

Brownson and the Common Schools: Nativism in an American Catholic

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Orestes Augustus Brownson (1803-1876) has exercised little influence upon the formation of the pattern which U.S. historians have chosen for the narration of their national epic. Brownson remains, thanks to the diligence of his son Henry in collecting and indexing twenty volumes of his writings,¹ a cornucopia – fruitful source of a variety of aphoristic, generalized, volatile and thus very usable quotations, and little else. The trouble is that “weathercock Brownson”² made such an intellectual hegira during his lifetime that few scholars care to risk committing themselves on the man. After several approaches to Protestantism, after “no-Churchism” and near-agnosticism, Brownson found his way into the Roman Catholic Church in 1844. From 1844 to 1849 we have the relatively quiet period of his life, a quiet resembling the eve of a storm. During this period he used his *Brownson's Quarterly Review* to assimilate his new religion by fighting comparatively harmless apologetical battles with Protestant champions. Then Brownson decided that the object of his *Review* must be “to baptize the secular, and to promote Catholic secular culture.”³ Here began the crucial decade of Brownson's life, in my view the still inadequately read period and the period under discussion in this paper. The Civil War saw Brownson emerge in full liberal-radical regalia. This was followed by a reversal from approximately 1866 until his death in 1876, a period of pessimistic reaction to much of his previous work.

What of the crucial middle years of Brownson's life, the period from 1850 to the Civil War? In my opinion, they are the most creative years of his life and show a brilliant inner consistency of thought which, if properly recognized, would give him a higher place than he now holds in the synthesis of U.S. history. This is a rather sweeping statement, but I feel that

¹ *The Works of Orestes A. Brownson*, collected and arranged by Henry F. Brownson, 20 vols. (Detroit, Thorndike Nourse, 1882-1887.)

² The phrase is James Gordon Bennett's. Cited in Arthur Schlessinger, Jr., *Orestes A. Brownson: A Pilgrim's Progress* (Boston, Little, Brown, and Co., 1939), p. 252.

³ Brownson to J. W. Cummings, June 23, 1849, quoted in Henry F. Brownson, *Orestes Augustus Brownson's Middle Life: From 1845 to 1855* (Detroit, H. F. Brownson, 1899).

Brownson studies are even yet so unspecified that we can still afford to deal with generics. But what can one say interpretatively about the middle years? In these years his thinking seems most confusing and cuts across all of the usual thought categories of his time. How does one interpret a 19th century man who seemed to be thoroughly papist yet who refused to admit the right of the pope to the Papal States?⁴ How do we reconcile the distinguished Catholic apologetical career of Brownson with his strong anti-Irish Catholic stand of the 1850's?⁵ How do we balance Brownson's extreme American Nationalism with his anti-Protestantism and ultramontane Catholic conservatism? In the Brownson of the middle period article seems to fight article and text struggles with text. So kaleidoscopic is the thought of Brownson that Maynard has created a rule of thumb for reading him: "At any period of Brownson's life we can reach what he really held by, so to speak, adding up everything he said and then striking an average."⁶ As a practical rule this has its advantages but it is hardly calculated to encourage the historian to venture a commitment on the man. This is one reason why few historians have seriously attempted to include Brownson in their syntheses.⁷

How do we get the key to the Brownson of the middle years? Out of several possible approaches to the problem we have isolated one, the conflict of Brownson with his co-religionists upon the subject of the common schools. I believe that such a discussion will yield some valuable pointers toward a unified interpretation of Brownson and will perhaps furnish us with some clue to the problem of the integration of Brownson into the flow of American history.

⁴ Cf. "The Spiritual not for the Temporal" (April, 1853) *Works*, XI, pp. 36-62. "Rights of the Temporal" (October, 1860) *Works*, XII, pp. 376-405.

⁵ Cf. "Protestantism not a Religion" (January, 1853), *Works*, X, pp. 426-449. "The Native Americans" (July, 1854), *Works*, X, pp. 17-38.

⁶ Theodore Maynard, *Orestes Brownson, Yankee, Radical, Catholic* (New York, The Macmillan Co., 1943), p. 266.

⁷ An example will suffice. Robert D. Cross, *The Emergence of Liberal Catholicism in America* (Cambridge, The Harvard University Press, 1958), is undoubtedly one of the more influential books in recent years on the Catholic phase of American history. In this book the author is concerned to show the Americanization of the Catholic Church in the later years of the nineteenth century. In this thesis Brownson was dismissed as an "intransigent" and one who "renounced... all deep sympathies with American life" (pp. 29, 55). Cross saw only the confusion in Brownson. The only reason given for this abrupt treatment is that the convert "denounced all non-Catholics and all non-Catholic ideas as often as he enjoined his new associates not to neglect the scattered virtues of American life" (p. 27). Cross seems dependent on Handlin for the context of this judgment (cf. pp. 233-235). That historian of the immigrant seriously misjudged Brownson in his *Boston's Immigrants, 1790-1865: A Study in Acculturation*. (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1941.)

