FREDERICK DOUGLASS' BIGOTED SIDE

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In schools all across America, Frederick Douglass is known as a former slave who became one of the nation's leading abolitionists; he was also a champion of women's rights. Not so well known was his bigotry: his anti-Catholicism was a trait he shared with most abolitionists, especially those who were Protestant ministers. Douglass was an ordained deacon and a preacher in a local African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church.

In his classic, *Catholicism and American Freedom*, University of Notre Dame historian John T. McGreevy notes that Douglass "displayed a casual anti-Catholicism, attacking the 'cunning illusions' of Catholic leaders." Professor Richard Hardack offers plenty of evidence to support McGreevy's observation; his work is available in an edited volume by Alan J. Rice and Martin Crawford, *Liberating Sojourn: Frederick Douglass & Transatlantic Reform*.

Douglass' bigotry became apparent when he visited Ireland for four months in 1845; it was part of a two-year visit to the United Kingdom. According to Hardack, Douglass' extensive lectures and writing amounted to an "anti-Catholic diatribe" seeking to blame the Catholic Church for slavery. He also blamed Irish Catholics, not the English, for their victim status in the United States and Ireland.

"Irish Catholics, especially Irish Americans," Hardack says, "are not simply ignored or critiqued, they are systematically cast out of Douglass's circle." Douglass spoke compassionately about the Irish experience, but he also depicted the Irish as unfairly competing with blacks. "Throughout his life," Hardack notes, "Douglass worried about Irish American prejudice,

intemperance, and competition with blacks regarding foreign support, jobs, and voting rights, anxieties partly reflected in and partly caused by his distaste for all varieties of Catholicism and Irish Catholicism in particular."

Douglass got away with his "anti-Catholic convictions" because America was receptive to this strand of bigotry. Indeed, his "anti-Catholic animus" was evident in his "descriptions of religious practices throughout his life." He was known for his "senseless tirades" and long lectures on the pope and bishops.

It cannot be that Douglass was reacting bitterly against his experience in Ireland—it was uniformly positive. He even went so far as to say that "one of the most pleasing features of [his] visit [to Ireland]…has been a total absence of all manifestations of prejudice against [him] on account of [his] color." No matter, he gave the Irish no slack, blaming the Catholic Church, not the English, for their plight. He referred to the Church as the work of "Satan," ultimately holding the Irish responsible "for this crushing religious" system.

This pro-black, pro-suffragette, and anti-Catholic American recorded many of his writings in his weekly publication, *The Douglass Paper*. In it, Hardwick writes, Douglass "minces no words in literally demonizing the Catholic Church as a force of evil and in following popular prejudice in equating Irish Catholicism with popery." In his own words, Douglass bragged how he spoke of "the prevalence and power of the Christian Church and religion at Rome and of the strange things that are believed and practiced there in the way of religious rites and ceremonies."

Douglass was quick to finger the Catholic Church with bringing about the "evil" that existed in Ireland, namely the "ignorance, cunning, and crimes" associated with "Romanism." Yet his expressed interest in opposing social injustice did not allow him to comment on the Irish famine.

"The potato blight was only a rumor and a worry when Douglass visited Ireland in 1845," says journalist Joan Walsh, "but it was a crisis by the time he left England in 1847 to return to the U.S. How could such a towering human-rights figure remain silent on the catastrophe, as it seemed he had?"

Douglass was struck by the suffering of the Irish, but he always chose to blame the victim. He noted that the "streets [are] almost alive with beggars," and women with "infants in their arms, whose emaciated forms, sunken eyes and pallid cheeks," clear evidence, he concluded, that they "had nursed in vain." He said the only difference between blacks and the Irish was the "black skin and wooly hair" of the slaves. But as Walsh notes, he attributed these conditions to Irish "drunkenness."

On the eve of the famine, Douglass wrote a letter to his abolitionist ally, William Lloyd Garrison, that summed up his position. "The immediate, and it may be the main cause of the extreme poverty and beggary in Ireland, is intemperance. This may be seen in the fact that most beggars drink whiskey…. Drunkenness is still rife in Ireland."

Drunkenness was also rife with Native Americans at this time as well, but not to mention the role that European explorers played in accounting for such conditions would be seen as irresponsible, if not bigoted. Douglass' reaction should not be treated in a different manner.

Like virtually all heroic figures in history, Frederick Douglass was a complicated person. His contributions to human rights, as far as blacks and women are concerned, must be recognized, but it cannot proceed without citing his anti-Catholic bigotry. It is time to set the record straight about him.