

Paths of Duty: Religion, Marriage, and the Press in a Transatlantic Scandal, 1835–1858

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When the Rev. Pierce Connelly denounced Protestantism and converted to Catholicism in 1835, he inadvertently started a small newspaper war among the burgeoning religious press in America. While Catholic periodicals celebrated their newest addition in print, Protestant newspapermen were scandalized. They worried about how the clerical husband's conversion might affect his marital life should he pursue ordination in the Catholic Church. Soon, the Connellys dissolved their marriage in Rome and moved to England, where Pierce became a priest, and his wife Cornelia entered a convent. When, thirteen years later, Pierce reconverted and sued Cornelia "for the restoration of conjugal rights" in an English court, the case became an international sensation – with both British and American newspapers covering the developments and using the saga to comment on larger religious and political issues of their time. The two scandals demonstrate how the transatlantic press debated contested global concerns about the limits of religious freedom, the changing nature of marriage, church–state relations, and international law.

In 1835, amid a personal crisis involving her clerical husband, Cornelia Connelly confided in her sister with surprising tranquility, "I am proud to say that against all my prejudices and in spite of the feelings of horror which I have nurtured against the Catholic faith, I am ready at once to submit to whatever my loved husband believes to be the path of duty."¹ Pierce Connelly's path of duty had been the Episcopal priesthood, but that year found him straying from the orthodoxy. "My faith in Protestantism is so shaken," Pierce wrote in an impassioned letter to his friend, "that I am compelled in conscience to lay aside for the present my functions; I begin to think the necessary tendency of Protestantism is revolutionary, immoral, and irreligious; that its success has been accidental, and that it has in itself no principle of duration."² Pierce's conversion scandalized his church and brethren, but

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¹ Quoted in John P. Marmion, "Cornelia Connelly's Work in Education, 1848–1879," PhD dissertation, University of Manchester, 1984, 7.

² Pierce Connelly's letter to J. N. N. (20 Aug. 1835), quoted in "Conversion of the Rev. Pierce Connelly, A.M.," *Dublin Review*, 1, 2 (July 1836), v–xiv, v.

most of all the Protestant press. What did it mean that this American minister was leaving his denomination in favor of a foreign and, supposedly, undemocratic institution? And what would Pierce's newfound religiosity mean for his family? Would this man abandon his wife and children to join the Catholic clergy? Pierce's unusual conversion symbolized a profound challenge to the entire gamut of American family values – from northern domesticity to southern patriarchy.

As if to confirm their Protestant contemporaries' worst fears, Pierce and Cornelia swiftly converted to Catholicism, asked the Pope to dissolve their marriage in Rome, and entered religious work in England – he as a priest, and she as a nun. But the drama was far from over. Fourteen years after the conversion, Pierce would once again grow disillusioned with his faith. He now wanted both his Protestantism and his wife back. Only this time, Cornelia was less amiable to following her husband's "path of duty." Frustrated, Pierce took Cornelia to an English court and in 1848 sued her for the "restoration of conjugal rights." The story quickly became an international sensation. As newspaper editors found themselves caught up in a storm of scandal consuming the lives of two colorful personalities and the leadership of Christianity's two major factions, they stoked the controversy to extend their influence and sell copy. Through the two Connelly scandals, American and British newspapers debated some of the most contested issues of the day: the boundaries of religious freedom, the changing nature of marriage, and the reach of international law.

That the Connelly drama unfolded between 1835 and 1858 and coincided with the period between the birth of the new American press and the maturation of transatlantic reporting makes this story rich with explanatory potential for how religion, gender, marriage, and the law were discussed on newspaper pages and debated in the public square. The first scandal illustrates how American denominational newspapers used Pierce's conversion to challenge one another and to establish legitimacy in the increasingly democratizing religious marketplace of the Second Great Awakening. As new religious movements multiplied and old religious giants battled it out in their respective denominational papers, the press had the authority to undermine – or bolster – certain religious claims in their coverage. The public's seemingly insatiable interest in the sensational made this project an especially lucrative endeavor. By appealing to issues of morality through questions of gender and family that were at stake in Pierce's conversion, newspapers articulated the interwoven concerns they had about what was properly American and properly religious in the young nation.

The second scandal reveals how the mature transatlantic press of the mid-nineteenth century used the Connelly family saga to debate issues of a more global nature: including international law, religious freedom, the rights and

obligations of marriage, patriarchal authority, and female independence. The European revolutions of 1848, the restoration of papal authority in 1850, and the reestablishment of the Catholic hierarchy in England that same year intensified global anti-Catholicism and raised the stakes for Protestant nativists. In this context, the Connelly scandal became a test case for how international law would play out in issues of religious freedom, marriage rights, and conjugal responsibilities. Whereas the 1830s denominational newspaper culture produced partisan commentary on the Connellys' conversion and raised traditional Protestant concerns about the preservation of the family unit, within the next two decades, the publishing world would explode, the public's interest in the sensational would cement, and – to the surprise of many – even some Protestants would come to side with Cornelia and defend her right to remain a Catholic.

THE FIRST CONVERSION

By all accounts, Pierce Connelly was a successful pastor. Born in Philadelphia in 1804 to a Presbyterian family from Northern Ireland, Pierce joined the Episcopal Church in his youth and began pursuing ministry at age twenty-two. Cornelia Peacock was also born to a family of Presbyterian immigrants and, like Pierce, became an Episcopalian as a young adult in 1831. Eight months later, Cornelia married the newly ordained Reverend Connelly, despite her family's hesitations on account of his humble origins and meager salary.³ But Pierce was an ambitious young man, motivated by career advancement. Soon after the wedding, the couple moved to Natchez, Mississippi, where Pierce became the pastor of Trinity Episcopal Church.

Natchez was a Mississippi river port town with a population of three thousand, a third of whom were enslaved people, working the cotton plantations. A year after their move south, the Connellys welcomed their first son. Baby Mercer brought another resident to the household – an enslaved woman named Sally, who became Mercer's nanny. Pierce would later defend slavery on account of how well he thought the family treated Sally. A northerner, Pierce nonetheless despised abolitionists and defended the status quo. Race would play a part in his own conversion – with enslaved Catholics serving as examples of ultimate submission to religion.

At least five Christian denominations competed for the membership of Natchez's inhabitants: Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Catholics. It was in this religious climate that Pierce became fascinated

³ Radegunde Flaxman, *A Woman Styled Bold: The Life of Cornelia Connelly, 1809–1879* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1991), 15.

with Catholicism.⁴ In a letter, Cornelia would explain that the “attacks upon the Catholics have led [Pierce] into a laborious study of the controversy, and he begins to doubt whether they are not more near the truth than we.”⁵ The Connellys’ curiosity was also fueled by the power of authority in Catholicism. “I became a Roman Catholic,” Pierce would later write, “wholly and solely on the ground of there being amongst men a living, infallible interpreter of the mind of God, with divine jurisdiction and with authority to enforce submission to it.”⁶ According to one early biographer, the event that inspired this line of thinking was the sight of a Catholic baptism ceremony, during which the Connellys were “struck by the power of the Catholic missionaries over the slaves – a rough lot, who responded not at all to the efforts of the Protestant ministers. They had watched with interest a crowd of slaves gathered round a priest on the bank of the river, submissive as children.”⁷ Many enslaved men and women in Natchez did indeed get baptized and joined the Catholic church – although whether these conversions happened of their free will or were a necessary strategy for survival is an ongoing debate.⁸

In either case, Pierce would later confirm the influence of African American Catholics on his own conversion. “I saw the masses of slaves around me apparently beyond the reach of the Protestant Church,” he wrote, “while, at no great distance, on the banks of the very same river, the Roman Catholic clergy held over them absolute control.” Even more impressive, Pierce thought, was the Catholic Church’s “ability to conquer” and “to control effectively” the spirits of those it converted.⁹ Pierce wanted to be “conquered” by Catholicism. Having simultaneous doubts about the insufficiently hierarchical nature of Protestantism and feeling annoyance at the “miserable fanaticism” of anti-Catholic periodicals, Pierce contrasted the faults in Protestantism with “the spiritual state” of African American Catholic converts.¹⁰ The slaves’ submission to the priests signaled to Pierce that the Catholic Church was doing something right.