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It is clear that most Catholics of the eighteen fifties viewed the public schools unfavorably.⁸ In general, the arguments of Catholics against them may be reduced to three points:

1. The school should be “an auxiliary of the pastor.” The state has no rights in education, which belong to the “parent and pastor.” Some states, forbidding religion in the schools altogether, created systems of education which were “essentially *infidel* and *atheistical*.”⁹ This is perhaps simplified and further distinctions could have been made, but often this was not done. The *Metropolitan* put the argument in its most extreme form:

The system of State Schools is contrary to the natural law. In it the state assumes the right to control public sentiment ... This system gives the state the right to act as though it were infallible [in geography, in astronomy, in philosophy, in ethics and consequently in theology];, an infallibility belongs to none besides the Church.¹⁰

2. At the most critical and formative time of life the public school contributed to the youth of the land an education “in which no impressions of true religion are made upon the mind of youth.”¹¹ The public school education was responsible for many Catholics losing their, faith and for the secularization of American life. The reading of the Protestant Bible contributed to this end. Protestantism controlled education. Thus the common school had a corruptive influence on Catholic youth. With some spirit the *Boston Pilot* summed up the first two arguments against the public school system:

The general principle upon which these laws are based is radically unsound, untrue, atheistical. ...It is, that the education of children is *not* the

⁸ Since the public school system differed from community to community with varying degrees of state interference, there is no such thing as a general idea of a public school which we can use. For our purposes we keep in mind the system set in motion by Horace Mann in Massachusetts from the eighteen thirties to the early eighteen fifties. In this system there was religion – Mann insisted on it – but it was supposed to be “non-sectarian,” and was thus unacceptable to Catholics and many Protestants. It would be this system which Brownson had in mind when thinking of “public schools.” Cf. William Kailer Dunn, *What happened to Religious Education?* (Baltimore, The John Hopkins Press, 1948), pp. 117-175.

⁹ Dunn, *op. cit.*, p. 215, quoting a report of the educational committee of the First Plenary Council of Baltimore, 1852. The head of this committee was Brownson’s adversary, Archbishop Purcell of Cincinnati.

¹⁰ *The Metropolitan Magazine*, I (March, 1853), p. 82.

¹¹ Dunn, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

work of the Church, or of the Family, but that it is the work of the State ... Two consequences flow from this principle. .. In the matter of education, the State is supreme over the Church and the family. Hence, the State can and does exclude from the schools religious instruction ... The inevitable consequence is, that ... the greater number of scholars must turn out to be Atheists, and accordingly the majority of non-Catholics are people of no religion ... The other consequence ... leads the State to adopt the child, to weaken the ties which bind it to the parent. So laws are made compelling children to attend the state schools, and forbidding the parents, if they be poor, to withdraw their little ones from the school ... the consequence of this policy is ... universal disobedience on the part of the children ... Our little boys scoff at their parents, call their fathers by the name of Old Man, Boss, or Governor. The mother is the Old Woman. The little boys smoke, drink, blaspheme, talk about fornication, and so far as they are physically able, commit it. Our little girls read novels ... quarrel about their beaux, up-hold Woman' Rights, and – ...We were a Boston school boy, and we speak of what we know.¹²

3. The Catholics of America, as soon as is financially feasible, should create their own school system and work for a system which would allow Catholics to assign their taxes to Catholic schools.¹³ Only in Catholic schools would the child be “preserved from the contagion of error”:¹⁴ here the children would be prepared “for the duties of state or condition of life they are likely to be engaged in”; the school could “accustom them from their earliest years to habits of obedience, industry and thrift,” and inculcate “habitual and cheerful submission of [their] wills to the dispensations of Providence.”¹⁵ (Under the pressures of the times, the hard pressed hierarchy did not seem overly concerned to state in positive terms the value of the Catholic school, and seemed to be more concerned about training than education.¹⁶

Now these lines of Catholic thought may appear to be direct challenges flung at the developing system of American education. In reality they are a statement of goals to be achieved. If it is true that “in 1855, in all of

¹² Quoted in Handlin, *op. cit.*, pp. 138-139, from the *Boston Pilot*, April 24, October 9, 1852.

¹³ Dunn, *op. cit.*, p. 218. For an expansion of these general arguments see pp. 215-220.

¹⁴ “Pastoral Letter of 1843” (5th Provincial Council of Baltimore), in Peter Guilday, *The National Pastorals of the American Hierarchy* (Westminster, The Newman Press, 1954), p. 152.

¹⁵ “Pastoral Letter of 1866” (2nd Plenary Council of Baltimore), *ibid.*, pp. 215-216.

¹⁶ However, an exception to this attitude may be found in the “Pastoral Letter of 1837” (3rd Provincial Council of Baltimore), *ibid.*, pp. 115-116.

Massachusetts ... there were only five free schools for girls, and only a few schools for boys,”¹⁷ then the battle is seen to be only a speculative one. Nevertheless, the question was very much in the air in the eighteen fifties.

From 1852 to 1862 Brownson published five articles directly upon the subject of the Catholic school-common school controversy.¹⁸ From these five articles we can make a synthesis of Brownson's thought on the matter of the public or common school system. The ideas of Brownson on the subject appear as consistent and all of the points which we intend to present appear in at least two of the articles.

The first point in Brown's synthesis of the school question is that it was not the public school system in itself which was corruptive, and that “we are far from recognizing as just the description of them which we meet in the Catholic journals.”¹⁹ This was the total point at issue in his 1852 “Paganism

¹⁷ Richard J. Quinlan, “Catholic Education in the Archdiocese of Boston,” *Catholic Historical Review*, XXII (April, 1936), p. 34.

