“BENVENIDO, MISTER ADAMS!”: ANTI-CATHOLICISM, THE BLACK LEGEND, AND RACIAL POLITICS IN THE FOUNDOING OF AMERICAN-Spanish Relations

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In the fall of 1779, John Adams was named Minister Plenipotentiary to France, charged with the task of brokering peace with British rivals in the ongoing American Revolution. Aboard the frigate Sensible, set for Paris, problems soon arose which required an emergency detour to Ferrol, Spain. Instead of waiting for repairs or for another vessel, Adams, along with his two young sons, Charles, 9, and John Quincy, 12, set out by carriage over a wide swath of northern Spain from Corunna to Astorga, across the meseta through León and Burgos, and on through the Basque Country to Bilbao, where they embarked again for France. Both future American presidents kept travel journals of their two-month long trek across the peninsula. They expressed disgust for Spanish accommodations, scoffed at the lack of agricultural, commercial, and industrial development, and articulated violently anti-Catholic beliefs. For the young John Quincy Adams, this journey was just his second overseas trip, his first time keeping a diary, and likely his first interactions with the Spanish-speaking world. Quincy Adams’ preeminence in later U.S.-Iberoamerican relations as Secretary of State, negotiating the Transcontinental Treaty and helping to form the Monroe Doctrine, comes into sharper relief against these early negative impressions. In this article, I analyze the diaries of both Adamses, focusing on the diaries’ diplomatic significance, their conflation of religious and economic criticism, and their racial ambivalence. I suggest that the enlightened hostility shown towards Spain in the diaries anticipates John Quincy Adams’ own tensions with republican idealism in his diplomatic negotiations. This tension hints at the limitations of Enlightenment ideology.

First, an understanding of diplomatic history of early America brings into focus the broader significance of the Adamses’ Spanish detour. Over the course of the two statesmen’s careers, the power dynamic between Spain, a major imperial power, and the United States, a fledgling nation, would be inverted. When the American Revolution began, diplomats for the United States looked to Spain as a coveted European ally, crucial to U.S. success in battle. Later, however, when the newly-independent nation had eyes for expansion, the United States regarded Spain as a stubborn defender of its far-flung North American territorial claims. A half a century after, when President John Quincy Adams left office, Spain had become a
disempowered negotiator willing to cede to U.S. demands even as it was being shut out of the hemisphere by piecemeal independence movements from within its own fallen empire. This process, initiated by early American revolutionary diplomatic relations with France in which John Adams played a key role, was undeniably shaped and accelerated by the actions of John Quincy Adams in the lead up to the Transcontinental Treaty of 1821.

Soon after drafting the Declaration of Independence, a group of colonial Americans chaired by none other than John Adams wrote a Model Treaty to use in dealing with sympathetic nations (Smith 6) and sent an American envoy that established fruitful diplomatic ties with France. Although Spain declined to join an initial alliance of European powers with the United States in 1778, France continued to seek out Spain as a necessary ally in achieving the two nations’ common goals against Great Britain. Practically speaking, the French navy could not manage to circumvent the British blockade without the addition of Spanish ships (Dull 110). Spain, however, had little interest in the independence of the Thirteen Colonies, being more preoccupied with the reacquisition of Gibraltar and Menorca, and in securing trade routes to her own American colonies (Dull 107).

Insofar as Spanish diplomats believed a Franco-Spanish union could achieve these goals, they solidified the alliance with the Treaty of Aranjuez of 1779 (Smith 14). Even with this support, the lack of direct dealings between Spain and the United States was highly concerning to the French, who lobbied both sides for more personal negotiation (Smith 15). Spain maintained a self-interested distance, trying unsuccessfully to negotiate with the British behind the Americans’ backs (Dull 112). And, when France finally convinced the United States to send a foreign minister to Spain in 1780, the ambassador, John Jay, sat for two years in Madrid waiting to be received at court. Such an inauspicious beginning of foreign relations between the two powers would underscore looming tensions in a century-long relationship that one diplomatic historian has characterized as dominated by “animosity” (Cortada x).

