

Holy Cross History Association

Orestes Brownson and Education in 19th Century America

Brother William Dygert, C.S.C., Ph.D.

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This paper is about Orestes Brownson. In it, I will attempt to inform you about who Orestes Brownson was, about his connection to the University of Notre Dame, and about what he had to say concerning education in the United States, one of the many topics he addressed during his adult lifetime.

Orestes Brownson was a 19th Century journalist who was considered one of the most controversial religious, social, and political thinkers of the nineteenth century.¹ His switches in religious affiliations and from radical to conservative views made him a unique thinker and one whose influence was felt in many of the major issues of his day.² He has been referred to variously as the greatest writer of the 19th century, a radical and social reformer, a literary critic, a political theorist, a philosopher and patriot, a master Catholic apologist and champion of Catholicity, and a logician of the first order.³ John Henry Newman was said to have referred to him as a person who had no equal.⁴ He is also listed as a transcendentalist along with such figures as Bronson Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau, and he was a member of the "Transcendental Club."⁵

Bronson was born in Stockbridge, Vermont, on September 16, 1803, and raised by an elderly New England Congregationalist couple. Early in his life he developed a love for reading,

¹ Lapati, 41.

² Lapati, 163.

³ McMahon, 1.

⁴ Shepherd, 1.

⁵ Wineapple, 9.

but his formal education consisted only of a brief stay at an academy in Ballston Spa, New York, when he was 14 years old.⁶

Religion and controversy occupied important places in his life from his early years. In 1822, he became Presbyterian, in 1824, he considered himself a Universalist and was ordained a minister and served until 1829 when he abandoned the ministry, and essentially religion. He became a skeptic and unbeliever in Christianity. However, when he came to the realization that religion was an important part of life, he began to function as an independent minister and then as a Unitarian until October 20, 1844, when he was baptized and confirmed as a Catholic.⁷

He was also a long time Democrat, but in an article in the *Boston Quarterly Review* of July, 1840, he condemned among other things the modern industrial system especially the system of wages for labor. Because of this article, he was viewed as a socialist, and the Whig party claimed that his ideas as expressed in this article were the objectives of the Democratic Party. They were not, and Democrats were horrified. President Van Buren, a Democrat, who was a candidate for a second term blamed Brownson's article as the main cause of his defeat by William Henry Harrison, a Whig.⁸ The historian Arthur Schlesinger considered Brownson to be the American precursor to Karl Marx.⁹

Brownson reviewed thousands of books and is said to be the most voluminous writer in America, having written about 2,500,000 words in his *Quarterly Review*.¹⁰ He also served as an

⁶ Roemer, 2.

⁷ Brownson, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*.

⁸ Heltzel, 13.

⁹ Wineapple, 9.

¹⁰ Shepherd, 1.

editor, and a publisher of numerous religious and secular journals, and even wrote novels and an autobiography.¹¹

In order to be unhampered by editorial restrictions, Brownson founded his own magazine which was first called the *BOSTON QUARTERLY REVIEW* and after his conversion to Catholicism, *BROWNSON'S QUARTERLY REVIEW*.¹² When he became Catholic, he used this journal, at first, in defense of his new faith, and later to comment on the questions of the day from a Catholic viewpoint¹³. Despite his lack of formal schooling, he was a leading Catholic intellectual of nineteenth-century America.¹⁴ His views attracted considerable attention: He helped mold the minds of his audience on questions of the day.¹⁵ And, as with many other topics, he has much to say about education, which will be address later in this paper.

But first, what was his connection to the University of Notre Dame? As you may be aware, his is buried in the central aisle of the crypt chapel of Sacred Heart Basilica. There was also a building named after him, Brownson Hall, which was the second oldest building still remaining on the campus until it was torn down in 2019.¹⁶ Brownson Hall was completed in 1855, and designed by Fr. Sorin and Brother Francis Xavier Patois. First, it was a student dorm, and then until well into the 1950's a convent for the Sisters of the Holy Cross who served at Notre Dame,

¹¹ Lapati, 11-13.

¹² Roemer, 8.

¹³ Lapati, 41.

¹⁴ McDonnell, 124.

¹⁵ Whalen, viii.

