Separatism, Americanization, and Catholic Schools
(or, The Irony of Early Catholic School Reform)

Near the middle of the 19th century, in the heat of the fierce battle between Catholics and Protestants over the future of the nascent New York City "common schools," John Hughes, the charismatic Catholic bishop of New York took center stage. Diane Ravitch describes him as "aggressive and militant" as well as an "uncompromising and fiercely loyal" Catholic prelate who "thrived on conflict and controversy." [1] In a famous 1840 address that served as a rallying point for immigrant Catholic dissatisfaction with the Horace Mann-inspired, Protestant-run education of the time, Hughes asserted that attendance at common schools constituted "a proximate danger to the religious faith of Catholic children," and that Catholic parents "could not in good conscience permit their children to attend these schools" – and upon hearing, the crowd "greeted his spirited suggestions with heavy applause." [2] These strong words signaled Hughes' later intention of "pursuing religious separatism"; in correspondence to another bishop he "exulted in the fact that the battle against the public School Society of New York would 'cause an entire separation of our children from those schools and excite greater zeal on the part of the people for Catholic education.'" [3] By 1850 Hughes would write "Let us leave the public schools to themselves" and "Let parochial schools be established and maintained everywhere." [4]

Fast-forward about 150 years later to two important sociological studies of American Catholic schools in the late 20th century: the 1982 report *High School Achievement: Public, Catholic, and Private Schools Compared* by a team of researchers led by James Coleman, and *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, a landmark 1992 study by Antony Bryk, Valerie Lee,

[1] Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 35-6.
[2] Quoted in Vincent P. Lannie, *Public Money and Parochial Education: Bishop Hughes, Governor Seward, and the New York School Controversy.* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1968), 255.
[3] Quoted in Ravitch, 47.
[4] Quoted in Lannie, 256.

and Peter Holland. Both would assert that Catholic schools offered greater access to a rigorous curriculum and a safer, more disciplined, and more orderly schooling environment than public schools, in addition to providing less internal segregation and greater integration into American society for minority and underprivileged students. The remarkable academic and societal success of these schools and their graduates would lead Bryk and his team to assert that "Although the common school ideal inspired the formation of American public education for over one hundred years, *it is now the Catholic school that focuses our attention on fostering human cooperation in the pursuit of the common good*. While the Catholic school…has becoming increasingly public, the public schools have become increasingly private, turning away from the basic social and political purposes that once lent them the title of 'common school.'" [5]

For any student of educational history, the irony is remarkable – how did Catholic schools go from essentially separatist projects to the standard-bearers of the mantle formerly assumed by the common schools? The remarkable success and advances of immigrant Catholics into all levels of American society and economy during the mid-20th century is often seen as a product of the superior education received in Catholic schools. How is it possible that a system originally defined by its brash defiance of American culture and religion became such a force for Americanization and successful integration into American society – so much so that researchers today would actually argue that Catholic schools perform a *better* job than public schools at the socialization and Americanization of urban minorities? Several studies have provided insight into the processes by which this transformation occurred, but the question remains: what is the true nature of Catholic schools? Are they essentially a separatist or an integrative American phenomenon?

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[5] Anthony Bryk, Valerie Lee, and Peter Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 11 (emphasis added).

This is one of the central questions in understanding the historiography of Catholic education (the great "irony of early *Catholic* school reform," if you will) and a thread that runs through just about all of the major historical publications on the history of Catholic schools. As Timothy Walch pointed out in 1996, however, "both the quantity and quality of the published historical literature on Catholic education in the United States has been very poor." [6] Walch goes on to bemoan the "tradition of filiopietism among Catholic educational historians," especially of the earliest generations of pro-parochial school writers, usually Catholic themselves, who are responsible for "only marginal efforts to write a balanced history of Catholic schooling in this country…for the most part these efforts were defensive and filiopietistic, more apologetics than history." [7] As a result, most of the earliest foundational historical literature offers little more than proud recapitulations of the same sort of separatist rhetoric favored by Hughes. Starting about the 1960s, however, a new tradition of researchers began to question the wisdom of the separatist mentality behind Catholic parochial schools – although interestingly, few of them doubted the importance or centrality of that separatist mentality. Finally, in the past 20 years or so since the mid-1980s, a new group of researchers began to question that centrality, and located sources of the "Americanization" tendency within Catholic schools, sometimes in surprisingly early historical moments. A survey of these three major movements within the historiography of Catholic education, exemplified by the most important writers from each of these "waves" of historical understanding, can illustrate how historians of Catholic education have grappled with the central irony of the separatist/ Americanization paradox. Ultimately, an awareness that the desire for Americanization has always been a concurrent part of Catholic schools' identity and self-understanding has gained a

[6] Timothy Walch, *Parish School: American Catholic Parochial Education from Colonial Times to the Present*. (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 251.
[7] *Ibid*., 252.

great deal of ground, shedding new light on the factors that enabled Catholic education to achieve such great successes in the modern era.