⁴ See Marmion, 6.

⁵ Cornelia Connelly’s letter to Adeline Peacock Duval (1 Sept. 1835), Society of the Holy Child Jesus Archives, Rome, Italy, at <https://corneliacconnellylibrary.org/library-materials/texts/Vol1.pdf>, accessed 5 Nov. 2016.

⁶ Pierce Connelly, *Reasons for Abjuring Allegiance to the See of Rome: A Letter to the Earl of Shrewsbury* (London: G. J. Palmer, 1852), 2.

⁷ Anonymous, *The Life of Cornelia Connelly, 1809–1879: Foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1922), 6.

⁸ See, for example, Mary Cuthrell Curry, *Making the Gods in New York: The Yoruba Religion in the African American Community* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 25.

⁹ Connelly, *Reasons for Abjuring Allegiance to the See of Rome*, 2.

¹⁰ Quoted in “Conversion of the Rev. Pierce Connelly,” xii.

Engulfed in his study of Catholicism, Pierce began to print *A Catechism for the Religious Instruction of the Negroes* on the eve of his resignation from Episcopal priesthood in 1835. That August, Pierce sent a ten-page letter to the Episcopal Bishop of Tennessee announcing his departure from the rectorship and explaining his reasons for reconsidering his Protestant orthodoxy.¹¹ The Second Great Awakening – with its new theologies, denominations, and charismatic personalities that were splintering traditional Christian institutions – proved too divisive for the young pastor. Pierce had grown uncomfortable with the increasingly democratizing spirit of American Protestantism. Despite having affection for the Episcopal Church and its members, Pierce felt that Protestantism as a whole was fundamentally misguided.

Subordination I consider the first principle of all law; a thing as necessary in the church, and in every other society, as the soul is to the body; and obedience with me is not more a duty of my profession, than it is a requisite of my nature. I have no faith in private inspiration; I have no faith in individual infallibility, or any absolute personal independence ... I must have some guide to lead me into truth; I must have some power to obey.¹²

Pierce wanted a clear theological structure. He wanted a guide. And he despised the petty but constant attacks on the Catholics he read in Protestant newspapers. Pierce was right to be irked by the all-pervasive negative coverage of Catholicism in America. Small in number (a little over 5 percent of the total population in 1835), Catholics received a disproportionate amount of suspicion on account of their religion.

Several factors contributed to American Protestants' skepticism of Catholicism. First, the Protestants were wary of the new immigrants' competing loyalties to Rome. Second, they perceived Catholics as superstitious and not altogether rational in their devotion. Third, American Protestants worried that they had to protect the Bible from the influence of Catholic translations and commentary. The American Bible Society, formed in 1816, was explicitly organized to encourage "a wider circulation of the Holy Scriptures without note or comment."¹³ Catholics, American Protestants argued, were a misguided, heretical cult with a tyrant as their leader and

¹¹ Although this was unusual at the time, Pierce's conversion would set a trend: in the two decades between 1840 and 1859, twenty-nine more Episcopal priests would convert to Catholicism in the United States. See George Burgess, *List of Persons Admitted to the Order of Deacons of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America* (Boston: A. Williams & Co., 1874), 12–48.

¹² Pierce Connelly, *A Letter to the Right Reverend Dr. Otey, Bishop of Tennessee, on the Resignation of the Rectorship of Trinity Church Natchez* (Natchez: Free Trader, 1835), 5–6.

¹³ Quoted in Henry Otis Dwight, *The Centennial History of the American Bible Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 25.

corruption as their guide. For these reasons, early nineteenth-century Protestants, like their Puritan predecessors, were convinced that Catholics were headed straight for hell.

The growing religious press of the day added fuel to the fire. To expose the various problems with Catholicism, Protestant publications began their anti-Catholic crusade in the 1810s.¹⁴ By 1830, at least thirty Protestant newspapers exhibited blatant anti-Catholicism. None would be as staunchly anti-Catholic as *The Protestant*, the first explicitly anti-Catholic weekly. The trajectory of its tenure is illustrative of the larger trends in the spread of anti-Catholic sentiment in the nascent religious publishing sector in America.

The Protestant's mission statement did not bother with subtlety: "The sole objects of this publication are, to inculcate Gospel doctrines against Romish corruptions – to maintain the purity and sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures against Monkish traditions," and so on and so forth.¹⁵ Failing to secure support from the more moderate Protestants, by 1831 the newspaper expanded its mission and no longer focussed exclusively on the alleged horrors of Catholicism. The image revamping required a name change, and the publication became known as the *Reformation Advocate*. But commercial success was slow, and the editorial board once again revamped the format and the name of the publication. By 1833, *The Protestant/Reformation Advocate* would become the monthly *Protestant Magazine*. The new mission statement explained that the editorial board no longer saw it necessary to exclusively target the magazine against Catholics, since other Protestant publications had been chipping in admirably: "The important cause in which we are engaged, in consequences of the almost silence of the religious papers formerly, rendered a weekly publication necessary. But happily a great change has of late taken place: articles against popery are now appearing weekly, in almost every part of our country."¹⁶ The work of the magazine could be modified because others had stepped up to the plate. By 1845, there would be seventeen semi-monthly, monthly, weekly, and daily publications that explicitly identified as anti-Catholic.¹⁷

Reading the religious press of his day, Pierce Connelly wondered why the Protestants were so nervous about the Catholic minority in America. Was their faith so fragile as to be shaken by the presence of alternative theologies? In the church, Pierce wrote, "fear always is unreasonable; it is unchristian; and I thank God that it is so, for it is a cruel passion. I have so deep a faith in

¹⁴ See Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade 1800–1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 43.

¹⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, 53.

¹⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, 56.

¹⁷ See the compilation of anti-Catholic publications in *ibid.*, 445–48.

Christianity, that I am entirely willing to trust it to itself, and to the help of God.”¹⁸ Within months of leaving the Episcopal Church, Pierce and Cornelia would convert to Catholicism, and the husband set out on his way to Rome.

Catholic conversions, especially among Protestant ministers, were rare in the early nineteenth century. As historian Lincoln Mullen shows, it was not until the 1870s, with the rise of the missionary priest movement, that conversion to Catholicism became a viable option for Americans.¹⁹ No hard numbers for Catholic converts in the first four decades of the 1800s exist, and the most famous convert of the century – Orestes Brownson – did not embrace Catholicism until 1844. Converts like Pierce and Cornelia were a rare deviation from the norm, and the Protestants’ fears about Catholicism’s insidious influence were greatly exaggerated.

Meanwhile, the small Catholic minority rejoiced in their newest additions. The *Catholic Telegraph*, a weekly Cincinnati periodical, joyfully announced the Connelly conversion:

We boast not, neither do we vainly triumph. But we rejoice, even as the angels do in heaven, when we see the immortal soul reclaimed from the byepaths [*sic*] of error, and able and anxious to lead his deluded brethren into the way which alone conducts to salvation, after the wanderings and trials of the present life.²⁰

Predictably, Protestant papers, like the Philadelphia *Episcopal Recorder* and the New York *Churchman*, had much harsher words for Pierce’s spiritual odyssey. Upset at the uncensored glee with which the *Telegraph* presented Pierce’s conversion, the Episcopal *Churchman* opened its coverage of the event with some unflattering commentary on the Catholic papers:

The Romanist papers with the proselyting spirit which has long been the disgraceful characteristic of their priesthood, are rejoicing at an event which is rather fitted to penetrate every humane bosom with sentiments of grief, disgust, and pity. For our own part, we have read poor Connelly’s letter with feelings of surprise and sorrow.

Pierce’s personality wasn’t spared from attacks either. According to *The Churchman*, whatever “gleams of intelligence” Pierce’s resignation letter showed, they were, in fact, signs of incipient insanity: “Verily we may be pardoned for saying that the Protestant who flies to the Papal system for a refuge from fanaticism must be either a natural simpleton or bereft of his wits.”²¹

¹⁸ Connelly, *A Letter to the Right Reverend Dr. Otey*, 6–7.