¹⁶ Lyons, 1-7.

and most recently housed offices of many Notre Dame programs including the Remick Leaders Program of the Alliance for Catholic Education.¹⁷

In addition to Brownson Hall, the crypt chapel where he is buried at one time was called the Brownson Memorial Chapel. In 1884, a portrait of him was placed in Washington Hall, and in 1890, one of the student dorms in the Main Building was also called Brownson Hall.¹⁸

According to most sources, he never stepped foot on the Notre Dame campus during his lifetime, but ten years after his death, he was re-buried at Notre Dame. Fr. Sorin was apparently impressed by Brownson who as a philosopher, essayist, and master of Catholic apologetics was considered one of the most famous and remarkable persons of his time.¹⁹ In 1862, Sorin invited Brownson to come to Notre Dame to teach a number of subjects, but Brownson declined because the schedule he was presented with, given his health, was too rigorous for him.

When Sorin started the *Ave Maria Magazine* in 1865, he asked Brownson to write for it, and Brownson contributed several articles to the magazine, most about the Blessed Virgin Mary. He even won a prize for one of his essays in a contest sponsored by Fr. Sorin with a prize of \$200 in gold for the best essay on the Blessed Virgin.²⁰

After the death of his wife, Brownson was offered a home at Notre Dame by Fr. Sorin, but Brownson declined for the time being, retired, and moved to Detroit to live with his son. Several times, Brownson had expressed a desire to spend his final days at Notre Dame, but he died in

¹⁷ Issues and News, 1-2.

¹⁸ Hope, 7-8.

¹⁹ Heltzel, 13.

²⁰ Hope, 7-8.

Detroit in April of 1876, before a move to ND could happen, and was buried in Detroit. In July of 1886, ten years after his death, during the administration of Father Thomas Walsh, Brownson's body was moved to Notre Dame and reburied in the crypt of Sacred Heart Church.²¹ Also, Brownson's books and papers are housed in the Notre Dame archives, and in October of 1953, Notre Dame sponsored a symposium commemorating the 150th anniversary of his birth.²²

As I mentioned earlier, Orestes Brownson had much to say about many things, including Catholic education, which, as is the case of many other topics, was addressed in his journal.

In order to really understand Brownson's perspective on Catholic education and the school question, a burning issue of his time, it is important to understand the nature of the school question itself, and Brownson's world view. Brownson was a native born American who had been brought up in the East and raised a Protestant, and although his formal schooling was limited to less than one year, he not only taught in the public schools, but he sent all of his children to them. He had experience of public schools as an educator and as a parent. In addition, education to Brownson was more than schooling. He believed that education had to be moral and religious as well as intellectual, but one could be taken care of by parents and pastors while the other was to be addressed in secular schools.²³

For Catholics of the day, the school question was whether or not the Catholic Church should erect and maintain parochial schools for the primary education of its children. Embedded in this question were several other issues. What was the Catholic Church's position on public

²¹ Hope, 7-8.

²² Murphy, 1.

²³ McDonnell, 124-125.

schools? How would Catholic schools be financed? And who has the right to educate children: The state, parents, the church? Questions which are still being asked and addressed today.

The official position of the church in the United States on the school question was stated by various provincial and plenary councils. In 1829, the First Provincial Council of Baltimore stated that “...schools should be established in which the young may be taught the principals of faith and morality, while instructed in letters.” Between 1829 and 1852, the seven Provincial Councils of Baltimore formed a committee to supervise the preparation of textbooks and instructed pastors to forbid Catholic students in public schools to use the Protestant Bible, prayers, or hymns.²⁴ In 1858, the Second Provincial Council of Cincinnati obligated pastors to form parochial schools in every parish.²⁵

The three Plenary Councils of Baltimore also addressed the school question. The First in 1852 exhorted bishops to establish a school in connection with all churches in their dioceses.²⁶ The Second Council in 1866 was content to let the decrees of previous councils stand.²⁷ And the Third Plenary Council in 1884 made the most definitive statement when it said that where parochial schools existed, they were to be continually perfected, that parents were to be obliged by pastors to send their children to these schools, that where no parish school currently existed, one was to be erected within two years of the decree, and that these parochial schools were to be maintained forever unless the bishop because of grave difficulties should judge otherwise.²⁸

²⁴ Reilly, 3.

²⁵ Reilly, 22.

²⁶ Reilly, 16.

²⁷ Reilly, 21.

²⁸ Reilly, 32.