First Wave: "Church and School Triumphant"

In an article on Catholic educational history, Marvin Lazerson wrote that "the historiography of American Catholicism has traditionally been directed at confirming Catholic beliefs and commitments to the Church's institutional structure," producing writings which "stressed the heroism and piety" of the immigrants and clerics who built the nation's first and largest private school system. [8] The model for this sort of hagiographical history was begun by John Gilmary Shea, the most important Catholic historian of the nineteenth century, who established the pattern of "an unfolding story about the Church Triumphant – a Church taking root in the New World, exuding 'faith in itself, in its own mission, its own power, its ultimate triumph'" in a series of short essays and vignettes written throughout the late 1800s. [9] His pattern would be taken up in force by James A. Burns, who published the first full-length history of Catholic education in two volumes in 1908 and 1912. His histories are dominated by the extolling of the sacrifices of heroic immigrants in the name of Catholic education:

> As we look back at it from the distance of half a century, the marvel is how men who received but the slender dollar-a-day of the average immigrant, with growing family to support, and newly purchased home to pay for, could, nevertheless, contribute not only to the building of churches and the support of pastors, but to the building of schoolhouses and the support of Catholic teachers as well….traditions still linger which bear witness to the heroic quality of the self-sacrifice of the Catholic pioneers in behalf of religion and education.[10]

As Vincent Lannie points out, this focus on heroism and triumphalism was accompanied by a deep distrust of the hostile Protestant environment, and a deep distrust of government schools.

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[8] Marvin Lazerson, "Understanding American Catholic Educational History." *History of Education Quarterly*, 17 (Fall 1977), 297.
[9] Vincent P. Lannie, "Church and School Triumphant: The Sources of American Catholic Educational Historiography." *History of Education Quarterly*, 16.2 (Summer 1976), 133.
[10] James A. Burns, *The Growth and Development of the Catholic School System in the United States* (New York, 1912, 1969), 15.

John Hughes plays a prominent heroic role as well in much of the writing from this era – the brave defender of the faith and chief architect and Father of the parochial school movement. The Catholic leaders of the time are portrayed as warriors against the powerful, entrenched enemy of heretical Protestantism, and separate religious education becomes identified with the only sure way to preserve the true faith and advance the Church's growth, ensuring that the largely immigrant population would remain faithful. Assimilation with the dominant Protestant culture was no option at all – as Lannie writes, "Cultural pluralism jeopardized Catholic religious unity and the public schools clearly manifested this danger." [11]

Catholic educational historiography was dominated by Burns and others of his ilk until the mid-1960s, when the "second wave" of historians started to emerge. But even as late as 1970, this model of traditional history persisted in the wide-ranging work *Of Singular Benefit* by Harold Buetow. Although Buetow does present a more balanced picture of successes and failures, the overall impetus of his book is to point out the many "frequently-overlooked contributions" and "important firsts" made by Catholic schools to the history of American education, thanks to the "extraordinary heroism" and perseverance of the charismatic individuals who led the charge against a hostile American culture, concluding that "the entire phenomenon seems from many points of view to be a miracle of American society." [12]

Second Wave: Separatism Under Attack

While the earlier and traditionalist historians tended to categorize the "miraculous" successes of Catholic schools as direct results of their foundations in a separatist ideal, a later group of historians beginning in about the mid-1960s began to challenge the hegemony of these ideas, and attempted to "professionalize Catholic educational history" in the "new era of freedom

[11] Lannie, "Church and School Triumphant", 137.
[12] Harold Buetow, *Of Singular Benefit: The Story of Catholic Education in the United States,* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 367.

and self-examination within the church" of the post-Vatican II era, attempting for the first time to "explore the history of Catholic schooling in an unbiased fashion." [13] Interestingly, most of them did not question the centrality of separatism as the motivating factor for the founding of parochial schools, although many of them noticed and emphasized the existence of integrationist or "Americanist" ideals as well in the history. Mostly they seem to accept the centrality of separatism and criticized it for its perceived short-sightedness and lack of relevance to the situation of the mid-20th century.