¹⁸ Here we must set forth for the reader the context of these articles, since in Brownson studies this is most important. “Paganism in Education” (April, 1852), *Works*, X, pp. 551-563, is published against those Catholics who sought to uphold the idea that when education is Christian then society is so. Brownson upholds the opposite, that when society is Christian then is education Christian. The implication is that the public school is not responsible for the paganization of society. “Schools and Education” (July, 1854), *Works*, X, pp. 564-584, is written against the “centralizing tendency” of the public school and not the public school itself. It points out advantages of common schools. Against those who are for the overthrow of common schools themselves Brownson is against the system “only inasmuch as it is intended to operate against Catholicity” (p. 571). Then, in the 1858 “Conversations of Our Club,” *Works*, XI, pp. 393-426, Brownson comes out against the separate school system adopted by some countries, and points out weaknesses of the Catholic schools. Attacked on this point Brownson published “Public and Parochial Schools” (July, 1859), *Works*, XII, pp. 200-216, in which he realized that he went against the grain of most Catholic thought on the problem but as long as the bishops had not “interdicted” district schools he was free to take any position he wanted! The article is an attack on Archbishop Purcell's school policy. Brownson then takes the tactful position of being “for” public schools and “for” Catholic schools. The last article of the series, “Catholic Schools and Education” (January, 1862), *Works*, XII, pp. 496-514, is the most remarkable of all of these articles. It illustrates perfectly that context is all important in any study of Brownson. It is a blank condemnation of the “supposed” moral and intellectual superiority of Catholic education. This in no way represents Brownson's real position. The heat of battle has once again forced the controversialist to overstate his case. Brownson could not understand why some Catholics appeared to be supporting the South in the Civil War, or at least were tepid toward the Northern cause. His solution is that the Catholic schools educated for the past, to appreciate the old glories of Europe. Thus they supported the South, both being backward and anti-progressive! (There is also another article, not included in this synthesis “Our Colleges,” *Brownson's Quarterly Review* (April, 1858), VI, 3rd Series, pp. 208-244. It does not appear in the *Works*, and I am not certain that Brownson is the author and it does not bear upon the common school question.)

¹⁹ “Public and Parochial Schools,” *loc. cit.*, p. 207.

and Education” article. Brownson here used a theological basis for his argument, that it is absurd to say that one social institution can corrupt an otherwise healthy group of people. There has always been corruption in the world; it is due to original sin, not the type of education prevalent at any one time.²⁰ A child cannot be corrupted “as clay in the hands of the potter,” since the educator has to deal with “a living subject, endowed with ... a free will of its own.”²¹ Then Brownson reminds Catholics of their own history:

Catholic education was never more general or more thorough in Europe than it was just prior to the outbreak of Protestantism. The children of Italy had received none but a Catholic education, and yet we found the peninsula, in 1848, overrun with Italians ready to war to the death on the pope and Catholicity. Not therefore are we opposed to education, or we would not have Catholic schools wherever they are practicable, but therefore we do not look upon education, not even Catholic education, as alone sufficient to protect faith and insure the practice of virtue, or as really of so much importance as the men of our age, in the plenitude of their Pelagian heresy, would persuade us.²²

In short, the religious evils to the child come from irreligion in the home²³ and from the “education of the streets”;²⁴ thus Catholics, who have not many schools of their own, should be thankful in many ways to the common school, which will, if nothing else, keep the child off the street where sin is learned, and give him a good secular education. Regarding religion, Catholics worry too much about the effects of common schools:

Our children know beforehand that the common schools are under Protestant influences, and that the teachers are for the most part non-Catholic. They are therefore forewarned to distrust whatever they find in these schools, or hear said by these teachers, on the subject of religion.²⁵

Thus in some ways these schools strengthen the faith of Catholic children. That Catholics do the common school less than justice by their charge of corruptive influences is one of the most often repeated of Brownson’s

²⁰ “Paganism and Education,” *loc. cit.*, p. 562.

²¹ “Schools and Education,” *loc. cit.*, p. 573

²² *Ibid.*

²³ “Slakes and Glanagans” (April, 1856), *Works*, XX, pp. 30-31.

²⁴ “Schools and Education,” *loc. cit.*, p. 573.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

disagreements with Catholics of the period.²⁶ The point, however, is negative, and predicates little about any positive value in the common schools. Nevertheless, it was certainly necessary to contradict the Catholic journals, which maintained the opposite.

There was also an apologetic reason why Brownson disliked the Catholic view of the common schools. This argument is called “apologetic” for lack of a better name, but does not exactly fit Brownson’s cause here, which is tinted with Americanism. Brownson argues that,

rightly or wrongly, we believe that the best safeguard, aside from purely Catholic instruction and the sacraments, of the faith and morals of our children is not in building up a wall of separation, not required by Catholic doctrine, between them and the non-Catholic community, but in training them to feel, from the earliest possible moment, that the American nationality is their nationality, that Catholics are really and truly an integral portion of the great American people, and that we can be, whatever the Know-Nothings may say to the contrary, without the slightest difficulty at once good Catholics and loyal Americans, and enlightened and earnest defenders of political, civil, and religious liberty.²⁷

Brownson thought that Catholics were,

unnecessarily provoking the hostility of our non-Catholic countrymen. We have gained nothing, but we have lost much, by the course that has been adopted. We have only the great body of the American people still more firmly attached to their common schools, still more determined to maintain them, and still less disposed to modify them so as to meet our conscientious objections, while we have rendered our own position in the country, as Catholics, more unpleasant and embarrassing. We ought to learn some practical lessons from the late Know-Nothing movement, and correct the errors on our part which provoked it.²⁸

The third point at which Brownson clashed with his Catholic contemporaries regarded the efficiency and actual educational value of the Catholic schools. “*Qua* ecclesiastical” he does not criticize, but “*qua* secular,”²⁹ Catholic schools come under a severe lashing from the Reviewer:

In my own view of the matter, I think the public schools, sectarian as they

²⁶ In Brownson’s most reactionary period the point is still made. Cf. “The Papacy and the Republic” (January, 1873), *Works*, XIII, pp. 344-345.