Politicians also had their views on the topic. Typical of the establishment viewpoint was that expressed by President Grant in a speech delivered in 1875. “Encourage free schools, and resolve that not one dollar appropriated for their support shall be appropriated for the support of any sectarian schools.”²⁹

Brownson’s view of the experiment in America in forming a new democracy and its compatibility with Catholicism influenced his view of schooling in America. Brownson loved God, country, and truth.³⁰ He thought that Catholicism was the religion needed to achieve and preserve national greatness,³¹ and he appealed to Catholics to be firm in their faith and fearless in asserting their rights as Christians, citizens, and men.³² Brownson wanted to Catholicize America and to Americanize Catholics.³³ He felt that the church and the state must continue to exist together and cooperate. As long as the state recognized the right of the church to form the conscience of its members, Brownson believed it was obeying the law of God, and this was all that could be expected of it.³⁴

In considering the school issue in the essays he wrote between 1854 and 1875, Brownson addressed two questions: Are the public schools destroying the faith of Catholics, and are Catholic schools impeding or advancing the Americanization of immigrants?³⁵ His answers to these questions sometimes ingratiated him to the American hierarchy and his fellow Catholics, and at other times alienated him from them. In 1849, the American bishops, who were

²⁹ Reilly, 29.

³⁰ Whalen, viii.

³¹ McDonnell, 124.

³² Lapat, 41.

³³ McDonnell, 130.

³⁴ Roemer

³⁵ McDonnell, 130.

assembled in Baltimore for the Provincial Council, sent him a letter of encouragement, and in 1854, Pius IX also sent him a letter of approbation.³⁶

However, in 1856, Archbishop John Hughes of New York publicly scolded him during a commencement address at what is now Fordham University for his too liberal views and later rebuked him for his too militant ideas to Americanize the Catholic Church. Brownson's *REVIEW* was even sent to Rome for examination, but Rome found nothing in it contrary to faith. Where Catholics questioned his orthodoxy and sometimes his sincerity, non-Catholics questioned his logic and stability of thought. Brownson found himself in the position of trying to defend his right to be Catholic against Americans, and his right to be American against Catholics.

In 1854, Brownson wrote an article in his *QUARTELY REVIEW* entitled "Schools and Education" to answer the charge that he was against common schools.³⁷ Brownson felt that the common school system had grave defects and in many respects was objectionable, but he also found it better than no common school system at all. He condemned what he considered the attempts of some to prevent Catholics from bringing up their children in the faith but made clear that his condemnation of the intentions of non-Catholics didn't mean his condemnation of the schools themselves. He felt that the public schools did not have the power to corrupt the faith of Catholic children, and many overrated the power of education to render people virtuous. Even if all schools were Catholic, he noted, there would still be crime in the country.³⁸

³⁶ Schlesinger, 216.

³⁷ McDonnell, 108.

³⁸ Brownson, "School and Education," 572.

Brownson was convinced that on the whole the common schools were an advantage rather than a disadvantage to Catholics. He believed that having Catholics and Protestants educated together would cause Catholics to be firm in their faith and cause Protestants to lose much of their prejudice. To the extent Catholics were nationalized, Catholicity would become strong in America, and since the reality of life mixed up Catholics and Protestants in all that was secular, children needed early on to learn to cope with the rough and tumble of American society as it existed.³⁹

“Conversations of Our Club” was a feature in Brownson’s *QUARTERLY REVIEW* which appeared during 1858 and 1859. Here Brownson noted that he didn’t feel that Catholics had the resources to run a separate system, so to him the choice was clear, public schools or wander the streets.⁴⁰

Brownson went on to criticize Catholic schools in New York and Boston, which he judged to be inferior. He thought these schools perpetuated a ghetto mentality, reinforced a sense of inferiority among Catholics, and prevented Catholics from becoming an integral part of American society. He found the teachers incompetent not only in secular subjects but also in religious instruction. Brownson concluded by saying that “I think the public schools, sectarian as they frequently are, preferable to very poor parochial schools....”⁴¹

Brownson also criticized those who would keep Catholics a foreign colony linked to worn out Europeanism. He felt Catholic children should be an integral part of American society from

³⁹ Brownson, “School and Education,” 581.

⁴⁰ McDonnell, 134.

