

# The choice between assimilation and counterculturalism

For people whose view of history extends beyond last week, the furor over Notre Dame's decision to invite President Barack Obama to be its commencement speaker and receive an honorary degree is simply the latest chapter in an old story by the name of "Americanism." Notre Dame is a paradigmatic institution – flagship of the Americanist impulse in U.S. Catholicism – and with the uproar over our pro-abortion president the university's special status has come home to roost for folks under the Golden Dome.

Pope Leo XIII in 1899 condemned a heresy he called Americanism as a "reprehensible" error. He had in mind a set of attitudes and practices intended to adjust Catholic belief and behavior (or in some cases just sweep them aside) to suit contemporary secular standards in unacceptable ways. The existence of such views, Leo XIII said, "raises a suspicion that there are those among you who envision and desire a Church in America other than that which is in all the rest of the world."

Prominent figures in U.S. Catholicism like Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore –to whom the pope's letter was addressed – and Archbishop Ireland of St. Paul promptly insisted they held none of the views which Leo XIII had condemned. And thereupon, one historian writes, Americanism "quickly disappeared as a meaningful force in the U.S."

But of course it didn't. Instead, as the 20th century progressed, the Americanist spirit merged with the sociological phenomenon of cultural assimilation. Especially after World War II, higher education, new affluence, and population shifts – the breakdown of inner-city ethnic parishes as Catholics moved to the booming suburbs – fueled a progressive thinning-out of Catholic identity that's still going on.

One result of this is easy to state: "American Catholics are firmly implanted in the American mainstream." Those words come from an official history of Notre Dame on the university Web site. The overview leaves no doubt that Notre Dame considers itself similarly "implanted" while at the same time remaining a Catholic school.

The cultural assimilation of American Catholics has been a good thing in many ways – but not all. That’s painfully clear from empirical data on U.S. Catholicism showing declines in Mass attendance and sacramental participation, in priests and religious, in adherence to Catholic doctrine, and even in number of Catholics (partially masked by Hispanic immigration). Life in the secular mainstream has not proved to be all that healthy for the church.

Notre Dame’s invitation to President Obama – an aggressive supporter of abortion “rights” who already has promulgated several anti-life policy decisions and threatens more – is part of this Americanist pattern. What could be more mainstream for a Catholic school, after all, than having the president of the United States as commencement speaker? That the official policy of the Catholic bishops of the United States rules it out evidently doesn’t matter.

“Quite a coup,” Kenneth L. Woodward, former Newsweek religion editor and a longtime Notre Dame booster, crowed on the op-ed page of The Washington Post. “Our voices must be raised to say that we are thrilled such a distinguished Catholic university is considered such a part of the life of the nation,” gushed an America magazine blogger named Michael Sean Winters.

At least since the time of Leo XIII, American Catholics have faced a choice between assimilation and counterculturalism. The emergence of legalized abortion makes that choice even more demanding. But Notre Dame’s invitation to Obama comes from the assimilationist heart of Catholic Americanism. The outrage it has produced is counterculturalism’s response. However this turns out, the argument will go on.

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