²⁷ “Public and Parochial Schools,” *loc. cit.*, p. 204.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

²⁹ “Conversations of Our Club,” *loc. cit.*, p. 430.

frequently are, preferable to very poor parochial schools, under the charge of wholly incompetent teachers, and dragging out a painful, lingering, half-dying existence. I consider the church has made it obligatory to establish schools, as far as we are able, in which our children will not be exposed to the loss of their faith, or the corruption of their morals; but I do not regard as such schools, though called Catholic, those in which the children in study and behavior are not brought up to the common average of the public schools of the country.³⁰

Catholic colleges come under the same castigation.³¹ The most extreme statement of this line of attack against Catholic education as it existed came in an article of 1862. Here Brownson issues a blanket condemnation:

They [Catholic Schools] practically fail to recognize human progress, and thus fail to recognize the continuous and successive evolution of the idea in the life of humanity ... They do not educate their pupils to be at home and at their ease in their own age and country, or train them to be living, thinking, and energetic men, prepared for the work which actually awaits them in either church or state.³²

The cause of this malaise “cannot be in Catholicity itself, nor can it be in our American order of civilization, for Catholicity, if catholic, is adapted to all times and to all nations.” Catholic education should fit men for “their precise duties in their own time and country.” The trouble is that just now Catholic schools treat the great truths as “isolated or dead facts,” not as “living principles” which permeate each new age.³³ Brownson, however, hastened to add that this condition was only “temporary and accidental.”³⁴

But why this lack of life in present Catholic education? Catholic education was dead just now because it sought to inculcate a lower and now useless form of civilization into the student. It was, to be blunt, foreign, and *therefore* useless. Lest it be thought that we overstress the vigor of this point in Brownson, we let him speak for himself, calling to the attention of the reader the deliberateness of the following quotations:

We have not favored, and until further advised we cannot favor, under pretext of providing for Catholic education, a system of schools which will train up our children to be foreigners in the land of their birth, for such

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 410; cf. also pp. 408-409; “Catholic Schools and Education,” *loc. cit.*, pp. 496-514.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 417.

³² “Catholic Schools and Education,” *loc. cit.*, p. 501; cf. also “Present Catholic Dangers” (July, 1857), *Works*, XII, pp. 145-151.

³³ “Catholic Schools and Education,” *loc. cit.*, pp. 502-503.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 512.

schools cannot fail, in the long run, to do more injury than good to the interests of religion. We quarrel with no man for being a foreigner, but we recognize the moral right in no class of American citizens to train up their children to be foreigners, and then to claim for them all the rights, franchises, and immunities of American citizens. We have no unfriendly or unbrotherly feeling towards any class of foreigners, but we do not want that miserable Europeanism, by which we mean despotism, in some or all of its ramifications, which oppresses the people, trammels the freedom of the church, and cripples the energy of the clergy in continental Europe, brought here to eviscerate Catholics of their manhood, and to keep up a perpetual war, in which faith has no interest, between them and the great body of American people.³⁵

The civilization they [foreigners] actually bring with them, and which without intending it they seek to continue, is, we being judges, of a lower order than ours. It may be our national prejudice and our ignorance of other nations, but it is nevertheless our firm conviction, from which we cannot easily be driven, that, regarded in relation to its type, the American civilization is the most advanced civilization the world has yet seen, and comes nearer to the realization of the Catholic ideal than any which has been heretofore developed and actualized. We speak not of civilization in the sense of simple *civility*, polish of manners, and personal accomplishments, in which we may not compare always favorably with the upper classes of other nations; but of the type or idea we are realizing, our social and political constitution, our arrangements to secure freedom and scope for the development and progress of true manhood. In these respects American civilization is, we say not the term of human progress, but in our judgment, the furthest point in advance as yet reached by any age or nation. Those who come here from abroad necessarily bring with them, therefore, a civilization more or less inferior to it, and which, in relation to it, is a civilization of the past. If they educate, then, according to their own civilization, as they must do, they necessarily educate for a civilization behind the times and below that of the country.³⁶

The opposition to us represented by “Native American,” or “Know-Nothing” parties or movements, is not opposition to us as orthodox Catholics, nor, in itself considered, to us as foreigners, but simply as representatives of a civilization different from the American, and, in many respects, inferior and opposed to it. We have practically, if not theoretically, insisted that our orthodoxy and our foreign and inferior civilization are inseparable; and the heterodox American people have in this agreed with us, and hence their opposition to us, and ours to them ... Orthodoxy is opposed not because there is any opposition to it on its own account, but because it is believed to be inseparably wedded to that inferior and less advanced civilization that has come hither with it to the New World, and which many honest Catholics think, if they ever think at all on

³⁵ “Public and Parochial Schools,” *loc. cit.*, p. 205.

³⁶ “Catholic Schools and Education,” *loc. cit.*, pp. 506-507.

the subject, is identical with it.³⁷

This attack on the grounds of foreignism is the most often repeated of all the attacks of Brownson upon Catholic education, being a main point in four of the five major articles on education.³⁸

Brownson's conclusion is obvious. If the common school will only serve its rightful function as true American tradition dictates, though Brownson never says that it actually fulfills its function, it would serve the church well in the United States: "The church will then cease to be a foreign church here; it will be nationalized, and Catholicity become an integral element in the national life. The Catholic population will assume their rightful position, and have their due moral weight."³⁹ In the present order the public school is the only place where true Americanism is taught.⁴⁰

We are led thus logically to the fifth point at which Brownson contradicted most of the Catholic thought of his times, namely, that there was not only little corruption in the common school, but that it represented a *positive* good in its own right. The school system had many "grave defects," true, but Brownson saw no reason why he should be "hostile to it, or ... wishing to destroy it, or even to impede its operation."⁴¹

There is, first of all the whole truth to be considered that the matter of education does not belong exclusively "to parents and to religious bodies to which the parents belong":

We favor in principle a system of public schools, and are not prepared to maintain that the state should withdraw entirely from the whole matter of schools and education. We assert its right and its duty to see, as far as in its power, that all its children receive at least a good common-school education, though we deny most energetically its right to interfere with the conscience of any class of its citizens, and we maintain with equal energy the plenary authority of the church in all that pertains to the moral and religious instruction of the children of Catholic parents.⁴²

While there are evils in the system as it exists, such as a centralizing tendency and a *de facto* secularism which should be remedied before

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 510.