¹⁹ Lincoln A. Mullen, “The Contours of Conversion to Catholicism in the Nineteenth Century,” *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 32, 2 (14 Aug. 2014), 1–27.

²⁰ “Rev. Pierce Connelly,” *Catholic Telegraph*, 21 Dec. 1835, 30.

²¹ “Mr. Connelly’s Letter to Bishop Otey,” *The Churchman*, 23 Jan. 1836.

Facetiously concerned for Pierce's mental health, the editors of *The Churchman* prayed, "God preserve him and restore him to a sound mind!"²²

The Churchman simply could not comprehend why someone who denounced fanaticism and blind faith (both of which were key themes in Pierce's resignation letter) would turn to Catholicism. The editors saw priestly celibacy and devotion to the authority of the Catholic hierarchy as the most troubling features of the denomination. They worried, too, about what would become of Pierce's family. If Pierce were to join the Catholic priesthood, he would be

renouncing the inalienable obligations of a husband and father, deepening even this dark shade of degradation by the accumulated cruelty of committing the wife and children whom God has confided to their trust, to the certain and hopeless misery, if not indeed to the doubtful purity, of a perpetual banishment from society! If this be not fanaticism, blind, pitiable fanaticism, we know not what is!²³

Without reservation, *The Churchman* condemned Pierce's deviation from the Protestant family ideal.

The Catholics took offense at such characterizations. The *Catholic Telegraph* opened its next article on the Connelly affair with a plea: "We appeal from the sentence of fanaticism and insanity, cruelly pronounced in the New York Churchman, of the 23rd Jan., against Mr. Pierce Connelly."²⁴ The *Telegraph* called the Protestant papers' coverage of the case intemperate and outright offensive. The *Catholic Herald* dismissed the *Churchman's* indictments as "ravings" and assured Pierce's Protestant critics that his wife and children were, in fact, "not, in the least, affected by the change of sentiment in Mr. Connelly." Pierce, according to the *Herald*, was still bound by the "sacred ties of a husband and a father," and the change in his religious orientation would not adversely affect his family. Finally, on the question of tone, the *Herald* chastised *The Churchman* for their uncharacteristically harsh treatment of the Connelys: "Consistency, good temper and kind words are more desirable than smooth periods in the columns of a Religious periodical."²⁵ Catholic and Protestant papers appealed to good manners and common courtesy even as they persistently undermined each other in their respective remarks.

Printed words had real-life consequences. Cornelia and Pierce were aware of the newspaper war that had broken out over their conversion, and Cornelia's extended family read *The Churchman*. To her sister Adeline, Cornelia wrote, "I expect you are a little dubious it not being very long since you

²² Ibid.

²⁴ "The Churchman and Mr. Connelly," *Catholic Telegraph*, 18 Feb. 1836, 5-12, 5.

²⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, 12.

²³ Ibid.

heard of [Pierce's] abjuration added to the abuse and disgust so plentifully poured out in the *Churchman*." To remedy her family's perception of the event, Cornelia asked that Adeline subscribe to the *Catholic Herald* and read their response: "Do not think of the expense[;] it is only 3 doll[ar]s a year and I dispense with a little luxury/that [*sic*] cost me a cent a day on purpose to have the pleasure of devoting it to that particular object."²⁶ The Catholic papers were worth the expense for Cornelia, and she asked that Adeline subscribe as well. Whether or not Adeline heeded Cornelia's request is unknown, but within a few years, Adeline would also convert to Catholicism.

For the time being, the feud between Protestant and Catholic papers subsided. In 1836, the Connellys sailed to Rome to be confirmed in the Catholic Church. Having become popular due to the sensationalism around their conversion, they spent the next two years in Europe – mostly in Rome, but also visiting Vienna, and getting familiar with the European Catholic elites.²⁷ Pierce began to entertain the idea of joining the Catholic priesthood. Back in 1836, the Catholic *Dublin Review*, in their celebratory article on Pierce's conversion, unequivocally stated that it was "to be regretted that Mr. Connelly's marriage state of necessity precludes him from entering the sacred ministry of our church."²⁸ But Pierce had a solution for that, too.

The couple briefly returned to the United States in 1838 and settled in Grand Coteau, Louisiana, home to a vibrant Catholic community. To study their new faith in earnest, the Connellys read Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* and other devotional classics. By 1840, they had three children and were expecting the fourth. That year also brought unexpected loss, when one of the children died in a tragic accident. Cornelia was heartbroken. Soon after, the composition and nature of the Connelly family would change once more. Early in 1841, Pierce suggested that the spouses begin living in chastity and end all marital relations while still living under one roof. Cornelia agreed. *The Churchman*'s jeremiads began to materialize into a strange new familial reality.

THE CELIBATE FAMILY

The decade following the Connellys' conversion was a tumultuous time for American Catholics. The anti-Catholic media commentary extended to

²⁶ Cornelia Connelly's letter to Adeline Peacock Duval (n.d.), Oscott archives, Birmingham, United Kingdom, at <https://corneliaconnellylibrary.org/library-materials/texts/Vol1.pdf>, accessed 5 Nov. 2016.

²⁷ Marmion, "Cornelia Connelly's Work in Education," 7.

²⁸ "Conversion of the Rev. Pierce Connelly," xii.

more than the occasional conversion scandal. The 1830s saw a rise in anti-Catholic publishing, including such sensational bestsellers as Rebecca Reed's *Six Months in a Convent* (1835) and Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures; Or, the Hidden Secrets of a Nun's Life in a Convent Exposed* (1836). Carefully crafted to nourish anti-Catholic sentiment, these books claimed to have been firsthand accounts of the horrors of convent life and of the abuses that innocent women suffered at the hands of Catholic priests. Fed by sensationalism and armed with nativist impulses, Protestant Americans responded to anti-Catholic rhetoric with violence. Back in 1834, an angry mob burned down the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts. A decade later, nativists incited the Philadelphia Bible Riots – a violent escalation of a conflict over the reading of the King James Bible in public schools that claimed the lives of at least fifteen people.²⁹ Pierce's fears about the extent of anti-Catholic prejudice among American Protestants were materializing, which may have been why the Connelys decided to move to Europe for good.

In 1845, after four years of celibacy, Cornelia took the vow of chastity in Rome. Soon after, Pierce petitioned Pope Gregory XVI to dissolve their marriage. The Pope granted the request, and Pierce could finally begin his preparations for ordination. The children were placed with their mother at the Convent of the Sacred Heart, with the exception of Mercer, the oldest, who entered a Jesuit college. The husband was promoted to the priesthood in July of 1845. All eventually settled in England, where Cornelia founded the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, while Pierce was assigned to serve as private chaplain to the Earl of Shrewsbury, a recusant nobleman.

Pierce's ordination was covered in American papers. The *Catholic Telegraph* and the *Catholic Herald* reported on the developments jovially. As they had done ten years earlier, these papers celebrated the converts' spiritual growth, writing that by embracing the life of chastity, the Connelys entered "into second but more holy espousals," as their children watched in admiration and took communion – for the first time, from their own father's hands.³⁰ The Protestant press was not amused; the familiar decade-old publishing rivalry was revived. The *Episcopal Recorder* quoted the *Herald* contemptuously and accused the Catholic Church of separating "those whom God hath joined together under the pretense of celebrating 'more holy espousals.'" ³¹ Other Protestants pointed out that this arrangement was

²⁹ On US anti-Catholicism in this period see Katie Oxx, *The Nativist Movement in America: Religious Conflict in the 19th Century* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

³⁰ *Catholic Herald*, quoted in "Rome," *Catholic Telegraph*, 23 Oct. 1845, 333.

³¹ "Conversions to Romanism," *Episcopal Recorder*, 25 Oct. 1845, 126.

scandalous not only because of Pierce's conversion, but also because it jeopardized the very foundation of society – the family. As one paper editorialized,

The family is broken up – ties, which nothing but death should sunder, are riven; the youngest child is placed in the hands of Prince somebody, to be taken care of, and the elder daughter is taught to venerate the mass, and perhaps before this has been placed in a nunnery under the control of unmarried priests, the wife herself leads a life of seclusion in a convent, and the husband becomes a priest, to spend his days in celibacy, never to see his family together again.³²

The not-so-subtle charge of sexual immorality thought to be inherent in Catholic practices served as yet another indictment of Pierce's conversion.