Perhaps the three most influential scholars of this era who helped to "break the filiopietism of the past" were Neil G. McCluskey, Vincent P. Lannie, and Robert Cross. [14] McCluskey points out the diversity of opinion among Catholics on the issue of Americanization, but, interestingly enough, lays the blame for the separatist nature of the founding of Catholic schools at the feet of the Protestant "common school" advocates of the past, and the secularists of his time. He argues that they (and to a lesser extent, the more extremist separatist Catholics) imposed a "contrived dilemma" over "the stark choice of flag or cross," in demanding that Catholics "choose between loyalty to the public school dedicated to producing Americans and loyalty to the parochial school dedicated to producing Catholics." [15] The true Catholic philosophy of education, he asserts, "finds no real antagonism between the two ideals of dedicated citizenry and religious allegiance. They are compatible, one complementing the other." [16] In this formulation, it is the intransigence of Protestant or secular school models that forced the hand of Catholics into creating their separate school system.

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[13] Walch, *Parish School*, 252.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Neil G. McCluskey, ed. *Catholic Education in America: A Documentary History*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1964), 35.
[16] Ibid.

McCluskey's interesting answer to the paradox of Catholic education in America is essentially by recourse to a different definition: the separatist idea was only due to the Protestant pressures of the early Catholic school era, not an intrinsic feature of Catholicism itself. Once the threat lessened, the defenses could be let down and the pre-existing desire for integration into American society could flourish. Lannie paints a similar picture, although he places more blame upon the separatist elements within the Church itself (especially the hierarchy) as the main causes for the entrenchment and "ghetto mentality" which characterized the schools:

> Catholic triumphalism had won the day and the siege mentality was in full advance. All institutional structures and intellectual currents were now required to reflect this brand of American Catholicism. Momentarily suffocated in a hostile (Protestant or secularist or both) society, Catholics gradually developed a religious and cultural separatism to go along with their physical separatism….Catholics retreated behind the walls and developed a ghetto mentality…And Catholic schools were the educational rampart of the defensive structure of American Catholicism. [17]

Opinions such as this marked an important change in the tenor of the historical discussion: Catholic separatism, whatever its causes, becomes a truly negative thing rather than a cause for celebration. The negativity goes even further: since parochial schools are characterized as an outgrowth of the separatist impulse, their importance is called into question, and it is suggested that in the mid-20th century context, they may in fact have outlived their usefulness. In another essay, Lannie even argues that the parochial schools were "impractical from the start" and decries the fact that voices of those who questioned the vision of Hughes and others of a separate parochial school system were never heard, and "the majority never challenged the soundness of the vision." [18] He ends by asking challenging, open-ended questions: "the Catholic Church is no longer an immigrant church…the Catholic siege mentality has been lifted. What need, then, for

[17] Lannie, "Church and School Triumphant," 141.

[18] Vincent P. Lannie, "Alienation in America: The Immigrant Catholic and Public Education in Pre-Civil War America." *Review of Politics*, 32 (1970): 519, 521.

the continued support of a separate system of Catholic education in America? What is the new rationale, if there be one, for Catholic education in the future?" [19]

This "revisionist" argument is taken up in a somewhat different fashion by Robert Cross, who completes the overthrow of the hagiographers, most evident in his treatment of bishop John Hughes. Formerly the unquestioned hero, Hughes becomes something of a whipping-boy, and is mildly castigated for his passionate separatism. Cross's provocative interpretation brings up the importance of ethnic and class issues, and the notion that the commitment to separate parochial schools was intimately tied to parallel developments in public education among non-Catholics. And like Lannie, Cross also questions the need for parochial schools anymore:

> In the late nineteenth century…most non-Catholics believed that the public school was a unique and irreplaceable engine of democracy and progress; and most, though not all, Catholics accepted the gross exaggeration of Bishop Hughes that if the Church was to survive, schools were more important than places of worship. The irreconcilability of these conclusions made the parochial school necessary. It exists today even though the premises about the importance of formal schooling for the preservation of the faith have been sharply challenged. [20]