³⁸ Cf. also "Conversations of Our Club," *loc. cit.*, pp. 408-409; "Schools and Education," *loc. cit.*, pp. 581-582.

³⁹ "Schools and Education," *loc. cit.*, p. 581.

⁴⁰ "Conversations of Our Club," *loc. cit.*, p. 34.

⁴¹ "Schools and Education," *loc. cit.*, p. 571.

⁴² "Public and Parochial Schools," *loc. cit.*, pp. 212-213.

Catholics can justly pay taxes to them,⁴³ nevertheless, this does not deny the right of the state to have a system of common schools, so long as the citizens are free to send their children elsewhere and provided that they do not offend the freedom of conscience of a class of the citizenry.⁴⁴ The state, in sum, has a stake in education and can definitely determine *that* a child be educated for the well-being of society.⁴⁵ As a clinching argument Brownson added this: supposing the country became Catholic. Would not Catholics find all they wanted in public schools as constitutionally provided, yes! Thus, how can Catholics be against them in principle?⁴⁶ All religious arguments aside, it remained true that somehow a child needed a good education in secular affairs. Whether it came by Catholic, private, or common schools was a secondary matter.⁴⁷ To the rejoinder that, “All education ... should be moral and religious, and as the church is the only competent authority in religion and morality, the church is the only rightful educator,” Brownson replied (in a prize example of his logic, wit, and incisiveness):

All tailoring, shoemaking, hatting, blacksmithing ... should be moral and religious, and therefore the church must make our coats, our shoes, our hats, our hoes and axes; nay must take the management of every department of secular life; and we must have priests and religious orders and confraternities to do our sowing and reaping, our washing and cooking ... Education, in the respect that it is purely secular, is no more the business of the church than any other secular matter. The church teaches religion ... The simple teaching of reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, history, book-keeping by double or single entry, is purely a secular affair, and as much within the province of the secular authority as the construction of roads and bridges, or providing for the national defense. The church has no more to do with the one than with the other. She has never acknowledged herself bound to establish a system of secular education for seculars, and in no age or country has she founded a system of secular education for all the children in the land ... To assume that the secular education of seculars is her business, which she and she alone is authorized to impart, is only assuming in other words that in every age and nation she has failed in her duty, and therefore cannot be the church of God.⁴⁸

The *positive* good of the common school system and its right to existence thus seem to permeate the entire body of Brownson’s writing on the

⁴³ “Schools and Education,” *loc. cit.*, pp. 575-577, 178; “Public and Parochial Schools,” *loc. cit.*, p. 211.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 205-206.

⁴⁵ Cf. “Conversations of Our Club,” *loc. cit.*, p. 402.

⁴⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 474.

⁴⁷ “Schools and Education,” *loc. cit.*, p. 584.

⁴⁸ “Conversations of Our Club,” *loc. cit.*, pp. 402-403.

educational question.

The sixth point in which Brownson chose to disagree with his co-religionists is in some ways the most spectacular point of difference. Perhaps not too much importance can be attached to it, as it is only based on two isolated texts. We refer to Brownson's seeming anti-clericalism. Thoroughgoing papist that he was, Brownson nevertheless could not see his way clear to admitting any clerical principle of control in the matter of education. Brownson did not by mere inadvertence let slip a phrase or two which sounded anti-clerical. He knew that his position ran counter to that of the hierarchy of the country, but he chose to let the difference continue. His position was not against faith or morals, he reasoned, and therefore as long as the public schools were not interdicted he could legitimately take his stand.⁴⁹ The truth is that Brownson had come to reject the possibility of clerical control in education in the United States. Faced with a choice, or seeming choice, he chose the position of his country:

We do not pretend to know or judge the motives or policy of our prelates, but we would respectfully suggest to our friends of the press, that any movement, whatever may be the rights of the church, or however desirable in itself, designed to secure to the clergy the whole management and control of education outside of faith and morals, must fail. Neither non-Catholic nor Catholic secular society will consent or can be forced to place the whole business of secular education in their hands, and give up public for parochial schools. The clergy may retain, as within their special mission, the moral and religious instruction of the young, but to struggle for more will ultimately be to get less. We say not that this is not an evil and much to be deplored, but we look upon it as a "fixed fact." The old union between church and state is dissolved in this country, most likely never to be restored, and sooner or later, struggle as we may, we shall be forced to accept all the logical and legitimate consequences of that dissolution. The sooner we foresee and make up our minds to accept these consequences and conform to them, the better we believe it will be for us and for our religion. It is always worse than idle to contend for the impracticable, or to war against the inevitable. Throughout the whole modern world there is a settled conviction, false assuredly, that the clergy, whether Catholic or non Catholic, are greedy of power, and constantly laboring to concentrate all power in themselves, and hence a determination on the part of secular society to yield them as little as possible. Whoever looks at the modern world as it is, and studies its temper, and the tendency of its thought and sentiment, must, it seems to us, be convinced that in all human probability, the most the church can hope to recover and retain is freedom to watch over and provide for the moral and religious instruction and education of the young. This is the most, we are convinced, that she will be able to obtain, although it may be not all that is her right. She, in

⁴⁹ "Public and Parochial Schools," *loc. cit.*, pp. 200-203.

her modes of acting in relation to secular society, is forced to consult the exigencies of space and time, and to follow the mutations of human affairs, though she herself remains unchangeable. She has no power to restore a political and social order that has passed away, or to establish in natural society an order of things resisted by the dominant ideas, sentiments, and passions of the age, when not absolutely required by Catholic faith and morals.⁵⁰

In reality, all of the points mentioned thus far converge into one idea, and were derived by Brownson from this idea. If Brownson thought that the public schools were not only not corrupting but a positively good institution demanding a place in Catholic thought, if he believed that clerical control would not work in the United States, if he believed that Catholic education was in need of Americanizing, if he believed that the Catholic schools were foreign and therefore retrogressive, if he refused to support the Catholic school, as constituted, in face of the public school; all is the result of Brownson's conviction that the American constitution was basically Catholic.⁵¹ He believed that in the whole of history the best *de facto* setting for the Church's life on this earth had been worked out by the constitution

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 208-209.