The grim picture of a shattered family that the Protestant newspapers painted was not quite accurate. At least initially, the couple maintained regular contact during weekly family visits (albeit only two hours at a time and in the presence of the children's nurse). Soon, however, the negative publicity that the Connellys attracted forced Cornelia's bishop and close confidant, Nicholas Wiseman, to limit familial visits, as he deemed it "provocative of scandal in Protestant England for the priest-husband and nun-wife to meet as they did in Rome."³³ The two youngest children were sent away to boarding school.

At the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, Cornelia quickly developed a curriculum for the general education of poor girls and excelled as a leader, teacher, and mentor. Pierce's new career progressed less smoothly. Unlike Cornelia, who appeared to thrive in her new environment, Pierce did not rise in the ranks of the Catholic hierarchy as quickly as he had hoped and he began to grow disillusioned with his new faith. With Cornelia on track to take the vow of poverty as the superior of her order in 1847, Pierce felt that he had not said the last word with regard to the affairs of his wife and her ministry. It occurred to the disgruntled priest that he was still technically responsible for his wife's finances. As Pierce explained in a letter to Bishop Wiseman,

Whereas I am responsible for the payment of all debts contracted by, or in the name and with the authority of, my wife ... I hereby protest against [her] being required or allowed to take any vow or vows binding her to any religious congregation whatsoever, before I shall have been fully satisfied of the sure, proper, and permanent endowment, and sufficient means, of the said religious congregation."³⁴

³² "Converts to Romanism," *Christian Secretary*, 31 Oct. 1845, 2.

³³ *Positio: Informatio for the Canonization Process of the Servant of God Cornelia Connelly (née Peacock), 1809–1979* (Rome: Sacred Congregation for the Causes of the Saints, 1987), 14.

³⁴ Pierce Connelly, "Cases before the Privy Council: Exhibit F" (letter of 24 Nov. 1847), quoted in Edmund F. Moore, *Reports of Cases Heard and Determined by the Judicial*

Pierce was technically right to be afraid. Under the Anglo-American common law known as “coverture,” the wife was the extension of her husband’s legal persona. A married woman could not make contracts, draft wills, or buy and sell property without her husband’s consent.³⁵ But Cornelia’s intention to take the vow of poverty made Pierce nervous for personal reasons as much as for financial ones. It was not just the potential for acquired debt that intimidated Pierce; the priest was also jealous of his wife’s accomplishments and wanted a piece of the pie that was Cornelia’s successful educational ministry.

Pierce had written several letters with recommendations for how to run the ministry, all of which Cornelia politely ignored. Feeling desperate, Pierce showed up at the convent unannounced and demanded a meeting with Cornelia in March of 1847. Cornelia refused to see him. Bishop Wiseman supported the decision and turned Pierce away. Wiseman would later write to Lord Shrewsbury and explain Pierce’s troubling behavior and Cornelia’s reasons for refusing to submit to Pierce’s will. According to Wiseman, since Pierce had given his “full consent” to Cornelia taking her vows and “signed a deed of separation” from Cornelia, he had “no rights as a husband whatever.”³⁶ Pierce’s ego was wounded.

Even after the incident, Cornelia tried to restore a sound relationship with her ex-husband. In May 1848, she wrote to Lord Shrewsbury and begged him to “undeceive Mr. Connelly of his hopes *of ever having any thing more to do with our Convent or our Rule.*”³⁷ But Lord Shrewsbury was not helpful. A year later, in a letter to Wiseman, Cornelia blamed the ongoing problem with Pierce’s meddling on Lord Shrewsbury’s and others’ “blindness on the

Committee and the Lords of His Majesty’s Most Honourable Privy Council, Volume VII (London: V. & R. Stevens and G. S. Norton, 1851), 463.

³⁵ Rick Geddes and Dean Lueck, “The Gains from Self-Ownership and the Expansion of Women’s Rights,” *American Economic Review*, 92, 4 (2002), 1079–92. See also William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, Book 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1765), 430: “By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs every thing; and is therefore called in our law-French *a feme-covert*; is said to be *covert-baron*, or under the protection and influence of her husband, her baron, or lord; and her condition during her marriage is called her coverture.”

³⁶ Bishop Nicholas Wiseman’s letter to Lord Shrewsbury (c.1847), quoted in Flaxman, *A Woman Styled Bold*, 125.

³⁷ Cornelia Connelly’s letter to Lord Shrewsbury (c.16 June 1848), Society of the Holy Child Jesus archives, Rome, Italy, at <https://corneliaconnollylibrary.org/library-materials/texts/Vol2.pdf>, accessed 5 Nov. 2016, original emphasis.

subject.”³⁸ Cornelia stated in no uncertain terms that Pierce’s intentions all along were to “break up [the] Order and ruin and upset the whole.”³⁹ She also believed that Pierce ultimately wanted to start another religious order, to which he hoped Cornelia would transfer so he could be in charge of his former wife. It is not altogether clear why Pierce wanted to sabotage Cornelia’s work or why he fantasized about having authority over her religious life, but Cornelia was convinced that this was the case and reiterated as much in a letter to Lady Shrewsbury in May 1849. Pierce’s object, she wrote, was to “force me to begin a new congregation under his guidance.”⁴⁰ Cornelia rejected Pierce’s attempts at interfering with her vocation. An English convent afforded this woman a level of independence that far surpassed anything that Pierce or Protestant domesticity had offered her in years past.

Pierce was upset, humiliated, and disillusioned with Catholicism. Converting was easy – the sensation it created back in 1835 brought Pierce some popular attention. Now, having given up his patriarchal control over his wife and children, he felt defeated and desperate. In an ironic twist, the same man who once found Catholicism’s authoritative power so compelling was now fighting against the implications of that power for his family. In a letter to Lord Shrewsbury, Pierce explained his uncompromising position and intended course of action:

The first of all my duties is to rescue my blessed wife from the hands of devils, & so help me God ... I will now never cease till Mrs Connelly is placed absolutely & unreservedly under my control ... Should I fail in the Court, I will carry it into the House of Commons, & will then make it an affair of the Amer[ican] Gover[nmen]t. And in so doing I believe verily I am doing Truth & the Church better service than any other way possible, even though I break up every Convent in England for fifty years to come.⁴¹

Since Pierce could not assert control over his ex-wife peacefully, he resorted to extreme measures. Pierce removed the three children from their schools (essentially kidnapping them), relocated them to Rome, and subsequently attempted to use them to extort Cornelia’s attention and incite drama. As if this was not enough, a few months later, Pierce decided to once again appear at the convent unannounced and demand a meeting with Cornelia. After being sent away the second time, Pierce turned to the courts.

³⁸ Cornelia Connelly’s letter to Bishop Wiseman (c.1849), Westminster Diocesan archives, London, United Kingdom, at <https://corneliaconnellylibrary.org/library-materials/texts/Vol2.pdf>, accessed 5 Nov. 2016. ³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Cornelia Connelly’s letter to Lady Shrewsbury (c.1848), Society of the Holy Child Jesus archives, Rome, Italy, at <https://corneliaconnellylibrary.org/library-materials/texts/Vol2.pdf>, accessed 5 Nov. 2016.

⁴¹ Quoted in Flaxman, 142; and in Denis G. Paz, *The Priesthoods and Apostasies of Pierce Connelly: A Study of Victorian Conversion and Anticatholicism* (Lewiston, NY: E.Mellen Press, 1986), 139.

