the Bible should be English.

B) Purcell’s Speech

Interestingly, Purcell’s speech bears a marked similarity to what he says in the January debate. For Purcell, Protestant ecclesial disunity and the plurality of incompatible philosophical schools were symptoms of a deep and abiding intellectual malaise in modern culture. While he gives examples of philosophical flourishing in the ancient


41 Editor, Transactions, 68.
world, he offers unqualified reprobation of modern philosophers like Diderot, Hume, and “above all . . . that delirium of human reason—the French Revolution.” Purcell’s censure was also directed at Scottish Common Sense Realism, Campbell’s intellectual heritage. Of it, he said,

[t]he Scottish school, which though rendered so respectable by the force and simplicity of Reid, the accuracy of Dugald Stewart, and the nice investigation, the refined analysis and attractive sensibility of Brown, cannot after all be said to have taught us anything new.

In making this observation, Purcell was granting that Scottish Common Sense Realism makes a valid contribution to contemporary philosophy, but is nonetheless an inadequate framework for discussing faith and reason. After blasting both skepticism and empiricism, Purcell utters a phrase the sentiment of which will come out repeatedly in the January debate: “What system, what theory, shall we choose? Whatever sect we embrace, we make all the other sects our enemies, for they reciprocally accuse each other of inaccuracy, inconsistency and absurdity.” For Purcell, the skeptical and empiricist philosophical schools were bankrupt, but their deficiencies were still no reason to embrace fideism. “Rather than “dishonor[ing] philosophy,” he believes

[t]he best eulogy that was ever spoken for her, is that which disabuses her of her pride and her presumptuous confidence; that shows her when she alone assumes our government through life, she leads us to darkness, precipices, and ruin.

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43 Ibid., 76.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid., 78.
Purcell aims to show that philosophy has “prescribed limit[s],” beyond which it is not capable of providing answers.\(^46\) As the “handmaid” and not replacement of religion, philosophy does the following:

After developing our ideas, confirming our judgments, giving method and clearness and accuracy to our arguments, and enabling us to study all the human sciences, with more satisfaction to ourselves and advantage to our fellow men, she crowns her useful lessons by showing us the necessity and the solid proofs of revelation. Thus confiding us to its guidance, she respectfully makes her obeisance and retires. This is the philosophy I would have taught in our schools; it has been the savior of society, as well as of the soul—it is pure, sublime, universal, unchanging, true.\(^47\)

Purcell’s lecture is calling into the question the Common Sense optimism of his audience. The Bible and nature, Purcell might say, are not as perspicuous as Campbell and others would like to believe. By foregrounding the competing and incompatible philosophical schools, Purcell is laying the foundation for a Catholic apologetic that we will see play out in the debate. He ends his speech by quoting from Job 20, accentuating a point about the limits of philosophical speculation: “Whence, then, cometh wisdom, and where is the place of understanding? . . . Behold the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil, that is understanding.”\(^48\)

\(\text{C) Post-Speech Discussion}\)

The same footnote in the proceedings that commented on Purcell’s introductory remarks about Wilson’s speech also stated the topics that were discussed following Purcell’s lecture:

\(^{46}\) Ibid.

\(^{47}\) Ibid.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., 79.
At the close of the Address, Dr. Wilson explained as to the first subject of inquiry, that he meant the Christian religion, in contradistinction to Mahomedan and Pagan religions and in reference to the Bible, an interesting debate took place, as noticed in the minutes. The minutes in the Transactions say that Wilson, Campbell, Purcell, and Alexander Kinmont participated in the discussion until the meeting ended at 10pm. The topic of their conversation, we are told, was “on the subject of the Lecture [Wilson’s] delivered in the forenoon, with particular reference to the introduction of the Bible into Schools.”

The minutes do not give us any more details about what was said in the meeting. We do have two dramatically different accounts of the tone and content of the meeting. The first is from a “Spectator” in the Cincinnati Daily Gazette, which is reprinted in the Catholic Telegraph, who characterized the conversation in very positive terms:

[To give a description of the discussion, even did the columns of your paper and leisure permit, would be but a shadow of reality.—The effect produced, will long be remembered by those who heard it . . . Never has the discussion of any question, before the College, elicited more interest; and, perhaps, never was the subject before discussed with so much good feeling, and harmony, and liberality, as on this occasion. It was the most interesting scene that I ever witnessed.

To see the three great champions of religion, Campbell, Purcell and Wilson, as opposite in their views almost, as light and darkness, come together on ground, and discuss a question upon which the Catholic and Protestant are so diametrically opposed, with the utmost good feeling and liberality.]

49 Editor, Transactions, 68.

50 Editor, “Minutes,” Transactions, 10.

51 Transactions, 10.

52 “Spectator,” Cincinnati Daily Gazette, in The Catholic Telegraph, October 13, 1836. Sic: the erroneous dependent clause is in the original. Also, the word “common” seems to be needed in front of “ground.”
The second is from Campbell, writing in the December issue of the *Millennial Harbinger*, who said he was somewhat surprised at the bold and pertinacious manner in which those learned Catholics, even in a Presbyterian meeting-house, sought to exclude the inspired volume from the common schools of our country.\(^{53}\)

What exactly were they talking about in this meeting? The “Spectator” tells us they spoke about “the practicability of a universal system of education; with particular reference to the introduction of the Bible, as a text-book, in schools.”\(^{54}\) In the same issue of *The Catholic Telegraph* that “Spectator” published his remarks, another author, “O,” gave the first of two accounts, the second of which would appear the following week.\(^{55}\) Part one of “O’s” article appeared on October 13 and reveals what Campbell perceived to be the “bold and pertinacious” attempt to exclude the Bible from public schools was a discussion about which version of the Bible would be used in the schools. “O” writes

> [t]o this part of the argument, Mr. Alexander Campbell replied that it mattered not what was said about the different versions, for they all agreed as to essentials, and were all equally favorable to morality. We confess that the assertion, coming as it did, from a gentleman of his extensive reading, astonished us.\(^{56}\)

In the article, “O” goes on to illustrate how a small grammatical change can have significant doctrinal implications. “O” also holds up the Mormons and Shakers as examples of communities who have a Scriptures that are satisfactory to people like Campbell. “O” concludes:

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\(^{53}\) *The Millennial Harbinger*, December, 1836, 552.


\(^{55}\) “O.,” “College of Teachers,” part 1 of 2, *The Catholic Telegraph*, October 13, 1836. Part 2 of 2 appeared a week later in the October 20 edition of the *Telegraph*. We do not know the identity of “Spectator” or “O.”

\(^{56}\) Ibid.
[s]ee what a host of claimants the Convention will have to satisfy! How many prejudices, discrepancies, errors, absurdities and impieties it is called upon to balance, to adjust, to purge away, to correct. Let it once give a preference to the Bible of any of these sects and we contend that it has given that sect a preference. This we need not say would be exceeding its powers—giving great and unnecessary offense to all the rejected sects—It would be, in one word, a suicidal act, which I do most sincerely depreciate.57

Part two of “O’s” article comes in the October 20 issue of The Catholic Telegraph. The tone of this article is noticeably darker. (This probably reflects the fallout from what I will discuss in Stage 3 of the 1836 timespan.) But this tone also reflects Catholic dissatisfaction with the Protestant assumptions undergirding the argument that the Bible should be used in public schools. “O” writes:

Already, and it is a fact to which we should be wide awake, Catholics are to a great extent excluded from the benefit of the district free schools, for whose support they are taxed, by the established practice of placing in the hands of children in these schools Bible and Testaments which Catholics are conscientiously compelled to regard as spurious and imperfect.58

“O’s” basic point is that American Catholics are forced to subsidize and tolerate an educational system that privileges Protestant Christianity. Such a system, he concluded, was an injustice. If Purcell had raised any of these points in the “animated discussion” that happened after his lecture, it’s understandable why Campbell, a beneficiary of Protestant privilege, would say they were “bold and pertinacious.”

These two accounts of the post-lecture discussion serve the following purpose: they help us understand what the climate of subsequent sessions in the College might have been like. Because Campbell and Purcell each perceived the meaning of the events very differently, we are better able to understand why things escalated the way they did in

57 Ibid.
58 “O,” “College of Teachers [Continued.],” The Catholic Telegraph, October 20, 1836. Emphasis original.
the following weeks. For Campbell, Purcell’s remarks were an attack on the Bible; for Purcell (via “O’s” account), Campbell’s comments were part of a broader system of Protestant privilege that systematically favored the Protestant Bible and Protestant interpretations of it in schools. In fact, because the language of Protestant Christianity infused public discourse about education, Purcell couldn’t even raise the issue about its legitimacy without being marginalized. As “O’” concluded his October 20 Catholic Telegraph article:

[t]he most odious features of British tyranny, compelling the dissenters of every creed to pay for the maintenance of a parliament-religion, will mark our future legislation in this once free and happy Union!! This is a subject, worthy, if any thing can be so considered, of the most serious deliberation of all our fellow-citizens. And we therefore warn them, while it may yet be in their power to avert it, of the impending danger.59

As it turns out, Catholics were just as worried as Protestants about the future of religious liberty in America.

Wednesday, October 5—Alexander Campbell’s lecture

On Wednesday, Campbell gave his lecture, “On the importance of uniting the moral, with the intellectual culture of the mind.”60 At its conclusion, he notes that educating a country’s youth “is incomparably more rational and commendable” than legislating for the punishing of criminals.61 “It is much more economic and philanthropic,” he goes on, “to raise funds to educate and discipline the youth in the paths

59 Ibid.

60 Alexander Campbell, “On the importance of uniting the moral, with the intellectual culture of the mind,” in Transactions of the Sixth Annual Meeting of the Western Literary Institute and College of Professional Teachers, Oct. 1836, ed. D.L. Talbott (Cincinnati, OH: published by the Executive Committee, 1837), 89-125.

of true science and moral excellence, than to erect houses of correction.”62 This work of education, he believes,

is the highest object of the whole community, to the patriot, the philanthropist and the Christian, and that those who will improve and elevate its character, and facilitate its operations, are to be honored and ranked among the most useful of citizens, and the best benefactors of mankind.63

Purcell could have easily affirmed Campbell’s encomium about education, if the latter had not revealed several troubling assumptions earlier in the speech. In the first minutes of his address, Campbell was clear that he fundamentally believed Protestantism and the English language and culture were the strongest catalysts for moving forward human progress in the arts and sciences. He states,

[ h ]appy are we to find that not only in the East and in the West, in the North and in the South, in the length and breadth of our own happy land, but in the land of our forefathers, and in all the regions of English and American commerce, wherever the Protestant religion is known, men are awakening to the examination of how much has been done, and how much remains to be done, not only in extending the means of education, but in adapting that education according to the lights of true science, to the whole constitution and circumstances of mankind.64

Campbell connects the current optimistic state of education in America to the Reformation. He does this in two steps. First, he narrates the Reformation as not simply a religious event, but an educational one. He said,

[ t ]he impetus given to the human mind by the Protestant Reformation, extends into every science, into every art, in all the business of life, and continues with increased and increasing energy, to consume and waste the

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62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., 92.
influence of every existing institution, law and custom, not founded upon
eternal truth, and the immutable and invincible nature of things.  

Second, he locates the Reformation’s educational implications in the American context,
specifically the *College of Teachers*:

> The spirit of free inquiry first seized the church, then the state, then the
colleges, then the schools, and now, even now in the second quarter of the
nineteenth century, it has invaded not only the *penetraria* of every temple,
but even the inmost recesses of the nursery, the infant head, the infant
brain; and in full harmony with the divining spirit of the age, we are now
in solemn conclave, assembled to inquire if aught of error yet remains
unscathed, or of truth undiscovered in the most useful of all human
sciences and arts: that of educating man.  

The conclusion is clear: truth cannot be silenced, even it has been “hid[den]
amongst the rubbish of human tradition” for a while.  
For that truth to emerge and
become clear, the student

should be permitted to rest with full assurance upon [his or her] own
investigations, and that perfect freedom of inquiry should be guarantied
[*sic*] to every man, to reason, to examine, and to judge for himself, on all
subjects in the least involving his own present or future destiny, or that of
society.  

While the explicit topic was education, the last sentence reveals that Campbell also has in
mind religious traditions that thwart “perfect freedom of inquiry.” And, of course, this
includes the Catholic Church.

In the context of Protestant hermeneutics, Campbell makes some interesting

remarks about science, the Bible, and the Catholic Church:

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65 Ibid., 91.

66 Ibid. Emphasis original.

67 Ibid., 90.

68 Ibid.
The Bible offers no theories of Astronomy, Geology, Chemistry, nor mental philosophy. It fears nothing, however, from the development of matter or mind. Ignorance of nature, of the Bible and of true science led the pope and his ecclesiastics to denounce all the leading scientific innovations upon ancient opinions, under the pretense, that they were unfriendly to religion, and would finally destroy the credibility of the Bible. But a better knowledge of nature and the Bible has shown that there is no discord or contradiction in their testimonies. Hence, without theorizing, the Bible says: ‘Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it.’

The October 20 issue of The Catholic Telegraph described Campbell’s lecture as “a decided effort to destroy the unity of action which heretofore prevailed.” The preceding remarks in the Telegraph, it should be noted, painted the College as exhibiting “[t]he greatest harmony and good will,” and presented a decidedly pro-Purcell stance: “not a thought, not a word [in Purcell’s lecture on Monday] was introduced to create the slightest suspicion in the breasts of his auditors.”

Campbell, in the December Millennial Harbinger, insists that his comments in the Wednesday lecture were misunderstood. He says

I was called to an account for having, unphilosophically, connected the present march of English society* in every country, in all the useful sciences and arts, with that impulse given to the mind by the Protestant doctrine, of every one thinking for himself, on every subject, as introduced into England at the era of the Reformation. To this sentiment Bishop Purcell was pleased to object; extending its signification beyond its contextual import, strongly affirming that “the Protestant Reformation is the cause of all the contention and infidelity in the world!”

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69 Ibid., 118.

70 “Controversy,” The Catholic Telegraph, October 20, 1836.

71 Ibid.

72 Campbell, The Millennial Harbinger, December, 1836, 552-553. The * refers to a footnote in the Harbinger saying the following: “By ‘English society,’ we mean all, in every country, who speak the English language” (552).
Thursday, October 6—Group discussion at the College on Campbell’s lecture

Campbell’s lecture had touched a nerve. On Thursday, the College resolved to make it the topic of the day for the afternoon. From 3pm-5pm Campbell, Purcell and Kinmont discussed the topic “before a crowded and deeply interested audience.” It’s worth noting that Kinmont, not Campbell or Purcell, was the person who introduced this to the College. The audience’s interest is understandable, considering the implications of Campbell’s argument for non-English-speaking Catholics. Because the conversation took a decidedly theological turn, the College decided to table it:

[a]t 5, the subject was closed, by a special resolution—the more desirable, as the subject began to take a latitude, which well nigh involved the College in a protracted theological discussion, which would alike have tended to excite unpleasant feelings between the disputants, and mar that harmony which has so strongly marked the meetings so far, and to injure the character of the College, by making it a theatre for disputants, on any subject whatever.

To reconstruct the conversation, we turn to The Catholic Telegraph and Millennial Harbinger. The Telegraph notes that Purcell “express[ed] his disapprobation of the language of Mr. Campbell,” which “provoked reply, but as the speakers found that the discussion must necessarily involve questions, not within the cognizance of the College, the debate was discontinued on a motion which was offered and received by the Institute.” In the Millennial Harbinger, Campbell makes similar comments, although he highlights his cool demeanor and Purcell’s seemingly inappropriate behavior. Referring to

73 “Spectator,” “College of Teachers,” Cincinnati Daily Gazette, October 8, 1836.

74 Ibid.

75 “Minutes,” Transactions, 17.

76 Ibid.

77 “Controversy,” The Catholic Telegraph, October 20, 1836.
Purcell’s comment about the Reformation being “the cause of all the contention and infidelity in the world,” Campbell replied

[t]his being an allegation, in my judgment, uncalled for, and irrelevant to any thing by me affirmed; and it having been stipulated that religious controversy was not to encumber the proceedings of the Convention, I could not honorably reply to those remarks from the Bishop in any other way than by simply informing him, that if he wished a religious discussion of that question, I was prepared for it, and would attend to it next week, or when convenient to him; but that in the College, I could not, under all the circumstances, do more than defend my assertion, in its bearings on education, as contemplated in the lecture.

[t]he worthy Bishop, time after time, declaring himself in favor of free discussion, saying that his ‘word was the word of God—commanding, Let there be light,’—approving of religious controversy, and rather complaining that in the College he was restricted; I took the occasion the second time to assure him of my willingness to render him all satisfaction, and to meet him, even on the consecrated ground of his own cathedral, and canvass the allegation in all its latitude and longitude. The invitation he did not, however, accept during the meeting of the College; but after its close, I made an appointment to speak on the subject, in the Sycamore street meeting-house, on Monday evening following.  

There are two purposes for providing these extended quotes. First, I want to show that Campbell perceived himself to be the non-aggressor in this discussion. It was Purcell who acted dishonorably by introducing theological topics into the conversation and complained about being “restricted.” Second, I want to show that in spite of Purcell’s unwillingness to have a discussion outside the meeting, Campbell prolonged the controversy by having a public lecture the following Monday evening.

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78 Campbell, Millennial Harbinger, December, 1836, 553. The two blocks of text from Campbell’s Millennial Harbinger are from his summary of events the led up to his decision to return to Cincinnati in January. Unfortunately, his account of the events of the week of the College’s meeting don’t clearly distinguish what happened on each day of the week. While Campbell doesn’t say that he said these things during the Thursday afternoon discussion period from 3pm-5pm, I have concluded (based on similar accounts in The Catholic Telegraph and the Cincinnati Daily Gazette) in my best judgment that this was the setting for his remarks.
Saturday, October 8—Campbell

The College of Teachers concluded its annual meeting on Saturday, October 8th. Campbell was chosen to give the closing address. His comments, unusually brief for him, were only a few pages long. Campbell describes the proceedings of the College as being characterized by “good temper, general harmony, and kind feelings.” He encourages the delegates to carry the ideas discussed and energy of the meeting back to their respective states and regions.

But his optimistic words were coupled with a cautionary reminder. Because a flood of immigrants was bringing to America men, women, and children unfit for participation in the country’s civil and political institutions, institutions like the College needed to be vigilant. The cause of education in the Ohio Valley had a moral urgency about it. The educational cause was moral because, if abandoned or executed poorly, the social harmony of America would eventually deteriorate. Campbell notes:

[e]very wind is carrying to our shores, hundreds and thousands of human beings from distant and oppressed countries, alike ignorant of things human and divine, calling for our sympathies and our means of promoting their cultivation, both in things intellectual and moral; and shall we suffer them to appeal to our humanity and our religion in vain? Our own interests, indeed, our political safety, our personal security from wrong and outrage, demand our best efforts to neutralize that mass of ignorance and corruption which otherwise must accumulate on our borders, or grow up in the bosom of our society, so long as the rights of hospitality and of

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80 Ibid., 253.
citizenship are tendered to men, of all climes and languages under heaven.\textsuperscript{81}

To borrow a phrase from Martin Marty, Campbell’s America was providentially and decidedly a “Benevolent Empire,” whose benevolence at times required society’s discipline to ensure its longevity. Campbell said

\begin{quote}
[t]o transmit to our posterity the rich blessings which we enjoy; it behooves us therefore, not knowing by whose hands the ‘rod of empire’ may yet be swayed in this our happy land, to give not only our suffrage, but our efforts to the cause of education, and to use all lawful means to facilitate the diffusion of knowledge and the influence of morality and good order, through every ramification of society.\textsuperscript{82}
\end{quote}

After covering a lot of ground, we can take away two key points about how the events of the College contributed to Campbell and Purcell’s January debate. First, it brought front-and-center the tension between the legal protections of the free exercise clause of the First Amendment and the social expectations that moral education in public schools would use the Protestant Bible. Education was a putatively neutral subject on which Protestants and Catholics could come together. However, Campbell’s philosophy of education presupposed freedom from authoritative intellectual traditions—religious or philosophical—for a person to be properly educated. For him, Catholicism and non-Common Sense philosophies were illustrative of these traditions, because they ostensibly prevented a person from investigating the facts—biblical or natural—on their own.

Education, these sessions show, was not merely a methodological project, but a value-laded enterprise that assumed a particular telos of human life. Purcell and Campbell could not agree on education because they could not agree on how one attains the end of a good life.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 255.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 255-256.
Second, it shows that discussions and debates about Catholicism happened within a cultural landscape of Protestant privilege. Campbell and Purcell did not engage the Catholic question on equal footing. The language and assumptions of Protestant Christianity infused public discourse about everything from education, to politics, to household management. For Purcell, or any Catholic, to offer dissenting opinions on any of these topics automatically placed him or her in the position of the social contrarian. Purcell’s initial reticence to accept Campbell’s invitations for a “discussion” may be read as a tactic that helped to ensure a social homeostasis for the Catholic community in a Protestant society.

Stage 3: Campbell and Purcell’s actions in the week after the College of Teachers meeting (Monday, October 10th to Friday, October 14th, 1836)

Monday, October 10—Campbell’s speech

After the College concluded, Campbell remained in Cincinnati to give the lecture he promised the previous week. He spoke at the Sycamore Street Meeting House on Monday, October 10 in the evening. 83 The Catholic Telegraph said that “Campbell had a notice inserted in the daily paper.” 84 The only hint we have of the content of Campbell’s lecture is from the Millennial Harbinger’s reprint of an article from the Cross & Baptist Journal. In its summary of events, the Journal said Campbell “gave a public address, in defence [sic] of his position.” 85 Presumably, this was Campbell’s theological defense of the Reformation that he was unable to give during the College the previous week. At the

83 “Roman Catholic Discussion,” from Cross & Baptist Journal, in Millennial Harbinger, December, 1836, 551.

84 “Controversy,” The Catholic Telegraph, October 20, 1836.

end of his speech, Campbell invited Purcell to reply. However, because of the late hour (10pm) and the audience’s wish to adjourn, Purcell postponed his remarks until the following evening.86

Tuesday, October 11—Purcell’s speech

On Tuesday night, Purcell occupied the pulpit of the Sycamore Street Meeting House, which seemed to have been something of a novelty. *The Catholic Telegraph* notes that the building was “overflowing” at the

novelty of a Roman Catholic Bishop occupying a Protestant pulpit and the still greater novelty of Protestants receiving from an honest source, the true picture of that Church which it is a part of their education to despise and vilify.87

Apparently, the Campbell-Purcell controversy, even in its earliest stages, had garnered significant public attention. Accounts differ on what Purcell said and how he spoke. The *Telegraph* claimed Purcell spoke with “the polish of eloquence and all the strength of reason and all the power of truth” in defending the Catholic Church and calling into question the character of Martin Luther.88 It also said Purcell gave an account of Luther based on primary sources, and put it in the audience’s hands to decide if reformer’s work was of God, or not.89

The *Millennial Harbinger* saw things differently. Campbell said Purcell mostly

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87 “Controversy,” *The Catholic Telegraph*, October 20, 1836.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid. “The Bishop . . . left the audience to decide, whether a man so horribly depraved as Luther proves himself to be, would have been chosen by the Almighty, as the herald of his gospel and the reformer of his people.”
spent the evening . . . in pouring forth a torrent of the most unqualified abuse of Martin Luther and his associates in the Reformation; representing him as a devil incarnate, the slave of the most brutal lusts and passions, to the extreme mortification, not only of every lady in the house, but to make even gentlemen themselves blush for his indecency and want of respect for public opinion.\textsuperscript{90}

At the end of the meeting, the \textit{Telegraph} said a large portion of the audience applauded Purcell’s speech, giving “unequivocal proof of their approbation.”\textsuperscript{91} The Catholic papers also said that Campbell stood up and said “the controversy should assume a more regular form—that moderators be appointed, and that a limited time should be alternately occupied by the speakers.”\textsuperscript{92} Both the \textit{Millennial Harbinger} and \textit{The Catholic Telegraph} say Purcell declined Campbell’s offer. In his recounting of the evening, Campbell said he went to great lengths to make the debate a possibility for Purcell:

The gentleman continued his speech till almost 10 o’clock, when on my motion to have the discussion subjected to a competent presidency, and to be regulated by equal laws, he positively declined any farther debate, alleging physical incompetency and the liabilities of his office to ministerial calls. To obviate these difficulties, I in vain proposed to measure the debate according to his physical strength, (which appeared to be greatly superior to mine) and the leave the time and place, whether by night or day, whether every day, or every other day, to his convenience and regulation.\textsuperscript{93}

We have two different sets of reasons for why Purcell declined Campbell’s offer. According to Campbell, Purcell turned down the offer because of the demands of his job as bishop. But according to the \textit{Telegraph}, Purcell declined because of the “extraordinary

\textsuperscript{90} \textit{Millennial Harbinger}, December, 1836, 553.

\textsuperscript{91} “Controversy,” \textit{The Catholic Telegraph}, October 20, 1836.

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{93} \textit{Millennial Harbinger}, December, 1836. 553.
positions” Campbell wanted to discuss. It lists some of Campbell’s propositions, some of which resemble what would become the propositions in the debate:

1. English speakers “are intellectually, morally and physically superior to all other people!!”

2. Religious orders in the Catholic Church are analogous to the sects of Protestantism.

3. The Catholic Church fulfills prophecy as the “Babylon,” “man of sin,” and the “youngest horn.”

4. “That ___ of the Popes could not ____ his name; (Mr. Campbell could not be induced to mention which of the Popes.)

5. That the papal chair had been occupied by a woman, Joan.

6. “That Charles Carroll was not a Catholic!!!”

Declining the offer for a debate, Purcell said he would “publish his views on the subject” and “would invite reply.” Purcell was not closed off to having a discussion, but it seems that he wanted to do it in print.

Wednesday, October 12—Campbell’s speech

On Wednesday evening, Campbell spoke to “a very crowded assembly in the Wesley Chapel.” We do not know if Purcell was in attendance. In the speech, Campbell

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95 The text was unreadable in electronic format.

96 Ibid. Some of the six propositions listed in *The Catholic Telegraph* are reflected in the later official debate propositions; others are not. In Campbell’s telling of the events of the evening, he does not mention listing any propositions on the Tuesday evening of Purcell’s lecture. Only twice do we get a mention of Campbell listing propositions for discussion during this week. The first comes from the letter from the concerned Cincinnatians on Thursday, asking Campbell to sustain the propositions his listed in his Wednesday evening talk, not Tuesday evening. The second comes from Campbell’s reply to the concerned Cincinnatians in which lists the nine propositions he outlined in his Wednesday night lecture.


outlined a set of propositions about Catholicism, which he said were “of superlative interest to every American citizen.””\(^9\) Campbell’s biographer said later that Campbell laid out “six propositions, which he declared himself at any time able to sustain.”\(^10\) The *Cross & Baptist Journal* said that “at the close [Campbell] gave notice that he designed to prosecute the subject no further.”\(^11\) We do not know the precise language of the propositions as Campbell uttered them that evening. On Thursday, he did, however, list a set of *nine* propositions that was likely an expanded version of the original six.