Third Wave: the Seeds of Americanization

Several books and dissertations published in the late 1970s furthered this analysis, mostly by drawing greater attention to the ethnic and immigrant nature of the urban Church and parochial schools. These immigrants were largely characterized by a mixture of two desires: to maintain their own cultural and ethnic identity (especially language in some cases), and a desire to integrate successfully and take full advantage of the opportunities of American society and economy. The Church provided for them a measure of both continuity with the past and access to the future, and their desires helped to transform the Church and its schools just as much as they were also channeled and controlled by it. Catholic historian Jay Dolan, in his study of

[19] Ibid, 521.
[20] Robert D. Cross, "The Origins of Catholic Parochial Schools in America," *American Benedictine Review*, 16 (1965), 209.

urban parish life in the mid-1800s, notes that the Catholic parishes served the immigrants by recreating "the devotional life" familiar to foreign Catholics. "Popular saints, hymns, and devotions reinforced the link with the fatherland, and satues, paintings, and shrines turned the interiors of American churches into replicas of Old-World Churches." [21]

James Sanders in *The Education of an Urban Minority* studied the history of these immigrant groups and their influence upon parochial schools in Chicago, noting that immigrants settled into largely segregated communities, often defined by diocesan parish boundaries. Their desire to set up their own micro-versions of the home countries from whence they came dovetailed nicely with the Catholic hierarchy's own separatist desire to "build within the city a Catholic educational island." [22] So each ethnic group was encouraged in its desire to establish an ethnic school connected to the parishes.

Here Sanders brings a crucial point into the discussion: the dependence of Catholic schools upon the attitudes of immigrants themselves, not necessarily on the hierarchy alone. Based on this fact, he argues very effectively that the two desires of separatism and Americanization were present within these immigrant attitudes themselves from the very beginning, and that the intransigence of the public schools, caught in the grip of anti-immigrant sentiment, caused the separatism to come to the surface. As David Tyack has chronicled, many of the public school educators of the time "were probably ethnocentric, proud of American middle-class standards, and confident that schooling could change the many into one people, *e pluribus unum*." [23] Catholic immigrant parents, although essentially amenable to the idea of public education, bristled at the "unbridgeable gulf" between such educators, flush with their

[21] Jay P. Dolan, *The Immigrant Church: New York's Irish and German Catholics*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 99.
[22] James W. Sanders, *The Education of an Urban Minority: Catholics in Chicago, 1833-1965*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 39.
[23] David B. Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), 233.

progressive-era confidence, and themselves: "there was to be no doubt about who was in charge. Immigrants must learn how to fit into the one best system." [24]

Accordingly, at first the ethnic Catholic parochial schools were completely separatist, along ethnic and language lines, chosen as a crucial refuge to immigrants who were weary of the one-size-fits all type of assimilationist tendencies found in the public schools. As Sanders writes: "most immigrants agreed that their children must be trained in the 'American experience'…the immigrant found nothing in the ideas and traditions of his home utterly opposed to the requirements of American citizenship. He resented the implication that in the public school his social customs would be 'minimized' and 'obliterated'…In contrast, the Chicago Catholic school offered an enticing alternative." [25] From the Church's side, its accommodation of the varied ethnic parishes and schools stemmed from pragmatic motivations as well as defiance of the nativist prejudices against foreigners, and despite some turbulence and conflict, this policy "clearly helped cement the immigrant's loyalty while cutting deep into the pull of the public school," producing "a substantial net gain for the Catholic educational enterprise." [26] And in fact, this accommodation proved to be one of the best ways to ease the immigrant's transition from the old world to the new. Not only that, but it had the effect of satisfying the desires from both the incoming immigrants and the existing hierarchical structures of the American Catholic church, one of those happy historical confluences that resulted in benefits for all parties – including American society itself, in the long run.

In other words, even at the foundational moments of the parochial educational system, the decisions made by both clerical and lay Catholics were influenced by the presence of both desires: separatism and Americanization, with neither truly playing the central role as often

[24] *Ibid*., 237.
[25] Sanders, *Education of an Urban Minority,* 41-43.
[26] *Ibid*., 55.

envisioned. Many Catholics wished to educate their children in the parish schools, but many others were willing to work out different options and even embrace public schools. As Lazerson writes, "Despite the emergence of the common school movement, the line between public and private still remained malleable." [27] Analyses like Sanders's bring a much more nuanced and complex understanding of the ways in which the creation of Catholic parochial education represented a deliberately pragmatic strategy that combined both separatism and integrationism into a workable, if imperfect, system.