CONNELLY V. CONNELLY AND ANOTHER CONVERSION

Pierce brought the suit “for the restitution of conjugal rights” against Cornelia in December of 1848 and renounced his Catholic faith five months later.⁴² These developments quickly became a transatlantic sensation for two reasons. First, the legal case captivated the British and American public because it happened to coincide with other mid-century negotiations of what marriage meant – ideologically and legally. Marriage was supposed to be a lifelong contract between two parties, but an increasing number of men and women found themselves unable or unwilling to remain in this particular living arrangement. In America, a handful of couples attempted to validate their separation through the courts in the 1830s and 1840s, but judges tended to protect the institution of marriage. They insisted that aside from the acceptable grounds for divorce (varying by state, but most often involving adultery or cruel treatment), husbands and wives could not break the marriage contract – regardless of whether one or both of them desired a separation.⁴³ This began to change in the late 1840s, as women’s rights advocates agitated for legal equality of the spouses in marriage – most famously in the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments, a product of the Seneca Falls Convention. The same year saw the introduction of the Married Women’s Property Act in the state of New York. Joining several other states in the union that already had similar laws in place, the provision allowed married women to maintain control over their property even after they entered the marriage contract. In England, divorce was not legalized until 1857. Before then, a legal separation could only be obtained by a Private Act of Parliament and only on the grounds of adultery, which in practical terms meant that it was accessible only to wealthy white men. As marriage, divorce, and spousal rights became more hotly contested at the mid-century, the Connelly scandal would provide a case study in the changing nature of marriage.

The second reason for the public’s close scrutiny of the Connelly developments was more provincial: yet another Connelly conversion simply made for fascinating newspaper material. Was the former Episcopalian who so publicly denounced his faith years ago really going back to it? For the commercial press, the story sold itself, while religious periodicals utilized the scandal to promote denominational agendas. Catholic newspapers used the story to didactically emphasize the necessity of post-conversion diligence in maintaining the new faith. Pierce, whom the *Catholic Herald* now called an “unhappy man,”

⁴² “Re-conversion,” *Christian Register*, 28 April 1849.

⁴³ On the many conservative judicial rulings in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries see Hendrik A. Hartog, “Marital Exits and Marital Expectations in Nineteenth Century America,” *Georgetown Law Journal*, 80, 95 (1991), 95–129.

apparently did not show sufficient “perseverance” in pursuing his Catholic devotion and therefore found himself in this awkward position.⁴⁴ Protestant papers, on the other hand, ridiculed Pierce’s initial conversion to Catholicism and pointed out the dangers of meandering between faiths. After all, they argued, Pierce secured his priesthood “by repudiating his family.”⁴⁵ The *Christian Witness and Church Advocate* nonetheless wished the best for Pierce – as long as he remained a layman and did not attempt to become a third kind of a minister in his short lifetime. “We trust,” the editors wrote, “he has come to a better mind, and will now spend his days in some suitable employment, as an humble, penitent, obedient, and peace-loving Christian, as some amends for the mischief and the scandal, which his former conduct has brought upon the cause of pure religion.”⁴⁶ Although this was not exactly a glowing endorsement, for the time being it seemed like the Protestants were moderately pleased to have Pierce back.

The London Court of Arches took up the Connelly case in May of 1849. Pierce’s side argued that Cornelia, “without any lawful cause, withdrew herself from cohabitation with her husband, and has ever since refused to return to cohabitation with him.”⁴⁷ These claims – about who initiated chastity and subsequent separation – were unequivocally false, and Cornelia contested the facts of the relationship. Her counsel argued that her conversion to the Catholic faith was done “with the full sanction and approval of her husband” and that it was Pierce, not Cornelia, who initiated living “in constant and perfect chastity, abstaining from sexual intercourse with each other, in order to the [*sic*] more fully devoting themselves mutually to the service of God,” after which Pierce began the process of ordination in the Catholic Church.⁴⁸ As part of the process, Cornelia was required to take the vow of perpetual chastity, which she did in 1845 – with Pierce’s consent and with the understanding that the vow was irreversible. Cornelia presented to the court the original certificate of the dissolution of her marriage issued in 1845 by Pope Gregory XVI. Since the separation was legal and mutual, Cornelia’s side argued, she should be allowed to remain in her current position and marital status.

Pierce’s lawyers challenged the legality of the separation. Did Rome have the authority to dissolve a marriage of two American citizens? Did a religious body, moreover, have the power to undermine a legal contract? Questions of

⁴⁴ *Catholic Herald*, quoted in “Rev. Pierce Connelly,” *United States Catholic Magazine*, 8, 18 (5 May 1849), 290.

⁴⁵ “Reconversion,” *Christian Witness and Church Advocate*, 13 April 1849, 34.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ “Connelly v. Connelly,” *The English Reports: Ecclesiastical, Admiralty, and Probate and Divorce*, Volume CLXIII (London: Stevens and Sons, 1919), 1291.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1292–93.

church–state boundaries puzzled both the courts and the observers in the press. Pierce’s lawyers argued that because English law allowed divorce only on the grounds of adultery, vows of chastity, poverty, or obedience had no legal bearing on the marriage contract between two parties, whether they lived separately or not. In response, Cornelia’s side questioned whether an English court had the jurisdiction to decide this case, since both the marriage and its dissolution took place in other countries. Besides, they pleaded, it would have been “monstrous to compel the wife, after the vows she has taken, to renew cohabitation.”⁴⁹ This was no easy marital controversy.

On 23 March 1850, Judge Herbert Jenner Fust delivered his decision. Fust dismissed any considerations of the law of Rome as applicable to this case, since it had been brought to the attention of an English court. He argued that because one of the primary features of a marriage contract in England was cohabitation, and since deeds of separation could be receded from by either party, Cornelia was to return to Pierce as his wife.⁵⁰ In the words of Fust, “Mrs. Connelly” was to be “compelled by law to return to her husband’s house and render him conjugal rights.”⁵¹ Cornelia appealed.

The London *Times*, which first reported on the decision, viewed the judgement favorably. *The Times* argued that the law of Rome did not apply in England and reiterated the court’s opinion that cohabitation was one necessary requirement of a marriage contract. Moreover, just as Pierce contended, since the husband was liable to cover his wife’s debts, Cornelia was not at liberty to become superior of any order that might enter into financial or legal contracts.⁵² In their coverage of the decision, the London *Observer* maintained a similar tone and emphasized Pierce’s financial ties to his wife as being the single most decisive factor in the judgement in his favor.⁵³ For the time being, American newspapers remained dispassionate and offered measured commentary on the case.⁵⁴ Once the appeal went to the judicial committee of the Privy Council, however, the tone, the content, and the temperament of the coverage changed dramatically on both sides of the Atlantic.

THE APPEAL

In 1851, the *Connelly v. Connelly* appeal was an international sensation. Why did it seem to hit a nerve with British and American readers alike? For one thing, militant nativism in both nations had reached a

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1303.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1310.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1313.

⁵² “Arches’ Court, Saturday, March 23,” *The Times*, 25 March 1850, 6.

⁵³ “Law Intelligence: Arches Court,” *The Observer*, 1 April 1850, 8.

⁵⁴ “Rev. Pierce Connelly,” *Christian Witness and Church Advocate*, 17 May 1850, 55; “Foreign Miscellany,” *Littell’s Living Age*, 18 May 1850, 313.

new high.⁵⁵ Although staunch anti-Catholicism in England was as old as Protestantism itself, a new wave of it consumed the country at the time of the Connellys' trial. The Great Famine had forced thousands of Irish Catholic men and women to relocate to England in the 1840s, and nativism, fueled by anti-immigrant rhetoric, was on the rise. The 1848 Revolutions and the ousting of Pope Pius IX from the Vatican had briefly given the most zealous Protestants hope for the collapse of Catholicism, but their enthusiasm was short-lived. Not only did the Pope return to Rome in 1850, but upon his return, Pius IX also announced the reestablishment of the Catholic hierarchy in England, in part to respond to the dramatic increase in the Catholic population. Not since the sixteenth-century reign of Mary Tudor had there been an expansive and fully functioning Catholic ecclesiastical structure in England.