**Thursday, October 13—Campbell receives a letter from concerned Cincinnatians\(^12\)**

On Thursday, Campbell received a signed letter from approximately sixty concerned Cincinnatians. They were aware of his lectures on Catholicism and knew that he was about to leave town. In order to impress upon him the urgency of their concern, they sent Campbell a letter that reads, in part, as follows:

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102 The *Millennial Harbinger* dates Campbell’s reply to the concerned Cincinnatians as Friday, October 14, 1836, whereas the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* dates the letter coming from Thursday, the 13\(^{th}\). In the letter itself, Campbell talks about his outlining certain propositions for discussion “yesterday evening.” It seems that the *Harbinger* misdated the letter and the *Gazette* had the correct date (or that Campbell wrote the letter on the 13\(^{th}\) and dated it/sent it on the 14\(^{th}\)). This makes better sense of the content of Campbell’s letter—saying he listed propositions the day before—and it fits with secondary testimony from the *Cross & Baptist Journal* which says “On Wednesday evening [the 12\(^{th}\)] Mr. Campbell addressed a very large crowd” and that on Thursday “the following correspondence took place,” implying that Campbell’s reply came the same day as his receipt of the letter on Thursday. It also aligns with the concerned Cincinnati’s letter from Oct. 13 asking Campbell “to establish before this community the six propositions announced at the close of your lecture, last evening.” The sequence of events remains the same, however this dating inaccuracy just affects the days on which they happened.
Dear Sir—The undersigned, citizens of Cincinnati, having listened with much pleasure to your exposure and illustrations of the absurd claims and usages of the Roman Catholic Church, would respectfully and earnestly request you to proceed immediately to establish before this community the six propositions announced at the close of your lecture, last evening. This request is made under the conviction that the present state of feeling in this city and the critical state of the country, with reference to Romanism, demand this and will fully justify such a course, and also with the expectation that it may result in much good to the cause of Protestantism in the West.103

The concerned Cincinnatians did not fail to add, at the end, that, “[o]ne half of the city could be obtained, would time permit. Fearing your hasty departure, induces the above persons to hand it in without delay.”104

Receiving their letter, Campbell echoed their concern. Summing up his thoughts on Purcell’s refusal to have a debate, he said this:

[i]n consequence of this failure to meet public expectation, and of the magnitude of the interests developing themselves, so far as this matter was agitated, and of the impressions made on the whole community, alive, as you are to the great importance of this whole subject, religiously, morally, and politically considered, you have been induced, gentlemen, to request me to deliver a series of lectures on certain propositions which I sketched in my address of yesterday evening. These propositions being of superlative interest to every American citizen, I have carefully considered, and on receiving your very kind and polite invitation, I have arranged and expressed them in the following order and style:—“105

Campbell then lists nine, not six, propositions which reflect the propositions that we see in the debate. Not included in the propositions are the (more) extraordinary ones listed by The Catholic Telegraph in its recounting of what Campbell said on Tuesday night when

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103 “To the Rev. Mr. Campbell,” Cincinnati, October 13, 1836, in Millennial Harbinger, December, 1836, 551-552.

104 Ibid.

105 Campbell, Millennial Harbinger, December, 1836, 553. Emphasis mine.
Purcell gave his speech (e.g., Pope Joan, etc.). Campbell hopes for “a candid, faithful, and friendly examination of this whole subject,” but tells the concerned Cincinnatians that they will have to wait for his help until January. Citing personal business elsewhere and an already lengthy travel schedule, Campbell said he needs to return home to Bethany, Virginia. But he also wants to gather some references for the discussion; and, it should be noted, Campbell seems to be offering his invitation to any other Catholic, of higher rank or ability than Purcell, to take up the challenge. In his letter to the concerned Cincinnatians, he writes

> [p]ermit me, gentlemen, to add, that I wish it to be more extensively published abroad, that if any of the Catholic priesthood, more vigorous, or of higher authority than the Bishop of this diocess [sic], out of this state, or if Bishop Purcell himself should feel desirous of a free and full discussion of the above propositions, they may have time to prepare themselves, and be present on the occasion.  

At the end of his letter, Campbell said that he plans to return in January when he will “attempt to sustain each and every one of the above propositions,” which will be “either in lectures or in a public discussion.”  

Campbell had the letter from the concerned Cincinnatians and his reply published in the October 17 edition of the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*.

**Stage 4: Public Announcements (December 1836)**

It is important to note that even after all the saber rattling between Campbell and Purcell during and after the *College of Teachers*, it was still not completely settled what exactly would happen in January. It could be a public discussion, or a debate, as

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106 Ibid., 554.

107 Ibid.
Campbell had asked of Purcell; or it could simply be Campbell delivering a series of lectures if Purcell refused to engage him. The point is that Campbell made it publicly known that he was planning to return to take up the Catholic question again, whether or not Purcell wanted to have the discussion.

The undefined middle-period between October and January often gets overlooked by historians. DePalma, in her otherwise fine coverage of the debate, covers this period in the span of a sentence: “Bowing to the wishes of these distressed citizens, Campbell agreed to continue his lectures; Purcell’s acceptance was printed in the Cincinnati Daily Gazette on December 19, 1836.”¹⁰⁸ The problem with DePalma’s (and other’s) slight coverage of this period is that it assumes a debate was going to happen. Campbell published his correspondence with the concerned Cincinnatians on October 17 and then announced his return in the same paper on December 16. Two months passed without there being a definite meeting set between Campbell and Purcell, only with the promise that Campbell would return. After Campbell left town in October, it would be quite accurate to say that among persons who feared the encroachments of “Romanism” there was something of a groundswell of excitement about his return. Additionally, Purcell had two months to think about his and Campbell’s interaction at the College.

Friday, December 16—Campbell’s return is announced

On Friday, December 16, the Cincinnati Daily Gazette ran the following unsigned announcement:

Mr. Editor:—You are well aware of the thrilling interest, which pervaded our community, during the discussion between Mr. Alexander Campbell,

¹⁰⁸ DePalma, 92.
of Virginia, and the Rev. Bishop Purcell, some months since. Your readers will be gratified to hear that Mr. Campbell has made arrangements to return, and continue the discussion, agreeable to the invitation of many of our citizens. Please insert the annexed notice, which has just been received from Mr. Campbell, that those at a distance, who may wish, can make arrangements to attend.”

The notice reads as follows:

We have made our arrangements, all things concurring, to be at Cincinnati in the beginning of the second week in January next. We hope that our Roman Catholic friends, who have avowed their regard for free discussion, and who have so boldly and wantonly impugned Protestant principles, will then and there be in readiness to sustain their allegata, or to dispute the propositions we have submitted to their consideration. In case of a failure on their part, we shall on Tuesday, the 10th of January, either by day or by night, as the friends of this discussion may decide, commence our investigation of the claims and pretensions of Popery, in defence [sic] of our propositions already offered. A. CAMPBELL.

We are not told who wrote the initial notice to the editor. It is possible that Campbell authored it himself, or that a local colleague penned it to introduce Campbell’s notice (perhaps Burnet?). What it reveals is that Campbell’s party understood the College and post-College engagements between Campbell and Purcell to have been the source of great excitement for many people in the city. This excitement is motivation enough to attract people from significant distances to attend the lectures or debate that will happen in the following month. We should also note the professional and serious tone of Campbell’s notice. Campbell’s January return was not for some avocational activity; he saw his engagement with Catholicism as being central to his job description as a Christian reformer. Finally, we need to be clear on who Campbell thought the aggressors,


111 In Purcell’s reply, we find a somewhat playful, self-deprecating tone.
victim, and hero were in these events. The aggressors were the “Roman Catholic friends.”
The victim, it’s important to note, is not Campbell, but Protestantism. Campbell believed that Purcell and Montgomery (a priest who was at the College with Purcell) had “boldly and wantonly impugned Protestant principles.” The hero is Campbell who will return to Cincinnati to vindicate the assaulted principles. Campbell’s strategy is quite clever: by refusing to make himself the victim, he is able to deny that he is attacking the Catholic Church out of any personal motivation. Instead, he is simply defending an assaulted Protestantism under attack by a pervasive and oppressive Cincinnati Catholicism.

Monday, December 19—Purcell responds

On Monday, December 19, the Cincinnati Daily Gazette published Purcell’s response to Campbell’s notice from three days earlier. Earlier in this chapter, I cited Purcell’s December 19 article to point out that he was aware of Campbell’s March 1836 Millennial Harbinger challenge long before the two met at the College of Teachers in October. Purcell recounts this history in his follow-up to Campbell’s December 16 notice to show that he is not the “bold and wanton aggressor” Campbell claims. At the end of his response to Campbell, Purcell said

[w]ith respect to the acceptance of Mr. Campbell’s cartel, I have only to say, that, however low of stature, my trust is strong in God and in the might of His truth, that I shall be found more than a match for this vaunting Goliath.

Purcell believes that Campbell has a “cartel” and that the challenge is not coming from a solitary individual, but from a group of people. We do not know if Purcell thought

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112 John B. Purcell, Cincinnati Daily Gazette, December 19, 1836.

113 Ibid.
the cartel was the concerned Cincinnatians who wrote Campbell the letter. Perhaps he thought the cartel included D.S. Burnet, the editor of the *Christian Preacher*, who reprinted and passed on Campbell’s March 1836 challenge. In fact, Burnet amplified Campbell’s challenge by prefacing it with a header, “Who will try?”, as if to goad Purcell on to a fight. Interestingly, everyone who has written on the debate has overlooked the role D.S. Burnet played in instigating the controversy. It is chronologically accurate to say that Campbell first said he wanted to have public discussion with a representative of Roman Catholicism before he and Purcell had met. But Purcell may never have known that Campbell said this if *D.S. Burnet had not reprinted Campbell’s article and passed it on to Purcell*. Burnet, it turns out, was a silent partner in creating the conditions for the debate to happen. Burnet was the one who made Purcell aware that Campbell was on the lookout for a debating partner.

We do not know if Campbell knew about or encouraged Burnet’s activities. What we do know is that Purcell thought there was a connection between Campbell and a contingent of people in Cincinnati, possibly including Burnet. In this way, we can see Purcell’s acceptance as a courageous effort to stand against a group Protestant threat. Purcell reverses Campbell’s order of blame: the aggressors are Campbell and his cartel, and the victim is Roman Catholicism. Despite their differences, Campbell and Purcell were men who shared an abiding interest in education. It was a dispute about this topic that drew them into the religious controversy that would manifest in the January 1837 debate, to which we now turn.
CHAPTER III:
THE DEBATE: THEOLOGICAL AUTHORITY

Introduction

Chapters three and four are the exegetical heart of the dissertation, where I engage Campbell and Purcell’s arguments from the debate about theological authority (3) and the role of Catholic Church in America (4). The overarching argument that encompasses these chapters is that for both men, the debate was an exercise in “pastoral apologetics.” In *American Catholic Religious Thought*, Patrick Carey describes how American Catholics understood the nature of their faith in relation to American Protestants in the nineteenth century. He notes,

American Catholic religious thought became primarily pastoral and apologetic (sometimes irenic and sometimes polemical). It was pastoral in the sense that it was chiefly concerned with identifying, defining and preserving for Catholics their religious identity in the midst of a voluntary and pluralistic religious country. It was apologetic in the sense that it tried to vindicate Catholicism in relation to the republican and Protestant tradition.\(^1\)

While Carey does not use the phrase “pastoral apologetics” *per se*, it is an appropriate way to describe the activity of Catholic leaders in the nineteenth century. In a voluntaristic and religiously pluralistic country, Catholic bishops had to conceive of and articulate a public Catholicism in ways that were historically unprecedented. The

apologetic they offered was irreducibly pastoral because it was driven by a concern to edify Catholics and help them live meaningful lives in a social and political context where their presence was viewed suspiciously. In addition to applying to nineteenth century Catholics, “pastoral apologetics” can be analogously applied to Campbell, who believed the Catholic Church posed a threat to America and saw his participation in the debate as a pastoral activity aimed at serving the church (broadly understood across denominational lines) and America.

In chapter three, I discuss how Campbell and Purcell were trying to identify, define, and preserve religious identity\(^2\) by discussing their arguments about theological authority. In making their arguments, they were trying to offer a robust account of Christian belief that could withstand skepticism on the one hand, and rival Christian claims on the other.\(^3\) This chapter will proceed in three sections. First, I describe the historical setting of the debate, picking up where I left off in chapter two. Second, I provide a brief introduction to the American intellectual context of the time, highlighting two competing and simultaneously present trends—the quest for certainty and presence of doubt. Third, I discuss Campbell and Purcell’s views on theological authority, with special attention to how they understood infallibility.

\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Carey, “American Catholicism and the Enlightenment Ethos,” 131 and Allen, Philosophy for Understanding Theology, 193. Carey and Allen make similar points about Enlightenment Catholicism and Common Sense Realism, respectively, being apologetically useful against rival Christian traditions. Allen is explicit regarding Common Sense’s usefulness against skepticism, and Carey gestures in that direction with his comments about Enlightenment Catholicism’s ability challenge deism. I am indebted to both for providing the broad framework for my argument.
Section 1: Historical Setting of the Debate

On Wednesday, January 11 at 2am, Campbell arrived in Cincinnati fulfilling his promise to the concerned citizens of Cincinnati: he would defend Protestantism and expose the errors of Catholicism. A frozen river had forced him to travel 240 miles over land to Cincinnati, some of which had been in a mail stage. By the time he got to his destination, Campbell had come down with a “violent cold” that he was not able to shake until midway through the debate. Originally thinking he might just give lectures, Campbell did not know until he arrived that Purcell had in fact agreed to have a public discussion.

In a letter to Purcell, dated the day of his arrival, Campbell praised Purcell’s “frank and manly” decision to have a free discussion about Catholicism, and remarked that his esteem for Purcell was “greatly heighten[ed].” Campbell requested a meeting in which the two could establish guidelines for the debate, and suggested that the debate be recorded and published so that the discussion might provide a “more extensive reading, and . . . a wider range of usefulness.”

5 Richardson, Memoirs of Alexander Campbell, 426.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., vi. It is beyond the purview of this dissertation to discuss the somewhat contentious publication of the printed version of the debate. What matters here is that scholars agree that we have a reliable transcript of the debate, which makes it a remarkable, even invaluable source.
the preliminaries settled that day, since “many persons [were] in waiting” for the details to be made known.⁹

Purcell responded in kind, noting that he would “be happy to meet . . . at any time in the morning, or in the afternoon, at the Athenaeum.”¹⁰ Being adjacent to the Cathedral, the Athenaeum was a convenient location for Purcell, so the two met there. They met at 2pm and after some wrangling¹¹ about who would begin and respond in the debate, they laid out five rules that would govern the weeklong discussion:

1. The discussion’s copyright will be sold to a bookseller, recorded by a stenographer, and its profits divided between two public charities chosen by Campbell and Purcell.

2. The discussion would happen at the Sycamore Street Meeting House, from January 13 and 21, excluding Sunday. Each day, the proceedings would go from 9:30am to 12:30pm, and then 3pm to 5pm.

3. Campbell would begin each day and Purcell would respond. Their first speeches of the day were to be one hour, and the remaining ones only one-half hour.

4. The discussion was to be governed by five moderators—two chosen by Campbell, two by Purcell, and the last by those four.

5. The moderators were tasked with “preserv[ing] order in the assembly, and . . . keep[ing] the parties to the question.”¹²

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⁹ Ibid.


¹¹ One historian notes, “Purcell demanded that as an essential to his entering the debate, he be the respondent, and after considerable discussion, Campbell was forced to agree.” (Humble, Campbell and Controversy, 132.)

¹² Purcell and Campbell, “Introduction,” “RULES OF DISCUSSION,” Debate, vii. The second rule for discussion contains a parenthetical reference indicating that the rules were written on Friday, January 13th, the first day of the debate. However, the editorial note above the rules said Campbell and Purcell met on the 11th and “after some debate . . . they finally agreed to the following [rules].” It’s possible that a period of two days passed between the Jan. 11 meeting and the first day of the debate when the rules were still
On Thursday morning, a day before the debate was scheduled to begin, Campbell sent Purcell the seven propositions he had written for the debate. The list was an abbreviated form of the nine that he outlined in his letter to the concerned citizens of Cincinnati on October 13th, and it seems that Campbell thought he and Purcell could cover one proposition a day. Agreeing to the propositions, Purcell met Campbell at 9:30 the next morning, Friday the 13th. The Meeting House was just a block south of the cathedral and it was Purcell’s routine each morning of the debate to stop at St. Xavier’s Chapel, next to the Cathedral, where he would say a short prayer and compose himself before taking the stage with Campbell in the Protestant church. The congregation that undefined. It’s also possible that the rules existed as a more or less defined text and were then copied on the morning of the debate, explaining the presence of the parenthetical remark.


14 Campbell, vii-viii. For reference, the propositions are as follows: “The Roman Catholic Institution, sometimes called the ‘Holy, Apostolic, Catholic, Church,’ is not now, nor was she ever, catholic, apostolic, or holy; but is a sect in the fair import of that word, older than any other sect now existing, not the ‘Mother and Mistress of all Churches,’ but an apostacy [sic] from the only true, holy, apostolic, and catholic church of Christ.” 2) “Her notion of apostolic succession is without any foundation in the Bible, in reason, or in fact; an imposition of the most injurious consequences, built upon unscriptural and anti-scriptural traditions, resting wholly upon the opinions of interested and fallible men.” 3) “She is not uniform in her faith, or united in her members; but mutable and fallible, as any other sect of philosophy or religion—Jewish, Turkish, or Christian—a confederation of sects, under a politico-ecclesiastic head.” 4) “She is the ‘Babylon’ of John, the ‘Man of Sin’ of Paul, and the Empire of the ‘Youngest Horn’ of Daniel’s Sea Monster.” 5) “Her notions of purgatory, indulgences, auricular confession, remission of sins, transubstantiation, supererogation, &c, essential elements of her system, are immoral in their tendency, and injurious to the well-being of society, religious and political.” 6) “Notwithstanding her pretensions to have given us the Bible, and faith in it, we are perfectly independent of her for our knowledge of that book, and its evidences of a divine original.” 7) “The Roman Catholic religion, if infallible and unsuscceptible of reformation, as alleged, is essentially anti-American, being opposed to the genius of all free institutions, and positively subversive of them, opposing the general reading of the scriptures, and the diffusion of useful knowledge among the whole community, so essential to liberty and the permanency of good government.”

15 “Archbishop Purcell and Sycamore Church,” Cincinnati Atlas, January 8, 1853, reprinted in Millennial Harbinger, March 1853, 163.
met in the building was organized as a Baptist church in 1828, and then by the time of the debate identified with Campbell’s reforms, earning the epithet “Campbellite baptist church.” The building itself was unremarkable, being two stories high, having a basic rectangular shape with a basement and galleries, and having an occupancy of about five hundred. The Meeting House stood on the west side of Sycamore Street between 5th and 6th street in Cincinnati’s First Ward. Five blocks to the south was the Ohio River, which at the time was closed off by ice; and a block to the north was Purcell’s towering cathedral, which at the time was six stories high.

The contrast between the Protestant Meeting House and the Catholic cathedral could not be more stark. The Protestant church was a spartan and squatting building that was dwarfed next to the imposing height of a cathedral and the adorned facades of its ancillary buildings. The short walk from his chapel to the “Campbellite” church might give us the false impression that Campbell and Purcell understood and navigated their cultural landscape in much the same way. This was decidedly not the case. For Catholics, large and imposing buildings were symbolic of God’s greatness and part of an architectural evangelism; for Protestants, these buildings were ostentatious symbols of ecclesiastical control and a reminder that a “foreign” religion lived on American (Protestant) soil. By walking from his cathedral to the Meeting House, Purcell was not

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17 “Review,” Western Christian Advocate, January 20, 1837.

18 Humble suggests that the debate was “completely filled” with 500 people, though his primary source for that assertion could not be located (132). With a full house, it is plausible that the building could hold this many people.
just entering another denomination’s house of worship, he was venturing into a new cultural region and (I would argue) contributing to the creation of a new cultural space.

This crossing of cultural boundaries seems to have been a major reason that so many people suffered the January cold to hear the debate. According to the *Cincinnati Whig*, the debate “created a vast deal of interest, and . . . large audiences of both sexes have been daily in attendance.”19 While we know that “many strangers and citizens” of Cincinnati attended the debate, we do not know an exact ratio of Protestants and Catholics in the audience.20 However, on the last day of the debate Purcell indicates that there may have been a significant Catholic contingent when he mentions “the crowds of Catholics thronging . . . to this debate.”21 The spectacle of their bishop taking a week out of his busy schedule to debate an out-of-town Protestant minister would surely have been an event that would have stirred up the curiosity, and pride, of Cincinnati Catholics. Likewise, the thought that a bishop would debate a restorationist Christian seemed to attract a variety of Protestants, not the least including the virulent anti-Catholic Lyman Beecher and his Lane Theological Seminary students, who, according to the *Cincinnati Atlas*, handed Campbell “long slips of paper with suggestions to confound the defender of the Catholic Church.”22 Not surprisingly, Campbell and Purcell were both “surrounded by their friends, who aid[ed] them by their suggestions, [made] notes, [and handed] books


21 Purcell, *Debate*, 354.

22 “Archbishop Purcell and Sycamore Church,” *Cincinnati Atlas*, 163.
of reference.”23 All of this goes to show that the debate, then, was not a solitary event, conducted only between two individuals; rather, it was a communal affair, garnering assistance from each man’s associates and the psychological energy of an interested audience.

Charles Hammond, editor of the Cincinnati Daily Gazette, noted that on third day of the debate the audience was so great and that “[s]o heavy was the pressure, especially in the galleries, that I could not help an inquiry, in my own mind, as to the strength of the building.”24 Hammond would also say the debate attracted “[a] full house,”25 and a writer for the Western Christian Advocate would say that “[t]he house [was] crowded to suffocation, and excellent behavior manifested by all present.”26 We do not know the total number of attendees for the week. However, the Cincinnati Daily Gazette estimates that “hundreds, if not thousands, of Protestants” attended.27 A modest estimate is 1,000.28 Thousands more Cincinnatians would have read about the debate, which, according to one paper, engrossed the city, with a population of 34,000, “to the exclusion of almost every other subject.”29

26 “Review,” Western Christian Advocate, January 20, 1837.
28 I use Humble’s estimate that the building could hold 500 people, and consider that each day different people would have attended.
29 “The Controversy,” The Republican, n.d., in Alexander Campbell and the Rt. Rev. John B. Purcell, A Debate on the Roman Catholic Religion (Cincinnati: H.S. Bosworth, 1865), 11. Based on its contents, this article was written toward the end of, or shortly after, the debate. The article was included, along with
Because the debaters thought the crowd might get unruly (which ended up not happening), they tasked the moderators with keeping order. On the first morning of the debate, Samuel Lewis, one of the moderators, “called the meeting to order . . . [and] requested the audience to refrain from any audible signs of approbation or disapprobation, as it would interrupt the debate.”30 Per the preliminaries, Campbell had the first speech, but instead of getting into the first proposition, he complained that “he had been misrepresented” by the Cincinnati Daily Gazette; he was not in Cincinnati to “[wage] . . . ‘war upon the Catholics’; he was only here to [stand] forth [as] ‘the champion of Protestantism.’”31

By assuming the designation “champion of Protestantism,” Campbell is walking a fine line. On the one hand, he needs to maintain continuity with the restorationism he had been preaching for the last fifteen years—that the church is most fully and faithfully realized in the nineteenth century when it replicates the beliefs and practices of the first century church. And on the other, he needed to cultivate amicable relations with other Christian denominations like the Presbyterians, who are not restorationist. In the debate, Campbell allows that denominational structures have a provisional, but not final, legitimacy, and this gives him the right to claim to represent Protestantism in general in the debate.

30 Editorial note, Debate, 9.

31 Hammond, “The Grand Debate,” Cincinnati Daily Gazette, January 14, 1837. It is unclear if Campbell is referring to Purcell’s December 19 response, or to another announcement the Cincinnati Daily Gazette had made prior to January 13th. Emphasis original.
It was important for Campbell to make clear that it was not his intention to wage “war upon Catholics,” as if he were actively seeking a fight, which according to Campbell is what Purcell and the editor of the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* had accused him of. For the first fifteen minutes of his first speech, Campbell noted that

> [c]onsiderable pains appear to have been taken by the gentleman who is my opponent on this occasion, to impress upon the minds of the public the idea that he stands here in the attitude of a defender of Catholicism, and to present me as its assailant. I am sorry to say that even some Protestants have contributed to give that color to this debate; for I saw in this morning’s Gazette an article, in which I am represented as conducting a crusade against the Roman Catholics. Its editor appears to have his sympathies morbidly enlisted in their cause. He is very sympathetic indeed, in behalf of the Roman Catholic religion. Every agony the mother church feels is a pang to him; for every groan she heaves he has a bottle full of tears ready to be poured out. I will not stop to enquire whether they are political or religious tears. I have to do with the worthy gentleman here [Purcell], who has represented me as having volunteered to come forward with an attack upon the Catholic Church.\(^{32}\)

Campbell seems to be going out of his way to show that he is not responsible for the debate. On an individual level, this defensiveness might be symptomatic of a desire to transfer responsibility to Purcell and Hammond, thereby exculpating himself and making him look better in the public eye. On a social level, Campbell is laying the groundwork for his argument that the Catholic Church is aggressively undermining the social, Protestant, ethos of the country. Referring back to the *College of Teachers*, Campbell remarked that Purcell “did first assail the Protestants”:

> [w]hen Dr. J. L. Wilson read an oration on the subject of universal education, the gentleman arose, and in that Protestant house, and before a Protestant assembly, directly and positively protested against allowing the book which Protestants claim to contain their religion, to be used in schools. He uttered a tirade against the Protestant modes of teaching, and

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\(^{32}\) Campbell, *Debate*, 9.
against the Protestant influence upon the community. *This was the origin of the dispute. Had it not been for the assertions made by the gentleman on that occasion, we should not have heard one word of discussion.*\(^{33}\)

Campbell seems to backtrack a bit, acknowledging that it might be possible to read his propositions and come away with the impression that he is assailing Catholicism. Recalling his March 1836 *Millennial Harbinger* article in which he argued against a “W.A.” from Illinois, Campbell responds to the hypothetical indictment by asking,

> [h]ow is it possible for the gentleman to prove that, because, a year ago, I made some answer to an attack on Protestantism from the state of Illinois, and called for some more reputable antagonist, that on this account he did not assail Protestantism, and that I am the assailant in this case? Does my having been plaintiff in that case make me necessarily plaintiff in every other case? Does my having told him that I stood prepared to discuss the question at large with any creditable gentleman—\(^{34}\)

In the middle of his last sentence, Campbell was cut off by the moderators for speaking off topic and admonished to stick to the debate proper, and not explain its origin. Before submitting to their decision, Campbell added one last remark to excuse his comments and proclaim his innocence:

> I thought it due to myself, that the public should know precisely the attitude in which the gentleman and myself stand in this matter. I stand here as the defender of Protestantism, and not as the assailant of Catholicism.\(^{35}\)

After these comments, Campbell got down to the business of addressing the first proposition for the remainder of his first hour-and-a-half.