By the end of the American Revolution, the United States shifted its diplomatic preoccupation away from British frontier negotiations in Canada and toward the increasingly fraught border situation with Spain to the south and west. John Jay’s objective in his 1780 envoy had been to negotiate American rights to navigate the Mississippi, implicitly recognizing the river as the United States’ western border (Cortada 12). While Jay was unsuccessful in this early attempt, Pinkney’s Treaty of 1795 secured the United States access to the river with the first in a long series of diplomatic victories (Weeks 22). Conflict would soon arise over the mammoth 1803 Louisiana Purchase, which Spain protested as illegitimate and an encroachment upon Spanish landholdings. Monroe’s failed negotiations in Spain in 1805 were soon sidelined by Napoleonic conflict in Europe, and diplomatic relations did not begin anew until 1817. That year, talks began between Spanish minister Luis de Onís and John Quincy Adams, the newly-
appointed American Secretary of State under now-President James Monroe.

William Earl Weeks, in his diplomatic history, *John Quincy Adams and American Global Empire*, paints a picture of a shrewd and cunning, if not morally conflicted, Quincy Adams in his multi-year negotiations with Onís that formed part of a much larger diplomatic panorama. While deftly managing lingering ambassadorial tensions with Great Britain, Quincy Adams also had to contend with rising North American public support for Latin American revolutions. Despite *de facto* and popular American support for the revolutions, Adams harbored doubts about the ability of Spanish American nations to adequately establish republican government, and worried that support of Latin American revolutions would jeopardize ongoing negotiations with Spain over western landholdings (Weeks 55). Monroe’s administration adopted an official policy of neutrality on the “Latin American question,” allowing Quincy Adams latitude to negotiate what would eventually become the Transcontinental Treaty (Treaty of Adams-Onís), ratified in 1821. At issue were America’s dubious claims to West Florida, their aspirations toward East Florida (seen as the key to shipping security in the Gulf of Mexico), and the ambiguous western boundary between the Louisiana Territory and the Spanish Viceroyalty of New Spain. In the end, Adams’ delays and haggling paid off, for Spain’s position as a colonial power had substantially weakened by the time the treaty was ratified. While ceding most of present-day Texas to Spain, the 1821 treaty granted the United States control of both Floridas as well as clear American passage to the Pacific coast in the northwest, two hard-fought diplomatic triumphs for Quincy Adams.

Weeks argues that the Transcontinental Treaty was a crucial step towards the creation of an American global empire, laying the foundation for the Monroe Doctrine and subsequent territorial expansions (3). Once the United States had resolved its territorial disputes with Spain, it was free to officially support Spanish American independence movements without fear of repercussions from the waning Iberian power. Monroe’s administration, guided by Quincy Adams as Secretary of State, wasted little time after the conclusion of negotiations with Spain (1821) in articulating the basic tenants of the so-called Monroe Doctrine (1823), a policy that Weeks characterizes as “a statement of hemispheric supremacy” (179).

James E. Lewis links early American policy dealings in Latin American with the rise of domestic unionism, the position advocating for a strong and sustained United States. The breakdown of the Spanish empire fueled the so-called “problem of neighborhood” (Lewis 10), or the anxiety on the part of unionists that the North American states would follow the fractious nature of Spanish American states with their individual independences. This unionist dilemma grew into the sectionalist conflict of the Civil War, and would ultimately prove to be a significant burden on Secretary of State and President John Quincy Adams.