⁵¹ This is nowhere stated better than in "The Constitution and the Church" (January, 1856), *Works*, VIII, p. 543: "We do not say that the political and social sentiments of all Americans are in perfect harmony with Catholic principles, for it is a lamentable fact that Americans are not up to the level of their social and civil order, and are at the moment injuriously affected by reminiscences of cultivated Graeco-Roman paganism, on the one hand, and by reminiscences of the uncultivated paganism of the northern barbarians on the other. But true Americanism – the political and civil order – the American civility – *civiltà* – is in strict accordance with Catholic principles. In founding the American state our Fathers were so directed and overruled by Providence, that they retained from the old civilization of Europe only those principles which harmonized with Catholicity; and added to them only those principles which the popes had for ages been urging in vain upon European statesmen. We hope, on some future occasion, to show this in detail, and to prove conclusively, that whatever of spiritual excellence we boast in our institutions, we owe directly or indirectly to the Catholic church. It must suffice us, however, for the present, to say that if the church had had the constituting of our civil order, we are unable to see how she could have framed it more to her mind. Here neither the state nor the individual is absolute. The state does not absorb the individual nor the individual the state. We have liberty by authority and authority by liberty ... Here the individual is both a man and a citizen, and his civil duties and personal rights are harmonized as they are under the natural law, which the church presupposes, accepts, and confirms. Hence, the natural would seem here to be fitted in advance, through the disposition of Providence, to correspond to the supernatural, reason to grace, civil society to the church. Nothing remains here to be effected but the conversion of individuals, in order to make us throughout an eminently Catholic nation, with a true and lofty Catholic civilization."

of the United States.⁵² In some of his writings of this period the American way of life and Catholicity achieve virtual identification.⁵³ Thus, whatever was done in the spirit of the constitution was in some way Catholic. But the common school system is within the spirit of the constitution, in principle if not in practice. Therefore the common school system is in some way Catholic. It is our opinion that this syllogism is always in the back of Brownson's mind. He thought that Catholics took the opposite attitude. In one place in his "Conversations of Our Club" he has one of the conversationalists mouth what he considered to be a typical Catholic objection to the common school:

"The first lesson to be taught the child is submission, and his first virtue is obedience," said Winslow; "and it is only in proportion as you can enforce this lesson and obtain this virtue that you can organize society on a Catholic basis. In my view there is an innate antagonism between American society and the Catholic religion, and if you educate for the one you cannot educate for the other."⁵⁴

To Brownson this was an impossible state of opinion. In answer to it he simply reiterated his doctrine of the identification of Catholic principles and American society:

We are not among those who fancy that Catholicity can flourish here only by rooting out every thing American, and completely revolutionizing American society and institutions. We believe American society, as natural society, is better organized, and organized more in accordance with the needs of Catholic society, than is any other society on the face of the globe, and we are anxious to preserve and perfect it according to its original type. We are disposed, also, to remember that the people who, under the providence of God, organized American society, in which Catholics enjoy a freedom they have nowhere else in the world, were themselves almost to a man non-Catholics, and at the time they organized it, there was probably no Catholic nation in existence that could have sent out a colony capable of organizing a society so much in accordance with the natural rights of

⁵² On this point see the thorough documentation in Francis E. McMahon, "Orestes Brownson on Church and State," *Theological Studies*, XV (June, 1954), pp. 175-228.

⁵³ Some places in the *Works* where this identification is made are: "Catholicity and Literature" (January, 1856), XIX, pp. 447-464; "Collard on Reason and Faith" (July, 1856), III, pp. 220-229; "Day Star of Freedom" (April, 1856), XII, pp. 107-109; "Civil and Religious Toleration" (July, 1849), X, pp. 236-238; "Liberalism and Socialism" (April, 1845), X, pp. 538-541; "Politics at Home" (July, 1860), XVII, pp. 94-102, *passim*; "Public and Parochial Schools" (July, 1859), XII, pp. 213-221; "Church Not a Despotism" (January, 1856), VIII, p. 245.

⁵⁴ "Conversations of our Club," *loc. cit.*, p. 427.

man and the freedom and independence of religion. Certainly no Catholic colonies did do it, or by the mother country were permitted to do it. It does not become Catholics, who have subsequently, by virtue of its own free constitution, been received into this society on a footing of perfect equality, to forget this fact, or to show themselves ungrateful to the memory of its founders by constantly holding them up to ridicule, and seeking to undo their work, as the so-called Catholic press frequently does our Puritan ancestors. The late Know-Nothing movement, unjustifiable as we regard it, should be turned to profit, and instead of exciting our hostility to Americans and everything American and making us sigh for a *régime* like that introduced into France by the Nephew of his Uncle, should induce us to reexamine our conduct, and inquire if we have not been pursuing a line of policy admirably fitted to provoke such a movement. It would do us no harm to inquire if there have not been faults on our side, and if there have been to seek to avoid them in future.⁵⁵

* * *

We who are used to reading Msgr. Ellis and Thomas O’Dea on Catholic intellect in America no doubt have great sympathy with Brownson’s approach.⁵⁶ I do not criticize this sympathy, but if I wanted to show Brownson as a predecessor of these gentlemen I have hardly begun to touch the depth of his thought on what Catholic education should have been in America.⁵⁷ However, this is not the direction of the paper. The point I am

⁵⁵ “Public and Parochial Schools,” *loc. cit.*, p. 213.