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\(^{33}\) Ibid. Emphasis mine.

\(^{34}\) Ibid.

\(^{35}\) Ibid.,10.
At 11am, Purcell stood up to give his first speech before the audience and expressed surprise that Campbell had not done a better job of arguing against the Catholic Church. He then took a few moments to address Campbell’s claims that he was not responsible for starting the debate. Claiming that the facts were before the public, Purcell said he would not speak on the matter, but let the public decide who was responsible for starting the controversy. Then, Purcell went on to discuss the oddity of Campbell claiming to represent Protestantism and wondered which particular Protestants would want to be represented by him. At this point, Purcell was cut off by moderators and directed to speak to the question at hand, proposition one. The *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* noted that in his opening comments, Purcell’s “commencement … wandered from the subject of debate, into general reflections, [and was] more declamatory than pertinent.”

On Thursday, January 19th, the debate was entering its sixth day and moving at a snail’s pace. Campbell had expected to be able to cover one proposition a day, but he and Purcell spent almost all of the first four days wrangling over the first two and they could find no common ground. However, toward the end of the day on Thursday, Campbell and Purcell made statements about theological authority, implicit up to now, that revealed a shared assumption about the authority of the Bible and the Church. During his 3pm-3:30pm speech, Campbell was responding to the sixth proposition and arguing against

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36 Purcell, *Debate*, 18.

37 Ibid., 18-19.


39 Wilson, 118-119. Wilson provides a helpful table in Appendix A in which he tracks what propositions were discussed when each debater spoke.

40 Proposition Six: “Notwithstanding her pretensions to have given us the Bible, and faith in it, we are perfectly independent of her for our knowledge of that book, and its evidences of a divine original.”
the Catholic Church’s understanding of tradition as the means through which biblical truth is expressed when he said:

The first and characteristic difference, between the Protestant and Roman Catholic, is this: the former believes the scriptures first, and the church afterwards; whereas, the latter believes the church first, and the scriptures afterwards . . . our faith in the bible, rests not upon the church of Rome.\textsuperscript{41}

Then, minutes later, during his 3:30pm-4pm speech, Purcell said as much, but in a manner that put Catholicism in a favorable light:

[W]e believe in the church first; and on the faith of the evidences which I have enumerated, we believe in the bible \textit{sic}, which the church presents to us, vouching for its purity and authenticity. The bible obtained, sanctions the authority of the church, and confirms our faith.\textsuperscript{42}

The idea that the Bible and the Church were alternative sources of theological authority was not a new claim in Protestant and Catholic polemics. Campbell and Purcell had accepted the basic terms of dichotomy that they had inherited from their sixteenth century forefathers: for Campbell, the Bible was the self-contained deposit of God’s revelation; for Purcell, the Bible was the deposit, although not self-contained, of God’s revelation that was properly interpreted through the Church’s teaching. What is remarkable is not that Campbell and Purcell were making these arguments, but that both men saw the arguments as self-evidently compelling. It is almost as if each man, while actually engaging in a debate, did not think a great deal of argumentation was needed to convince another person of the veracity of his position. The point was easier for Campbell to make as a Protestant in America, already indebted to and profiting from the ubiquity of Common Sense Realism. For Purcell, it was a harder, though still

\textsuperscript{41} Campbell, \textit{Debate}, 257.

\textsuperscript{42} Purcell, \textit{Debate}, 262-3.
conceivable, case to make, with Enlightenment Catholicism. Yet, he would proudly say that Catholics believe the Church before they believe the Bible. This admission, far from being a sign of intellectual servitude on the part of Catholics, was for Purcell a banner justification for the rightness of his position. While “Common Sense” was the technical term for a particular philosophical school, it is appropriate to say that Purcell thought his position on theological authority was common sense. So, the question becomes, how did these two men who had two radically different conceptions of theological authority imagine that their positions were self-evident, even obvious?

Section 2: The American Intellectual Context

In the first half of the nineteenth century, we can observe American Protestant and Catholic church leaders trading in two related rhetorical strategies: the first was a rhetoric of certainty, which offered Christians religious assurance not just in the Bible or the Church, but in a certain way of understanding the Bible and the Church’s nature and authority; the second was a rhetoric of doubt, which, in addition to being the necessary correlate for the rhetoric of certainty, cast alternative modes of having religious assurance as being deficient and leading to uncertainty.

The rhetoric of certainty grows out of the intellectual matrix that Henry May calls the “Didactic Enlightenment,”⁴³ which is an American appropriation of the European Enlightenment that is largely coterminous with Scottish Common Sense Realism. As a

⁴³ Henry F. May, The Enlightenment in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). May argues that Americans did not receive and appropriate just one monolithic European Enlightenment (which, of course, did not exist). Rather, he claims that Americans received, modified, and appropriated several Enlightenments that follow a basic chronology: The Moderate Enlightenment (1688-1787), the Skeptical Enlightenment (1750-1789), the Revolutionary Enlightenment (1776-1800), and the Didactic Enlightenment (1800-1815). While important differences between the periods remain, May puts forward two propositions they all share: “first, that the present age is more enlightened than the past; and second, that we understand nature and man best through our natural faculties” (xiv).
conservative expression of the Enlightenment, the Didactic Enlightenment “was opposed both to skepticism and revolution, but tried to save from what it saw as the debacle of the Enlightenment the intelligible universe, clear and certain moral judgments, and progress.”\textsuperscript{44} Specifically, the Didactic Enlightenment would have affirmed with Thomas Reid that

\begin{quote}
[on such grounds as experience, consensus, and necessity . . . we can assume what most people have always assumed: that our minds can know actual objects, and not mere images or ideas of them.\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

Drawing heavily on Reid and other Common Sense Realists, the proponents of the Didactic Enlightenment were not only defending against the idealism of Kant and skepticism of Hume, but also the revolutionary and caustic appropriation of Common Sense by Thomas Paine. The Didactic Enlightenment, May notes, was “the principle mode in which the Enlightenment was assimilated by the American official culture.”\textsuperscript{46}

Even though Protestants were the ones largely responsible for transmitting the Didactic Enlightenment to America,\textsuperscript{47} American Catholics would embrace its general aims in a qualified way because it affirmed two convictions that might otherwise be contradictory: that one could maintain faith in “social and even scientific progress” on the one hand, and “unchanging moral principles” on the other.\textsuperscript{48} By intertwining these convictions, as opposed to holding them in tension, the Didactic Enlightenment “had a common purpose:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{44} Ibid., xvi.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 344.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 358.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 343. Among its most vocal advocates were American Presbyterian ministers, who tended to be “conservative, literate, [and] anti-enthusiastic”—not coincidentally, all characteristics of Campbell.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 342.
\end{itemize}
to show that culture, science, and urbanity were compatible with morality, religion, and law.”49 And that was a purpose that Campbell and Purcell both could affirm.

The Didactic Enlightenment had the added benefit of easily aligning with the social and political values of antebellum America. Discussing the Didactic Enlightenment and drawing on Nathan Hatch’s democratization thesis,50 Mark Noll observes

that the Scottish Enlightenment [for our purposes, a synonym for Didactic Enlightenment] offered Americans exactly what they seemed to require to master the tumults of the revolutionary era . . . the intuitive, sensationalist ethics provided by the Scots offered an intellectually credible way to establish public virtue in a society that was busily repudiating the props on which virtue had traditionally rested—tradition itself, divine revelation, history, social hierarchy, an inherited government, an the authority of religious denominations.51 Catholics would certainly have challenged the Didactic Enlightenment’s aversion to tradition by suggesting that Catholic tradition affirmed reason and was not an obstacle to its expression. What the Didactic Enlightenment did for Catholics was provide a public language with which to promote conservative republican virtues, which Purcell would then describe as features of the Catholic Church. The Didactic Enlightenment was a shared intellectual context out of which American churchmen like Campbell, who was more explicitly its heir and spokesman, and Purcell could find common cause in articulating rhetorics of theological certainty that were both thoroughly harmonious with the intellectual norms of American public discourse. The Didactic Enlightenment,

49 Ibid., 343.
50 Nathan O. Hatch, The Democratization of American Christianity (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989). Hatch “argues both that the theme of democratization is central to understanding the development of American Christianity, and that the years of the early republic are the most crucial in revealing that process” (1).
51 Mark Noll, “The Rise and Long Life of the Protestant Enlightenment in America,” in Knowledge and Belief in America: Enlightenment Traditions and Modern Religious Thought, 100.
ingeniously, gave both the ability to appeal to authority in an anti-authoritarian social climate.

Campbell and Purcell would appeal to the Bible and the Church as sources of authority and certainty in their arguments. The rhetoric of doubt against which they were contesting was made up of the usual suspects—Kant, Hume, and the Deists. But as Amanda Porterfield shows in *Conceived in Doubt*, uncertainty was not limited to an “official” intellectual culture of well-educated elites; it saturated American society, and was expressed in the practices of everyday life from the bottom up.\(^{52}\) One of Porterfield’s main arguments is that in the late-eighteenth century there was widespread uncertainty about the stability and longevity of the American republic, and church leaders met this doubt with religious teaching that assuaged these social, as well as religious, fears. Some of these fears were worries about the federal government, land speculators, the stability of the currency, and the role of non-white and non-male members of society.\(^{53}\) Beneath these anxieties there was a numbing uncertainty about a national future that could no longer rely on tradition to be a social cohesive. Porterfield notes:

> As old traditions fell away, uncertainty about how to conduct oneself, cynicism with respect to other people, and ambivalence about the effects


\(^{53}\) Ibid., 1-2. Porterfield cites some of these anxieties as “cynicism toward policies enacted by the federal government to resentment of sharp traders and land speculators. People feared the miseries of debt, grew wary about counterfeit currency, suspicious of women who worked along waterways, and Indians harboring revenge. Free blacks would work for almost nothing, and the problems associated with slavery were legion. The 1790s saw rising panic about how to get along in the new world of American liberty, where old traditions of decorum had broken down, stability was a memory of the past, and innocence an invitation to predators.”
of American independence all contributed to the uneasy atmosphere of mistrustful doubt.\textsuperscript{54}

In this context of tradition-less uncertainty, Porterfield argues that along with assuaging this doubt by appealing to religious authority, ministers also stoked certain types of doubt for which they were uniquely equipped to provide answers. Challenging Hatch’s democratization thesis, Porterfield argues that the upsurge of Protestant church involvement in the early nineteenth century did not happen primarily because of some inherent democratic principle within a nascent evangelicalism; rather, she claims that Protestant (and I might argue Catholic, as well) Christianity capitalized on a felt existential uncertainty in the American populace and provided answers to fears it may not have created, but nonetheless stoked. She notes:

Managing anxiety about American freedom, churches muffled skepticism about biblical revelation and the need for religious authority. Promoting the supreme authority of God’s law, churches not only exerted moral authority as interpreters of divine governance but also fostered distrust of secular reason and government. Thus churches manipulated distrust as well as relieved it, feeding the uncertainty and instability they worked to resolve.\textsuperscript{55}

While there is room to debate how far and deep doubt and uncertainty permeated American society, and the extent to which ministers stoked it, I think Porterfield’s primary observation is correct: rhetorics of doubt were common in the popular discourse of the early nineteenth century, and religious leaders assiduously responded to them with rhetorics of certainty.

Campbell and Purcell were representative of orthodox American Protestants and Catholics in the 1830s who marshaled the resources of their theological traditions to

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 1.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 2.
provide certainty in the face of religious doubt. For Protestants, Common Sense Realism was the ready-at-hand philosophical system to accomplish this goal; for Catholics, Enlightenment Catholicism provided the resources to do the same, but had the added benefit of articulating Catholic theology in a decidedly republican form. Importantly, the American intellectual context of the 1830s provided a canopy under which Campbell and Purcell could articulate distinct theological projects, but still share enough philosophical assumptions to make debate a possibility.

Campbell and Purcell also shared common ground when it came to the method and purpose of apologetics. Even though one was schooled in Scottish Common Sense Realism and the other was indebted to Enlightenment Catholicism, both saw “apologetics [as] a means of ascertaining through the inductive method the facticity of God’s revelation.”56 They would, of course, disagree on the locus of that revelation, but they presupposed this first principle and considered “[all other theological questions [as dependent] upon the correct understanding of this ‘rule of faith.’”57 As a rule of faith, revelation was the standard against which Campbell and Purcell measured the accuracy of their own, as well as their interlocutor’s claims. Both were confident that the inquiring subject could know this revelation (in contrast to the skeptics) and that his or her reason would lead to an affirmation of its contents.

Given their confidence in the possibility of persuasion, it is not surprising that each was eager to debate—if not to convince his opponent, then at least persuade some members of the audience. Campbell and Purcell inherited intellectual traditions for which

56 Carey, American Catholic Religious Thought, 27.
57 Ibid.
debate was the quintessential expression of their viability. Commenting on the American
expression of Enlightenment Catholicism’s relationship to Europe, as well as its
convergence with Common Sense Realism, Carey observes,

[t]his emphasis upon the reasonableness of faith (which, in fact, many
times made reason the bar for revelation) not only reflected a theological
continuity with European Catholic responses to deism but also appeal to
the basic Enlightenment values in American society and established a
common ground of discussion with those Protestants who had taken up
Scottish Common Sense Philosophy. 58

The common ground that Campbell and Purcell shared was not an agreement on
the contents of the foundational loci of Christian theology, such as the nature and
authority of the Bible, hermeneutics, and specific doctrines like Christology. Rather, their
common ground was optimism in the subject’s rational ability to adjudicate rival truth
claims, and come to a conclusion about Christian belief that could rightly be called
reasonable and not a leap of faith. Underscoring the intellectual integrity and rigor of
Enlightenment Catholicism, Carey notes that “[s]ubmission to the church’s teachings . . .
was perceived as rational and not blind obedience.” 59 We could alter Carey’s sentence by
deleting the phrase “church’s teachings,” and substituting it with the word “Bible,” and it
would be an equally accurate description of Campbell’s Common Sense view of
apologetics.

Section Three: Campbell and Purcell on Theological Authority

When Campbell and Purcell met, each man was poised to offer a robust defense
of the Christian faith that could offer certainty in the face of doubt. To do this, each

58 Ibid., 26-27.
59 Ibid.
needed to play up the strengths of his own tradition, discredit his interlocutor’s, and then offer an alternative proposal.

**Campbell’s Project in the Debate**

In order to make a successful argument against Purcell, Campbell knew he needed to establish the Bible’s theological and historical priority over the church. Establishing its theological priority meant making an argument that the Bible was the sole receptacle of God’s revelation that would stand in judgment of the church. Establishing its historical priority meant offering an account of how Protestants could receive the canonized text of Scripture without deferring to the Catholic Church’s canonization process. These were Campbell’s penultimate goals in his attempt to establish Protestant Christianity as a bulwark of assurance in contrast to skepticism and Catholicism.

Campbell’s argument for the theological priority of the Bible over the Church is not surprising. He believed the New Testament was the only authoritative source for locating legitimate Christian beliefs and practices:

> [T]he New Testament . . . is the only authenticated standard of faith and manners—the only inspired record of the christian [sic] doctrine . . . [w]hat is not found there, wants the evident sanction of inspiration, and can never command the respect and homage of those who seek divine authority in faith and morality.\(^{60}\)

He would underscore this point later in the debate: “[d]ivine authority cannot exist, but in the holy oracles: against any other pretended infallible standard, all men should protest.”\(^{61}\) Unlike some other Protestant biblical theologians, Campbell did not feel it

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\(^{60}\) Campbell, *Debate*, 13.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 100.
was necessary for interpreters to burden themselves with accounting for the Bible’s historical origin or canonization process:

Among Protestants, the reason and authority of religious belief and practice, is, “Thus saith the Lord.” It is not important to ascertain when any opinion or practice began, nor who introduced it; but if it be not in the BIBLE, no matter how ancient it may be. [sic] It wants apostolic sanction, for the apostles sanction only what was written and ordained before their death.\(^{62}\)

For Campbell, the Bible has seven attributes that set it apart from the Roman Catholic rule of faith, and make it the ultimate source of authority for Christians. Noting the attribute and then following it with a line from Scripture, Campbell says

1. It is inspired: for, “\textit{Holy men of God},” says Peter, “\textit{spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.}”

2. Authoritative. “The word that \textit{I} speak to you, shall judge you in the last day,” says the Lord from heaven.

3. Intelligible. To the Ephesian converts he saith, “When you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ.”

4. Moral. “The word of the Lord is pure, rejoicing the heart.”

5. Perpetual. “The word of the Lord endureth for ever; and this is the word which has been announced to you as glad tidings.”

6. Catholic. “He that is of God, heareth God’s word.” “Preach the word.” “Preach the gospel to every creature.”

7. Perfect. “From a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, \textit{which are able to make thee wise to salvation.”} “All scripture given by inspiration of God, is profitable for doctrine, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, \textit{thoroughly furnished to every good work.}”\(^{63}\)

With inspiration at the forefront, these attributes provide the foundation for everything Campbell says about the Bible, its authority, and why it should be seen as the

\(^{62}\) Ibid., 277.

\(^{63}\) Ibid., 182.
sole and true repository of God’s revelation. Without inspiration the Bible would simply be another human book—a book like what Campbell believes the traditions of the Catholic Church are. Shortly after listing these attributes, Campbell discusses why the Catholic Church’s rule does not reflect them:

1. It is uninspired: consequently, being human, it can have no authority over the conscience; and this makes it

2. Unauthoritative. God alone is Lord of the conscience, and no man can make a law to govern it. Hence a christian never can be subordinate to any institution in religion, that wants the sanction of divine authority.

3. Unintelligible. No man can ever find time to examine all the creed [sic] of Roman Catholics. It is constantly accumulating; and if any one had time to read it all, he never could understand it.

4. Immoral. This is that attribute which I wish specially to consider . . . It gives me no pleasure to dwell upon this theme, to expatiate on the immoral character of the papistic rule of faith . . . it is my duty conscientiously and benevolently to expose the immoral tendencies of this system.64

Campbell would discuss the immorality of the Catholic rule of faith for two pages in the speech, but never discuss the remaining three attributes.65 He was convinced that the Catholic rule of faith was immoral because it required Catholics to hold beliefs and practice their faith in a way that contradicted the Bible. He cites confession as an example:

[t]he Roman Catholic rule of faith erects a tribunal of confession unknown in scripture, and commands all to come to it at least once a year. It moreover

64 Ibid., 183. Emphasis mine. N.b., in the debate text, point #1 does not end with a punctuation mark.

65 It seems that Campbell intended to go through his seven attributes point-by-point showing how the Catholic rule is the opposite of the Protestant one. However, once he gets to the immorality of the Catholic rule, he becomes consumed with the topic and spends the remainder of the time in his speech on it. He then picks up on the immorality of the Church during his next scheduled time-slot, but doesn’t engage the remaining three attributes.
institutes a new office called confessor, unknown in the New Testament, and gives to him the office of a father, a physician, a teacher, and a judge.  

Campbell believed that the Catholic Church imposed injunctions on Catholics that were not found in Scripture, and this made the Catholic Church immoral. Because the Catholic Church is immoral, *ipso facto* it is uninspired and without divine inspiration.

For Campbell, the problem is not that Catholics do not have the Bible in their theological tradition; the problem is that they “humanize” it. Campbell says this about how Catholics understand the authority of the Bible:

The bible [*sic*] being a part of the Roman Catholic rule, is such only as explained by the apocrypha, the traditions of the fathers, the decrees and canons of councils, or in the hands of bishops; so completely humanized, as to lose all its peculiar attributes, and is made to partake of all the characters of the mediums, through which it is given to that people; and, therefore of the whole Roman Catholic rule, the attributes are just the opposite of those seven of the Protestant’s.

In this particularly telling passage, Campbell reveals that the tradition of Roman Catholicism is what humanizes and mutes the text’s authority. Catholics, for example, are only able to understand the facts of Scripture as they are taught by the Catholic clergy, whose teaching “humanizes” the text’s authority by placing injunctions on the Catholic not contained in the Bible. Campbell is not just saying that non-ordained Catholics do not have access to the Bible; his point is much more fundamental: the Bible as a part of the Catholic Church is “fenced in” by the Apocrypha, traditions, decrees and canons, or the bishops. Campbell will play up this Bible/Church contrast throughout the debate, emphasizing the timelessness of Bible facts and the human-ness of the Catholic Church’s teachings. Unlike the Catholic Church, Campbell believes that Protestants allow these

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66 Ibid., 185.

67 Ibid., 182-183.
facts to speak for themselves without any human mediation. The way Christians come to know the timeless doctrine of the Bible, then, requires an accurate translation, not a tradition of teaching.

Campbell does not directly engage the issue of Bible translation in the debate, but by 1837 his translation of the New Testament—*The Living Oracles*—had been in print for eleven years, and would have been for him an important vehicle for communicating the facts of the Bible. Paul Gutjahr notes that “Campbell’s version was arguably the best-selling translation by an individual prior to the Revised Standard Version.”68 Campbell’s most famous (and infamous) contribution was his decision to translate the Greek word for baptism not as the transliterated “baptize,” but as “immerse” because Campbell felt that the original meaning of the word in Greek was being lost with the English transliteration. Called an “immersion version,” *The Living Oracles* “was extremely popular in the [Stone-Campbell] Movement but severely criticized by other church bodies.”69 Gutjahr emphasizes how the early nineteenth century “quest for the original meaning of the Scriptures demanded that the ambiguity of the term finally be cleared up”; and Campbell was “[t]he first American to seek such clarity in a bible translation.”70 Campbell’s linguistic choice is important for the history of Bible translation, but it is also reflective of his more fundamental hermeneutic assumption: that there was one, stable meaning of the biblical text, and it was the burden of translators and interpreters to communicate that

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68 Paul C. Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777-1880* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 105. Interestingly, Campbell did not assert that his should replace the King James Version but rather be read “alongside” it. “Campbell did not view his work as sectarian, but as liberating. He felt he had finally produced a pure version by which Christians could make themselves ‘intelligent, united, and happy’” (105).


70 Gutjahr, 101.
meaning faithfully in whatever context they found themselves. Campbell and others were convinced that the meaning of the text was knowable, and that the interpreters then had the responsibility of figuring it out by way of accurately studying the text.

The reason centuries of misinterpretation had happened is because the Catholic Church had occluded the plain meaning of the Bible, or as Campbell would say, the Church had “humanized” it. Not thinking that he was the first Christian to read rightly the Bible, Campbell offers a creative historical account of how Protestants in his own day could receive the Bible without accepting to the Catholic Church’s canonization process or history of biblical interpretation. We might call this Campbell’s “alternative historiography,” which on historical grounds is an indefensible attempt to posit that the apostolic faith was passed on from the time of the New Testament to the present day through heretical groups who were outside the communion of the Catholic Church.

Campbell assumes that there have always been dissenters from the Catholic Church, who, though called various names, were all fundamentally Protestant in that they were protesting the ecclesiastical encroachments of the Catholic Church. Outlining this historical succession, Campbell notes:

[e]very sect and individual . . . is passive in receiving a name. Sectarian names are generally given in the way of reproach; thus the disciples were first called Christians [sic] at Antioch, most probably in derision; yet it was a very proper name. Call us what you please, however, it does not change nature or race. The disciples of Christ are the same race, call them Christians, Nazarenes, Galileans, Novatians, Donatists, Paulicians, Waldenses, Albigenses, Protestants, or what you please. A variety of designation affects not the fact which we allege; we can find an unbroken series of Protestants — a regular succession of those who protested against the corruptions of the Roman church, and endeavored to hold fast the faith once delivered to the saints, from the first schism in the year 250, A. D. to
the present day; and you may apply to them what description or designation you please.\footnote{Campbell, \textit{Debate}, 77.}

Campbell is not concerned with providing a thorough account of the orthodoxy or heterodoxy of the groups in his family tree. What is of primary importance for him are two points: first, that these groups protested against and were persecuted by the Catholic Church; and second, in spite of what they were called, they tried “to hold fast to the faith once delivered to the saints.”\footnote{Ibid.}

The year 250 is important for Campbell, because it is at this point when the Catholic Church experienced its first schism with the Novatian Controversy and when “[t]he spirit of true religion seems to have fled from Rome.”\footnote{Ibid., 68.} Campbell’s statement puts him at odds with conventional Protestant counter-histories, and narratives of declension, which posit the fall of the Church with the death of the last apostle at the close of the first century. Instead, Campbell seems willing to concede that there was a brief period in church history between roughly 100 and 250 when the post-New Testament church existed \textit{in} history and \textit{in} purity.\footnote{This is an interesting historical and theological issue, but beyond the scope of this dissertation.} Campbell does not say much more about this period, except when he vaguely notes,

[w]e can . . . show that from the earliest times there has existed a people whom no man can remember, that have earnestly and consistently contended for the true faith \textit{once} delivered to the saints.\footnote{Campbell, \textit{Debate}, 65.}
Campbell’s fundamental concern is to show that the Protestant church is a visible church, however its visibility should not be held to standards set by the Catholic Church.\(^76\)

In the Novatian Controversy of 250, Campbell presumably believed that the Novatians assented to the New Testament rule of faith, because he said the “controversy [was] about the purity of communion and discipline, rather than about articles of doctrine.”\(^77\) Citing Eusebius, Campbell says that the historian “appears greatly incensed against Novatus and his party, [but] can record no evil against them expect for their ‘uncharitableness,’ in refusing to commune with those of immoral or doubtful character.”\(^78\) Calling the Novatians “Puritans or reformers,” Campbell said they “spread all over the world, and continued to oppose the pretensions of those who, from being the major party, claimed to be the Catholic or only church.”\(^79\)

Campbell is doing two things with the Novatian Controversy: first, he is using it as symbol for how catholicity has always been contested and is inextricably linked to power in Christian history\(^80\); second, he identifies the Novatians as the first in a long series of protesters, or Protestants, against the Catholic Church with whom he can count himself a link in a long, historical chain.

\(^76\) We will recall Thomas Campbell’s *Declaration and Address*, where he spells this out: “the church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the scriptures, and that manifest the same by their tempers and conduct, and of none else as none else can be truly and properly called Christians.”

\(^77\) Campbell, *Debate*, 66.

\(^78\) Ibid. Emphasis original.

\(^79\) Ibid., 67.