The negotiations for the Transcontinental Treaty were not undertaken
without significant cost to Quincy Adams and his idealistic vision of republican government. On the way to achieving his goal of boundless American expansion, Adams was forced to use unsavory techniques, such as lying about Spanish intervention in the Seminole Wars, and purposely misrepresenting Spanish American movements of independence to quell American public support (Weeks 97), thus “resorting to the force, fraud, and hypocrisy characteristic of the European order that the republican revolution presumed to transcend” (Weeks 145). Neither was his intervention as an aggressive American expansionist without racial implications. Quincy was raised an avowed abolitionist from a respectable New England family and played an important role in antebellum abolitionist movements in Congress after his presidency. Nevertheless, as Secretary of State, he was conscious of the fact that the annexation of Florida involved the addition of a slave state, and conceded to slaveholder demands that the Louisiana Purchase land be open to slavery (Weeks 35). Moreover, in his extensive publication of anonymous pamphlets against intervention in Spanish America, Quincy Adams distorted the role of black activism in Latin American independence movements to scare southerners out of supporting them, playing on fear of slave revolts like that of Saint-Domingue (Weeks 97). While his diary indicates the tension he felt over his tactics of misrepresentation and his support of slavery’s expansion (Weeks 125), these public actions seem not to have reflected his idealistic upbringing:

In the end, Adams opted for diplomatic and electoral success at the cost of his sense of virtue. By doing so, he demonstrated the irrelevance of classical republican notions of public service in the nineteenth century. In this sense, Adams’s life bore witness to the truths contained in the predictions of republican disintegration and collapse. (Weeks 4)

Weeks’ summative thoughts on Quincy Adams’ disenchantment provide an especially important lens with which to view the early travel writings of the future diplomat. Historical inquiry of colonial America, both academic and popular, often takes an uncritical eye towards the virtue of Enlightenment republicanism as exemplified in the foundation of the United States. Implied in the nineteenth-century loss of the republican idealism as expressed in Weeks’ analysis is the coherence and virtue of these same ideas during revolutionary period. If Quincy Adams is seen as the transitional figure toward a crass erosion of idealism in early nineteenth-century America, one must take a closer look at the eighteenth-century Enlightenment idealism from which it descended. The anti-Catholicism and Black Legend thinking in the diaries of the Adamses on their Iberian sojourn help shed light on this idealism and its limits.

I will begin by considering the political emphasis in the diary of John Adams in the context of Anglo-American travel writing. Andrew Hadfield
argues that one of the purposes of travel writing, either implicitly or explicitly stated, was to engage in “anthropological speculation or the study of comparative government” (2), focused especially on matters of national sovereignty and religious tolerance (12). Likewise, Pere Gifra-Adroher characterizes pre-romantic Enlightenment travel writing as “a residue of the eighteenth-century Grand Tour,” undertaken to learn languages and observe political systems (18). Gifra-Adroher considers letters, journals, and other personal, non-published materials, including those of the Adamses, to fall under the category of travel writing (22). The educational or instrumental purpose of travel for many early Americans is reflected in the journals of the Adamses, who, while detoured in Spain, cannot help but comment on the political climate in the former imperial power. Ulrike Brisson argues for the necessity of contextualizing political travel within diplomatic networks (14), as politically important travelers had in mind the political and commercial “success of a polity” (2) during their travels. Even on his accidental detour to Spain, John Adams’ specific curiosity about the Spanish regional rule and commercial practices can be understood as fact-finding for best practices that might promote the “success of a polity,” namely the fledgling American state.

Forced ashore in unfamiliar territory, the elder Adams can find nothing to suit him, from the “dull Entertainment” of the Italian opera (9 Dec. 1779, 405), to the lack of good horses or carriages, and even the novelty “Cooshoo Nuts” (cashews) whose oil inflames his eyes (7 Dec. 1779, 404). He is not impressed by the town planning of Ferrol, neither geographic (“The Inconvenience of this Harbour is, the Entrance is so narrow, that there is no Possibility of going out but when the Wind is one Way, i.e. South East, or thereabouts” [13 Dec. 1779, 405]), nor economic (“There is little Appearance of Commerce or Industry except about the Kings Dock and Yards and Works” [14 Dec. 1779, 407]). Despite his discomfort, the diary account of John Adams shows a statesman determined to keep his political mission at the fore. He records his conversations with Ferrol’s corregidor, or chief magistrate, about the legal structure of Spain and the governance of the separate provinces of the kingdom. Perhaps with the organization of the United States in mind, Adams is curious about “Gallice,” or Galicia, for the special privileges it is afforded. Adams is also interested in inquiring about Spanish diplomatic relations, presumably to arm himself with more information for his new country to set up relations of their own.