⁴¹ McDonnell, 145.

the earliest moment possible and be at once good Catholics and loyal Americans. Brownson stated that he had always been in favor of really Catholic schools, where religion was well taught, but he did not favor schools which trained children to be foreigners in their own country.⁴²

Brownson acknowledged the state's right to establish a system of public schools and to impose a tax for their support provided matter offensive to the conscience of any class of citizens was excluded, compulsory attendance was not required, and parents would be free to use them or to establish private schools "at their own expense."⁴³

He accepted Bishop Purchell's assertion that education is nothing without religion, but he claimed that he was not recommending secular education without religious education; he just didn't believe that it had to be done in the same place, at the same time, or by the same teachers.⁴⁴

He found all of the agitation for a separate system impractical, counterproductive, futile, and offensive. He reminded his audience that the public school system was the pride of the American people, and that continually exaggerating its defects and agitating against it only confirmed in the minds of non-Catholics their prejudices against Catholics.⁴⁵

The Civil War marked a basic shift in Brownson's attitude on many issues including the school question. During and after the Civil War, Brownson grew disillusioned with American institutions.⁴⁶ Two of his sons died as soldiers in the Civil War, and he opposed Lincoln's

⁴² Brownson, "Public and Parochial Schools, 205.

⁴³ Brownson, "Public and Parochial Schools, 206.

⁴⁴ Brownson, "Public and Parochial Schools.208-209.

⁴⁵ Brownson, "Public and Parochial Schools, 210-212.

⁴⁶ McDonnell, 137.

renomination in 1864.⁴⁷ Although he was profoundly anti-slavery, he did not approve of what he considered the high-handed tactics of abolitionists. His writings began to reflect an increasingly cynical view of American society as corrupt and as anti-Catholic.⁴⁸

In January of 1862, Brownson again wrote about education in his *QUARTERLY REVIEW* in an article entitled “Catholic Schools and Education.” Here, he accepted the goal of the American bishops that religious and secular education should exist together in a single school system. He also concluded that public schools were more dangerous to Catholics than he had previously admitted.⁴⁹ Brownson now argued that since the bishops have decided that the Catholic school movement should go on, it was his duty to advance the goal, not hinder it, because nothing could be gained by opposing hierarchical action.⁵⁰

However, in this article, Brownson was very critical of Catholic schooling as it existed. He questioned the Catholicity of some schools, and he stated that Catholics are not obliged to patronize schools just because they were founded by or directed by Catholics. He took the schools to task for failing to prepare Catholics to harmonize religion and modern civilization and indicted the schools for resisting it.⁵¹

Despite his criticism of Catholic schools, however, he stated that these deficiencies were not sufficient cause to abandon the Catholic school movement. Brownson still favored Americanization of the Catholic population and suggested that Catholic schools should be formed

⁴⁷ Lapati, 11-13.

⁴⁸ McDonnell, 145.

⁴⁹ McDonnell, 139.

⁵⁰ Brown, “Catholic Schools and Education, 118.

⁵¹ Brown, “Catholic Schools and Education, 99-107.

to preserve orthodoxy as living and operative truth and not as a dead letter, and to associate the faith with living in the civilization of the present rather than continually recalling a dead past.⁵²

Brownson wrote again about education in the April 1870 issue of the periodical the *CATHOLIC WORLD*. His *QUARTERLY REVIEW* had folded in 1864 for financial reasons. In this article entitled “The School Question,” Brownson moved from being an advocate, even if a critical one, of the common schools and a skeptic and critic of Catholic schools, to being solidly behind the Catholic school movement and of becoming something of a spokesman for the cause.⁵³

In this essay, Brownson wanted to set forth his views as a Catholic and an American citizen. Brownson considered the current solution to the school question, that is, excluding sectarianism, impractical. Schools would either remain Protestant or, what is worse, have no religion. Brownson said that Catholics objected to the common schools because they were hostile to Catholic beliefs, and in them Catholics could not be raised to be true and unwavering to their faith. Catholics also objected to being taxed for schools which in conscience they could not use. Brownson went on to state that he valued no education that was divorced from religion and religious culture, a marked change from his earlier view.⁵⁴

Brownson saw as the only solution to the school question the dividing of the government funds to support schools between Catholic and Protestants based on the proportion of students each had to educate. To Brownson, this division would satisfy the Catholic conscience and not offend the Protestant one. He stated, almost offhandedly, that those with no religion who refuse

⁵² Brown, “Catholic Schools and Education, 119-120.

⁵³ Whalen, 345.