\(^80\) I borrow the idea of “contesting catholicity” from Curtis Freeman’s recent book, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).
Linking the Novatians to the Donatists and then to the Paulicans, Campbell says such groups can all be classified under the label “Protestant.”81 Defending himself against lionizing heretics, Campbell admits that such groups are only called heretics by Catholics, those in power: “[t]he gentleman [Purcell] has given you his definition of orthodoxy and heterodoxy: my definition is—the strong party is the orthodox, and the weak party is the heterodox.”82

Having established the historical groups who are the counter-church to Catholic Church, Campbell gives an account of how he can claim that the Bible and the doctrine contained in it can rightly be affirmed without deferring to the authority of the Catholic Church, its process for canonization, or its theological tradition.83 Triumphantly, Campbell said,

we have copies of the bible [sic] more ancient than the grand schism [c. 250, Novatian Controversy], more ancient than the first pope84 [c. 606]:

81 Campbell, Debate, 67-8.

82 Ibid., 68. Emphasis original.

83 In his argument with Purcell, Campbell assumed the canonical shape of the Bible and spent no time justifying that decision. Boring points out, it “never occurred” to Campbell “to debate with alternate understandings [of the canon] in Roman Catholicism, Greek Orthodoxy, or even the Anglican Church” (69). Even when he discussed purgatory in the debate, Campbell did not think to argue about its unscriptural origin in 2nd Maccabees; rather, he said it was based on two errors relating to the Atonement: that humans can earn their salvation, and that Christ’s sacrifice for sin was insufficient. (Campbell, Debate, 267-268, passim.) Further, in the debate Campbell never discusses the criteria used to determine which books of the Bible were to be considered canonical. (See Purcell’s critique, Debate, 262-263) Boring is right when he says, “Campbell’s dispute with Roman Catholics was not over the extent of the canon, which he simply assumed, but access and hermeneutics” (69).

84 Campbell, Debate, 40. Campbell is referencing Boniface III, who in 606 received the title papal head over the whole church, from Emperor Phocas. Campbell uses Boniface (and not Peter) as the origin of the papacy, because he assumes the pope’s universal authority, something not recognized until then. Elsewhere Campbell comments on this idea: “My argument hitherto has been to shew that the supreme head called pope, being of the essential elements, nay the chief element of the Roman Catholic church, and not found either in the bible [sic] or ecclesiastic history for ages after the christian [sic] era . . .” (27). Campbell also states, “He [Purcell] seems to be squinting at infallibility, authority, order in the ministry, rather than looking the face the simple question, was there a pope in any church for the first six centuries?” (27). Emphasis original. See also, 10-18; 26-31; and Friday, Saturday, Monday, and Tuesday generally.
nay, that were written before the question of a supreme head began to be discussed; and which copies, in the form of transcription, have never been soiled by the fingers of a monk. 85

Campbell’s argument has three parts. First, he makes a historical argument that textual traditions of the Bible exist that go farther back than the points in history when the Catholic Church exercised its inappropriate ecclesiastical control, and therefore makes the Bible common property to both contemporary Catholics and Protestants. 86 Specifically, Campbell is saying that the Protestants are not indebted to the Catholic Church for collecting and canonizing the text. Second, Campbell makes a geographical argument by citing the discovery of biblical manuscripts in India, which he believes demonstrates that the text was circulating and Christianity was being practiced outside of the region where Roman Catholicism was largely centered—Europe. 87 One important manuscript for Campbell contains the old and new Testaments, engrossed with beautiful accuracy in the Estrangelo (or old Syriac,) character, on strong vellum, in large folio, and having three columns in a page. The words of every book are numbered: and the volume illuminated, but not after the European manner, the initial letters having no ornament. 88

85 Ibid., 257-258.
86 Ibid., 259. Using what he thinks is the best manuscript evidence available, he cites the the Codex Alexandrinus (shortly after 325), the Codex Vaticanus (late-400s), and the Syriac Peshitta (late-100s/early-200s). Referencing the French Catholic historian Louis Dupin (1657-1719), Campbell points that by “the third century, the scriptures were read as they are now.”
87 Ibid., 259. Quoting the English biblical commentator Thomas Hartwell Horne (1780-1862), Campbell recounts a recent manuscript discovery in India by a “Dr. Buchanan . . . [of] the British church in India” who during his work “among the Syrian churches and Jews of India, [Buchanan] discovered and obtained numerous ancient manuscripts of the scriptures, which are now deposited in the public library at Cambridge.”
88 Ibid. Bold emphasis mine, italics original.
The manuscript in question is dated to the 600s. What is important to note is that Campbell believes that a manuscript tradition indigenous to India exists about the same time as when Boniface III was claiming the title of papal head. It is less important for Campbell that the exact date of the manuscript antedate Boniface III; what is more important is that Christianity was being practiced in India and had a text tradition that was independent of its European counterpart.

Third, Campbell argues that contemporary Protestants could reconstruct the New Testament by reading the works of Christianity’s despisers:

[w]e have Jews, Greeks, Armenians, and Protestants, from the first schism, A.D. 250, down to the present day; to say nothing of the ancient skeptics, Celsus, Porphyry, Julian, and others; and the ancient heretics, from whose writings, together with those of the infidel pagans, we could almost compile a New Testament.89

Campbell’s goal in making these three arguments was to identify historical communities that had copies of, or portions of, the Christian Scriptures who stood outside of or on the margins of the ecclesial jurisdiction of the Roman Catholic Church. Doing this allowed him to point to a counter-tradition to the Catholic Church that could provide a historical channel that would pass the Scriptures on from the first century to the nineteenth.

Campbell is absolutely convinced that contemporary Protestants can claim the Bible as their own without deferring to the Catholic Church. For him, the Roman Catholic-persecuted Christians (e.g., Novatians) and the Christians of India connect him historically, and not just theologially, to the apostolic church and give him access to the text of Scripture. Campbell illustrates the point with a story of a man living on the Nile

89 Ibid.
who has access to seven mouths of a river from which to get his water. The man, Campbell says, goes to the mouth nearest his residence out of convenience, not necessity. It is the same for the Protestants of western Europe who historically, but not necessarily, received the Bible “from [their] Roman Catholic ancestors.”

For Campbell, the Catholic Church is an accidental carrier of Scripture. Protestants are in no way obliged to recognize it as providing the ecclesial conditions for canonization. In fact, the “ecclesial conditions,” such as the church councils, aided in the obfuscation, or “humanization,” of the Bible (the Protestant canon, of course) by adding to it the Apocrypha and other traditions of interpretation. Because Protestants are not embedded in the ecclesial life of Roman Catholicism, accepting its traditions, they are bound neither to the scope of the Catholic canon, nor its process of canonization.

Campbell notes,

[t]he fact, that we reject her apocryphal bible [sic] and testament, with all other traditions of Roman Catholics, ancient and modern, resting solely upon her authority, and that we retain the bible, (one version of which she has,) is incontestable proof, that we receive the bible on other authority than her traditions.

Summarizing Campbell’s point, Carroll Ellis make the following observation:

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90 Ibid. Here is Campbell’s tale: “Now, if we of the west of Europe, did receive the bible first from our Roman Catholic ancestors, I ask, would that make us dependent on their traditions alone for that book; any more A.B., who lived on one of the seven mouths of the Nile, from which he supplies himself with water, was, on that account, absolutely dependent on the branch nearest his dwelling. Tell him that he is absolutely and alone dependent on it for water; and he will say, ‘No; but it is more convenient to supply myself from this stream: there are six other branches, from which I could supply myself, were it necessary for my life or comfort.’ So say we [Protestants].”

91 Ibid., 257.

92 Ibid.
[h]is point was that Protestants received the Bible, but rejected Roman Catholic tradition. Campbell explained that the Bible was its own proof of divine origin, just as was nature. The Catholic Church is a witness for the Bible, but by no means the only one.⁹³

**Purcell’s Project in the Debate**

While Campbell’s attack on Catholicism had a significant historical component (that Protestants could get the Bible without the Catholic Church, and that the Protestant church was a visible church), Purcell’s challenge to Protestantism was primarily theological and epistemological. “How could one,” Purcell might ask, “know that your Protestant sect manifests the fullness of the Body of Christ when another sect claims the same and holds views opposite yours?” Purcell’s strategy was, in fact, quite fitting given the proliferation of denominational and non-denominational churches in the Ohio Valley after the Second Great Awakening.

Employing a classic post-Tridentine apologetic, Purcell argued that the Catholic Church’s magisterium was necessary to ensure the correct interpretation of the Bible. Purcell did not believe that Common Sense Realism and Baconian induction could give Protestants an unassailable method for understanding the text of Scripture. The fruit of that method was not the singular grammatical-historical interpretation of scripture and ecclesial unity that Campbell and others preached. Instead, the method yielded an ever-increasing number of denominations built on question begging and *ad hominem* arguments.

In an important part of the debate, Purcell makes a comparison between Deism and Protestant hermeneutics that illustrates his point. He introduces this illustration by

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⁹³ Ellis, 98.
speaking about the unity of religious truth, the human desire to seek that truth, and the
incompatible plurality of Protestant theologies. To paraphrase Purcell: truth is unified
and simple, and Protestant theologies are an affront to this metaphysical principle
because they conflict. What is worse than the presence of incompatible theologies is an
indifference to religious truth. Purcell said,

[t]he misfortune of the great majority of mankind at the present
day, is not so much a blind fanatical attachment, (bad as this is) . . .
as a certain latitude of principle, which has obtained the specious
name of liberality, and which resolves itself into a fatal and
unreasonable indifference to all religions, true and false.

It is this “unreasonable indifference” to religious truth that Purcell understands to
be the hallmark of Deism. He understood Deism to emphasize either an indifference or
hostility toward the category of revelation, resulting in a general agnosticism about
religious convictions. Deism has no internal critical principles to say if one religion is
better (or worse) than another. Likewise, Purcell would say, Protestants who affirm sola

94 Purcell, *Debate*, 173-175.

95 Ibid., 175.

96 Purcell would have echoed Gerald McCool’s words: “The rationalism against which all the [nineteenth
century] Catholic theologians aligned themselves was the Enlightenment commitment to pure reason on the
basis of which defenders of ‘natural religion’ in France and Germany had rejected the intellectual and
moral claims of positive Christian revelation.” Gerald McCool, *Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth

97 Purcell, *Debate*, 176-177. Purcell talked about two consequences of this indifference, what I call
“cultural relativism” and “doxological pluralism.” I classify the first consequence as “cultural relativism”
because Purcell describes Deists as affirming that truth shouldn’t be what dictates one’s choice of religion,
but chance, or where one has grown up. With what I like to imagine as a little bit of showmanship, Purcell
said, “Sincerely profess, piously practice the religion of the country in which you live . . . A Christian in
Europe, Mussulman in Persia . . . on the banks of the Ganges an adorer of Vishnou, let not truth dictate the
choice of your religion, but chance—let not reason decide, but the measurement of a degree of latitude, or
longitude.” The second consequence, what I call “doxological pluralism,” is Purcell’s conviction that for
Deists “the Supreme Being must be pleased with diversity of worship rendered him by his creatures, that no
one is to be more accountable for errors which, however discordant in themselves, when softened and
mellowed by being mingled with the errors of others, ascend to the deity in the grateful harmony of
universal praise.”
scriptura have no internal critical principles to adjudicate between rival theological
claims. This lack of critical principles is the formal connection Purcell uses to link Deism
to Protestantism.

Purcell believes that Protestants who claim to base their beliefs on the Bible alone
are left equally agnostic, but for different reasons. Calling the Bible a “dead letter,”
Purcell would argue that every reader could make the Bible say what he or she wanted it
to say about religion.98 Stating concisely his views on Protestant hermeneutics, Purcell
said the following:

[t]he basis of Protestant belief is, that the Scripture, this book of divine
revelation, is the only rule of faith; and that Jesus Christ having left on
earth no living infallible authority to interpret it, every man is obliged to
expound it, for himself, or in other words, to seek in it the religion, in
which he is to live and by which he must be saved. His duty is to believe,
what, it seems to him, this book clearly teaches and what as far as he has
ascertained by subjecting it to the test of private examination, contradicts
not his reason: and as no man has a right to say to another, ‘my reason is
more vigorous, my judgment more sound than yours,’ it follows that every
man should abstain from condemning the interpretation of another and
should consider all religions, at least, as good and safe as his own. This is
the infidel principle in disguise. The Deist takes the book of nature, the
Protestant takes the Bible.99

Purcell said the only difference between the Protestant and the Infidel (Deist) is that the
Protestant “contracts the range of the Infidel’s misapprehension of religion, and for the

98 Ibid., 170.
99 Ibid., 176. To summarize Purcell’s position: Protestant hermeneutics could not work because 1) it didn’t
have a living, infallible interpreter; 2) the onus for interpretation is on the individual alone; 3) the
individual is then compelled to believe what s/he has deduced; and 4) assuming one’s neighbor followed
the same procedure, “no man has a right to say to another, ‘my reason is more vigorous, my judgment more
sound than yours.’”
book of the universe takes the bible.”¹⁰⁰ Still, the Protestant, according to Purcell, “contends for the same erroneous principle.”¹⁰¹

For Purcell, Deism and Protestantism were formally identical intellectual systems because both begin with a book, rely on fallible individuals to interpret it, and end—arguably—in religious agnosticism. The solution to these twin errors, for Purcell, was the epistemological assurance offered through the infallible magisterium of the Catholic Church.¹⁰² A day earlier Purcell said in no uncertain terms, “for the deserter from the Catholic church, there is no resource but to deny everything, to become a deist.”¹⁰³ Purcell thought the inconsistency between the theory and practice of Protestant Christianity was enough to make Protestants reconsider the intellectual viability of their faith. He tried to capitalize on this questioning by likening the effects of Protestant hermeneutics to Deism. Because Protestants did not have a living, infallible interpreter of Scripture they were left with competing fallible interpretations, none of which could be guaranteed to be correct. The inherent uncertainty about religious truth is what made Protestant hermeneutics “the infidel [Deist] principle in disguise,” to use Purcell’s words.¹⁰⁴ Against this backdrop, Purcell offered Catholicism as an epistemologically sound faith.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 177.
¹⁰¹ Ibid.
¹⁰² Ibid., 175.
¹⁰³ Ibid., 130.
¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 176.
Purcell’s description of Deism doesn’t do justice to the diversity of Deist thought. But that wasn’t really his goal. Rather, he wanted to present Deism and Protestant hermeneutics as twin foils to play up Catholicism’s strengths. But more than this, Purcell offered a message of hope to disillusioned Protestants: there was an “ark of safety” known as the Catholic Church. From this perspective, it is plausible to frame Purcell’s participation in the debate and this particular line of argument as an exercise in pastoral apologetics. One indication of this is that while he retains the category of heresy, he refrains from using the word “heretics” in theological controversies because of the negative baggage the term carries. Purcell says,

I never use this word, as it is now so harshly understood, to designate those who differ from me in religion; but I know not how any human being is to determine without the aid of a competent tribunal, who are heretics, and who are not; for we cannot look into the heart.

Purcell did not intend his charity toward Protestants to be confused with latitudinarianism. For him, Protestants were inescapably trapped in a constellation of four crises. First, Protestants were susceptible to a crisis of authority. Protestants societies cannot exercise theological and ecclesial authority over believers who espoused and promulgated heresy. Second, Protestants were in a perpetual crisis of assurance. No individual in a Protestant society could have assurance that his or her belief was correct.

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105 While mainly focused on the eighteenth century, Kerry Walters’s book is a valuable resource for understanding the diversity of American Deism. See, Kerry Walters, Revolutionary Deists: Early America’s Rational Infidels (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2011).

106 Purcell, Debate, 64.

107 Ibid.

108 Ibid.

109 Ibid., 174-175.
If, under the Protestant Principle two pious and reasonable Protestants reached opposite theological conclusions, there could be no supra-individual authority to offer assurance about which one was the correct interpretation. Third, Protestants were prone to a crisis of action. Since Protestant principles necessarily allow for individual misinterpretation of Scripture, the presence of opposite conclusions among pious and learned Protestants on matters of doctrine makes an act of divine faith impossible because it “is incompatible with uncertainty, and much more so with error.” Fourth, Protestants reproduce a crisis of unity. As long as the Protestant Principle is maintained, Protestants will have no hope for the ecclesial unity that Jesus prayed for in John 17.

The only way for Protestants to escape these crises was for them to enter the Roman Catholic Church. Doing this would grant them the assurance their previous belief system could not. When Purcell talks about assurance he is referring to a sense of confidence one can have that his or her beliefs about God are objectively true. This confidence, though, is not something that rests exclusively in the intellect; rather it takes root in a person’s soul giving them assurance in a world filled with doubt. Purcell notes that “the most humble Catholic can have a divine assurance for the truth of his religion,” but “not even the most learned Protestant can ever be positively sure that either himself or his church is right!” The source of this assurance for Catholics is the infallible tribunal of the Church that either affirms or corrects the individual’s subjective

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110 Ibid., 175. Purcell’s makes a bold point here: he is saying that for a person to make an act of faith, one has to be certain in their theology—an assurance that the Catholic Church can offer, but Protestants cannot. The full text of Purcell’s statement is as follows: “That as the entire system [Protestantism] is based on the possibility of each one’s being mistaken, where the most learned and pious have adopted such opposite conclusions, no one can ever make an act of divine faith, which is incompatible with uncertainty, and much more so with error.”

111 Ibid., 192.
understanding of theological truth. In this way, “the most humble Catholic” can rest assured that what s/he believes is true because of the Holy Spirit’s abiding presence in the Church as a guide to truth. This assurance, however, is not something “the most learned Protestant” can have because s/he does not have a norm for interpretation outside the Bible. Purcell’s epistemological certainty is rooted in his doctrine of God. “God,” Purcell says,

is as essentially the God of truth, as he is the God of virtue. He can no more sanction error, than he can tolerate vice. His right is as absolute to the submission of the understanding, as to the obedience of the will.¹¹²

In a portion of the debate that reads like a sermon, Purcell said

[i]t is to fix the otherwise perpetual variations of the human mind, and secure the anchor of our faith, not in the moving sands of man’s vacillating judgments and uncertain opinions, but by lodging it deeply and indissolubly in the rock which the Divine Architect has made the foundation of his church, and against which the winds of error and the rain of dissolving scandal will rage and beat in vain, that the Word made Flesh vouchsafed to become the Light of the world.¹¹³

In the Catholic Church, Christians could be assured they were receiving sound and coherent doctrine from an infallible interpreter. The Church exhibited the doctrinal singularity and competency that, at an observational level, were profoundly lacking among competing Protestant churches.

**Infallibility**

In the debate, Campbell and Purcell both used the concept of infallibility to provide the philosophical underpinnings for their critiques and constructive proposal. During the nineteenth century, Christian apologists faced unprecedented challenges in

¹¹² Ibid., 175.

¹¹³ Ibid.
defending the historical reliability of the Bible. Higher critics applied the same historiographical methods to the Bible as they did to any other historical or literary text, and theologians now had to justify the Bible’s historical reliability in a prolegomena before they made foundational theological claims. The challenge of higher criticism was equally threatening to Protestants and Catholics, and both responded to it with some variation of a doctrine of infallibility.

This important concept however, caused a great deal of confusion in the debate because Campbell and Purcell meant different things by the term. For Campbell, *infallibility was an activity of the reader* of the Bible who accurately employed the grammatical-historical tools of biblical study, so s/he could understand the author’s intended meaning. For Purcell, *infallibility was a quality of Catholic Church* that was promised to her by Christ and *ipso facto* validated her interpretation and teaching. This disagreement on the term of infallibility challenges what Jaroslav Pelikan said about Protestant and Catholic uses of infallibility: he said that it was “not the character of the infallibility, only its locus, [that] was in dispute.” Pelikan summarizes the conventional understanding: Protestants believed the Bible to be infallible, and Catholics thought the Church was. However, a close analysis of the use of infallibility in the debate reveals more than a dispute about the location of infallibility, but a fundamental disagreement about what infallibility was.

This issue was at the heart of the Campbell-Purcell debate. Campbell used infallibility (and fallibility) in three of his seven propositions to frame his contentions against the Catholic Church. The second proposition claims that apostolic succession is

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founded “wholly upon the opinions of interested and fallible men.” The third asserts that the Catholic Church neither represents the universal faith, nor exhibits unity among her members; instead, she is “mutable and fallible.” And the seventh maintains that “the Roman Catholic religion, if infallible and unsusceptible of reformation, as alleged, is essentially anti-American.” As we can see, Campbell’s use of the term was incredibly pliable. It could modify persons such as bishops or popes (#2), the Catholic Church and its beliefs and practices (#3), and Roman Catholicism as a religion with the related social and political implications of its presence in America (#7).

In the following quote, Campbell says as clearly as anywhere in the debate what he means when he talks about infallibility:

> there is, in strict propriety, no infallible rule of faith. Nor is it possible there can be: for men and angels have erred under all rules. I wish to be understood. The terms fallible and infallible do not at all apply to things: they only apply to persons. We may have a perfect and complete—or a sufficient rule: but we cannot have an infallible one. The fallibility, or the infallibility is in the application of the rule—not the rule itself. The mechanician may have a perfect rule; and yet err in measuring any superficies. It is not possible in mechanics, nor in morals, nor in religion, to have a rule which will prevent error so long as those who use it are free and fallible agents.\(^\text{115}\)

To unpack what Campbell is saying, it is important to know that Campbell believes that the “rule of faith” for Protestants is “the bible alone,” while for Catholics it is “the church, or the bible explained by the church.”\(^\text{116}\) Also, we see Campbell make the curious decision to divert from the classic Protestant sola scriptura argument and claim that *the Bible is not an infallible rule of faith, and that it is not possible in the first place*
for there even to be an infallible rule of faith. It is important to note what Campbell is not saying here. He is not saying that Bible contains historical inaccuracies or that it in any way fails to communicate Christian doctrine. Recalling his Seven Attributes of the Bible, Campbell will say again in this speech that the Bible is “perfect rule” and that it is perfect because it is “inspired.” Campbell makes the semantic distinction between the Bible’s “perfection” and its “infallibility,” the latter which he believes to be a logical impossibility. The reason Campbell thinks it is logically impossible for the Bible or the Church to be infallible is because terms “fallible” and “infallible” cannot modify inanimate objects like the Bible: they can only modify the actions that people do. To illustrate, we might say that mechanics have a perfect (we might also say, “true, accurate, or precise”) set of instructions about how to build a carriage, but there are no guarantees that they will build it exactly to its specification on the page. The instructions do not “make” the object; the mechanic, following the instructions, makes the object. It is only when the mechanic builds the object according to its design on the page that we can say s/he has built it “infallibly,” or without error.

Campbell thinks that because we use the phrase “infallible rule” we get ourselves into a linguistic conundrum. He notes,

I own, it may be said, that in common parlance, we do figuratively talk of an infallible rule. I admit that we do, and that is the reason, when we come to debate the matter, the parties are confounded: for the bible [sic] alone . . . ; and the church alone, or the church and the bible together, have made no one free from error. Therefore, there is no infallible rule in truth: but

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117 Ibid., 168.
we have a perfect rule, and if we apply it perfectly, it will make us perfect.\textsuperscript{118}

Campbell thinks the same logic applies to the Christian life: by accurately studying the facts of the Bible and applying them to our lives, we can say we have applied it “infallibly.” For Campbell, infallibility modifies the act of studying the Bible, not the Bible itself. In true modern form, Campbell wants to say that infallibility is a matter of method. He seems to be advocating “methodological infallibility,” instead of “objective infallibility” that vests infallibility in the objects of either the Bible or the Church.

To make matters more confusing, two sentences later, Campbell says, “OUR RULE IS THE BIBLE ALONE.”\textsuperscript{119} Then a few lines following, he said “the phrase \textit{rule of faith} is not Protestant. The bible [\textit{sic}] is the faith; and that testimony is the rule and measure of our belief: for in logical truth testimony is the only proper rule of faith.”\textsuperscript{120} Christians can know that the rule they are following is perfect because it is inspired by God. Campbell explains that Jesus “inspired twelve apostles to form that rule, and enjoined us to \textit{hear} them . . . and that perfect rule is the bible [\textit{sic}]; and the reason of its perfection is its \textit{inspiration}.”\textsuperscript{121} The measure for how well one hears the Bible is the extent to which one’s beliefs match the facts communicated in the Bible. Campbell was confident that the Bible was clear enough to be understood through the application of the grammatical-historical method of biblical studies, and the reader having a humble attitude toward the text. Any failure of understanding was the failure of the reader, not the text.

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid. Emphasis original.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid. Emphasis original.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid. Emphasis original.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid. Emphasis original.
Campbell saw himself as a Christian reformer. And part of that reformation was the goal of changing the way Christians spoke about the Bible. He was trying to get Christians to break free from using the word infallible to describe the Bible (which, ironically, he still assumed to be without historical error), and instead get them to focus on infallibly studying the Bible. Virtually everyone assumed the Bible was infallible, yet they all still disagreed on its meaning. Campbell hoped to correct this by shifting the emphasis of infallibility onto the method, instead of the object. When a student of Scripture gets the method right, and they approach the text with the proper attitude, they will get the meaning right.

For Purcell, the term infallible modifies the teaching authority of the Church, in contrast to Campbell’s assertion that it modifies the activity of studying the Bible. The Church is the “infallible guardian of the holy deposit.”\(^2\) He states:

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\text{[i]nfallibility was promised to the church by Jesus Christ. Its testimony is heard in a general council, or in the pope’s decision in which all assent. The church can subsist without a general council. General councils are not essential—though frequently of use, because, though all believe without exception, that the pope’s decision, in which, after it has been duly made known, all the bishops of the Catholic world acquiesce, is infallible, still the decision of a general council declares in a more impressive and solemn, though not more authoritative, manner, the belief of the Catholic world on the contested doctrine, and thus more effectually proscribes the contrary error.}\(^3\)
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This statement reveals three important points about Purcell’s view on infallibility expressed in his ecclesiology. First, infallibility was given to the Church, not one individual within the Church (the pope alone), and arguably not one group within the

\(^{122}\) Purcell, Debat, 172.

\(^{123}\) Ibid.
Church (the bishops alone). The nature of infallibility is organically dispersed throughout the multiple organs of the Magisterium. Infallibility is not reducible to one subset of the Magisterium. Elsewhere, Purcell makes two comments that seem to be in tension: “no enlightened Catholic holds the pope’s infallibility to be an article of faith,”\(^\text{124}\) and the infallible expositor of Catholic teaching could be found in “a general council, or the pope, with the acquiescence of the church at large.”\(^\text{125}\) Second, infallibility can be exercised in a “pope’s decision” that all the bishops affirm. Purcell is not denying that popes can make infallible decisions. Third, general councils can make infallible decisions on doctrine; because of their universal representation they demonstrate a “more impressive and solemn” affirmation of the issue in question, but their decision, importantly, is “not more authentic” than a pope’s infallible decision. If Purcell were a Gallican, he would have said that the Councils offer a more infallible decision than which the pope could. If he were an Ultramontanist, he would not have described the Councils as being “impressive and solemn.” What Purcell is doing is offering an interdependent and irreducible doctrine of infallibility that challenged the reductionism of both Gallicanism and Ultramontanism. Purcell’s radically collegial vision of infallibility made him easily misunderstood and difficult to pigeonhole as mouthpiece for a particular agenda.\(^\text{126}\)

\(^{124}\) Ibid., 23.