⁵⁶ The well known comments of these and many other Catholic intellectuals on the state of Catholic education are collected in Frank L. Christ and Gerard E. Sherry, *American Catholicism and the Intellectual Ideal* (New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1961).

⁵⁷ Note for example, the implications of the following: “Catholic education must recognize the catholicity of truth under all its aspects, and tend to actualize it in all the relations of life, in religion and civilization. Its tendency is to aid the church in the fulfilment of her mission, which is the continuous evolution and actualization of the idea, or the life of the Word made flesh, in the life of humanity, or completion if mankind of the incarnation completed in the individual man assumed by the Word. The completion of this work is the complete union of men, through Christ, with God, the finite with the infinite—the true term of human progress, or final cause of the divine creative act. All education, to be Catholic, must tend to this end, the union, without absorption of either, or intermixture or confusion of the two natures, of the human and the divine, and therefore of civilization and religion. It must be dialectic, and tend to harmonize all opposites, the creature with the creator, the natural with the supernatural, the individual with the race, social duties with religious duties, order with liberty, authority with freedom, the immutability of the dogma, that is, of the mysteries, with the progress of intelligence, conservatism with reform; for such is the aim of the church herself, and such the mission given her by the Word made flesh, whose spouse she is. Fully and completely up to this idea we expect not education in any age or in any nation to come, but this is the type it should aim to realize,

interested in making is simply this: given Brownson's views on the common school and his relation to the existent Catholicism of his time, are we not justified in saying that he was precisely what he was so often accused of, that there was in Brownson a deep-rooted American Nativism? In view of the documentation of this paper the point seems obvious. May we not conclude that Brownson was at one, at least in principle, with the nativist writer of the *Sons of the Sires*, who wrote that the common school was "the noblest institution ever devised to form American citizens out of the different nations represented among us."⁵⁸ If one puts himself in the place of the besieged church administrator of the eighteen fifties, trying to establish a school where Catholic children could learn what he considered to be Catholicism; if one pictures to himself the Catholic Irish immigrant lad mocked by his schoolmates in that most American of institutions, the common school, then Brownson does take on a different shape. His American progressivism, his inability to put up with first generation foreignism,⁵⁹ his more than tolerant, nay positive, attitude to the common school in spite of its *de facto* condition, take on a new light. Brownson emerges as a Nativist.

John Higham in his *Strangers in the Land* has given us the most workable⁶⁰ definition of Nativism: "Nativism ... should be defined as intense opposition to an internal minority on the ground of its foreign (i.e., un-American) connection." It is a "zeal to destroy the enemies of a distinctively American way of life."⁶¹ Brownson was possessed of this zeal and his opposition to Catholic education was on the grounds of this foreignism. His positive support of public schools was based on an admitted ancestral Puritanism,⁶² an element common to the nativism of the eighteen fifties.

Two things must be made clear at this point. First of all, I do Brownson's memory no violence here. Several times he stated his attitudinal

and be constantly and, as far as human frailty admits, actually realizing. Such is the character and tendency of what we term Catholic education." "Catholic Schools and Education," *loc. cit.*, p. 500.

⁵⁸ Frederick R. Anspach, *The Sons of the Sires* (Philadelphia, Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1855), p. 34.

⁵⁹ Of all the charges against Brownson his inability to put up with the foibles of first generation immigrants seems to me to be the most telling. A writer in the anti-Brownson *Metropolitan Magazine*, IV (January, 1857), p. 723, scored on Brownson when he made the point that the Reviewer should have based his hopes "upon the children of emigrants, rather than upon the emigrants."

⁶⁰ Cf. Colman J. Barry, "Some Roots of American Nativism," *Catholic Historical Review*, XLIV (July, 1958), p. 138.

⁶¹ John Higham, *Strangers in the Land* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1955), p. 4

⁶² "Public and Parochial Schools," *loc. cit.*, p. 213.

nativism.⁶³ Also, if we look at his attitude to the immigrant, it seems clear that Brownson exhibited the same distaste for Irish manners,⁶⁴ the same reactive frustrations to Irish nationalism,⁶⁵ the same sentimental attachment to country,⁶⁶ the same racist tinge,⁶⁷ the same charges of political corruption,⁶⁸ as did any good nativist of the 1850's.

But secondly, it must be clear that I imply no moral judgment adverse to Brownson by the charge of Nativism. Indeed, is it not true that the

⁶³ Brownson often admitted the rightness of basic Nativist aims: "We can assure our Catholic friends, that the sentiment which underlies Native Americanism is as strong in the bosom of American Catholics as it is in the bosom of American Protestants. If the party assumes an anti-Catholic character, the reason is to be found in the craft of the No-Popery leaders, and in the opposition manifested to it by Catholic as well as non-Catholic foreigners." "The Native Americans" (July, 1855), *Works*, XVIII, p. 286; cf. also "Politics and Political Parties" (October, 1852), *Works*, XVI, p. 376. The political manifestation of this wave of Nativism, the Know-Nothing Party, was opposed by Brownson on grounds that, while its end was honourable, its means were reproachables: "As a Catholic, looking solely to the interests of Catholicity in the Union, we are opposed to this Know-Nothing Party only as we are opposed to the principle of doing evil that good may come." "A Know-Nothing Legislature" (July, 1854), *Works*, XVIII, p. 407.