Cornelia's bishop, Nicholas Wiseman, was named the Cardinal Archbishop of the diocese of Westminster. The majority Protestant public, used to mere toleration of the Catholics, was outraged. They wrote letters to Protestant newspapers decrying the evils and inherent anti-scriptural spirit of Catholicism.⁵⁶ They burned effigies of the Pope, Cardinal Wiseman, and other Catholic bishops and rallied around the "No Popery" and "No Puseyism" cries.⁵⁷ Protestant newspapers referred to the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy as "Papal Aggression" and mercilessly condemned the Pope, Wiseman, and anyone else on the "wrong" side of the interdenominational battle.⁵⁸ The Connelly case played into this fight. According to one historian, the petrified Protestant public now anxiously awaited the verdict with some pressing questions in mind: "Would England's highest ecclesiastical court uphold the sanctity of marriage and return the wife to the husband?" Or would it "condone Romish beliefs and allow a separation based on the twin evils of celibacy and religious life"?⁵⁹

In the United States, the case had similarly high stakes. The nativist Philadelphia Bible Riots of 1844 were still fresh in American memory.⁶⁰ With the rise in immigration from Germany, Ireland, and Italy, Americans grew more suspicious of their new Catholic neighbors' allegiances. The year 1850 also marked a moment in which numerous nativist secret orders began to coalesce into a political movement, eventually culminating in the united

⁵⁵ See, for instance, Edward R. Norman, *Anti-Catholicism in Victorian England* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968).

⁵⁶ See, for instance, "Correspondence," *Preston Guardian*, 7 Dec. 1850.

⁵⁷ "Burning in Effigies of the Pope, Cardinal Wiseman, and His Twelve Bishops, at Brasten, Kent," *York Herald and General Advertiser*, 21 Dec. 1850.

⁵⁸ See, for instance, Eleanor McNeese, "Punch and the Pope: Three Decades of Anti-Catholic Caricature," *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 37, 1 (2004), 18–45.

⁵⁹ Flaxman, *A Woman Styled Bold*, 149.

⁶⁰ See Oxx, *The Nativist Movement in America*, 53–82.

“Know Nothing” party. As they would time and again throughout American history, US Protestants feared that their country was in great danger due to foreign influence.

It was in this atmosphere that Cornelia’s appeal went to the judicial committee of the Privy Council in June of 1851. Cornelia’s lawyers contended that the marriage separation, the vows of religious profession, and Pierce’s ordination “had the force and effect in law of a judicial sentence, or decree of divorce, or separation.” Compelling Cornelia, “a sincere believer in the Roman Catholic tenets,” to return to her husband would violate her religious freedom. Religious toleration, Cornelia’s lawyers insisted, extended to the legal recognition of matters like marriage and spousal separation, regardless of whether a “foreign law” sanctioned either. Besides, the lawyers argued, Pierce’s mercurial conduct had already come at a high price for his wife and family. Since Pierce was the initiator of the conversion, the move to Europe, and the vows of chastity, “it would be the highest cruelty that could be exercised by the Court, to compel [Cornelia], under such circumstances, to re-cohabit with her husband.”⁶¹

Pierce’s side pointed out that restoring the marriage did not technically presume that Cornelia’s vows of perpetual chastity would be broken. “The Court,” they said, “cannot compel husband and wife to do more than reside under the same roof; it can compel cohabitation, but nothing more, and Mrs. Connelly may, therefore, live with her husband without any infringement on the vows taken by her.” Pierce’s lawyers went so far as to say that if Pierce were to force Cornelia to break the vow of chastity, then – and only then – would she have a legitimate reason to seek divorce, on account of “legal cruelty.” This suggestion the court found laughable, and here Chief Baron Sir Frederick Pollock interjected and asked, rhetorically, “Is the Court to bring the parties together, and then, if the necessary consequences resulting from it ensued, separate them again?” Abandoning this troubling line of reasoning, Pierce’s lawyers proceeded to argue that since, according to the English doctrine, marriage constituted a contract, it could not be “dissolved by voluntary agreement of the parties, being a matter of municipal regulation, over which the parties have no control.” They closed with reiterating that this was not a question of religious toleration, but one of the legality of marriage.⁶²

The Protestant press echoed the same argument. An impassioned editorial from the London *Times* pointed out that the Catholic Emancipation Act “gave no sanction to an interference with the obligations of the matrimonial

⁶¹ “Connelly v. Connelly,” *The English Reports: Privy Council*, Volume XIII (Edinburgh: R. & R. Clark, 1901), 949–66, 960–62.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 963–65.

law of the land.” *The Times* also worried that this case was only the tip of the iceberg in terms of Catholicism’s expanding reach in England. The status of Catholicism as a “tolerated religion” did not entitle it, the editorial reasoned, to influence over the law of the land. The court, *The Times* argued, had to ignore claims of religious protection made by minority religions and focus instead on international law.⁶³

Overwhelmed by the number of moving pieces, the Right Honorable Dr. Lushington delivered the court’s opinion: that the matter would not be considered further until the court had sufficiently studied the marriage law of Pennsylvania and understood the precise nature of the Connellys’ “domicile” (i.e. marital arrangements) during their stay in Rome, when the official separation was granted by the Pope.⁶⁴ The Court of Arches made a subsequent hearing conditional on Pierce’s ability to pay for the legal costs of the case. Ironically, since Pierce insisted that he and Cornelia were still married in the eyes of the law, and since the husband was responsible for the wife’s debts under coverture, Pierce was supposed to cover the legal fees of both sides in the case. When Pierce’s money was exhausted, so was the case. For all intents and purposes, the suit against Cornelia ended, but the court of public opinion continued to battle it out in the press.

Not surprisingly, Protestant and Catholic papers diverged in their coverage of the case, each adding a different twist on the story in their retelling. The London *Times*, for instance, spent a whole paragraph discussing how the Catholic Church violated “the most sacred of contracts” by approving the Connellys’ request to dissolve their marriage. “Probably, however,” the article continued, “the Roman Ordinary regarded a marriage of American Episcopalians in the city of Philadelphia as a mere civil contract; for Rome, which imposes a religious sanction on her own acts of authority, denies that sanction even to the churches of foreign nations.”⁶⁵ *The Times* charged Rome with poor international etiquette in its blatant disregard for the temporal boundaries of authority between nation-states.

The Times also continued to worry about how foreign Catholic doctrine might affect English law. Surely, the editors pleaded, a religiously motivated separation granted in Rome could not have legal bearing in England. *The Times* accused Rome of exercising an unsanctioned level of influence by assuming “this extraordinary power of abrogating Mrs. Connelly’s marriage vow” and claimed that the case demonstrated “that the spiritual power of Rome may, under pretext of liberty of conscience, be intruded into matters of an

⁶³ “Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, Saturday, June 28,” *The Times*, 30 June 1851, 7.

⁶⁴ “Connelly v. Connelly,” 966.

⁶⁵ “The Proceedings Which We Have Lately Had Occasion,” *The Times*, 2 July 1851, 5.

essentially temporal character, affecting marriage, legitimacy, and even criminal justice.” Playing on old stereotypes of Catholics’ primary allegiance to Rome, *The Times* warned its readers that the “intrusion on such grounds is in the highest degree dangerous, and any such excess of power tends to deprive the Romish judicature not only of the obedience due to Papal authority, but even of the respect paid to all foreign courts of law by the comity of nations.”⁶⁶

Somewhat surprising was the response of another London publication, *The Spectator*. Despite being a decidedly Protestant (though not fanatically anti-Catholic) periodical, *The Spectator* unexpectedly sided with Cornelia.⁶⁷ Rhetorically joining her lawyers, *The Spectator* defended this Catholic’s freedom of conscience and religion. To begin with, the editors “regretted” that the Connelly case was even heard by the English courts, since it involved “two questions that ought to be kept distinct, – the right of the ecclesiastical chief of Rome to override the marriage law of other countries, and the right of an individual husband to enforce upon his wife that which must in her estimation be criminal.” The marital separation, *The Spectator* affirmed, was consensual – with both parties deciding to live in celibacy and, ultimately, to dissolve the marriage. Reversing that decision would violate both Cornelia’s rights and her conscience. After all, they wrote, she “must regard as sacrilege” to be compelled to return to her husband after taking the vow of chastity. To return Cornelia to Pierce would also jeopardize the rights of all English citizens with regard to religious liberty: “Deny the right of Rome to retain her, and you may with equal justice deny to every converted priest the right to officiate in his adopted church.” Let Cornelia remain a Catholic, *Spectator* argued, lest all religious liberty be compromised.⁶⁸

As *The Spectator* introduced a liberal interpretation of the case, other Protestant publications joined in. London’s *Leader* and the *Liverpool Mercury*, for example, simply reported the facts of the proceedings without inserting much commentary on the matter, aside from occasionally using anti-Catholic buzzwords like “Romish” and explaining to their Protestant readership that Pierce and Cornelia were now respectively known as Father and Mother Connelly. News of the appeal reached America in mid-July.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ In the 1850s, *The Spectator* was admittedly more measured than *The Times* or *The Standard* (and called both out for being unnecessarily outraged by the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in 1850). Nonetheless, *The Spectator* frequently affirmed its own Protestant preference, as for example in this statement with regard to the restoration of the hierarchy: “We believe that Popery cannot live in the free atmosphere of England, now becoming freer every day.” See “Rome in England,” *The Spectator*, 26 Oct. 1850.