\(^{125}\) Ibid., 181.

\(^{126}\) Ibid., 171. In the same speech in the debate, Purcell uses the human body to illustrate his point: “The pope is the head—the council is the heart—and I have no objection to calling the laity the members, to continue the figure. While there is no schism in the members, no separation of the head or of the heart, all is soundness and life—so in the church—pope, pastors, and laity. United we stand, divided you fall. The true theory of the church, like that of the human body, is union. Ask not, does the heart, alone, or the head alone contain the vital principle—they sympathize; they live and more and have their being together.” Purcell’s understanding of infallibility seems to have been in line with that of Archbishop Hughes. The following long quote illustrates how Purcell thought about infallibility after Vatican I: “Because of his loyalty to the church, Purcell sent the pope his own acceptance of the council’s decision.
Seeing divine approval for religious authority in the Bible, Purcell then explains why the Church should be understood as infallible. For him, the Church’s infallibility is rooted in Christ’s Great Commission to his disciples. The content of the commission, drawn from Matthew 28, is the three-fold directive to go to all nations, teach them the message of Christ, and baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Additionally, Christ promises to abide with his disciples until the end of time. As an assurance that the message the disciples would preach would be free from error, Christ granted to them the promise of infallibility, found in John 14:26: “Receive ye the Holy Ghost, who will teach you ALL TRUTH, and bring all things to your mind whatsoever I have said to you.” 127 Immediately following the passage, Purcell cites John 14:17: “The Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it seeth him not, nor knoweth him; but you shall know him, because he shall abide with you and be in you.” 128 To underscore the enduring nature of the Church’s infallibility, Purcell poses the question, “[w]hy did St. Paul say that the church was the ‘pillar and ground of truth,’ if this pillar and that foundation were to give way as soon as the apostles died, that is to say in a few short years?” 129 In addition to Christ’s abiding presence, Purcell reminds the audience

But he seems to have remained intellectually unconvinced. About a week after his address at Mozart Hall, he received a letter from a Richard E. Randolph of Topeka, Kansas, who had read newspaper accounts of the archbishop’s lecture. Mr. Randolph told Purcell that he had written to Bishop Hughes thirty-four years earlier [the same year as Purcell’s debate with Campbell], asking him whether the Catholic Church believed the pope to be infallible. Hughes replied that the church has never taught or held that the pope is infallible but does believe that the church itself is infallible. Hughes illustrated his point by saying that all Americans believe that the United States is independent. Yet that independence does not reside in the president or in the congress or in the supreme court alone, but rather in all of them combined. On the back of this letter Purcell wrote, in a more careful than usual penmanship: ‘I subscribe to these views with a perfect assent. J.B.P.”’ (Hussey, Archbishop Purcell of Cincinnati, 116.).

127 Ibid., 165.
128 Ibid.
129 Ibid.
that Christ also said, “HE THAT HEARETH YOU HEARETH ME: and he that despiseth you, despiseth me: and he that despiseth me, despiseth him that sent me.” The juxtaposition of these passages fortifies Purcell’s position because it identifies the Church as the body responsible for receiving and preserving the truth passed on by Christ. The juxtaposition also builds into the Church’s identity a binary capable labeling and adjudicating rival truth claims. The Church’s infallibility, therefore, is intended to be a unifying doctrinal force aimed at guiding Christians to the time when “all nations shall be gathered into one fold under one shepherd: until we all meet in the UNITY OF FAITH.”

For Purcell infallibility was the supernatural ability granted to the Church by Christ “to teach true doctrine.” It is important to remember that for Purcell the question about infallibility was not framed predominantly in terms of papal infallibility, as it would be during and after the First Vatican Council. Rather, it would be more precise to say that Purcell is talking about magisterial infallibility because he takes into account the breadth of the Church’s teaching authority—bishops and councils, as well as popes. At one point, Purcell poses the question, “What gives general councils their infallibility?” He responds, “The power and omniscience of God: the Holy Ghost abiding with the church, all days, until the consummation of the world.” Purcell’s theory of infallibility, much like his ecclesiology, is very fluid, or as Campbell might say, imprecise. Upon

130 Ibid.
131 Ibid.
132 Ibid., 172.
133 Ibid., 207.
being asked by Campbell where the infallible expositor of the Catholic rule was, Purcell says that it was “[a] general council, or the pope, with the acquiescence of the church at large.”

Purcell would maintain that God inspired both the Bible and tradition, making both in principle harmonious. He would say, “[w]e go for the Bible and tradition—the whole word of God, written and unwritten. We take the Bible and the church; the Bible and the testimony.” A breakdown of the sentence would look something like this:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>We go for the</th>
<th>Bible</th>
<th>and</th>
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<tr>
<td>the whole word of God</td>
<td>Written</td>
<td>and</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>We take the</td>
<td>Bible</td>
<td>and</td>
<td>the church</td>
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<tr>
<td>the</td>
<td>Bible</td>
<td>and</td>
<td>testimony</td>
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The manner in which Purcell moves back and forth between the Bible and church tradition was incredibly fluid, but that authority flows from a single, uninterrupted source—God—and progresses through the Bible to the Church. To test the “effects” of infallibility one has only to compare it to the Scriptures. Purcell maintains

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134 Ibid., 181.
135 Ibid., 188-189.
136 Ibid., 188.
we believe nothing contrary to the Bible — nothing that the Bible does not clearly approve. The same God that revealed the Bible, established the church. They do not contradict, they mutually sustain each other. I did not say that the pope is inspired, that the council is inspired, or that the church is inspired; but I do say that the church, whether assembled in a general council, or diffused throughout the world, is as certainly assisted by the Holy Ghost to teach all truth, as the evangelists and other writers of the Holy Scriptures were inspired by the same divine Spirit to WRITE the special truths which they were commissioned to reveal to particular churches, and on particular occasions.  

The Holy Spirit supernaturally assists the Catholic Church to teach authoritatively and pass on the faith:

> [a] Catholic is under no necessity of knowing every thing that has been ever said or done by the doctors and fathers of the church, before he can understand what are the articles of his faith. He knows that, in regard to doctrine they unanimously agree in receiving the Apostles’ creed.  

And the average Catholic, as well as the average Protestant, can rest assured that “[n]either the pope, nor a general council, nor the whole church has now, or ever had, the power to change, or suppress an article of the creed, or a precept of the decalogue [sic].”

**Conclusion**

Part of what made communication so difficult for Campbell and Purcell is not just that they located infallibility in different theological loci, per Pelikan’s suggestion; rather it is that they had fundamentally different conceptions of how infallibility worked. For Campbell, infallibility meant that one studied the Bible without error, and his or her understanding matched perfectly with the singular, unchanging meaning of the text. For

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137 Ibid., 188-189. Emphasis original.

138 Ibid., 189.

139 Ibid.
Purcell, infallibility meant that the Church, represented either by the pope, or a council, accurately taught the faith once delivered to the saints. For both, the subject was capable of knowing with confidence the meaning of the biblical text. This meant that in the face of doubt and skepticism, one could have certainty about divine revelation. Even with their fundamentally different understandings of infallibility, each man found a way to narrate his tradition’s understanding of it so it could address the need for assurance that American Christians had.

The issue of infallibility was the topic that most clearly revealed the theological differences between Campbell and Purcell. In two of the debate’s propositions, Campbell made this point: first, he wrote that the Catholic Church’s idea of apostolic succession was founded “wholly upon the opinions of interested and fallible men”; second, he asserted that the Catholic Church neither represents the universal faith, nor exhibits unity among her members, instead she is “mutable and fallible.” The infallibility that the Catholic Church claimed for herself, according to Campbell, had political implications, expressed in the last proposition of the debate: “the Roman Catholic religion, if infallible and unsusceptible of reformation, as alleged, is essentially anti-American.” Campbell understands Purcell’s argument about infallibility to mean that the Catholic Church cannot err in teaching and that it cannot reform. This understanding of infallibility, Campbell might say, strikes of anti-Americanism. However, in attempting to castigate Catholicism, Campbell inadvertently gave Purcell the chance to show that Catholicism was just as American as Protestantism.
CHAPTER IV:
THE DEBATE:
THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN AMERICA

Introduction

In chapter three, I presented Campbell and Purcell’s differing views on theological authority in the debate, concluding with a discussion of infallibility. This study aimed to show that they crafted their “pastoral apologetics” to withstand skepticism and rival Christian claims. In chapter four, I will discuss how their “pastoral apologetics” included a political dimension, in which both made an argument about Catholicism’s presence in America, namely whether or not it was a parasitic or wholesome presence.

We will recall that Campbell’s propositions for the debate began by attacking the Catholic Church’s ecclesiology (#1), moved through its history (# 2) and theology (#s 3-6), and concluded with its politics (# 7). It seems that Campbell was making a logical argument in the ordering of the propositions, hoping to show through an accumulation of evidence that the Catholic Church was bad for America. Campbell’s strategy did not require him to make a systematic case for the Americanism of Protestantism, something already assumed by the majority of Americans. So his was a negative goal: he aimed to show that Catholicism was anti-American precisely because it claimed to be infallible; that is to say, it accepted an understanding of infallibility that seemed not to require the
individual to critically investigate the Bible and trust in the teaching of the Church. Arguably, Campbell’s plan backfired as Purcell responded in force and made a compelling case for the Americanism of the Catholic Church\(^1\).

Chapter three proceeds in three sections. First, I present the Americanist assumptions of the debate. Second, I discuss what Campbell thinks the Catholic Church is and how it can be reformed by America. Third, I offer Purcell’s response.

**Section 1: Americanist Assumptions of the Debate**

The Campbell-Purcell debate is a fascinating mixture of theological and Americanist apologetics. Both were trying to defend the theological claims of their ecclesial traditions, but additionally they were making a case for or against Catholicism in America. They were fashioning their traditions to make an argument about Catholicism. Campbell set the Americanist tone for the debate, and he and Purcell made their arguments about Catholicism in light of it. Campbell was certain that America was an exceptional nation. He believed America was historically unprecedented and morally outstanding. Greece and Rome were only shadow republics compared to “Protestant America,” because “[t]here never was on earth so free and so equitable an institution as the Protestant institutions of these United States.”\(^2\) Campbell was sanguine about

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\(^1\) In this context, I use “Americanism” only in a general sense to describe an optimism Campbell and Purcell shared, namely that the convictions of their ecclesial traditions harmonized with the sociopolitical climate of the United States. I recognize that using this term in U.S. Catholic history brings to mind the later “Americanist” controversy and Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical, *Testem Benevolentiae* (1899), condemning it. Because my definition of Americanism is so broad, it is understandable that we might suggest a logical connection between the Campbell-Purcell debate and that later controversy. However, it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to explore Purcell’s later writings to see if they conform to what Leo condemned in his encyclical.

\(^2\) Campbell, *Debate*, 311.
America because her institutions were “humane.” He was confident about the humanity of those institutions because their first principle was to promote religious liberty. Campbell believed that

in all history, civil liberty follows in the wake of religious liberty; insomuch, that it is almost an oracle of philosophy, that religious liberty is the cause, and political liberty an effect of that cause, without which it never has been found.  

America’s greatness, however, could not be taken for granted. While religious liberty was the condition for America’s political arrangements, a strong culture of intellectual and moral education was needed to sustain the republic. “Nothing can preserve our republican institutions,” Campbell said, “but a system of intellectual and moral culture, accessible to every child born upon our soil or brought to our shores.” Not an isolationist, Campbell was ready and willing to accept immigrants (like himself) who sought freedom and flourishing in America. But with this openness came the responsibility to be vigilant. With apocalyptic insinuation, Campbell stated:

Unless we benevolently co-operate in this great cause of humanity, this last and best hope of the oppressed of all nations will vanish from the earth, and a new and ghostly despotism shall arise and extend its iron sceptre over this our beloved land. Nothing but intelligence and virtue universally diffused, can save us from dread catastrophe.

While Campbell does not explicitly name the “new and ghostly despotism” as Roman Catholicism, it is safe to assume as much. In the sentence following this quote, he notes,

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3 Ibid., 170.
4 Ibid., 311.
5 Ibid., 350.
6 Ibid.
In Protestant Prussia, with a Roman Catholic minority, they understand so well the importance and utility of education, and its power to dissipate the darkness of superstition, always tyrannical, that every child is by law compelled to be educated, and that morally as well as intellectually.\(^7\)

Campbell’s point would not have been lost on his audience. In America, like Prussia, citizens need to cultivate intellectually and morally well-formed young people, because only this strategy will “dissipate the darkness of superstition” of the Catholic Church.\(^8\)

Clearly, Campbell is in the same camp with the optimistic Protestant ministers who had been preaching America’s providential role in world history since the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Additionally, Campbell shows obvious similarities with his contemporary Lyman Beecher. During the debate he references a book containing Beecher’s *Plea for the West* and said it “ought to be in every family, and read by every adult in the great valley, who feels any interest in the preservation of our free and happy institutions.”\(^9\) Beecher’s *Plea* was a two-hundred page warning to Americans that Roman Catholicism posed a grave threat to the United States. One of Beecher’s concerns was that Catholic priests could easily influence how Catholics voted, because in the confessional priests “learn all the private concerns of their people, and have almost unlimited power over the conscience as it respects the performance of every civil or social duty.”\(^10\)

But Campbell’s optimism about America extends beyond world history and into salvation history. *Specifically, Campbell believed that America existed to make churches*
better churches, and Christians better Christians. Four days into the debate, Campbell said this about Catholics, Catholicism, and America:

I could wish that the Roman Catholic faith, under the mild genius of our institutions, might become so modified, as to be suited to the character of our republic; especially to abandon the absurd pretension of infallibility, which indeed, she must do, if ever she can become American.\textsuperscript{11}

And immediately after this statement, he said,

\textit{[f]or the sake of Romanists, as well as Protestants, we desire to see them [American institutions] permanent. We fear the exclusive, proscriptive, and despotic system of Romanism; but we feel nothing but benevolence to Roman Catholics.}\textsuperscript{12}

What is telling about these two statements uttered halfway through the debate is that Campbell reveals a deep assumption he has about American institutions: \textit{they have a telos of cultivating intellectually and morally fit citizens while also cultivating intellectually and morally fit Christians}. While Campbell would not identify America with the church, he believed that for the most part American institutions and Protestant moral values were coterminous.\textsuperscript{13} For this reason, he could use the terms “American” and “Protestant” almost interchangeably.

\textsuperscript{11} Campbell, \textit{Debate}, 162. Emphasis mine.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 170. Emphasis mine.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 256. In a passage revealing his pacifism and post-millennialism, Campbell says, “Although I prefer the American Eagle to the British Lion, I would rather light the battles of my king, under the device of a milk white dove, on an azure flag, as more consonant to the genius of the Reign of heaven. War, however, is wholly barbarous. Nations at war, are at best but partly civilized. . . When we become more rational, more civilized, and more christian [sic], we will find some other way of settling our national disputes, than with the sword, and with the confused noise of the warrior, and garments baptized in blood.”
When Campbell identifies American institutions as “Protestant”\textsuperscript{14} and when he talks about America being “Protestant soil”\textsuperscript{15} he is using the term Protestant in two different, but related, senses. First, Campbell is making something like a philosophical assertion about the nature of liberty. He can call America’s institutions “Protestant” because they model and protect the liberty that seems to be at the heart of Protestant Christianity. Campbell does not make an argument for this, but he assumes that liberty is primarily a religious value and secondarily a political one.\textsuperscript{16} The liberty that is at the heart of Protestantism (and America) is the ability to choose for oneself the extent to which one will investigate and act upon his or her religious convictions, without formal (ecclesial or governmental) interference. So for Campbell, the adjective “Protestant” can be used as shorthand to describe what he perceives to be the non-coercive political institutions of the United States.

Second, Campbell is making an historical observation about Protestants settling British North America, and consequently using the term “Protestant” as a proprietary mark of that geographic region and the nation that eventually organized itself in it. Campbell actually speaks of America as if it belongs to Protestants. Comparing his and Purcell’s status as foreigners in America, he makes the following boisterous observation:

\[\text{[A]}\text{though politically considered, in one sense, we both may be called foreigners; yet, we are not foreigners in the same sense. I claim a very intimate relation with the Protestant family. I am one of that family. It was}\]

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 311. “There never was on earth so free and so equitable an institution as these Protestant institutions of these United States.”

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 183. “I shall reveal to you some of the secrets of that institution [“Romanism”], which seeks to be rooted in this Protestant soil.”

\textsuperscript{16} Campbell’s statement about civil liberty following religious liberty seems to be a historical observation, rather than a philosophical argument as such.
then my family, that first settled this country. The bishop’s family settled Roman Catholic America. He is a foreigner here, as I would be a foreigner in Mexico or South America. I belong to the persecuted—he to the persecutors of that family.\textsuperscript{17}

Odd as it sounds, Campbell believes that he is still in some sense persecuted by the Roman Catholic Church. In making this persecutor/persecuted distinction between Purcell and himself, Campbell is not suggesting that in America he and Purcell should have different rights and privileges.\textsuperscript{18} There should certainly be equal protection under the law. But Campbell is saying that America (at least what was colonial British North America) is primordially Protestant and the presence of Catholicism within it is, at the very least, a threat to its republican values. And because of this, Campbell and other Protestants can claim an American identity in the United States in a way that Purcell and other Catholics cannot.\textsuperscript{19} (It should not be forgotten that Campbell is debating as a representative of Protestantism, so his argument can legitimately—if cynically—be read as a tactic to secure his place within mainstream American Protestantism.)

For Campbell, America is not Protestant because she is religiously established;\textsuperscript{20} she is Protestant because the values of her institutions are coterminous with Protestant

\textsuperscript{17} Campbell, \textit{Debate}, 333.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 333.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 334. Campbell adds another dimension to his argument of what makes one a “true” American. He suggests that because Purcell does not have children he is qualitatively a different kind of American than Campbell, with the latter being a “truer” American. Campbell says: “But still better, I am the father of family: my children are native Americans: and through these I am more a kin to the great American family than he can ever be. Without perjury or apostacy [sic] from his office, he can never have a wife, nor family. He is a stranger to those near and holy relations. He has no country—no home. He lives and must die under the command of foreign superiors; and they may, by authority or promotion, remove him to Europe of Asia at pleasure. For these and other reasons I am identified with Protestant America, and claim a relation here to which his heart shall ever be a stranger.” Through childbirth, it seems, Campbell is saying that one is a qualitatively different kind of American.

\textsuperscript{20} David Sehat’s \textit{The Myth of American Religious Freedom} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) makes clear that at the local and state levels there were laws privileging Protestant Christians.
values. It is because the values of Protestant Christianity and America so closely align that Campbell believes America has a role in salvation history, namely to make churches *better* at being churches and Christians *better* at being Christian. America will do this by passing and enforcing legislation that secures the conditions for religious (Protestant Christian) flourishing.

Section 2: What Campbell Thinks Catholicism Is And Why He Thinks America Can Reform It

Campbell did not have a singular definition of Catholicism. Throughout the debate he would talk about the Catholic Church as both a heretical sect and a foreign power. His definition of the Catholic Church was a messy combination of religious and political elements that went something like this. As regards the religious dimensions of the Catholic Church, Campbell cites the Douay Catechism and gives his audience “a definition of her pretensions.”21 According to the Catechism, the Catholic Church is made up of four essential parts: “A pope, or supreme head, bishops, pastors and laity.”22 Campbell claims that “[i]t will be confessed by all, that, of these, the most essential is the head. But should we take away any one of these, she loses her identity, and ceases to be what she assumes.”23 Believing the pope to be “the most indispensable of these elements,”24 Campbell thinks that if he can show that there was a time when the pope was not the supreme head of the Church, then he has invalidated one of the Church’s essential


22 *Douay Catechism*, 20, in Ibid.


24 Ibid.
assumptions. In the first part of the debate, that is what Campbell tried to do: he made the case that in the Bible and early church history there was no idea of papal supremacy (that didn’t come until 606) and so the papacy—in the modern use of the term—did not exist.  

Because the pope did not exist, then according to the Douay Catechism one of the essential parts of the Catholic Church was missing. Ergo, the Catholic Church did not exist according to its own definition.

Believing that he had proved the Catholic Church cannot live up to its own religious definition of itself, Campbell tried to show that Catholicism was also a political entity. In proposition three of the debate, he calls the Roman Catholic Institution “a confederation of sects, under a politico-ecclesiastic head.” It need not concern us here what Campbell means by a “confederation of sects.” What is important is that Campbell believes that in the office of the pope there is a blurring of the lines between religious and political authority, and that the pope is both a spiritual and temporal leader. Because the pope is an essential part of the Catholic Church, and because the pope acts as a foreign sovereign, Catholic churches can be understood to be party to the actions of a foreign state.

While Campbell’s fears are certainly informed by a fanciful history of the high Middle Ages, we need to recognize that Campbell (and many, many others) believed that in fact

the pope of Rome is a foreign prince—at this very moment a prince temporal as well as spiritual, exercising political authority over all the

\[25\] Ibid., 27 and 40.

\[26\] Campbell and Purcell, Debate, viii.
Campbell supported his argument by citing the American oath of naturalization. Because the American “oath of naturalization requires the candidate for citizenship to swear that he does absolutely and entirely renounce all allegiance and fidelity to every foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty,” Campbell is worried about “every Roman Catholic layman feeling a paramount obligation to his bishop, and through him to the pope.” Campbell wondered if “all the rulers of the Roman Catholic church, being sworn to the pope absolutely and forever,” could be loyal citizens of their countries.

As messy as Campbell’s definition of Catholicism was, I suggest that based on what he said he knew about the Catholic Church he made a logical—if strained and paranoid—argument. In a very real sense, we might say that Campbell looked at Catholic churches in America as more resembling foreign embassies than houses of worship, and Catholics in America as more like foreign emissaries than immigrants. With this view of Catholics and Roman Catholicism, Campbell believed that America had a responsibility to reform Catholicism. We might say that Campbell thought of Catholics and the Catholic Church as objects of America’s religious and political missionary activity.

We see Campbell making two types of arguments about America and the Catholic Church. On the one hand, he speaks about America having a providential relationship to Roman Catholicism, its doctrines and beliefs, and its hierarchy. This argument is both abstract and contrived. But on the other hand, Campbell speaks about America having a

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27 Campbell, Debate, 324.

28 Ibid. Emphasis original.

29 Ibid.
providential relationship with actual Roman Catholics coming to America. This latter argument cannot be separated from the former, but it operates in a separate category of reflection.

As Campbell sees it, America exists in part to shear off those characteristics of Catholicism that prevent her from integrating into U.S. society. While there are more, one characteristic is its proclivity to persecute, which makes it an anti-American institution. Campbell believes that “Papal Rome is and always has been, a persecuting government. She is essentially so.” As he elaborated, he notes

\[ \text{papal Rome is essentially a persecuting power—still a persecuting monarchy; because she has it yet written in her infallible and immutable decrees of councils, in the bulls and anathemas of her popes; and in the constitution of her inquisitions, which as a church she still acknowledges and maintains.} \]

In the debate Campbell also discussed how Catholic bishops are sworn in their oath “to persecute and oppose heretics and schismatics.” Purcell responded by saying the Latin *persequor* “means to follow, and nothing more.” Campbell remained unconvinced. He believed that the Catholic Church had a “tyrannical, oppressive, and
persecuting spirit.” This spirit is lodged within the Catholic institution because, Campbell claims, “[t]he Council of Trent has ordained and enjoined all these principles of implicit and blind obedience, intolerance, proscription, and persecution.” What makes this “tyrannical, oppressive, and persecuting spirit” a threat to America (and the world) is that

[n]o council has since met, and no power but a general council can define a single article of faith, or rule of manners, according to the declarations of my antagonist. Indeed, the doctrine of the council of Trent must remain immutable and infallible while time endures, according to him: for no other general council can possibly contravene it; and, therefore, while the Roman church exists, she must be, what I have shown she was, before and since the council of Trent.

In short, Campbell believed Catholicism was a threat to America because of what she does (persecute) and because her commitment to infallibility makes it impossible to reform that practice. But while his view of Catholicism was incredibly dark, Campbell was confident that America was strong enough to soften even its roughest religious edges. Speaking of Purcell, he said,

[m]y friend has made concessions here, which I never expected from him. He has avowed principles, which, till within a few years, were unknown in the Roman Catholic church. I look upon this fact as an evidence, that better days are coming.

So we might say that Campbell held out hope for Roman Catholicism. Of course his foremost hope would be that Catholics would convert and cease to be Catholics:

35 Campbell, 348.
36 Ibid., 349.
37 Ibid., 349.
38 Ibid., 162.
the best and most grateful return that I could make to a Roman Catholic benefactor, for any benefit conferred, would be, if possible, to convince and save him from the most ruinous and destructive heresy that time records, or ever will record.\footnote{Ibid., 293.}

But, even if conversion was out of the question, Campbell thought the Catholic Church in America would become a better version of itself \textit{by being in America}. What this shows is that America is more than a divinely ordained nation in world history; it is also a divinely ordained agent of ecclesial reform in salvation history.

As I mentioned earlier, Campbell did not think America’s greatness could be taken for granted. In his words, America was the “last and best hope of the oppressed of all nations.”\footnote{Ibid., 350.} But as Campbell was aware, cultural demise was always just a generation away. It is for this reason that immigration and Roman Catholicism were such important issues for him. He states:

\begin{quote}
[w]ith open arms, I would welcome to our shores the oppressed of all nations, Romanists and Protestants. I would extend to the Roman Catholic every facility to improve his condition by immigration into this favored land, provided only I were free from all suspicion, that his faith in the pope and mother-church, would not induce him or his children to wrest from me or mine, that freedom and liberty which I would gladly participate with him.\footnote{Ibid., 169-170.}
\end{quote}

For Campbell welcoming an Irish Catholic to America was qualitatively different from welcoming an Irish Presbyterian. The former, by virtue of their “Romanist” upbringing, were conditioned to be unfit for participation in republican societies. Campbell believed that Catholics, regardless of national origin or ethnicity, were not
accustomed to using their rational capacities like Protestants. Speaking of Purcell,
Campbell condescendingly said,

[t]he gentleman may find it more to his account, or he is more accustomed
to speak to the prejudices of that part of the community who rely on the
authority of the Roman church without asking questions, who are told not
to think or reason for themselves; but to believe in the church... But I
speak to Protestants as well as Catholics; and, therefore, I must reason, for
they are a reasoning population. I expect them to decide by evidence, and
not by authority.\footnote{Ibid., 134-135. Emphasis original.}

This deference to authority makes the Catholic prone to mental subservience. Campbell said,

[t]his I have so far proved, as reference has already been made to those
doctrines, which make the Roman Catholic population abject slaves to
their priests, bishops, and popes—to that hierarchy, which has always
opposed freedom of thought, of speech, and of action, whether in
literature, politics, or religion. Such are the laws of mind, that if in religion
the mind be enslaved to any superstition, especially in youth, it rarely or
ever can be emancipated and invigorated.\footnote{Ibid., 311. Campbell repeats these sentiments in other places: He claims to speak for Protestants when he says they think “civil liberty and the papacy are wholly incompatible with each other; and that the introduction of large numbers of Roman Catholics into this community, would inevitably subvert this government; and place us under a spiritual and political despotism, intolerant and cruel as those, which the see of Rome has established in every country on earth, where she has obtained a majority” (304). Also, “[h]ow any person can, from such a system, elaborate a single element of free government, or of civil liberty, I cannot imagine. Indeed, the radical ideas of papal supremacy, are as antipodal to republican doctrine and American institutions, as are the zenith and nadir” (295). Finally, “[l]et him show us here in what manner the decrees of councils, the bulls of popes, the oaths of the clergy, and the infallibility of the church are to be disposed of, if we could promise ourselves that the prevalence of his party in this country would not be an end of all those free and equitable institutions, which have made these United States the wonder and admiration of the world” (304).}

Campbell employs the trope of slavery, like persecution, to describe the Catholic Church. In a statement where Campbell expresses friendliness toward Roman Catholics, but not Catholicism, he says, “I oppose his religion; because, I sincerely think it enslaves him, and would enslave me, if it had the power. But, in all this there is no hatred to
Roman Catholics as men.”