⁶⁴ "I love the Irish for their attachment to the faith and for many amiable and noble qualities, but they are deficient in good sense, sound judgment, and manly character. They lack honesty and truthfulness, and are unreliable. They can do nothing in a straight-forward, manly way." Quoted in Henry F. Brownson, *Orestes A. Brownson's Later Life: From 1855 to 1876* (Detroit, H. F. Brownson, 1900), p. 7.

⁶⁵ "We American Catholics are in a small minority, if you will, but we have feelings, and we do not see why our feelings are not as sacred as those of Irishmen, why they should here in America be free to agitate for Ireland and defend Irishmen and Irish interests, and we not free to defend America and Americans, and American interests." Brownson to Hughes, n.d., 1856, quoted in, pp. 586-587.

⁶⁶ "After God our first and truest love has always been, and we trust always will be, for our country. We love and reverence her as a mother, and prefer her honor to our own, and though as dutiful sons we may warn her of the danger she incurs, we will never in silence suffer her to be vilified or traduced. While we respect the national sensibility of foreigners, nationalized or resident among us, we demand of them equal respect for ours." "Native Americanism" (July, 1854), *Works*, XVIII, p. 282.

⁶⁷ "I contend that this American nationality has a wonderful absorbing power, and gradually assimilates all foreign nationalities that meet it on our soil, and thus tends to mold the whole population of the country of whatever race or country born into one homogeneous people ... Here are no principles layed [*sic*] down but a simple statement of facts." Brownson to Judge Hilton of Cincinnati, July 26, 1854, quoted in *Middle Life*, p. 571.

⁶⁸ "'The Irish influence on our politics is great, and most disastrous. There is probably not a worse governed city in the world than New York, and New York is governed principally by Irish grogsellers. The Irishman here seems to understand nothing by politics but the gaining of office for himself and his followers.'" Quoted in *Later Life*, p. 8, unnamed source.

majority of us felt sympathy for his educational views as presented? From our point of view it is difficult to see where he was basically wrong, or why he was attacked so vehemently.⁶⁹ And we are right. In 1890 we find Cardinal Gibbons writing to Pope Leo XIII that divisions between Catholics and their fellow citizens,

are caused above all by the opposition against the system of national education which is attributed to us, and which, more than any other thing, creates and maintains in the minds of the American people the conviction that the Catholic Church is opposed by principle to the institutions of the country and that a sincere Catholic cannot be a loyal citizen of the United States.⁷⁰

Forty years before this Brownson had made a valiant attempt to stave off this very difficulty.

I have submitted that Brownson may be looked upon as a rarity of his time, that he was an articulate Catholic Nativist. Depending on the degree of validity of the thesis two conclusions should be made:

1. Nativism should be explored with a view to giving it somewhat more dignity than we have heretofore accorded it. Have we adequately sheered Nativism from its extreme left wing pamphleteering faction? For example, if Ray A. Billington or, more recently, Carleton Beals had a notion of the possibility of there being a well wrought, soundly reasoned nativist position in the ranks of the Catholics, would not this have added (at least) a shading to their treatments?⁷¹ Is Nativism to be looked upon as a right wing movement, or was it, in its 19th century context, a progressivist phenomenon? Was Nativism simply the John Birchism of the 19th century? If so, what of our present sympathy to Brownson's educational position with its nativism?

2. Brownson was a *Catholic* Nativist. The whole reason for his taking this stance was to separate the question of Catholic from foreign. He wanted to erase from the mind of his countrymen the proportion which read:

⁶⁹ For his stand Brownson was attacked by at least the *Catholic Herald* (Philadelphia), the *Catholic Telegraph* (Cincinnati), the *United States Catholic Magazine* (Baltimore), the *Boston Pilot*, the *Pittsburgh Catholic*, and the *Truth Teller* (New York). Cf. Edward John Power, "Brownson's View on Responsibility for Education," *American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia Records*, LXII (December, 1951), p. 241.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Neil G. McCluskey, S.J., *Catholic View-point on Education* (New York, Hanover House, 1959), p. 35.

⁷¹ Ray A. Billington, *The Protestant Crusade* (New York, Rinehart and Company, Inc., 1952) ; Carleton Beals, *The Brass-Knuckle Crusade: The Great Know-Nothing Crusade, 1820-1860* (New York, Hastings House, Publishers, Inc., 1960).

Protestant is to American as Catholic is to foreign.⁷² His task was to show that a Catholic could be a good American. This he did well before the *floruit* of Isaac Hecker and the American liberal bishops celebrated by Robert D. Cross. He accomplished his work in such a vigorous and reasoned manner that he deserves to have a more prominent place in our thinking on the development of American nationalism.⁷³

In his own time Brownson felt like “poor Tom of Bedlam,” who was wrong because outvoted. In our time Brownson remains on the fringe of American history, the image of the hard working but eccentric and therefore harmless and unusable intellectual. Has history adequately served his memory?

⁷² Brownson never tired of stating that his aim was to separate the question of nationality from that of religion: cf. “The Native American” (July, 1854), *Works*, XVIII, p. 294; “The Know-Nothings” (October, 1854), *Works*, XVIII, pp. 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 318, 327, 328, 329; Brownson to Judge Hilton (July 26, 1854), quoted in *Middle Life*, p. 571. Lest we think this distinction obvious to all today, see Maynard, *op. cit.*, p. 302: “And it [nativism] was a continuous whole, since it sprang from the same cause – a hatred of the Church and a dislike of the Irish.”

⁷³ Ralph Henry Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought* (New York, The Ronald Press, 1940), comes closest to giving Brownson his proper place within the spectrum of American history.