⁶⁸ “The Connelly Case,” *The Spectator*, 5 July 1851, 5.

The *New York Herald*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *Alexandria Gazette*, the *Boston Courier*, *The Constitution*, and *The Sun* all reprinted the *London Times* article. The *Evening Post*, the *Boston Evening Transcript*, the *Hartford Daily Courant*, the *New York Observer*, and the *Christian Witness and Church Advocate* went with the more moderate accounts of the case presented by the *Leader* and the *Mercury*. For the first time in the coverage of the Connelly scandals, lines between denominational allegiance and partisan support of one of the Connellys were becoming blurry. There was something compelling about Cornelia's cause and something suspicious about Pierce's perpetual wavering. Even the Protestants recognized that.

PIERCE'S PROTESTANTISM 2.0

Seeing that the public was not on his side, Pierce tried to distract them from one scandal by manufacturing another. As his legal case reached an impasse, Pierce embarked on a one-man crusade against the entire Catholic religion. Unable to reclaim his wife, he began to channel his energy into the business of anti-Catholic pamphleteering. Not accustomed to settling religious doubts privately, Pierce published his letter of explanation of the second conversion to the Earl of Shrewsbury. In *Reasons for Abjuring Allegiance to the See of Rome*, Pierce affirmed his faith in the necessity of church hierarchy, just as he did in 1835, but renounced the blind obedience that he now thought flowed from the Catholic belief in the Pope's "supreme headship over Christendom."⁶⁹ Advertised and cited in dozens of English and American newspapers, Pierce's pamphlet explained that the loss of reason and sound judgement was too high a price to pay for spiritual obedience – just as the Protestant press had warned back in 1835.

Like other anti-Catholic writers, Pierce also jumped on the bandwagon of sensational allegations and salacious innuendo. He focussed specifically on the alleged hypocrisy that, according to him, went hand in hand with the Catholic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The vow of poverty, he argued, was a joke – since luxury and excess were never abolished in Rome; the only real prohibition being individual ownership, with no restrictions on communal property or wealth. The vow of chastity did not, in practice, mean celibacy, since "Rome sets upon the purity of those who minister at her altars" only "the comparative value" and practices "habitual disregard of this obligation, provided it be modest, that is, provided there be no public scandal." Finally, the vow of obedience gave clergy unmitigated access to the minds and bodies of the devout and constituted a "Holocaust wherein the

⁶⁹ Connelly, *Reasons for Abjuring Allegiance to the See of Rome*, 3.

whole man, without any reserve whatever, is immolated to his Creator by the hands of his minister.”⁷⁰ The possibility for abuse of power in this scenario seemed, for Pierce, unconscionable, especially in England. That a “Protestant nation” like England would “tolerate convents of English nuns,” Pierce argued, was scandalous. English women who converted and joined Catholic convents were, according to Pierce, “not only slaves,” but “secret prisoners for life.”⁷¹

Pierce had always had a flare for the dramatic, but in *Reasons for Abjuring Allegiance* he held nothing back; it was almost as if he had a deeply personal stake in the matter. Pierce failed to mention, of course, that Cornelia had voluntarily and on multiple occasions expressed her desire to remain in the convent. Proceeding from hypotheticals to particularities, Pierce cited a number of instances of moral and sexual impurity among the Catholic clergy, including an alleged attempted assault on Cornelia herself (which Pierce incidentally failed to mention in any of the court documents). After recounting a handful of clerical improprieties and seductions that he had allegedly witnessed, Pierce went on to say that he had been promised an investigation into the immoral conduct of a young priest whom he caught naked (“before there had been time for him to dress himself”) in a bedroom with a nun (“apparently as much at home as her confessor was himself”). To Pierce’s horror, the investigation was never conducted.⁷²

Pierce closed the pamphlet with a jeremiad on the dangers of Catholicism in places like England. In all capital letters, Pierce wrote, “If there is ever to be either political or social regeneration for Europe, if the continent is ever to be anything better than a half-way Hades, my solemn conviction is, it must be by the annihilation of the whole ecclesiastical system of the papacy.”⁷³ Toleration, Pierce argued, gave too much religious freedom to the essentially autocratic Catholicism. It was up to the forward-thinking Protestant Englishmen to redeem their women, their country, and their part of the world from the corrupting influence of Catholicism. (This was quite the reversal in Pierce’s attitude toward the English, since only ten years earlier, Pierce had a different take on the nature of England and Englishmen: “What is the use of praying for such a people?” he wrote, “For even when converted to the Catholic faith, they retain their *Saxon* heart, and their viper’s tooth.”⁷⁴) Pierce ended his pamphlet by saying that while he respected the sincere faith of some Catholics, he could not, in good conscience, hold on to it himself, having seen the abuses and dangers within the church.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 4–5.

⁷¹ Ibid., 5.

⁷² Ibid., 10.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Quoted in “Family Quarrels,” *New York Evangelist*, 6 Jan. 1842, original emphasis.

Most Protestant papers welcomed Pierce's anti-Catholic pamphlets.⁷⁵ The Scottish Reformation Society's *Bulwark*, an anti-Catholic paper, which, according to one scholar, "specialized in lurid woodcuts and stories of lecherous monks and blood-thirsty torturers," praised Pierce's literary achievements.⁷⁶ London's *Morning Herald* quoted from *Reasons for Abjuring Allegiance* liberally. Cornelia read both Pierce's pamphlet and the *Herald*. Her archives contain marginalia written in another one of Pierce's pamphlets. In response to the *Herald*'s allegations that she was "illegally detained by Romish ecclesiastics in the nunnery in Hastings," for example, Cornelia wrote of herself in the third person, "But Mrs. C[onnelly] knows better what she wants for herself than the *Morning Herald* can know."⁷⁷ In the end, Cornelia remained unmoved by either publicized newspaper sensationalism or Pierce's private pleas.

Catholic papers predictably sided with Cornelia. The London *Tablet* dismissed Pierce as a "filthy old man" and a "miserable and guilty wretch" who was merely exploiting his story to enjoy his fifteen minutes of fame. "He will have his day and fret his hour upon the stage of life – perhaps for a few years, perhaps only for a few moments," *The Tablet* predicted, "Like Achilli and Maria Monk, and others of the class to which he too clearly belongs, he will run his course, and will square his account with truth in the fatal hour which, unless he repents, will draw him in, soul and body, to a very dismal reckoning."⁷⁸

American newspapers' responses to Pierce's pamphlet varied from unadulterated praise to cautious suspicion. Herman Hooker, an Episcopal minister and Philadelphia publisher, reprinted Pierce's letter for the American audience in early 1852. The *Charleston Courier* carried an advertisement for *Reasons for Abjuring Allegiance* on a nearly weekly basis between 1852 and 1854. Newspapers like the *Christian Witness and Church Advocate* liberally quoted from the pamphlet's sensationalist allegations, but acknowledged that Pierce's commercial success far outweighed his efforts at dismantling Catholicism in practice: "He has succeeded in his book much more successfully than he has in prosecuting his [conjugal rights] suit."⁷⁹

⁷⁵ London newspapers and periodicals that covered Pierce's pamphlets included *The Bulwark* (Oct. 1853), the *Protestant Magazine* (Oct. 1853), the *Morning Advertiser* (22 Aug. 1853), *The Standard* (24 Aug. 1853), the *Morning Herald* (26 Aug. 1853, 8 Sept. 1853); *Britannia* (27 Aug. 1853, 10 Sept. 1853), *John Bull* (29 Aug. 1853, 10 Sept. 1853), the *St. James Chronicle* (8 Sept. 1853), *The Times* (8 Sept. 1853). See Paz, *The Priesthoods and Apostasies of Pierce Connelly*, 178.