The historiographical picture now begins to look somewhat more complete, as the diversity of opinions among Catholics about the questions of separatism vs. Americanization become more and more understood and appreciated. And in the process, the assumption of separatist centrality, first challenged in the "second wave," is further weakened, and the idea of separatism's early ascendance as a result of particular Protestant pressures is strengthened. One can see that the seeds of Americanization had always been present, but the necessary environmental factors had yet to arrive before they could fully blossom. In Chicago, for example, after the establishment of the schools had created safe "waystations" or even "halfway houses" for the various immigrant groups, the progress towards greater integration with American society could begin. This slow birth of a unified American church and school system and concordant movement away from the separatist ethnic churches, was midwifed largely by the powerful archbishop George Mundelein. Mundelein, a charismatic figure not unlike bishop John Hughes, nevertheless proved to be something of the opposite of his famous urban prelate predecessor: he devoted much of his energies to unifying the disparate churches and schools under his command (thanks to a stroke of genius in the earlier accommodations to ethnic groups, when all parish property was legally transferred to the archbishop's control). In the following

[27] Lazerson, "Understanding American Catholic Educational History," 304.

years, the competing ethnic groups were ultimately reconciled when the national parishes were replaced by territorial ones and Cardinal Mundelein insisted on a uniform curriculum with English as the primary language. By the end of the 1920s, thanks in large parts to his efforts, Chicago's Catholic schools boasted an organized, centralized school system which produced a generation of students who quickly rose to power in the economic and social spheres of the city.[28]

This final step allowed the processes of Americanization, already nascent in the original foundation of the schools and desired by the immigrants themselves, to truly flourish. Finally, after many years, the Catholic parochial system in Chicago and in every major city by 1960 had become one of the finest and the largest private educational system in the world, and with the election of John F. Kennedy to the presidency that same year, the old days of Catholic separatism seemed a distant memory indeed.

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Sadly, the story took a downward turn for Catholic schools from that point (a subject for another paper, perhaps…). By the mid-1990s, and even today, although Catholic schools across America have faced major issues of decline, due primarily to financial constraints and a host of intra-church struggles in the 1960s, they continued to play an important role in American education. American Catholics no longer support parochial schools to the extent they once did, both in the initial ethnic commitments and in the 1920-1960 era of expansion, riding the crest of the Catholics' newfound societal and economic might. This is the deeper irony of Catholic education; perhaps a victim of their own successes, the mainstreaming of the Catholic population

[28] Sanders, *Educating an Urban Minority*, 139.

was so well achieved that the schools may have effectively Americanized themselves out of prosperity.

Yet the Catholic schools that do remain soldier on, and continue to bring a wealth of sound educational benefit to their students and to American society as a whole – both Catholic and non-Catholic. As the Coleman and Bryk reports show, a great deal of attention in educational circles has focused on Catholic schools in recent years. A good deal of quantitative and qualitative data has been amassed by these and other researchers as a part of current discussion on how to help beleaguered inner-city public schools; perhaps the successes and lessons of Catholic education in attempting the twin goals of preserving ethnic and religious identity while successfully participating in American democracy can be harnessed and continue to inspire future educators across America.

One interesting bit of qualitative data along these lines comes from the writing of Mark Gerson, a young Jewish college graduate who volunteered to work in an urban Catholic high school in the mid-1990s. In his book *In the Classroom: Dispatches from an Inner-City School that Works*, Gerson describes his experience teaching history and economics to a mainly minority student population of at-risk students at St. Luke's, a small, inner-city Catholic high school in New Jersey. His report demonstrates that despite a small budget, "high standards and committed teachers, along with supportive parents," are part of an "ethic of sacrifice" that makes St. Luke's a genuine community of learners, and an example of the kind of schools that are desperately needed in today's urban environments. [29] His insightful witness to the continuing power of Catholic schools to educate and inspire even the most troubled and disaffected youth is testimony to the lasting contributions of a remarkable system of education, first planted by the

[29] Mark Gerson, *In the Classroom: Dispatches From an Inner-City School That Works.* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

seeds of ethnic and religious separatism, yet ironically even today producing the fruits of integration and community within American society.

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