⁵⁴ Brownson, “The School Question,” 246.

to send their children to the Jewish, Protestant, or Catholic schools, should start schools of their own at their own expense.⁵⁵

Where previously Brownson had looked with favor on the common schools because they could train students to be good citizens, Brownson now stated that Catholic children could only be brought up to be good citizens in schools under control of the church where faith would be fully taught and where character would be appropriately formed. Brownson believed that the Catholic demand for schools was a matter of conscience and justice, and that Catholics needed free schools of their own because Catholics were a large part of the country's poor.⁵⁶

In April of 1871, Brownson again wrote about the school question in the *CATHOLIC WORLD*. This time in an article captioned "Unification and Education," Brownson blasted the proposal of Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts to support the Hoar Bill, a piece of legislation then before Congress which advocated a national system of education under the direction of the Federal Government. Brownson charged that this legislation was an attempt to suppress Catholic education, to extinguish Catholicity in the country, and to form one American identity modeled after New England Evangelicalism. Again, Brownson called for a tax-supported, universal, compulsory, free religious education directed by each denomination.⁵⁷

After his wife's death, and at her previous urging, Brownson revived his *QUARTERLY REVIEW* in January of 1873, and continued it until October of 1875, when ill-health forced him to stop publishing it again. In the issue for January of 1874, he wrote an article entitled

⁵⁵ Brownson, "The School Question," 254-255.

⁵⁶ Brownson, "The School Question," 258-260.

⁵⁷ McDonnell, 143.

“Education and the Republic .” In this article, Brownson’s disenchantment with life and values in post Civil War America is obvious. He disparaged the public school system not as the source of moral corruption of America but as the exponent of the false ideas of modern society. For Brownson, the only support for virtue was Christianity which he considered inseparable from Catholicism, and he, therefore, concluded that the church was the only competent educator, and only a thorough Catholic education could have any value.⁵⁸

Brownson’s last essay in the *QUARTERLY REVIEW* on the subject of education appeared in the October 1875 edition. Entitled “The Public School System,” Brownson used the essay to comment on a lecture that had been delivered in San Francisco earlier in the year by Edmund F. Dunne, the Chief-Justice of the Arizona Supreme Court. Dunne believed that while the majority in this country held the power, they were bound to exercise it justly. According to Dunne, the Federal Constitution was designed for the protection of individuals and minorities, and Brownson pointed out, as he claimed Dunne showed, that the majority had imposed on Catholics a triple tax which was unjust: A tax for schools which Catholics in good conscience could not use; a “tax” to establish Catholic schools; and then a tax on buildings and fixtures of Catholic schools while the public system was exempt from the same taxation. Brownson wondered if there could be a more monstrous injustice and pointed out that the move to prohibit Catholic schools and to make attendance at public schools compulsory qualified as monstrous.⁵⁹

Brownson urged Catholics to unite—a practice they were not in the habit of doing—to demand the proportion of funds which Catholics contributed to be used in support of their own

⁵⁸ Brownson, “Education and The Republic,” 450-451.

⁵⁹ Brownson, “The Public School System,” 517-519.

schools and to use the ballot box to gain their objectives. In 1873, he had rejected the call of Bishop Richard Gilmour of Cleveland for political action, but now Brownson recognized that Catholics could have an impact. Most Catholics were Democrats, and Brownson knew that the Democratic Party could not come to national power without the Catholic vote. Brownson expected a clamor, but he reminded his Catholic readers that they had both the good of religious society and of civil society in mind since Catholic education was an essential of both religion and the state.⁶⁰

With this issue, Brownson ceased publishing his *QUARTERLY REVIEW*. These words were literally his last on the subject of Catholic schools, and in the years that he had been writing about the issue, he had come full circle, from being a skeptic about Catholic schools and an advocate of Catholic involvement with the common schools, to becoming completely against the common schools for Catholics and a spokesman in favor of the Catholic school movement.

In 1884, eight years after Brownson's death, the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore issued its directives that every parish should have a Catholic school and every Catholic child should attend one. No doubt Brownson would have approved. His world view had changed. Ten years after his death, when Brownson's remains were reburied in the crypt of Sacred Heart Basilica, the inscription in Latin on the stone covering his grave is a fitting tribute: "Here lies Orestes A. Brownson, who humbly acknowledged the true faith, lived a full life, and by writing and speaking bravely defended His Church and country, and granted that His body may have been taken by death, the labors of his mind remain immortal monuments of genius."⁶¹

⁶⁰ Brownson, "The Public School System," 521-524.

⁶¹ Lapati, 137.

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