So while mental slavery is a consequence of the system of Roman Catholicism, Campbell believes that individual Catholics are capable of reform under the right conditions. Throughout the debate, Campbell tries to convince his audience that he has no antipathy toward Catholics, just the system of Catholicism. He said, “[i]t gives me pleasure to say, that there are some Roman Catholics, to whom I could trust my life and my all as confidently, as to any Protestant . . . In such cases the man rises above the system.”

In the same speech, Campbell said, “I always distinguish between a system and those who profess it,—between a creed, and the people. And therefore I war against principles and not men.”

It is important to note what Campbell is not saying. He is not saying that Catholics are not welcome in America. He is saying that Catholics require remedial religious and political education within a matrix of American exceptionalism married to a general Protestant worldview to make them fit for participation in American society. And, Campbell would hope that this education would make Catholics question some of the doctrinal (transubstantiation, infallibility) and liturgical (auricular confession) absurdities of Catholicism.

What Are We to Make of All This?

So, what are we to make of Campbell’s attitude toward Catholicism and Catholics in America? Was he a Nativist? There certainly is a family resemblance between

44 Ibid., 170. Emphasis original.
46 Ibid. Emphasis original. See also, “We feel the same humanity and benevolence towards Roman Catholics, as men, as to Protestants. We always discriminate between tenets and men, a system or theory, and those who hold it” (169).
Campbell and well-known Nativists like Samuel F.B. Morse and Lyman Beecher.

However, Campbell’s posture toward Catholics, at least in the debate, seems to be characterized by two points that would challenge his being lumped in with the Nativists: first, he seems to have had legitimate evangelical concern for the conversion of Catholics and the reform of the Catholic Church\textsuperscript{47}; second, he seemed to think of himself as being politically beneficent because he had a guarded openness to Catholic immigration. Therefore, I do not believe it is accurate to label Campbell a Nativist.\textsuperscript{48} He seemed to believe he was showing his amicability toward Roman Catholics while still expressing his fears about Roman Catholicism when he said,

\begin{quote}
any who have no antipathy against Roman Catholics have some fears of them. I belong to that class. I have no antipathy: but I have my fears. I do honestly think, (and I avow it here, that I may give my ingenious opponent an opportunity to remove the impression if he can,) I say, I do sincerely believe and think, that Roman Catholicism, in any country is detrimental to its interests and prosperity: and in a republic, directly and positively tending every moment to its subversion. Such is my conviction. I avow it, that if possible, it may be removed.\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

Campbell thought Catholicism was “detrimental” to a country’s “interests and prosperity” because its antiquated beliefs were evidence she could not reform. He said,

\begin{quote}
I introduced these institutions, as proof of the immoral nature and tendency of the Romanist rule of faith. I think it almost enough to have these doctrines or institutions acknowledged in this age and country, to prove that Roman Catholicism is not susceptible of reformation; and it
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{47} Weedman, 19. Weedman makes a similar point when he says Campbell’s “criticism of Catholicism arose primarily from his conception of himself as a Protestant reformer.”

\textsuperscript{48} Hicks, 43. Hicks observes that “Campbell never participated in formal nativist politics,” yet “he was nonetheless a strident and influential anti-Catholic spokesperson.”

\textsuperscript{49} Campbell, \textit{Debate}, 304.
would be the same in this community as in Spain, Italy, or Portugal, under similar circumstances.\textsuperscript{50}

If the Catholic Church cannot reform, then she cannot be a productive participant in a republican society. And Campbell thinks the Catholic Church is fundamentally incapable of reform because she claims to teach infallibly. Campbell believes that any action the Church has taken or advised, either in conciliar decrees or papal bulls, is an action that can be infallibly practiced in the present time (e.g., deposing monarchs, absolving oaths).\textsuperscript{51} These actions are not the rogue results of an individual pope; Campbell would say, they represent “the spirit of the system.”\textsuperscript{52}

Campbell admits that he may misunderstand Catholicism and expresses his desire that Purcell would clarify what he gets wrong. Campbell acknowledges, “I shall be happy to be assured that his system is better than we Protestants can now regard it.”\textsuperscript{53}

Nevertheless, Campbell believed that his participation in the debate was the result of providence. Desiring to be faithful to that divine leading, Campbell sought to “reveal . . . some of the secrets of that institution, which seeks to be rooted in this Protestant soil.”\textsuperscript{54}

If we combine Campbell’s understanding of the pope as a politico-ecclesiastic head and his understanding of the Church’s infallibility, we can get a glimpse of why he thought the Catholic Church was such a threat to America. The Church and the pope’s teachings are immune from lay-critique, or we might say the critical investigation that

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 251.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 312-313.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 313.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 183.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
Campbell thought his hermeneutic assumed. In this way, it is more understandable to see why Campbell would say Roman Catholics are “abject slaves to their priests, bishops, and popes.” Campbell would say this “abject slavery” predisposes Catholics—because of their religious formation—to not appreciate liberty, and consequently America republican values. Speaking of Catholicism in both religious and governmental terms, he says:

[t]he fact of putting the bible under a bushel, of forbidding the reading of it, of swearing for ever to interpret it as it has been interpreted, of not permitting men to think or speak for themselves on religion, of teaching them the power of priests to work miracles, to create a god out of bread, that the people might adore it and them, of making a supreme judge of controversy out of one of the parties, or combining the legislative, executive, and judicial powers in one person, (the model of the most cruel despotism,), is the paragon of supreme tyranny, never surpassed, never equaled on earth.56

America, it seems, is not just the “last and best hope of the oppressed of all nations,” but also the “last and best hope” of the Catholic Church.

Section 3: Purcell’s Response

Purcell responded to Campbell’s dark analysis of Catholicism in two ways: first, he framed Catholic ecclesiology in terms that might sound amenable to Protestants; and second, Purcell critiqued two of Campbell’s faulty arguments, hoping to show the audience the weakness of his positions.

55 Ibid., 311. The full quote: “‘Essentially anti-American.’—This I have so far proved, as reference has already been made to those doctrines, which make the Roman Catholic population abject slaves to their priests, bishops, and popes—to that hierarchy, which has always opposed freedom of thought, of speech, and of action, whether in literature, politics, or religion. Such are the laws of mind, that if in religion the mind be enslaved to any superstition, especially in youth, it rarely or ever can be emancipated and invigorated.”

56 Ibid., 294-295. Emphasis original.
Catholic Ecclesiology

Early in the debate, Purcell makes the pedestrian observation that all societies depend on some authority to maintain a certain level of organization. But this mundane statement sets the tone for his entire discussion about the church, infallibility, and the papacy, which are the organizing principles that allow epistemological assurance to be possible for Catholics. Quoting his diocese’s catechism, Purcell offered a definition of the church that was not original to himself, but one that mirrored the Counter-Reformation ecclesiology of the time:

the catechism of this diocese defines the Catholic church to be the congregation of all the faithful, professing the same faith, receiving the same sacraments, and united under one visible head, the pope, or vicar of Jesus Christ, on earth. It is defined to be the congregation of all the faithful.

This is a traditional definition in that it relies on the four marks of the church for its foundations.

But what is more interesting are the three metaphors and three attributes Purcell uses elsewhere to describe the church. They are interesting because they describe the Catholic Church in ways that American Protestants might find amenable. First, Purcell calls the church the congregation of the scattered faithful. As he notes halfway through the debate, “the meaning of ‘the church’ is the whole congregation of the faithful scattered through the earth.” He uses this definition of the church to underscore the role of ecclesiastical authority for interpreting scripture and making canonical judgments. For

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57 Purcell, Debate, 20.
58 Ibid., 21.
59 Ibid., 166. Emphasis original.
Purcell, believing in Christ and obeying the church have a near equivalence. He offers the following illustration:

Suppose I tell a man that I believe him; but persuade him to his face, in spite of his repeated asseverations, that he did not say what he says he did. Do I believe him? Suppose I say I love him, and yet do all I can to his injury, are my protestations what they ought to be? So it is with Jesus Christ. If you believe in him, you obey his words and hear his church which he commands you to hear. It is vain to say, I believe in Jesus Christ, unless we follow him also, and keep his commandments. If we do not so [sic], we are hypocrites, or, at least, we deceive ourselves; and if we despise his church, he assures us most positively, that we despise himself. “If any man,” says he, “will not hear the church, let him be to thee as the heathen and the publican.”

The scattered congregation of the faithful is united in a commitment to a “tribunal,” Purcell’s shorthand for the magisterial authority of the Church, “which he [Christ] commands me to hear, under the penalty of being reputed a heathen and publican.”

Purcell concludes this discussion with a rhetorical question, “If this tribunal could pronounce falsely, would Christ have commanded me thus to hear and obey it, as I should obey himself?”

The second metaphor Purcell uses throughout the debate to describe the Church is the “pillar and ground of truth.” The phrase, from 1st Timothy, is employed to present the Church as the body responsible for preserving Christ’s doctrine, passing it on through history, and correctly interpreting it. For Purcell, the ecclesial interpretation of Scripture is the measure for right interpretation. Without the church’s hermeneutic, Scripture is a blank canvas that can yield any meaning the reader brings to it. “The bible [sic],” Purcell

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60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
says, “is a dead letter—all pretend to find their conflicting tenets in it.” In light of the preponderance of interpretations, Protestants are left asking which is the correct reading, or whether or not a correct reading is a valuable object to pursue. The Catholic Church then functions as a condition both for the right interpretation of Scripture, and for the assurance that what one hears is harmonious with the deposit of faith. Purcell notes that the apostles, aware of the doubts that error would originate on the authority of the church, gave a sure and unerring guide to every sincere believer, teaching him to say, next after the profession of his belief in God himself—not, I believe in the bible [sic]—it is not once mentioned—not in any sect—there were none heard of at that time—but “I believe in the holy Catholic church.”

That Purcell vests the Catholic Church with hermeneutic preeminence is important. The church’s history has been a tradition of competing interpretations of Scripture. Purcell observes that in contrast to the Greek churches, the Roman church was “preserved [by God] . . . from the errors and heresies that proved infinitely more fatal than the pagan persecutions.” In the context of theological controversies like Arianism and Nestorianism, the Roman church was an ecclesiastical and creedal center of unity for the universal church. In this sense, “Rome was the primary see, the centre of unity, the mother and mistress of all the churches.” For Purcell all of this testifies that God has not “abandoned his children so far as to leave them prey to every innovator, every sheep in wolf’s clothing.” Purcell asks the rhetorical question, “Is there no ark of safety for man,

63 Ibid., 170.
64 Ibid., 74.
65 Ibid., 55.
66 Ibid..
67 Ibid., 64.
while the waters of error overspread the earth?" Predictably, his response is “Yes, my friends, there is. It is the church.” In a world of deception, there still exists a colony of veracity, the Church which is the “pillar and ground of truth.”

The third metaphor that Purcell alludes to (without specifically naming) in the debate is that of “sympathetic union.” In a section of the debate where he talks about ecclesiology and infallibility, he says the following about the Church:

> the true theory of the church, like that of the human body, is union. Ask not, does the heart, alone, or the head alone, or the members alone contain the vital principle—they sympathize; they live and move and have their being together.

For Purcell, the Church is a sympathetic union because its constituent parts fit together in a harmonious, organic whole. A few lines before his description, Purcell said, “[t]he pope is the head—the council is the heart—and I have no objection to his calling the laity the members, to continue the figure.” In the following line he writes, “[w]hile there is no schism in the members, no separation of the head or of the heart, all is soundness and life—so in the church—pope, pastors, and laity.” Purcell’s ecclesiology provides him the flexibility to maintain important points about the papacy, but at the same time not reduce the church to the papacy, or the councils.

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68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 171. Emphasis original.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid. In the first sentence, Purcell explicitly uses the pope, councils, and laity to make up the triad, but in the second he uses “pastors” instead of councils. I take this to be a simple change in terminology, not a substantive altering of his positions. Pastors—bishops—compromise the ecumenical councils, so it reasonable to use the terms interchangeably in this context.
After using these helpful metaphors to describe the Catholic Church, Purcell reflects on three pertinent attributes of the Church’s character: it is republican, adaptable, and led by the pope, who illustrates this republicanism. Purcell claims that the Catholic Church is a perfect model of republicanism. Making the interesting claim that Christ “drafted the constitution of the church,” Purcell contends that the church “contain[s] the excellencies, while it excludes the defects of the most popular forms of civil government.”74 The Catholic Church, Purcell goes on, has a perfect feature of the Republican Model, in this, that with us, merit is the grand criterion of fitness for office. No favoritism is allowed. No matter how humble the parentage or obscure the kindred of the individual, virtue, talent and common sense are sure, sooner, or later, to elevate him to any situation he may be advised to accept.75

By casting the Church in republican terms, Purcell directly challenges the dark picture Campbell paints of a corrupt and corrupting hierarchy inherently at odds with the genius of American institutions. Purcell is making a creative Americanist argument by intimating that it is not so much that Roman Catholicism has accommodated itself to American political institutions, but that American political institutions have simply discovered an eternal truth lodged in the Catholic Church since the time of Christ.

The second attribute of the Church’s character that Purcell highlights is its adaptability. At the heart of Purcell’s ecclesiology is a distinction between doctrine and discipline. The Church’s doctrine does not change, but the Church’s discipline does and should be expected to adjust across time and culture. Discipline, on the one hand,
regulates such things as “the dress of the clergy, [or] the liturgical language.”\textsuperscript{76} “The church,” Purcell says, “must have the power of changing in these respects—in other words of adapting her discipline to times, and countries.”\textsuperscript{77} And this, he goes on to say, “is a proof of her perfection, of her having been established by Jesus Christ to teach, and guide, and sanctify all nations \textit{for ever}.”\textsuperscript{78} The Church’s doctrines, on the other hand, are defined and insusceptible to change. He cites the “Anathema sit” formula and points out that “this formula always marks the definitions of Catholic faith, among the acts of general councils.”\textsuperscript{79} Purcell also posits a hard distinction between Catholic doctrine and the opinions of Catholic bishops when he says, “[t]he opinions of all the bishops in the world, are no article of faith. Articles of faith are defined, and they are no longer opinions.”\textsuperscript{80} Purcell accuses Campbell of “confound[ing] discipline with morals [which are infallible and linked to doctrine],”\textsuperscript{81} in his charges that the Catholic Church’s moral code is vicious. It is this lack of clarity, Purcell says, that “is the source of the entire difficulty.”\textsuperscript{82}

Third, Purcell cites the Petrine confession as the primary text used to defend the scriptural and historical origins of the papacy. This passage illustrates the fundamental truth that the Church has never been “without a foundation” and that Peter, resting on

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 170.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid. Emphasis original.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 207.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid. Emphasis original.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 170.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
Christ the cornerstone, was the rock upon which “the whole edifice [of the church] securely rest[ed].” Purcell contends Peter’s primacy was readily acknowledged in the New Testament. “No man,” he says, “can read the New Testament attentively without seeing, at almost every page, the evidence of Peter’s divinely appointed and acknowledged primacy.” Likewise, the historical and conciliar record affirms Petrine and papal primacy. Purcell maintains that the pope is a link in the apostolic chain: “Discard the pope—sever from the communion of the church of Rome, and you lose all claim, or shadow of a claim to a connexion with the apostles.”

Purcell spent a considerable amount of time addressing concerns Protestants had about the character of the papacy. One of his earliest points in the debate was to show that the pope was not an ecclesiastical and political ruler akin to a European monarch. He did this by stating that “the pope’s power is spiritual, his kingdom like that of Christ, is not of this world.” In the debate, Campbell would repeat the common Protestant refrain that the pope, by virtue of his having papal states, was a foreign monarch and therefore made American bishops subjects of a foreign power. Purcell minimized the scope and importance of the pope’s temporal holdings and pointed out that the reason he had that power in the first place was because of “the people’s preference” for ecclesial rule as opposed to secular. Purcell asserted that Campbell’s fear about a papal ecclesiastical-

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83 Ibid., 33.
84 Ibid., 106.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid., 24.
87 Ibid., 60.
88 Ibid.
political juggernaut “is no part or parcel of the Catholic doctrine.” Even if the pope’s temporal power were stripped away, he would have no less spiritual authority because “his chief authority is . . . Such as this world can neither give nor take away.”

Because the pope’s power is spiritual and not temporal, Purcell tried to calm Protestant fears about the pope’s having the power to depose secular rulers. In the following extended quote, Purcell rehearses a few central points about the issue: 1) Catholics do not believe he has it; 2) if he tried to exercise it, his fellow bishops could (and would) rightly object to it; 3) its novelty precludes it from being considered a part of Catholic doctrine. Purcell says

[h]ere is the fullest, the clearest, the most unequivocal disavowal, of the doctrine of the pope’s deposing power. The Catholics do not believe that he has any such power. We should be among the first to oppose him in its exercise; and we would be neither heretics nor bad Catholics; and we each of us bishops swear the very words of the oath: “Persequar et impugnabo, salvo meo ordine,” in the sense specified, which is the only true sense, the assumption of any such power by the pope, or the pope for the assumption of any such power. FOR TEN CENTURIES THIS POWER WAS NEVER CLAIMED BY ANY POPE. IT CAN, THEREFORE, BE NO PART OF CATHOLIC DOCTRINE. IT HAS NOT GAINED ONE FOOT OF LAND FOR THE POPE. IT IS NOT ANY WHERE BELIEVED, OR ACTED UPON, IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH. NOR CAN IT BE, AT THIS LATE DAY, ESTABLISHED, IF ANY MAN COULD BE FOUND MAD ENOUGH TO MAKE THAT ATTEMPT. Let these go before the American people, as the real principles of Catholics concerning the power of the pope. And if we must pronounce a judgment on the past, let it be remembered, that when the pope did use this power, it was when appealed to as a common father, and in favor of the oppressed! We should go back, in spirit, to former times, when we undertake to judge them. We should understand the condition

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89 Ibid.

90 Ibid., 62-63.

91 “For the sake of my order, I will strive and contend.” I offer my thanks to Dr. William Portier for his translation suggestion. Emphasis original.
of society at the period; we should know the circumstances, general and particular, which controlled or influenced the great events recorded in history.92

Trying to put the pope’s temporal authority into historical context, Purcell’s is presenting to the Protestant audience a more “America friendly” papacy. In fact, Purcell contends that the papal office is conducive to all forms of government. He notes,

[c]onfined to its proper sphere the influence of the head of the church must needs be salutary; must, if God was wise, be beneficial and far above reproach. This power has been exerted for the welfare of society under every form of government, monarchical, aristocratical, mixed, and republican. It is the friend of all.93

The next point Purcell wanted to make about the character of the papacy, like the Catholic Church in general, was to show that it was republican and conciliar. Realizing that he was facing an uphill battle, Purcell explicitly stated that the pope’s organizational leadership was republican. He says, “[w]hen the pope writes to the bishops, he begins by ‘Dilecti Fratres’ ‘BELOVED BRETHREN,’—a republican, and if you please democratic address.”94 Furthermore, Purcell understands the character of papal leadership to be expressed in conciliar and consultative terms:

The pope never gives a decree without taking counsel from his constitutional advisers, availing himself of the light of present wisdom and past experience. He takes all human means to weigh the subject well and to come to a sound and scriptural conclusion.95

It seems that Purcell spent a lot of time “pulling back the curtain” on Roman Catholicism for his Protestant audience. Fueled by fear, ignorance, and misinformation,

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92 Ibid., 353. Emphasis original.

93 Ibid., 58.

94 Ibid., 22. Emphasis original.

95 Ibid., 24.
many American Protestants had probably never heard from a member of Catholic hierarchy how the organization of the Church was run. By showing his audience that the Catholic Church can be described in understandable metaphors and that the attributes of the Church are welcome strengths, Purcell was laying the groundwork for a systematic dismantling of Protestant opposition to the Church.

**Critiquing Campbell’s Faulty Arguments**

In addition to presenting Catholic ecclesiology in America-friendly terms, Purcell advances the case of Catholic Americanism by critiquing Campbell’s biblicism on two different occasions in the debate: when Campbell talked about the call to Christian ministry and the American Revolution. These exchanges helpfully illustrate how Campbell thinks we should understand the will of God. Said differently, these statements reveal how he thinks God speaks to Christians without the infallible tribunal that Purcell advocates. These exchanges serve as something like bookends for the debate—the first on Friday and the second the following Friday, just a day before the debate ends.96

At the very end of the last speech on the first day, Purcell, somewhat exasperated, claimed “not [to] know what Mr. Campbell’s tenets are, or what he believes.”97 He felt as if he were “fighting in the dark.” Wishing to get clarification and specificity, Purcell asked Campbell if he believed that ministers needed a “call or mission” to separate them for the work of ministry. Campbell affirmed that he believed in such a call, and Purcell

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96 As we will recall, the debate was designed so that each man could make an uninterrupted speech which would be followed by the other. However, at various points in the week one of the men would engage the other in the middle of his speech, asking a question or seeking clarification. The discussions on Christian ministry and the Revolution are examples of this.

97 Purcell, *Debate*, 44.
countered by asking, “[h]ow is that calling made known, that mission given?” The following exchange took place:

**MR. CAMPBELL.** By the word and providence of God.

**BISHOP PURCELL.** How can we ascertain that word and providence of God?

**MR. CAMPBELL.** By the voice of the people and the written word—“vox populi vox Dei.”

**BISHOP PURCELL.** Suppose the people are displeased, for instance, with a Presbyterian pastor, have they the sole power to remove him?

**MR. CAMPBELL.** Yes.

**BISHOP PURCELL.** Suppose the ministry of a Presbyterian church are displeased with him, and the people of his church are pleased with him. May he then retain his station against the will of the ministry?

**MR. CAMPBELL.** If the people will have it so, it must be so. “Vox populi, vox Dei”!

**BISHOP PURCELL.** There my brethren, you have heard him! Such declarations!

Under this cross-examination, Campbell reveals two important assumptions about how he understands God’s will to be known through providence. First, God may legitimately speak a message to a congregation the content of which is opposite what God ostensibly communicated to the church’s denominational leaders. Second, God’s communication is democratic in the sense that the people (the congregation) have the ability, in principle, to ascertain God’s will outside those denominational structures.

Purcell’s responses reveal his epistemological and ecclesiastical reservations/uncertainties about Campbell’s position. Launching what would be a

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98 Ibid.

99 Interestingly, the stenographer put an exclamation point after the second “vox populi, vox Dei” as if to signify the intensity of Campbell’s speech.

100 Purcell, *Debate*, 44.
recurring theme during the debate, Purcell hammers Campbell on the issue of how one knows that what one believes is God’s truth, or not. In terms of strategy, Purcell was making a soft offensive strategy by pointing out what everyone in Cincinnati already knew: Protestants disagreed a lot and fought about it. He then intimated a solution, something we might call “Catholicism’s best-kept secret” (or most misunderstand attribute): an infallible tribunal for adjudicating competing truth-claims.

On the following Friday, the next-to-last day of the debate, Purcell stood up and posed to Campbell a moral quandary about political allegiance that was similar to the ministry question in that it critiqued how people claim to know the will of God. Campbell had been talking about how the pope could absolve subjects from the oaths they made to their kings, as well as depose kings. So Purcell addressed the following scenario to Campbell:

Suppose you had been living at the time of the American Revolution, and were witness to the tyranny, which these colonies had to endure, on the part of his most gracious majesty, king George III of England: when the spirit of a mighty and a numerous people was roused by excess of wrong, to make one vast effort for freedom. Under these circumstances, the General in chief, the officers, and the army, the revenue department, and postmasters, all of whom had taken an oath of allegiance to that king, appeal to you, inquiring what is to be done? Asking you if the oath was binding. What would be your reply?  

The following exchange took place:

MR. CAMPBELL. If they had taken a solemn oath, they should not break it.

BISHOP PURCELL. Then was George Washington a perjurer, and all the officers of the army and navy, all the signers of the Declaration of Independence, and all the subjects of the king of Great Britain were perjurers!!

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101 Purcell, Debate, 314.
Mr. Campbell. That does not follow from my answer to your question.

Bishop Purcell. And what would you have persons to do, who had taken the oath of allegiance?

Mr. Campbell. “It is better not to vow, than to vow and not pay”—as saith the good Book. [Here the stenographer summarizes] Mr. Campbell rose and said, that for his part, we should always do our duty, and leave consequences to God. When he intends the deliverance of a people, he will effect for them redemption, as he did for his people out of Egypt.

