

## Catholic and Jewish Immigrants

*Summary: Massive waves of immigration to the United States in the 19th century changed the American religious landscape and sparked nativist, anti-immigration responses. Irish immigration led to anti-Catholic sentiment, and Jewish immigration to antisemitism. Later, Italian and Eastern European immigration led to intra-faith and additional inter-faith conflict as well. These tensions played out in debates on the presence of Protestant religion in public schools, which precipitated the growth of Catholic independent schools and the eventual eradication of devotional Biblical reading in schools. Muslims and non-European immigrants have also experienced such tensions in the 20th and 21st centuries.*

While there had been small communities of Catholics and Jews since the Colonial period, the massive immigration of the 19th and early 20th centuries brought a new influx of Catholics and Jews to America. For the first time, Anglo-Protestant Americans were presented with a new level of ethnic and religious diversity and with it came the challenge to assess the true meaning of America's commitment to religious freedom.

America has always been a nation of immigrants, but the greatest waves of immigration did not begin until the 1820s. Following the Napoleonic Wars in Europe, nearly 600,000 immigrants, mostly English and Irish, came to American shores. In the next twenty years, annual immigration rates reached three million. By the mid-19th century, English-speaking immigrants were joined by Germans, with nearly one million flocking to America between 1848 and 1858. Many came as political dissidents or uprooted peasants, discouraged by the limited economic opportunities at home. German Jews came seeking freedom from burdensome taxes and legal limitations on their right to marry, find jobs, and establish a home.

Around the same time, beginning in 1845 and continuing for ten years, potato famines struck Ireland, sending Irish families pouring into America at a steady rate. The famines were the catalyzing crisis, but population growth, an outmoded economy, and increasing literacy were all contributing factors to this wave of Irish immigration. By 1855, nearly two million Irish people had resettled, largely in the American northeast. *The Boston Pilot*—a Catholic publication named after a journal in Dublin—began publication in the 1830s, and by the 1840s and 1850s more than a dozen Catholic churches had sprung up in Boston alone.

The German and Irish migrations in the period before the Civil War brought new religious challenges to a country on the eve of its own internal conflicts. Some outspoken religious and political leaders spoke out against the Catholics, calling them “Papists” whose allegiance would always be to the Pope rather than to the American flag. For others, anti-Catholicism was still a legacy of the Protestant Reformation, kept alive by groups such as The American Society to Promote the Principles of the Protestant Reformation, founded in 1840 to guard against the rapid growth of the “influence of Romanism.” To be Protestant, for some, meant to define oneself over and against Catholicism, and to resist the presence of Catholics in schools, neighborhoods, and the nation. In the 1850s a political party calling themselves the “Know-Nothings” gained widespread support for a party platform that was distinctly anti-foreign and anti-Catholic. “Nativism” began to walk hand in hand with anti-Catholicism, despite the historical fact that Catholics had played a significantly supportive role in the American Revolution, had participated in the Constitutional Convention, and had otherwise demonstrated their distinctly American loyalties.

The response to Jewish immigrants was equally embedded in a history of anti-Jewish sentiment. Between 1825 and 1865 the Jewish population in New York City grew from approximately 500 to 40,000. Many new Jewish immigrants found that the stereotypes they had hoped to leave behind them were alive and well in their new country. Some non-Jews were uncomfortable with the rising Jewish population and were quick to define Jews as clever, miserly, competitive merchants, eager to snatch a dollar from the hands of the innocent customer. Such negative images, perpetuated for centuries in Europe, had travelled to America in the minds of some of the earliest Protestant immigrants. As Jews became the newest American arrivals, old myths about Jewish character resurfaced, reinforced by the reality that the majority of Jews made their living as peddlers and merchants.

By the 1880s, new arrivals from southern and eastern Europe began to form a distinctive “second wave” of immigration to America. In addition to Protestant Scandinavians were Italian Catholics and Eastern European Jews. This period was distinctive for the sheer numbers of immigrants arriving, the diversity of their languages and cultures, and the extent to which their religious practices were unfamiliar not only to the American-born residents but also to the immigrants who had arrived mid-century. In the feverish years between 1892 and 1924, more than 12 million immigrants passed through Ellis Island, and a new American cultural milieu emerged.

In this new multi-ethnic setting, the powerful pulls of religious and cultural identity often worked at cross purposes. Newly arrived Italian Catholics often found themselves at odds with the Irish, with whom they shared a common faith but held entirely different languages, nationalities, customs, and even styles of worship. Yet both Irish and Italian Catholics were drawn together, working to resist the anti-Catholicism they confronted on both national and neighborhood levels. Similarly, newly arrived Russian Jews faced resistance from both Jews and non-Jews. More Orthodox than their German counterparts, Eastern European Jews faced difficult decisions about how much of their communal village life should and could be preserved in American cities. Refusing to work on the Sabbath limited economic opportunities and could cost a garment worker his or her job. Meanwhile, more established middle-class American and German Jews expressed ambivalence about the influx of their Eastern European and Russian counterparts. Many feared a loss of economic status or an increase in discrimination as the rise of Jewish immigration fanned the flames of antisemitism. With a kind of ironic logic, some established immigrant Jews added their voices to the cries for more restrictive immigration policies.

The public school, also called the “common school,” was perhaps the most important arena of inter-religious encounter and conflict. From the mid-19th century on, both Catholics and Jews struggled with the American public school system, finding that the much vaunted “free public education” had a strong Protestant bias. Catholics like Archbishop John Hughes of New York protested against what he called anti-Catholic teachings in the schools. Jews like Joseph Brandon of San Francisco raised their voices against the move to recite the Lord’s Prayer in the classroom. Staunch advocates of a public school system that would not allow sectarian teaching found their voice in Horace Mann. And Protestant defenders like Josiah Strong articulated commonly held prejudices about the incompatibility of Roman Catholicism and democracy and the threat of Roman Catholics to the public school system. The public discussion that raged through the second half of the 19th century raised many of the same issues that were at the center of the debate on religion in the public schools in the late 20th century.

The Catholic and Jewish communities eventually evolved different strategies for dealing with public schools. Catholics developed a privately-funded parochial school system, supported by Catholic parishes and staffed, on the whole, by nuns, thereby seeking to insure children received Christian moral and religious education as well as instruction in the specifically Catholic catechism. The Jewish community, however, opted for active participation in the public schools, which they saw as nurturing American

roots and opening avenues into mainstream American life. They also sought to appeal to the Constitution in protesting the school system's Christian bias. As early as the 1860s, Isaac Mayer Wise, leader of the Reform community in Cincinnati, succeeded in having devotional Bible readings eliminated from what were supposed to be secular public schools. After lengthy appeals, the Supreme Court of Ohio ruled such devotional Bible reading violated the Constitutional separation of church and state.

In late 20th and into 21st century America, Muslims have encountered many of the same challenges that Catholic and Jewish immigrants faced a century ago when it comes to public education. Today, however, Muslims often perceive the bias to be secular rather than Protestant. In addition, school curricula may contain stereotypical or inaccurate discussions of Islam. Many Muslim parents have opted for full-time Islamic schools. They contend that it is too difficult to bring their children up as "good Muslims" when they are immersed in the values and environment of American public schools. Other Muslims have insisted on the importance of the public school system and worked to improve the understanding of Islam among teachers, administrators, and textbook providers.