

Andrew S. Moore. *The South's Tolerable Alien: Roman Catholics in Alabama and Georgia, 1945-1970.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007. xii + 210 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3212-8.

Reviewed by Arthur Remillard (Department of Religious Studies, Saint Francis University)
Published on H-Catholic (January, 2008)



Becoming Tolerable in an Intolerable South

Writing in 1941, journalist W. J. Cash labeled southern Catholics “the intolerable alien.”[1] In his time, the Protestant mainstream frequently relegated Catholics to the periphery of society. According to Andrew S. Moore, however, when the black freedom struggle reached a peak in the 1960s, many Catholics “rose to the defense of racial segregation” (p. 161). As a result, the former religious foes found common ground atop the bedrock of white supremacy. Southern Catholics thereafter had become, as Moore says, “the tolerable alien” (p. 162). What about Catholic activists, though? Did they keep the flames of anti-Catholicism burning? Certainly many priests and nuns in particular—empowered by Vatican II reforms that encouraged increased social involvement—labored for racial justice. While southern bishops like Mobile’s Thomas J. Toolen often lamented this activism, it did not translate into anti-Catholicism. Instead, the author shows that critics concentrated on defending the racial status quo, and largely ignored religious differences. Locating his study in Alabama and Georgia, Moore’s account comes with an impressive array of archival sources, which include the voices of priests, bishops, the white laity, and the “muted, but ever present” black laity (p. 10). *The South’s Tolerable Alien* is a welcome and needed addition to the field of southern religious history, which has too few studies of Catholicism.[2] Scholars interested in southern religion, civil rights, and the broader topic of American Catholicism will no doubt find this book valuable

The book opens in the immediate years after World

War II, when the anti-Catholicism of the early twentieth century remained strong in the South, even though it had waned elsewhere. Public rituals, such as Reformation Day celebrations, became platforms for southern Protestants to confirm their religious/national identity and simultaneously disclaim the religion/patriotism of Catholics. Similarly, Christ the King observances gave Catholics an opportunity to unify (which was significant, given the paucity of southern parishes) and protest their religious/civic alienation. At these public ceremonies, writes Moore, Catholics demanded “the boundaries of the southern religious mainstream to be redrawn to include Catholicism” (p. 37). The “boundaries” changed very little, however, until opposition to civil rights became the white majority’s preeminent standard for social acceptability. To foreshadow this transition, Moore points to Father Albert S. Foley, a priest-educator in Mobile who began supporting civil rights in the 1940s. The “hostility directed at [Foley],” asserts the author, “came because of his self-described role as a southern liberal, not because he was a Catholic priest” (p. 64).

In addition to the white Protestant mainstream, Foley had little support from Bishop Toolen in Mobile, who was generally satisfied with the South’s racial norms. But in urban Georgia, the situation was quite different. The diocese of Atlanta, led by Ohio native Bishop Paul J. Hallinan, formed after World War II. Most of the population was new to the area and, on the whole, more liberal on racial matters than elsewhere in the South. When Hallinan desegregated the parochial schools, one parish-

ioner sent his tentative endorsement, writing, “let’s just say that it is the proper thing to do and that it is inevitable” (p. 89). Not every Catholic in Atlanta agreed, however. One woman complained that the bishop’s decision brought upon her the disfavor of her non-Catholic colleagues. “I have never felt the need to lower my head until this morning” (p. 89). Here as elsewhere, Moore gives readers a textured picture of the Catholic South, showing differing perspectives on the complicated issue of race. Further enriching this sense of nuance is the author’s many citations of lay voices, which immeasurably improves the book’s overall quality.

While the civil rights movement gained momentum, the Second Vatican Council cast the nature of hierarchical authority into question. As Moore explains, many Catholics believed that these reforms “released liberty and conscience from their ecclesiastical moorings” (p. 139). Pro-civil rights clergy found comfort in this interpretation of Vatican II, which gave them more freedom to become part of the movement. In the process, some openly criticized superiors who espoused opposing racial views. Consider an exchange between Richard T. Sadlier, a Josephite pastor in Mobile, and Bishop Toolen. After Martin Luther King’s assassination, Toolen conveyed what appeared to be genuine remorse. Sadlier was unconvinced. “Your letter on the death of Martin Luther King irked me,” he wrote. “I could almost vomit at the hypocrisy in it” (p. 142). Sadlier perhaps had good reason to be suspicious, since the bishop did express opposition to the 1965 Selma demonstrations. In any case, Toolen resented the rebuke, and asked the Josephite provincial to transfer Sadlier. In years past, Toolen’s request would have likely been granted. But the provincial refused, ar-

guing that people would interpret the transfer as punishment for the priest’s activism, which would reflect badly on everyone involved except Sadlier. Moore uses this affair as an emblem of the era. The pre-Vatican II model of the church, which stressed deference to authority, was no more. And while many white Catholics and Protestants agreed on segregation, there was a “crisis of authority” fueling disputes within Catholicism (p. 138).

For its succinct presentation, compelling observations, and exemplary research, Moore’s book is a noteworthy addition to the historiography of southern religion. *The Intolerable Alien* is one of an emerging series of books examining the role of religious minorities in the civil rights movement, which includes Amy L. Koehlinger’s *The New Nuns* (2007), Raymond A. Mohl’s *South of South* (2004), and Clive Webb’s *Flight against Fear* (2001). Combined, these studies have begun revealing the widespread influence of civil rights, and how even the smallest groups made significant contributions to this important time in American history.

Notes

[1]. W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1941), 342.

[2]. See Paul Harvey, “Religion in the American South since the Civil War,” in *A Companion to the American South*, ed. John B. Boles (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002). Harvey’s survey of the historiography focuses almost entirely on the various permutations of evangelical Protestantism. He rightly resolves, “Important questions and avenues of scholarship remain” (p. 403).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-catholic>

Citation: Arthur Remillard. Review of Moore, Andrew S., *The South’s Tolerable Alien: Roman Catholics in Alabama and Georgia, 1945-1970*. H-Catholic, H-Net Reviews. January, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14051>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.