Bishop Purcell. There is no oath of artificial contrivance, stronger than the natural tie between the subject and the king, the governed and the government; of whatever form it may be. This is an oath, prior and superior to all other oaths. But if those of the colonists, who had not taken a conventional oath, or an oath of office, to the king of England, had alone rebelled, what could they have done? Were not the army and the civil and military officers bound by their oath to resist rebellion? How then could human rights have been vindicated, or human wrongs redressed? You have repeatedly said “vox populi, vox Dei,” in the course of this discussion; in other words that the people’s will was the most authentic interpretation of the will of God, that it could give a call to the ministry and give to its choice a right to exercise spiritual powers!! Thus, my friends, you see the dilemma to which the gentleman has been reduced, and that, while Catholics are reproached for their slavish tenets, he himself teaches the whole doctrine of passive obedience, and condemns the very principle of the American Revolution.102

What we see in this exchange is that Campbell and Purcell are really talking about two different topics. Campbell is making a point about oaths—“once you’ve taken one, don’t break it.” Purcell is making a point about how we “hear” God—we might paraphrase him and say, “through natural law.” When Purcell asks “How then could human rights have been vindicated, or human wrongs redressed?”, he is saying that through casuistry the colonists could reach the conclusion that rebellion was justified. Campbell, however, would only say that the colonists should “do . . . [their] duty, and leave [the] consequences to God.” For Campbell, in that scenario God’s message could

102 Campbell and Purcell, Debate, 314-315. Emphasis original.
not be one that justified rebellion. On the following day, Campbell attempted to justify himself (and his Americanism) by saying that King George “vacated” the oath because he “failed to protect and cherish his American subjects, according to the tenor of the charter given,” and they were therefore “freed from the obligations of allegiance.”\(^{103}\) So in strict terms, according to Campbell, the colonists never broke their oaths.\(^{104}\)

In this exchange, Purcell is attacking Campbell’s “vox populi, vox Dei” hermeneutic. What was Purcell’s point? To show that Campbell was caught in a contradiction, because in his system of moral reasoning, the voice of the people and the voice of God were saying two different things. Purcell knew he was on the defensive when the subject was the compatibility of the Catholic Church with America. In order to turn things in a favorable direction, he did two things. First, he articulated Catholic ecclesiology in a manner that was harmonious with republican political convictions. Second, he challenged the assumed harmony between Campbell’s theology and American political convictions. The first laid the theological foundation for Catholic political engagement; the second challenged Campbell’s assumption that America was primordially a Protestant nation.

Purcell’s final move was to demonstrate that Catholics had, in fact, already been active participants in American political society. On the last day of the debate, in the last speech, Purcell closed his remarks by reading George Washington’s Letter to the U.S.

\(^{103}\) Campbell, *Debate*, 323.

\(^{104}\) Ibid., 323. Campbell says, “If, indeed, an oath has in it the nature of a covenant, then one of the parties failing, so far vacates the covenant as to set the other free from his oath.” But he is quick to say that this is not absolution: “but this is not absolution for breaking it; it is a simply annulling of its conditions.”
In the letter, Washington speaks optimistically about America’s future:

America, under the smiles of divine providence, the protection of a good government, and the cultivation of manners, morals, and piety, cannot fail of attaining an uncommon degree of eminence in literature, commerce, agriculture, improvements at home, and respectability abroad.

Coupling the success of the country with the contributions of its citizens, Washington then goes on to note,

[a]s mankind become more liberal, they will be more apt to allow, that all those who conduct themselves as worthy members of the community, are equally entitled to the protection of civil government. I hope ever to see America among the foremost nations in examples of justice and liberality. And I presume that your fellow citizens will not forget the patriotic part which you took in the accomplishment of their revolution, and the establishment of their government, or the important assistance which they received from a nation in which the Roman Catholic faith is professed.

Two things stand out about Purcell’s use of this letter in the closing moments of the debate. First, Purcell was emphasizing that George Washington rightly understood that Catholics actively participated in the Revolution and the founding of the country, and thus they merited equal protection in America. More than this, Purcell was using Washington’s choice of words to highlight that not only were Catholics in America from the beginning, but – in their participation in the Revolution and the founding of the government – they were American from the beginning. They were truly American, no less American than the Protestants who participated in the Revolution.

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105 Purcell, *Debate*, 357-358.


107 Ibid. Emphasis in debate text.
Conclusion

The preceding analysis helps us see two important points about the debate. First, Campbell and Purcell had two very different goals. Campbell’s was necessarily negative, attempting to demonstrate what the Catholic Church was not—biblical, unified, American, etc. Purcell, on the other hand, had a much more modest goal: to show that the Catholic Church was theologically and politically ordinary, not the monster Campbell made it out to be. By this, I mean that Purcell simply wanted to show his audience things like the ecclesial ordinary-ness of the papacy; the pope was not a cartoonish political despot who aimed for world domination. By showing just how ordinary Catholic practice and belief were, Purcell was hoping to cast Campbell’s propositions further into absurdity.

Second, Purcell wanted to show that Catholics wanted what every other American wanted: the freedom to worship as s/he saw fit, a stable society in which to live and work, and a peaceful coexistence with their American co-religionists. Toward the end of his last speech, Purcell made the following moving remarks:

I disclaim all unkind feelings towards Mr. Campbell or any of his friends, and acknowledge my gratitude to him for enabling me to place my religion, in its proper light, before the public . . . Instead of quarrelling about religion we ought to be engaged in our vocation of love and peace, as its faithful ministers, and sincere professors. We have all a great deal to do to improve the morals of the age, to elevate the standard of literature, to promote by any such means as all christians [sic] approve, the welfare of our common country, and to obtain for our green state, the fertile and flourishing, Ohio, a distinguished rank for knowledge, virtue and patriotism, among her elder and her younger sisters in this fair republic.
These are legitimate pursuits, alike pleasing to God, and useful to man. The world is large enough for us all.\footnote{Ibid., 357.}

What Purcell wanted to do, it seems, was put on display an “everyday Catholicism” that made the Catholic Church seem like an ordinary and upstanding part of American society.

As we move into the last chapter, we benefited from analyzing the arguments in the debate. We were able to get a sense for what Campbell and Purcell thought about their own religious tradition, and the one they were critiquing. However, understanding the arguments does not capture fully the importance of this event. To do that, we need to attend to the form of the debate itself. To this we now turn.
CHAPTER V:
THE PUBLIC RECEPTION OF THE DEBATE AND CAMPBELL AND PURCELL’S RELATIONSHIP

Introduction

So far we have investigated the biographies of Campbell and Purcell, put their first meeting in 1836 into context, and—in chapters three and four—discussed the content of the debate, in the process seeking to make the case that they both engaged in “pastoral apologetics.” In the final chapter, I will discuss the end of the debate and Campbell and Purcell’s subsequent relationship.

What I think is most interesting about this debate is not the laundry-list of theological and political disagreements that Campbell and Purcell had. Rather, what is remarkable is that they both devoted a week to a public conversation about a controversial topic; they carried themselves in a professional manner and refused to engage in low-brow polemics (e.g., Campbell did not use the Maria Monk narratives for his arguments in the debate); and in the years following the debate they were friends. Finally, Campbell and Purcell contribute a positive narrative in American religious history because despite their disagreements they maintained open, civil lines of communication instead of retreating into their ecclesiological enclaves.
This chapter has two sections. First, I will discuss the conclusion of the debate and its public reception. Second, I will discuss the character of Campbell and Purcell’s post-debate relationship. In this conclusion, I suggest briefly what this debate could mean for contemporary Christian scholars who, like Campbell and Purcell, suffer imperfect ecclesial unity.

Section 1: The Close of the Debate and its Public Reception

On Saturday, January 21st, Campbell and Purcell concluded their weeklong debate on Roman Catholicism. Since the final proposition dealt with whether or not the Catholic Church could truly be an American institution, it is not surprising that both closed their final speeches addressing this point. Campbell ends his speech still clinging to his skepticism, while Purcell makes a personal plea for Catholics and Protestants to amicably share the same national space.

Campbell spends his final moments speculating that Purcell might cite America Catholic participation in the Revolution as “proof of Roman Catholic love of either civil or religious liberty.”¹ Then he wonders “whether hatred of Protestant England, rather than the love of rational liberty, instigated those [Catholic] soldiers that served during that war.”² Not leaving his audience to doubt, Campbell ended his weeklong debate with these words: “For my part, I incline to the opinion that the hatred of England was at least as strong an impulse to their efforts as the love of liberty.—But—”³ It would be interesting to know what Campbell would have said after the closing conjunction in his

¹ Campbell, Debate, 351.
² Ibid.
³ Ibid., 351-352.
last sentence; but as it stands, he finishes the debate with a reminder that he finds Catholic claims of Americanism dubious.

In Purcell’s closing speech, he fulfills Campbell’s prophecy and cites George Washington’s letter as his last words in the debate. But just before he reads that letter, he makes a plea for Catholics and Protestants in the Ohio Valley to stop “quarrelling” and recognize that “[t]he world is large enough for us all.” Citing Abraham and Lot’s willingness to “settl[e] their difficulties, [by] feed[ing] their flocks” in different fields, Purcell admonishes his audience to take the same attitude. According to Purcell, Catholics and Protestants have enough room in Ohio to exercise their religious devotion without having to “quarrel.”

Purcell’s and Campbell’s conclusions provide a marked contrast in how they viewed the Catholic Church’s relationship to America. On this topic, both men ended the debate much like they came into it: Campbell was dubious, and Purcell hoped for a peaceful coexistence. Neither Campbell nor Purcell changed the other man’s mind on this issue. The practice of participating in a religious debate, it seems, did not prompt either man to concede one of their fundamental convictions, and give the other the satisfaction of having “won” the point.

One of the interesting points about the debate is that Campbell and Purcell had no built-in mechanism for determining a winner. Additionally, they gave no explanations for the absence of such a mechanism. In the public imagination, debates have winners and

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4 Purcell, Debate, 357.
5 Ibid.
6 Shea, 120.
losers. In Campbell’s 1829 debate with Robert Owen, a majority vote was taken and the
audience sided with Campbell.7 Campbell and Purcell could have taken this strategy; or
they could have left the judgment up to the moderators. But they did not choose either of
these routes. Rather, they left it up to the audience to decide. Going into the debate, they
knew that the proceedings would eventually be published. Given this, it seems likely that
Campbell and Purcell understood that this debate would have multiple audiences, only
one of which was the audience in the meeting house, and they did not want a vote to
cloud the judgment of any person who wanted to read the printed version.

That Campbell and Purcell refrained from having a winner declared did not stop
the public from stepping in to render their judgments about who won. Campbell
supporters made it very clear they thought their hero had been the victor. On February 3,
1837, the Philanthropist published several resolutions to that effect:

1st. Resolved, That it is the unanimous opinion of this meeting that the
cause of Protestantism has been fully sustained throughout this
Discussion.

2d. Resolved, That in our opinion the arguments in favor of Protestantism,
and the objections to the errors of Popery, have not been fairly met.

3. Resolved, That we look forward to the publication of this Discussion as
a powerful antidote to the sophistry and arrogance of all the advocates of
Romanism, and that we have the fullest confidence in submitting it to the
impartial decision of the American people.

4. Resolved, That we approve of the spirit and temper and were pleased
with the power of arguments and authorities by which Mr. Campbell
sustained his position, and concur with him in possessing “no unkind

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feelings or prejudices towards individuals, but believe the principles of Romanism inconsistent with our free institutions."^8

Not only had Campbell sustained his propositions, his supporters were happy that the debate had garnered him a higher standing with other Protestants in the Ohio Valley. Robert Richardson, in his biography of Campbell, commented:

The discussion terminated greatly to the satisfaction of the Protestant clergy of Cincinnati and vicinity, among whom was the celebrated Lyman Beecher, and they concurred in bestowing upon Mr. Campbell the warmest commendations.\(^9\)

The commendations helped establish Campbell’s credibility as a *bona fide* mainstream Protestant, and not simply a frontier sectarian. Richardson went on to describe the debate’s effect related to Campbell’s ascendency:

> [t]he debate, when published, had a very extensive sale, and a powerful effect in exposing to the community at large the false pretensions and dangerous tendencies of the Roman hierarchy, and raised Mr. Campbell to a much higher position than he had yet attained in the estimation of the public.\(^10\)

Expectedly, Purcell also had his outspoken supporters. On March 2, 1837, *The Catholic Telegraph* published a notice about a gift Purcell received from “the English Catholics of Cincinnati, [who] presented him various articles of plate, among which were two large and beautiful pitchers.”\(^11\) The inscription read as follows:

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8 Rees E. Price, “Roman Catholic Discussion,” *Philanthropist*, February 3, 1837. The numbering is consistent with the editor’s stylistic choices. Emphasis original. The editor included a fifth resolution: “5th. Resolved, That the proceedings of this meeting be published in all the city papers, and that Editors in all other places, who may have noticed the Discussion, be requested to publish them.”


10 Ibid.

11 “Presentation of Plate,” *The Catholic Telegraph*, March 2, 1837.
Presented to the Rt. Rev. Bishop Purcell, D.D. By the Roman Catholics of Cincinnati, as a testimonial of their gratitude, for his late eloquent and triumphant vindication of their Holy Religion.  

Published with that notice was a letter from the Catholics of Cincinnati to Purcell. It thanked him for defending the faith and vindicating it in the public’s eye. Among other things, the notice said,

[y]our eloquent and convincing exposition of our doctrines, will disabuse honest minds of their erroneous impressions, respecting our religion. This happy consequence of the discussion, is already widely diffused through the community in which we dwell. Even the minister of a large and respectable body of our dissenting friends has publicly avowed, that “his charity for the Catholic communion is considerably enlarged.”

Supporters of each man would also make a connection between the debate and conversions. Robert Richardson, Campbell’s friend and biographer, did not make an explicit causal connection, but hinted at one: “[m]ore than fifty persons were lately added to the church in Sycamore street . . . Of these, forty were immersed during Mr. Campbell’s stay in the city after the discussion on the Roman Catholic religion.” For Purcell’s side, Mary Agnes McCann observed that “many converts [were] gained,” and John Lamott claimed that “even the converts which had been gained for the Catholic Church by the bishop’s brilliant defense could not satisfy his demands for growth.” In a more subdued tone, Thomas Thoma notes that “[m]any conversions to the Catholic Faith

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid. Emphasis original.
14 “R.R.” [Robert Richardson], *Millennial Harbinger*, March 1837, 143.
15 Sister Mary Agnes McCann, “Archbishop Purcell and the Archdiocese of Cincinnati: A Study Based on Original Sources” (Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of America, 1918), 25.
16 Lamott, 79.
followed this debate, some of which could be traced directly to its influence, others resulting indirectly.”

McCann names a convert, Peter H. Burnett, who also happened to be a former member of Campbell’s Disciples Christ. Burnett wrote a 750-page tome, entitled *The Path Which Led a Protestant Lawyer to the Catholic Church*, and dedicated it to Purcell with these words:

To the Most Rev. John B. Purcell, Archbishop of Cincinnati, whose arguments laid the foundation of my conversion to the old church, this work is dedicated as an evidence of the gratitude of his son in the true faith.

In parts of his book, Burnett’s arguments resemble closely those made by Purcell against Campbell. At one point Burnett said

the more earnestly and emphatically they [Protestants] contend that the Scriptures are plain and easily understood in all important points, the more powerfully do they condemn themselves for those divisions so utterly inconsistent with right reason and the united and consistent law of Christ.

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18 McCann, 25.

19 Peter Hardeman Burnett, *The Path Which Led a Protestant Lawyer to the Catholic Church* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1860), iii. Between 1859 and 1862, Burnett and Purcell corresponded about the many details surrounding the publication of his book, and developed something of a friendship. For more on this, see, Letter, Peter H. Burnett of San Jose, CA to Archbishop (John Baptist) Purcell of Cincinnati, May 17, 1859, II-4-o, A.L.S., 4pp., 4to., 2, University of Notre Dame Archives. Other letters available. Burnett would eventually become the first governor of California. His “reputation,” however, “remains marred by his political positions on race, one of which was that African-Americans should be excluded from California.” Herbert D. Miller, “Protestant Hermeneutics as the ‘Infidel Principle’ in Disguise: Bishop John B. Purcell’s Case Against *Sola Scriptura* in His Debate with Alexander Campbell,” *U.S. Catholic Historian*, vol. 33, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 47.

20 Ibid., 128.
Burnett also claimed that the Bible is “mute,” similar to Purcell’s “dead letter” statement, and made the case that individuals—who are fallible readers of the Bible—need an infallible guide to make sure they get the correct sense of Scripture.\textsuperscript{21} However, given the amount of space Burnett devotes to the infallibility of the church (approximately 90 pages) it seems that Purcell’s argument about the Catholic Church being an “ark of safety,” or an ecclesial space of hermeneutical assurance, had the greatest impact on Burnett.

It is clear that some people wanted the debate to have easily identifiable and measurable effects, i.e., victors and converts. However, attempts to find “effects” is problematic and often offers far too simplistic analyses of the debate. Criticizing our previous examples, we could say that the Catholics and Protestants who put forward resolutions were simply biased. And even if a Protestant were to declare Campbell a loser, that notice could be contested because it could be argued that the writer had an ax to grind. Furthermore, we are not helped by looking for a “neutral,” secular paper to render a verdict, as if it would give an objective, non-biased account. All of these resolutions are helpful in that they reflect opinions of specific communities or individuals, but they should not be seen as definitive accounts of the debate’s “effect.”

Additionally, conversion\textsuperscript{22} is a very unreliable metric to use to measure the “effect” of the debate. A person’s motivations for conversion are subjective, complex, and irreducible. We simply cannot know if, or to what extent, the debate motivated

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 150.

\textsuperscript{22} I recognize the theologically problematic usage of the term “convert” to describe what happens when one moves from Protestantism to Catholicism, or vice-versa. However, I use the term because Burnett and others employed it.
people to convert to the faith. Thoma, in his discussion of conversions, gestures toward direct and indirect motivations, and seems to understand this point. Burnett’s case is slightly different because he explicitly acknowledges his indebtedness to Purcell. But we still need to be cautious with Burnett. In the preface of his book, Burnett even admits that before he read the Campbell-Purcell debate, he had a moving experience attending a high Catholic mass, in which he articulates an appreciation for the aesthetic and experiential dimension of Catholicism. All of this is to say, that even with first-person testimony conversions should only cautiously and in circumscribed ways be used to talk about an “effect” of the debate.

One temptation in studying this debate is to try to identify some way in which it had an impact on history, or to find what effect it had on individuals or society. As the previous section has shown, writers have been quick to suggest “effects” of the debate. However, these “effects” can easily be challenged and deconstructed. Effect, it seems, is not the best way to assess the importance of this debate. Rather than seeing the value of the debate in its effects, I suggest that the form of the debate has value in its own right, regardless of what may or may not have happened after it. The debate is valuable because it was a site of “boundary crossing” and “productive friction.”

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23 Burnett, v-vi. Burnett recalled, “I had never witnessed any thing like it before, and the profound solemnity of the services—the intense, yet calm fervor of the worshippers—the great and marked differences between the two forms of worship [contrasted with Protestant worship]—and the instantaneous reflection, that this was the Church claiming to be the only true Church, did make the deepest impression upon my mind for the moment. In all my religious experience, I had never felt an impulse so profound, so touching. I had witnessed very exciting scenes in Protestant worship, and had myself often participated, and was happy. But I had never felt any impulse so powerful—an impulse that thrilled my inmost soul. I gazed into the faces of the worshippers, and they appeared as if they are actually looking at the Lord Jesus, and were hushed into perfect stillness, in His awful presence.”
“Boundary Crossing”

The debate was a site of “boundary crossing” because it created the conditions for an informed, lived engagement with the religious other. Campbell and Purcell were confronted in the debate with a human interlocutor who held views opposite their own. This is important because their idealized constructs had to be checked against what they were encountering with the man sitting across the stage. Boundary crossing was important for the audience, as well. For many women and women, debates like the one between Campbell and Purcell were interesting not just because they wanted to watch some rhetorical sparring (though that was surely part of it), but because they could anonymously and vicariously, participate in the arguments. And in doing so, they could examine their own fundamental questions about religious truth. While the Protestants and Catholics in the audience probably would have encountered each other elsewhere in business and social interactions, this was perhaps the first time they shared a space—a church no less—in which theological topics were being discussed and debated by credible representatives of both traditions.

Of all the press coverage on the debate, the one that best captures this “boundary crossing” is Charles Hammond’s January 24, 1837 account in the Cincinnati Daily Gazette. Hammond, an Episcopalian, was acutely aware of the reality of anti-Catholicism in America and decried it in his article. He noted,

[f]or some two or three years incessant efforts have been made to cast odium upon the Catholics, especially upon their clergy. This has been particularly the case in Boston, in New York and Cincinnati. An inundation of books . . . have been poured upon the country, calculated to make an impression that the Catholic Convents were receptacles of the

most flagitious enormities. The bald grossness of these fabrications, upon any other subject, would have been generally denounced as too indecent for countenance in an intelligent community.25

Pointing out the “low-brow” nature of this literature, Hammond comments on how it has been received in Cincinnati specifically:

[all these abominations have been greedily received by many in this community—have been read and credited, so as to impress the reader with the belief that Catholicism was the monster they represented it to be.]26

Hammond went on to point out the difficulty one faced trying to challenge these dominant anti-Catholic narratives:

Refutation was out of the question; it would not be listened to if offered. Nay, to question the narrations was held to associate the questioner with the Catholics, and brand him as a participator in their crimes. The Protestant pulpits, in Cincinnati, or most of them, frequently presented Catholicism in unfavorable lights . . . There was, in fact, an incessant and strong current running in one direction unfavorable to Catholicism. In this state of things, Protestantism, apparently had nothing to apprehend in Cincinnati.27

After giving the anti-Catholic context in America, Hammond went on to describe the origins of the debate, taking his own jabs at Campbell in the process:

[s]he [Protestantism] had no occasion for a champion. But a tilting gladiator, on the field of religious debate, came among us [Campbell], and an occasion was contrived, by an inconsiderate few, to invite him to an exposition of Catholicism. Hence this debate. Through it the Catholics have been heard, by hundreds, if not thousands, of Protestants, who came to witness the prostration of the whole fabric and all its institutions and adherents, and who came to believe the worst that could be said of them. Many of these received new impressions. They heard the Bishop’s exposition of the points of exception, and they learned that they believed much that was disputed, and had condemned much that was capable of

25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
plausible explanation. They ascertained that Mr. Campbell was often at
fault in his assertions and in his arguments. They saw him sometimes non-
plussed, and often hard pressed. Thus did they come to understand that
there was a fair side as well as foul one for Catholicism, and herein have
the Catholics gained in something, whilst they have suffered in nothing.28

Hammond went on to make the point that in the process of discussing Catholicism,
Purcell was able to offer “plausible explanation[s]” for issues about which Protestants
had previously been misinformed.

In all of this Hammond remained true to his Protestant convictions: “I do not
regard this Catholic gain as Protestant loss. I honor Protestantism too much to believe she
can be injured by the dispersion of prejudice, or by the discomfiture of presumptuous
vindicators.”29 More important for our purposes is the point Hammond makes about
“boundary crossing” and the effects it has had on Cincinnati’s civil society:

One of the most gratifying results of this controversy is, the interchange of
good feeling and Christian regard which it elicited from Catholic and
Protestant. We were delighted to see and hear the congratulations which
passed between men, hitherto, unfortunately, estranged. The mists of
prejudice have been dispersed, and we all were happy to behold each other
in the pure light of love, benevolence and charity. It was gratifying to
observe the warmth and sincerity with which Bishop Purcell was greeted
by his Protestant fellow-citizens, and we feel assured that he responded in
the fulness [sic] of his heart to their kind felicitations upon the virtuous
triumph which he has achieved.30

Hammond and Campbell would have a back-and-forth in the press, and Campbell
felt that Hammond had treated him unfairly. Even on the first day of the debate,

28 Ibid. Emphasis original.

29 Ibid. Emphasis original.

15. In my copy of the Cincinnati Daily Gazette, which I used for the previous quotes, I could not locate this
paragraph. In the preface to the 1865 Bosworth edition of the debate, this paragraph is included at the end
of the section devoted to the January 24, 1837 Cincinnati Daily Gazette article, “The Grand Debate.”
Campbell referred to Hammond as “[having] his sympathies morbidly enlisted in their [Roman Catholics’] cause.” It is clear that Hammond was not impressed by Campbell’s abilities, or his presumptiveness in claiming to represent Protestantism. But putting the Hammond-Campbell relationship on the back burner, we can find in Hammond’s comments some valuable information about how the debate functioned as a site of boundary crossing. According to Hammond, the audience “received new impressions” and “[came] to understand that there was a fair side as well as a foul one for Catholicism.” Furthermore, there was an “interchange of good feeling and Christian regard,” as well as “congratulations . . . passed between men, hitherto, unfortunately, estranged.” Hammond even goes so far to note that “[t]he mists of prejudice have been dispersed” and Catholics and Protestants “were happy to behold each other in the pure light of love, benevolence and charity.”

Allowing exception for the flowery language, what becomes clear from Hammond’s perspective is that the debate functioned as an important space for Catholics and Protestants to engage each other, as well as the belief systems about which they disagreed. Hammond’s account intimates the importance of having a concrete place in which religious debate can happen. It is important that Campbell and Purcell met each other and stayed in conversation for a week. These actions are qualitatively different than publishing alternating articles in a newspaper or religious periodical. By being in a place, Campbell and Purcell had to confront a person, not just a caricature. This confrontation was messy, of course, because the men often misunderstood each other, had to clarify points, and frequently made tangential arguments. But in this messy site of “boundary

31 Campbell, Debate, 9.
crossing,” Campbell and Purcell made an event that facilitated “productive friction.”

“Productive Friction”

In his article “Dissoi Logoi, Civic Friendship, and the Politics of Education,” Stephen Olbrys uses the ancient Greek rhetorical concept known as dissoi logoi, roughly translated “Contrasting Arguments,” to describe how college classrooms can be sites of “productive friction” that enable students to have sympathy for arguments that are fundamentally unsettling for them.\(^{32}\) Dissoi logoi was a rhetorical concept articulated by the Greek Sophists who, in contrast to Plato’s Socrates, were maligned for their relativism and readiness to sell the tricks of their trade to paying customers. The Sophists were known for being able to take a single topic and make multiple convincing and conflicting arguments about it. What the Sophists revealed, and what seems to have made Plato bristle, was the radically unstable nature of public discourse. For every argument that could be made, no matter how obvious, a logical counter-argument could be offered. Dissoi logoi effectively turned every argument into an open-ended conversation in which logical consistency was not the sole criterion for truth.

In his article, Olbrys defends this Sophistic practice and makes the case that colleges and universities would serve well the interests of democratic society by teaching students how to look at, and argue, a single topic from multiple points of view. Explaining how dissoi logoi might help teach students intellectual humility, Olbrys says the concept would be used as “a rhetorical and pedagogical strategy of arguing many

\(^{32}\) Stephen Gencarella Olbrys, “Dissoi Logoi, Civic Friendship, and the Politics of Education,” Communication Education 55, no. 4 (October 2006): 359 and 362. I am indebted to Dr. Susan Trollinger for introducing me to dissoi logoi, its relevance to the Campbell-Purcell debate, and providing critical feedback on this chapter.
sides of an issue that advances a particular relativism as constitutive of ethical action and
democratic polity.” In his article, Olbrys is addressing a specific criticism from some
critics of higher education who assert that the contemporary university is dominated by
liberal faculty, and who claim that the remedy to this problem is to have equal numbers
of conservatives represented. Olbrys disagrees. He thinks such equity would not be an
effective solution to redress a purported monolithic, liberal intellectual culture in
academia. Instead, what he suggests is that all faculty should aim to cultivate “civic
friendship” within the pluralistic setting of higher education through an “engagement
model of education” that uses “argument and counterargument” to accomplish this goal.
The student and society will then be best served not by having a one-to-one ratio of
conservative to liberal faculty members teach them. But instead, they will thrive as public
intellectuals when they are able to sympathetically and critically look at a single issue
from multiple, reasonable points of view.