⁷⁶ Paz, 175.

⁷⁷ *Positio*, 171.

⁷⁸ *The Tablet*, 1 May 1852, p. 281.

⁷⁹ "Pierce Connelly's Developments," *Christian Witness and Church Advocate*, 17 Sept. 1852, 1; "Recantation," *Christian Witness and Church Advocate*, 4 March 1853, 14.

Less enthusiastic reception came from publications like *Church's Bizarre*, a Philadelphia monthly, whose editor Joseph M. Church was a friend of Pierce's US publisher. The *Bizarre* took a measured approach to evaluating Pierce's claims regarding the Catholic Church. The paper lauded the pamphlet's successful sales, but cast aspersions on the author's credibility. "If the reader peruses this letter, we think he can scarce help being shocked and horrified: though whether those feelings attach to Catholicism or Mr. Connelly will depend on whether he believes its statements true or not true." If the reader concluded that Pierce's statements were true, the *Bizarre* argued, then Catholicism would indeed be "more diabolical and dangerous" than any other religion. If the reader doubted Pierce's allegations, however, then the only logical conclusion would be that Pierce was "a person for whose blackness of depravity no name is sufficiently strong."⁸⁰ The choice was not immediately clear.

Even the *New York Sunday Times*, de facto Protestant in its positions, rejected Pierce's musings and characterized them as fanatical:

The anti-Catholic party are trying to raise funds to compel Mrs. Connelly the abbess, to return to her husband, (who voluntarily dismissed her from bed and board, years ago,) and the ancient spinsters are wonderfully interested in the matter, as well as sundry old women, in and out of petticoats.⁸¹

Of course, the Connelly scandal went far beyond compelling the town gossips. Within two years, the Know Nothing party would use Pierce's anti-Catholic propaganda in its own publication – the 1855 edition of *The Know Nothing Almanac and True Americans' Manual*.⁸² By then, the scandal had moved from the gossipy lips of "sundry old women" and onto the reading eyes and minds of "true Americans" as well.

CONCLUSION

Despite the scandal, Cornelia quickly recovered and her ministry continued to flourish. In 1858, the year Pierce's lawsuit was officially dismissed, he and the children moved to Brussels and eventually settled in Florence, where Pierce spent the rest of his life. Cornelia never saw her children again. Many a hagiography would present Cornelia's loss of the children as the ultimate sacrifice and testimony to her devotion. The movement for her beatification began in

⁸⁰ "Reasons for Abjuring Allegiance to the See of Rome," *Church's Bizarre*, 7 Aug. 1852, 279.

⁸¹ *New York Sunday Times*, quoted in "European Chit Chat," *Charleston Courier*, 22 Sept. 1853.

⁸² *The Know Nothing Almanac and True Americans' Manual* (New York: De Witt & Davenport, 1855), 58.

1953, seventy-four years after her death. In the end, scandal brought positive publicity to her cause.

Pierce also lived his last decades as a religious man. Already in 1853, he sought reinstatement as an Episcopal minister and soon began to pastor a small expatriate church in Florence.⁸³ For a time, the enthusiasm around his case brought in a small camp of supporters – some zealously anti-Catholic financial contributors who pleaded with the English public to stand by Pierce because his case was “directly affecting the first great principles of British liberty, and involving no less a question than whether the law of Rome or the law of England shall prevail in these realms.”⁸⁴ Over the years, however, even Pierce’s supporters grew skeptical, and the publicity around his sensationalist claims subsided. No amount of anti-Catholic sentiment could supersede people’s dislike of Pierce Connelly’s personality. He was, according to many, a wavering, opportunistic, and misguided zealot. As one US Protestant clerical acquaintance of Pierce remembered,

Mr. Connelly was a weak, vain man, of slender pretensions as a preacher or a scholar. His attainments were superficial, and his powers of analysis and logic uncommonly limited ... He had, like most men of little minds, an ambition or a passion to be popular with the rich and proud.⁸⁵

Pierce never achieved the greatness he sought. He outlived Cornelia by four years, but his legacy pales in comparison.

The Connellys were a sensation twice – first in 1835 and again in the early 1850s. In the decade and a half between Pierce’s two conversions, the media had changed in profound ways, as had the American and British public. In 1835, only a handful of religious newspapers covered the Connellys’ conversion. The burgeoning press market used the scandal to assert denominational authority and to undermine their rivals’ theologies and journalistic tactics. For Protestants, Pierce’s conversion story was an omen for what un-American influences could do to even the highest offices within the church. For the Catholic minority, the case illustrated how the power of divine truth could penetrate even the most hardened, nativist American hearts. Over the next fifteen years, these tensions continued to grow, and by 1851, the Connellys’ religious and familial drama turned into a full-blown international sensation.

The scandal of the Connelly trial was no longer merely about religious adherence or denominational preference: it spelled out the anxieties of the

⁸³ “Episcopal Ordination,” *Achill Missionary Herald and Western Witness*, 28 June 1853.

⁸⁴ “Case of the Rev. Pierce Connelly,” *The Times*, 16 Aug. 1853, 6.

⁸⁵ Handwritten note attributed to James S. Johnston in the *Journal of Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church* (New Orleans, 1835), quoted in Paz, *The Priesthoods and Apostasies of Pierce Connelly*, 40.

increasingly democratizing and diverse new world with which American and British papers were forced to grapple. The second scandal neatly tied together global concerns about the limits of religious freedom and tested the boundaries of civil and ecclesiastical authority, church–state relations, and international law. The Connelly story piqued public interest, provided space for cutting-edge commentary, and encouraged readers to draw their own conclusions about the legitimacy of sensationalism’s subjects’ claims. By the mid-century, the genre of scandal had become a vehicle for working out the political and legal mechanics of the new, increasingly complex and mobile world.

The wide acceptance and utilization of scandal as a genre also opened doors for unexpected discoveries. It presented private lives in a new light and challenged public perceptions of the most profound questions of the day. The Connelly case demonstrates how scandal allowed for and enabled a more nuanced public discussion of the contentious issues of the age. Scholars of anti-Catholicism have argued that, by the 1850s, the average American Protestant “had been trained from birth to hate Catholicism” through the medium of reading. “His juvenile literature and school books had breathed a spirit of intolerance,” writes one historian, “his religious and even his secular newspapers had warned him of the dangers of Popery; and he had read novels, poems, gift books, histories, travel accounts, and theological arguments which confirmed these beliefs.”⁸⁶ Indeed, the evidence for the profound partisan literature of the age abounds. Yet the Connelly case also provides a counterexample to the tendency to divide the reading public strictly along religious lines. The fact that so many nondenominational (but still Protestant) newspapers sided with Cornelia and dismissed Pierce’s claims speaks to a new spirit that the mid-century transatlantic press had ushered in. Nativism, of course, still reigned supreme, and religion was, as always, a contested topic, but the wide interest in the Connelly drama produced opinions that did not always square with denominational boundaries and ideological allegiances. Protestants defended Cornelia’s right to exercise her freedom of conscience and to practice Catholicism in a foreign convent. They were also increasingly suspicious of Pierce’s motivations and weary of his constant religious wavering. If the evidence of public reaction to the Connelly scandal in the mid-1830s revealed strict denominational adherence, press coverage in the 1850s would signal a new era – with more competing voices, closer journalistic scrutiny, and a reexamining of the boundaries of religion, marriage, and the law through scandal.

⁸⁶ Billington, *The Protestant Crusade*, 345.

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