

AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONALISM
VOLUME II: RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES
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Supplementary Material

Chapter 5: The Jacksonian Era – Individual Rights/Religion

Samuel Morse, **Foreign Conspiracy against the Liberties of the United States** (1835)¹

Samuel Morse (1791–1872) was a successful painter, the inventor of the telegraph, and an active Nativist. In 1834, he published a series of anti-Catholic essays in a New York newspaper under the pen name “Brutus.” Those essays were widely reprinted in the religious press and collected together in a book. Like many Nativists, Morse maintained that Catholic immigration posed a threat to the American republic. The *Foreign Conspiracy* combined a detailed critique of illiberal church-state combinations in Catholic countries with warnings that Catholics in the United States had similar ambitions. Morse rejected establishing a unified Protestant political party as inviting the union of church and state that he sought to avoid. He warned against the use of “unlawful means” against Catholics. The best “weapons of Protestantism” were education and an active religious press that countered Catholic influence and denounced the political implications of “Popery.”

Morse in the passage below asked, “What is religious liberty?” How did he define religious liberty? Why did he believe Catholics a threat to republican values and religious liberty? Why did he believe Protestantism embodies republican values?

...
No one of the Protestant sects owns any head out of this country, or is governed in any of its concerns by any men, or set of men, in a foreign land. All ecclesiastical officers are nominated and appointed, or removed by the people of the United States. . . . Our Episcopalians appoint their own bishops without consulting the church of England; our Presbyterians are entirely independent of the church of Scotland; and our Wesleyan Methodists have no ecclesiastical connection with the disciples of Wesley in the old world. But how is it in these respects with the Catholics. The right of appointing to all ecclesiastical offices in this country, as everywhere else, is in the Pope. . . . All the bishops, and all the ecclesiastics down to the most insignificant officer in the church, are, from the genius of the system, entirely under his control.

...
And to whom do these leaders look for their instructions? Is it to a citizen, or body of citizens belonging to this country; is it to a body of men kept in check by the ever jealous eyes of other bodies around them, and by the immediate publicity which must be given to all their doings? No, they are men owning no law on this side of the ocean; they are the Pope and his Consistory of Cardinals, following the plans and instructions of the imperial cabinet of Austria,—plans formed in the secret councils of that cabinet, instructions delivered in secret, according to the modes of despotism, to their obedient officers, and distributed through the well disciplined ranks in this country, to be carried into effect in furtherance of any political designs the Austrian cabinet may think advantageous to its *own interests*. And will these designs be in favor of liberty? With a party thus formed and disciplined among us, who will venture to say that our elections will not be under the control of a Metternich, and that the appointment of a President of the United States will not be virtually made in the Imperial Cabinet of Vienna, or the Consistory of Cardinals at Rome? Will this be pronounced incredible? It will be the almost certain result of the dominion of Popery in this country.

¹ Excerpt taken from Brutus [Samuel Morse], *Foreign Conspiracy against the Liberties of the United States* (New York: Leavitt, Lord & Co., 1835).

... What is religious liberty? Is it merely a phrase to round a period in a fourth of July oration? Is it a dazzling sentiment for Papists to use in blinding the eyes of the people, while they rivet upon them their foreign chains of superstition? Is it a shield to be held before Infidels, from behind which, they may throw their poisoned shafts at all that is orderly and fair in our *civil* as well as religious institutions? Or is it a prize above all price, that heaven-descended gift to the world, for which ... we contended in our war for independence, and which we are bound by every duty to ourselves ... to guard with the most jealous care? And has it ever occurred to Christians that this duty of guarding religious liberty in a more special manner devolves on them? Who but the religious community appreciate the inestimable value of religious liberty? Are their interests safe in the hands of the infidel, who scoffs at all religion, and uses his civil liberty to subvert all liberty? Is it safe in the hands of imported radicals and blasphemers? Is it safe in the hands of calculating, selfish, power-seeking politicians? ...

We cannot be too often reminded of the double character of the enemy who has gained foothold upon our shores, for although Popery is a religious sect, and on this ground claims toleration side by side with other religious sects, yet Popery is also a political, a despotic system, which we must repel as altogether incompatible with the existence of freedom. ...

It is asked, how can we separate the characters thus combined in one individual? How can we repel the politics of a Papist, without infringing upon his religious right? I answer, that this is a difficulty for the Papists, not for Protestants to solve. If Papists have made their religion and despotism identical, that is not our fault. Our religion, the Protestant religion, and Liberty are identical, and liberty keeps no terms with despotism. ... Shall political heresy be shielded from all attack, because it is connected with a religious creed? Let Papists separate their religious faith from their political faith, if they can, and the former shall suffer no political attack from us. ...

...
If they cannot, or will not, let them not complain of *religious* persecution, or of *religious* intolerance, if this republican people, when it shall wake to a sense of danger that threatens its blood-bought institutions, shall rally to their defense with some show of indignation. Let them not whine about *religious* oppression, if the democracy turns its searching eye upon this secret treason to the state, and shall in future scrutinize with something of suspicion, the professions of those *foreign friends*, who are so ready to rush to a fraternal embrace. ...

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