In the Campbell-Purcell debate, the audience was witness to “contrasting
arguments” on Roman Catholicism. Hearing the debaters, the audience functioned as a
collective subject who was able to look at one topic—Roman Catholicism—from two,
contrasting, credible standpoints. Drawing on Hammond’s account of audience
members having changed perspectives as a result of the debate, we can call it “a site of
productive friction,” in which audience members experienced the cognitive dissonance

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33 Ibid., 355.
34 Ibid., 355.
35 In this way, the audience functioned much like a jury in U.S. courtrooms, who have the job of deciding
the truth based on what (and how) the prosecution and defense argue.
36 Olbrys, 362.
of hearing logical arguments on a single topic. Similar to Olbyrs’s goal of mobilizing *dissoi logoi* in the service of higher education, the debate was a site for performing this aspect of discourse and helped “combat . . . political divineness and enclaves.”

Hammond’s account helps us see how in the debate *dissoi logoi* was mobilized to help dislodge previous biases among audience members. Writing about the debate, Hammond made the following somewhat benign observation: “Protestantism *gained* nothing in the contest, and . . . Catholicism *suffered* nothing.” I suggest that Hammond is inaccurate in saying that “Protestantism *gained* nothing.” It is possible to suggest that Cincinnati Protestants gained something by being exposed to a credible exposition of Catholicism from its leading representative in the region. The debate gave Protestants an opportunity to see Catholics as human beings, and not just stereotypical arch-enemies. Also, it is possible that Protestants gained something by being put in a space of undecidability. The debate provided a space in which Protestants (and Catholics) not only heard an apologetic for Catholicism, but also had their theological assumptions challenged. Protestantism, contrary to Hammond’s assertion, gained something: it encountered the *actual* beliefs Catholics held, instead of caricatures, and had its own commitments cross-examined. Arguably, Cincinnati Protestants came away with a better appreciation for the possibility of there being reasonable, contrasting arguments about Roman Catholicism.

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37 Ibid.

Section 2: Campbell and Purcell’s Post-Debate Relationship

In the previous section, I argued that the debate was valuable in its own right and that it should not be evaluated by what it effected (e.g., public resolutions, conversions). I then went on to describe the debate as a site of “boundary crossing” and “productive friction” that provided the conditions for a new experience of the religious other, whether or not any effect came about as a result. I concluded by suggesting that the structure of the debate enabled a worthwhile and meaningful encounter for all present insofar as it enacted the ancient Greek rhetorical concept of dissoi logoi and thereby, de-centered all present, inviting them to take seriously the counter argument.

However, there were those at the time of the debate who doubted the value of such an activity. Hammond, perhaps somewhat whimsically, called the debate a “mortal combat of words.” In a more caustic tone, the Boston Recorder made some observations about the debate, indicating that it was both a waste of time, and a throwback to “a semi-barbarous age”:

[s]uch discussions might be of some use as a substitute for books, before printing was invented, and for a short time afterwards; but they are properly ranked among the clumsy contrivances of a semi-barbarous age.

Suggesting that the debate was inappropriate for the modern age, and calling the debate a “clumsy contrivance,” the Recorder assumes that, in debating, Campbell and Purcell were engaging in a socially unhelpful practice for ministers in the nineteenth century. The writer also assumes that discussions about controversial religious topics are less helpful than reading out those ideas, presumably because discussions might elicit the passions of

the participants and lead to uncivil behavior. By reading about an opposing view, a person can reflect on it in a calm and dispassionate manner, and ostensibly come to a conclusion that has not been influenced by emotion.

In response, I do not want to deny the value of reading arguments with which one disagrees. However, per Olbrys’s argument about *dissoi logoi*, I would suggest that something qualitatively different happens when one encounters an argument from an actual person who holds the contrasting belief. As I will show in this section, it seems that Campbell and Purcell’s post-debate relationship was structured by *dissoi logoi*, and that through their subsequent relationship each one continued to serve for the other as a “contrasting argument.” And, what is telling is that they seemed to like that arrangement. What I am suggesting is that by experiencing *dissoi logoi* together they were able to cultivate civil and ecclesial friendship that can serve as a model for contemporary intra-Christian relations.

For Campbell and Purcell (and for generations of Christian leaders before them, not the least of whom was Augustine), religious controversy was not an aberration from their everyday pastoral activities; rather it was an expression of them, because the truth claims implicit in those activities required the practitioners to challenges habits of thought and action that were contrary the Christian life. In his *History of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati*, Lamott highlights two of Purcell’s post-Campbell controversies:

Even age did not suppress his energy or love of truth, so that when sixty-seven years old [1867, and 30 years after the Campbell debate] he hesitated not to enter the lists of controversy with a Congregationalist

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41 I owe this insight to Dr. Susan Trollinger.
minister, Thomas Vickers at Cincinnati, and again with Rev. A.D. Mayo on the question of religion in the common schools.\textsuperscript{42}

Humble makes the following substantial claim about Campbell and the controversy-driven character of the Stone-Campbell Movement:

> the entire Restoration Movement was born of controversy and had to defend itself to survive. Campbell’s debates are, therefore, but a reflection of this fundamental spirit which characterized the Restoration Movement.\textsuperscript{43}

What we see in Lamott and Humble’s analyses is that for Purcell and Campbell to cultivate and pass on a discernable identity for their churches, they needed to bequeath the practice of conflict. This relationship between conflict and the construction of identity fits generally within Alasdair MacIntyre’s understanding of tradition, which is a community of discourse that passes on a conversation about its identity over time.\textsuperscript{44} We have already noted in chapter one that Campbell and Purcell as individuals were controversialists. But what I am suggesting is that conflict was much more fundamental, almost necessary, for Purcell and Campbell to maintain their church’s identities.

In the last speech of the debate, Purcell closed out the affair by reading George Washington’s letter to the American Catholics. Purcell was making the case that Catholics in the United States could be both unwaveringly American and Roman Catholic

\textsuperscript{42} Lamott, 83. For a contrasting picture of Purcell, see Fortin, 106. Fortin presents a different picture of Purcell, one in which the bishop was circumspect about religious controversy. Fortin said, ‘Purcell himself later expressed reservations about public debates. ‘I did not seek the controversy,’ he wrote a month after the [Campbell] debate, and ‘I am now, as I have ever been, averse to such exhibitions. Religion is not in need of them.’”

\textsuperscript{43} Humble, 21. It should be noted, in the book Humble has all of this text in bold.

\textsuperscript{44} I am using Alasdair MacIntyre’s understanding of tradition as “an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition . . . and those internal, interpretive debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted.” Alasdair MacIntyre, \textit{Whose Justice? Which Rationality?} (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 12.
at the same time. But he was also claiming, in a way, that the debate they were having—at
least regarding the Americanism of Catholics—was a waste of time. Instead of
“quarrelling about religion,” Purcell thought Protestants and Catholics should be working
to secure the common good in American society. Purcell’s closing words are inspiring,
especially in light of the heated debate he and Campbell just had. This said, Purcell’s own
life makes clear that he recognized that there were times when confrontation and conflict
—“quarrelling about religion”—are necessary. Purcell’s words leave us with a sober
estimation about the role public disagreements played between Catholics and Protestants
in the nineteenth century. As much as Purcell wanted to avoid controversy, there was no
way of getting around it: he was part of a religious tradition in a social context that
seemed to require it for survival.

But what it is remarkable is that in the midst of this particular controversy, Purcell
and Campbell developed a friendly relationship. Toward the end of his life Purcell gave
an interview with the former governor of Indiana, Ira Chase, who was also a preacher in
the Disciples of Christ. In that interview, Purcell reflected on his relationship with
Campbell: “[I]n our debate not a particle of ill-feeling or bitterness was mixed up. After

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45 Purcell, *Debate*, 357. “I disclaim all unkind feelings towards Mr. Campbell or any of his friends, and
acknowledge my gratitude to him for enabling me to place my religion, in its proper light, before the
public. I also beg leave respectfully to tender to this audience my thanks for the dignity of their deportment
during this debate. Instead of quarrelling about religion we ought to be engaged in our vocation of love and
peace, as its faithful ministers, and sincere professors. We have all, a great deal to do to improve the morals
of the age, to elevate the standard of literature, to promote by such means as all christians [sic] approve, the
welfare of our common country, and to obtain for our green state, the fertile and flourishing, Ohio, a
distinguished rank for knowledge, virtue, and patriotism, among her elder and her younger sisters in this
fair republic. These are legitimate pursuits, alike pleasing to God, and useful to man. The world is large
enough for us all.”

46 I might even suggest that being part of any tradition means that one will be unable to avoid controversy.
the discussions were over we would meet and be just as friendly as if we both belonged to the one and the same church.”

It may be tempting to think of these words as indicative of an aging man reflecting sentimentally on his younger years. But they were corroborated by what Campbell’s wife, Selina, said in her memoirs. Sharing her husband’s suspicions about Catholicism, Selina acknowledged that both she and Alexander “[had] no personal feeling of animosity” toward Catholics. Yes, she balked at the Church’s exclusive ecclesiological claims and was worried that Catholicism’s “teachings . . . and practices [were] at variance with our Government.” But, even though she and Alexander held these convictions, she was open about her husband’s friendly interaction with Purcell after the debate. She wrote about a meal the two shared:

Mr. Campbell was invited to attend a large social dinner party at the house of one of the prominent members of the “Mother Church.” He went and, in company with the Bishop, enjoyed the kind social interview.

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48 Selina Campbell, Home Life and Reminiscences of Alexander Campbell by His Wife, Selina Huntington Campbell (St. Louis, MO: John Burns, 1882), 481.

49 Ibid., 480. For her full statement, see, 479-480: “Our America! Our great American Nation! Our Protestant part of it, I am wont to say, I think ‘are slumbering, not awake’ to the two dangerous foes she is nourishing in her bosom: The Roman Catholic community and the tribe of Mormons. The former of these two, forms a respectable element in our civilization. But their teachings, their dogma and practices are at variance with our Government. Don't be startled, reader, it is even so. They consider obedience to the ‘Holy Mother Church’ infinitely more obligatory upon them than all the laws of the land. Whether in unison with their feelings, or contrary to them the Church must be obeyed, or exclusion would follow, and out of her limits no one can be saved--no Heretic can reach the portals of glory, is their dogma.”

50 Ibid., 481.
Her stylistic choice to use scare-quotes around “Mother Church” communicates a lot, but nonetheless she would gloss the event saying, “I have heard him speak of it with pleasure frequently.”

The image we get is that Campbell and Purcell were two strong-minded men with divergent convictions who nevertheless were able to transition between spaces of controversy (the debate house) and fellowship (the dinner table). The records for the 1837 College of Teachers meeting, which took place eight months after the debate, recount that Campbell and Purcell were in a small group together in which they (once again) had an “animated discussion”! What changed between Campbell and Purcell was not that controversy disappeared, but the possibility for a redefined relationship emerged.

In the months immediately following the debate, Campbell and Purcell wrote a great deal in their periodicals about the debate, clarifying arguments, providing further details, and explaining their positions on two mini-controversies regarding the debate—Campbell’s (unknowing) use of a dubious quotation, and disagreement over the debate’s publication. Once the dust had settled around these issues, it seems that a form of editorial playfulness emerged in Campbell’s and Purcell’s writing about each other.

On September, 14, 1844, The Catholic Telegraph took a playful jab at Campbell’s discourse on prophecy from the debate and compared him with the millennial “Millerites”:

The Rev. Alexander Campbell of Virginia has been smitten again with the Apocalyptic fever and his brain is fearfully agitated. He ought to enter into

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51 Ibid. Emphasis mine.

52 Transactions of the Seventh Annual Meeting of the Western Literary Institute, and College of Professional Teachers (Cincinnati, OH: James R. Allbach, 1838), 10.
partnership with Old Miller. That same “little horn” and the Beast and the vials of wrath have filled poor Campbell’s head with all sorts of visions—affording another instance of the facility with which a man can make a fool of himself when he attempts to interpret the Apocalypse.\(^53\)

Likewise, in 1853, the *Millennial Harbinger* used the opportunity of the sale of the debate meeting house to the Catholics\(^54\) to mock the noisy accouterments of Catholic Church services: Campbell remarked that the occupants of the meeting house simply “did not wish to be annoyed, in prayer and praise, with the tolling of papistical bells.”\(^55\)

In the *Millennial Harbinger* article, Campbell prefaces these remarks with an article from *Cincinnati Atlas* in which is reported Purcell’s comments at the 1853 dedication of the building as a Catholic Church. In those comments Purcell reflected on the debate in a humorous but decidedly self-assured tone. At one point he compared Campbell to Don Quixote fighting windmills\(^56\) and asserted “that the greater part of his Protestant auditory went away satisfied that [Campbell] had been discomforted, and not a

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\(^{53}\) *The Catholic Telegraph*, September 14, 1844.

\(^{54}\) In approximately 1828, the Disciples of Christ built and occupied the building until about 1843, when they sold it to the Southern Methodists. In 1852, Purcell purchased the building from the Methodists and renamed it St. Thomas Church. In January 1853, Purcell dedicated the building. Then seven years later he passed it off to the Jesuits, who used it until 1918, when the building was torn down. Lamott (133) gives a brief history of the building: “The honor which All Saints’ church enjoyed of having been a filial church of the first cathedral parish of Cincinnati, was shared by it in 1853 with St. Thomas church on Sycamore, between Fifth and Sixth streets. This church, which bore the distinction of having been the church in which the Purcell-Campbell debate had been held in 1837 and was destined to take care of the overflow of St. Francis Xavier’s church, was purchased by Archbishop Purcell towards the end of the year 1852 from the Soule Chapel Society, Methodist Episcopal Church South, and was blessed the following January second. It was transferred, however, to the Jesuit Fathers on September 6, 1860. It was demolished in 1918.” Additionally, the account from the *Cincinnati Atlas* offers helpful details on the history, in “Archbishop Purcell and Sycamore Church,” in *Millennial Harbinger*, March 1853, 162. C.f., Wilson, 44 (n. 123) for this history.

\(^{55}\) Alexander Campbell, “Archbishop Purcell and Sycamore Church,” *Millennial Harbinger*, March 1853, 164.

single Catholic had his faith staggered.”\(^{57}\) Against the claim that there were no Catholic defectors, Campbell disagreed, asking, “[h]as not one of the priests that then waited on him, turned Protestant?”\(^{58}\) He then proffers this as an explanation for why after the debate Purcell so hurriedly left Cincinnati:

> [t]he Priests now tell a story, that the Bishop was so mortified that he seemed to have lost his reason, and that, after holding a council, the clergy advised the Bishop to take a trip down the Ohio, under some pretence [\textit{sic}] of health and business; which I know he did, for he set sail for New Orleans immediately, even before the whole copy of the debate was put into the hand of the printer.\(^ {59}\)

And with not a little sarcasm, Campbell closes his article with what appears to be his last ever printed words on the debate: “Such was the triumph of the Papacy in the hands of Bishop Purcell, for which the Pope created him an Archbishop.”\(^ {60}\)

The foregoing examples illustrate a playfulness between Campbell and Purcell. More than this, there is quantitative evidence to suggest that following the debate Campbell eased his aggressive prosecution of Catholicism. In his article on the debate, Mark Weedman observes that “Campbell’s debate with Purcell did make him famous as an anti-Catholic debater, but after the debate itself his anti-Catholic writing curtailed sharply.”\(^ {61}\) Jacob Wilson, in his thesis on the press coverage of the debate, analyzes Campbell’s publication record in the years immediately preceding and following the debate and notes:

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 163.

\(^{58}\) Campbell, “Archbishop Purcell and Sycamore Church,” 165.

\(^{59}\) Ibid.

\(^{60}\) Ibid.

\(^{61}\) Weedman, 18, n.5.
While *The Millennial Harbinger* issues of 1830 and 1831 published no articles explicitly aimed against Roman Catholicism, 1832 had three covering four pages, 1833 had six covering thirteen pages, 1834 had eight covering thirty-two pages, 1835 had nine covering twenty-four pages, 1836 had four covering twelve pages, and 1837 (the year of the debate) had eight covering thirty-three pages—these directly pertained to the debate. After the debate, Campbell published two articles in 1838 covering three pages, none in 1839, one in 1840 covering one page, and one in 1841 covering two pages.62

After the debate, we see a change in Campbell’s posture toward Catholicism in his journal. We know that his anti-Catholic publishing declined and he refused to “[participate] in formal nativist politics.”63 While Campbell never explained this decline in anti-Catholic publishing, this change is a testimony worth noting. Along with his refusal to participate in political Nativism, we might suggest that Campbell’s relationship with Purcell resulted in his having a changed posture toward Catholicism. This is not to suggest that Campbell changed his mind about Catholicism’s central theological claims. Rather, this observation is meant to say that in a changing political climate that became more vitriolic toward the Catholic Church, Campbell altered his public posture toward Catholicism so as to not be associated with the Nativists.

What prompted this change in Campbell? I suggest that his personal relationship with Purcell had something to do with it. In the literature discussing Campbell and Purcell’s relationship, two accounts indicate that the two had a positive relationship. The first comes from a biography of Campbell written in 1930, which admittedly presents him as erudite, though with an earthy sensibility.64 In the account, the first-person in the

62 Wilson, 26.
63 Hicks, 43.
narrative is Bishop August Toebbe, a former student of Purcell’s who went on to become a priest and later bishop of Covington, KY. Toebbe said the following:

I grew up in the home of Archbishop Purcell, and it was my good fortune to be present during the debate between him and Alexander Campbell. That was a battle of giants; and it was worth ten years of any man’s life to have the privilege of listening to it.

They were both courteous gentlemen, both great scholars; and out of it grew a friendship that lasted through life. They kept up a correspondence for years, and Mr. Campbell rarely passed through Cincinnati without calling Archbishop Purcell.

One day the doorbell rang, and I found Mr. Campbell standing there, invited him into the sitting room, and took his card . . . to the Archbishop. Mr. Purcell sent me to invite Mr. Campbell up to the classroom and we recited to him that day.

After the recitation, we were permitted to remain in the room. Young gentlemen, in the busy activities of my life I have been in the presence of some great men, and listened to some wonderful conversations; but I have never heard another like that one; I never expect to hear such a one until I stand in the everlasting Presence. Just in the midst of a discussion to which we were listening with bated breath, the doorbell rang. The boy answered it and came back with the statement, “Mr. Campbell, your wife is at the door waiting for you.” He said, “In just one minute.” But he forgot himself and talked on. In about five minutes the bell rang again, violently. I answered it that time. A lady was seated in a carriage, a colored man in livery was at the door, who said, “Tell Mr. Campbell his wife declined to wait any longer.” I delivered the message. The conversation immediately ceased. He went down the stairs, hurriedly picked up his hat and cane, bade us farewell, and I never saw him again. My God, boys, think of it! An intellectual giant like Alexander Campbell tied to any woman’s apron strings.65

In addition to the humorous gloss on Campbell’s marriage, the Toebbe story gives us a few characteristics of the Campbell-Purcell relationship. First, they had a lifelong

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65 Smith, 200. In trying to identify any relevant facts about the narrative, I was able to locate that the narrator of the Campbell-Purcell story, a Bishop Toebbe (misspelled by Smith a “Tobe”), in Lamott, 354: “TOEBBE, RT. REV. AUGUST MARY, D.D.; born at Meppen, Hanover, Germany, January 15, 1829; ordained September 14, 1854, at Cincinnati; in the diocese since ordination; consecrated Bishop of Covington, January 9, 1870, at Cincinnati; died May 2, 1884, at Covington, Ky.; buried at Covington, Ky.” Toebbe’s biography puts him in Cincinnati around the time Campbell and Purcell could have met.
friendship and “kept up a correspondence for years.” Second, Campbell would often call on Purcell when he was in Cincinnati, which was quite regularly. We know that Campbell was in Cincinnati in 1837 for the *College of Teachers*, as well as 1841, 1842, 1851, 1853, and 1855.66 Sadly, we have no known record of Campbell and Purcell’s correspondence.

The second account comes from Purcell himself in an interview in the *Christian-Evangelist*, a Disciples of Christ newspaper published in St. Louis. The interviewer, known only by the initials “I.C.,” is generally regarded as the one-time governor of Indiana and preacher for the Disciples of Christ, Ira Chase.67 From the interview, done toward the end of Purcell’s life, we see a Purcell who speaks highly of Campbell, sometimes edging close to flattery, while also recognizing that there are ecclesial differences separating the two. In the interview, Purcell said that Campbell “was a most lovable character,” and that he treated the bishop “on all occasions like a brother.”68 Purcell said that for the entire span of their relationship he “always entertained the kindest feelings toward that gentleman.”69 Purcell remarked that he and Campbell “differed in some matters—for instance, on church government, prayers for the departed, confessions of sin to the priest, [and] the celibacy of the clergy”; Purcell also faulted Campbell and his followers for their naiveté about the possibility of maintaining the


67 Haley, 245 and Humble, 152.

68 Purcell, “Archbishop Purcell on Alexander Campbell and His Work.”

69 Ibid.
ecclesiastical simplicity of New Testament Christianity. But Purcell also claimed that “[t]hese “were all minor matters,” as “[i]n the essentials of Christianity we entirely agreed.” This is an obvious exaggeration. But it is an exaggeration that seems to be explained by Purcell’s understanding of Campbell as a human being. In this regard, Purcell made two helpful remarks in his conversation with Chase. First, he described Campbell’s fairness:

Campbell was decidedly the very fairest man in debate I ever saw, as fair as you can possibly conceive. He never fought for victory . . . He seemed to be always fighting for the truth, or what he believed to be the truth.

Then he went on to describe the friendliness of their relationship:

[i]n our debate not a particle of ill-feeling or bitterness was mixed up. After the discussions were over we would meet and be just as friendly as if we both belonged to one and the same church. Oh, how I should like to have met this dear son of God socially and in private life, after age had whitened our locks and mellowed our tempers and dispositions.

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70 Ibid. “In Mr. Campbell’s church the form of worship is very simple, as in the day days of the apostles. He hoped always to keep it so. Here is where he was mistaken. It cannot be kept so. As the church becomes great in numbers, and rich and strong, it will lose its original simplicity. This is inevitable. We begin to see the change already in some of the richer congregations in the cities. Are not the advanced congregations already discarding congregational singing, and procuring fine organs and hired choirs? Are they not placing soft and luxurious cushions in their seats, and placing flowers in the pulpits and in the altars? Has not fine stained glass found its way into the lofty windows of their truly Gothic cathedrals? Surely, all these things have taken place, and very shortly they’ll have representations of the apostles and the saints in these same windows, and fine frescoed ceilings, with scenes form sacred Scriptures represented thereon, as we have in the Sistine Chapel at Rome. I do not think that the Christian Church [Disciples of Christ] will introduce into their worship our incense-throwing, or our scarlet robes, or many other things that are peculiar to the Church of Rome. We have been many centuries in introducing all these forms into our worship. The church of Mr. Campbell is not one hundred years old. It is yet in its infancy, and a very lively brat it is, too! What forms it will adopt in its manner of worship in the future, what changes it will inaugurate in the next five hundred years, no one can tell.”

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.
In both the story that Bishop Toebbe told and Purcell’s interview with Ira Chase we see a civility and friendliness between Campbell and Purcell. These two men clearly inhabited separate ecclesial spaces. They did not pretend to practice something like a “cheap ecumenism” that glossed over disagreements for the sake of unity. But even with those disagreements remaining, the two had a lifelong friendship. As if to playfully get the last word (Campbell had already died), Purcell commended Campbell for always searching for the truth, or what he “believed to be the truth.”

Conclusion

The form of nineteenth century debate is not likely to be practiced in the twenty-first century. But debate or dispute still takes shape in multiple forms, not the least of which is the academy. For academic theologians, like the rest of the academy, dispute is an essential part of the credentialing process, with graduate seminars, dissertation defenses, conferences, and peer-reviewed journal articles being the most obvious examples. Yet, for academic theologians the practice of debate operates with the assumption that the church catholic must always be striving to realize the visible unity that Jesus prayed for in John 17. Typically the work of ecumenists, this striving for Christian unity is also the responsibility of those theologians who are not directly engaged in ecumenical talks. What keeps Protestant and Catholic theologians in conversation, I suggest, is the conviction that the Church’s full visible unity is an eschatological reality that requires for its realization our present intra-Christian effort.

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75 Ibid., Emphasis mine.

76 Steven R. Harmon, Ecumenism Means You, Too: Ordinary Christians and the Quest for Christian Unity (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 3. I echo Harmon’s definition of ecumenism as “the quest for unity among Christians now divided by denomination.”
Reflecting on the debate, I suggest that a mutual commitment to the visible unity of the Church was an ecclesiological condition that facilitated Campbell and Purcell’s post-debate relationship, even if neither expressed it. It is natural for us to assume that Purcell would have understood and valued this mark of the Church. And it should be obvious that the Church’s full visible unity was a priority for Campbell, as well. As the history of the Stone-Campbell Movement has shown, it was not altogether clear what “obedience . . . in all things according to the Scriptures” looked like for a church who would later divide over whether or not musical instruments should be used in worship, for example. So it is debatable whether or not the Campbell vision of how to achieve church unity can actually work. But a fundamental point remains: the visible unity of the Church was a non-negotiable ecclesiological assumption for Campbell. In light of his and Purcell’s shared conviction that the church should work toward visible unity, I suggest that ecclesiology was part of the foundation for their friendship.

Contemporary academic theologians would do well to practice intra-Christian debate and disagreement in the context of Christian friendship. To use Olbyrs’s phrase, we might look at theological debate as a site of “productive friction.” What Campbell and Purcell can teach us is that debate, dispute, and disagreement are not misplaced priorities, but valid, though not ultimate, extensions of “faith seeking understanding.” By naming and foregrounding debate as a Christian practice, the Church can be better positioned to identify and engage the inevitable disagreements that arise in her day-to-day life.

One of the main threats to the viability of my proposal is the polarization and fragmentation of contemporary social life. When people disagree, whether on cable news, Facebook, or in graduate seminars, it is easy for them to walk away and never
substantively engage their interlocutors again. Because of this, I am not offering a
“theory of debate” that will apply to all people. Instead, I am proposing that Christians
name debate with other Christians as an eschatological practice that has as its aim the
full, visible unity of the church. Specifically, I suggest that Christian theologians display
longsuffering as they exercise this practice in those places where they most acutely
encounter “boundary crossing” and “productive friction” (sometimes in graduate school
programs and conferences, other times in inter-denominational events). Being present in
these places, with a patient commitment to withstand the discomfort of misunderstanding,
is a move in the right ecumenical direction. If academic theology hopes to catalyze
ecumenism, then at the very least theologians need to remain in conversation with each
other.
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