As the trip drags on, the elder Adams records some evidence of Spanish support for the American cause. In Corunna, he writes: “The Governor of the Province, told me he had orders from Court to treat all Americans as their best friends. They are all very inquisitive about Mr. Jays Mission, to know who he is, where he was born, whether ever Member of Congress, whether ever President” (15 Dec. 1779, 409). Later in the journey, he reflects on popular sentiment he has experienced for the
American Revolution: “This War is popular in Spain, the Clergy, the Religious Houses and other Communities have offered to grant large Sums to the King for the Support of it. The English had become terrible to them” (8 Jan. 1780, 426). He even includes in his diary a transcription of a newspaper clipping from the “Gazetta de Madrid” that reports favorably on his own journey through Spain and about news of American successes in war (4 Jan. 1780, 422). Despite this positive support, Adams is clearly impatient to arrive in France where his true diplomatic mission lay. Any more sustained talk of diplomatic future between Spain and the United States takes a back seat to Adams’ preconceived notions of French superiority and his own acerbic negativity toward Spanish customs. Not all of Adams’ acquaintances share this positive view of American independence. Adams writes of a conversation with “an Irish Gentleman” in Ferrol (notably, a Catholic) that moves beyond mere political writing to engage the ideological core of the Black Legend:

[The Spanish Nation in general have been of Opinion that the Revolution in America was of a bad Example to the Spanish Colonies and dangerous to the Interests of Spain, as the United States if they should become ambitious and be seised with the Spirit of Conquest might aim at Mexico and Peru. (14 Dec. 1779, 408)

Given this provocative and potentially prophetic statement, Adams is quick to respond with an exhortation that the North American colonies have no interest in extending war, because it “would divert their Attention, Wealth, Industry, Activity &c. from a certain Source of Prosperity, and even Grandeur and Glory” (14 Dec. 1779, 408). He opines briefly about the impossibility of Latin American independence, due to Spain’s heavy hand that “could extinguish the first Sparks of discontent, and quel the first risings of the People” (14 Dec. 1779, 408). Going so far as to assert the benefit that independence of all American colonies would bestow on their European mother countries, Adams clearly favors liberty for both British and Spanish America, but is pessimistic about the ability of the Spanish colonies to achieve the kind of “Grandeur and Glory” he boasts of in North America.

These political musings on Spanish colonial control engage with longstanding Black Legend thinking in the Anglo-American world. The Black Legend, a twentieth-century term for anti-Spanish prejudice, has traditionally been understood as an outgrowth of the wide multilingual circulation of Spanish friar Bartolomé de las Casas’ *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1552). Jesús Pérez García traces the evolution in the Black Legend from a northern European perspective, beginning with its origins in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as anti-Spanish prejudice on the grounds of excessive religiosity and religious hypocrisy (111-12). Later, in the eighteenth century, Enlightenment critics focused on the
perceived scientific and political decline of Spain (Saglia 35-36), adding an economic dimension to the Black Legend that emphasized Spain’s corruption and the failed emergence of a strong Spanish bourgeoisie (Pérez García 115). Irene Silverblatt dismantles the Black Legend as myth, pointing out the tragic efficiency and modernity with which Spain organized bureaucracies to manage the exploitation of an empire (101). She explains the rise of the Black Legend in this way: to catch up with early Spanish colonial advances, northern Europeans had to justify Spain’s inferiority in order to rationalize using their very same imperialistic methods:

British apologists were in a bit of a bind: they wanted to stake a claim to the world’s riches yet at the same time distance themselves from Spain. They did so by deprecating the Spanish model—that is, colonialism, or direct state control over conquered populations. Their weapon of choice was trade, and their not-so-innocent rhetoric was to guarantee the creation of a world of sovereign nations united by the free market. (Silverblatt 115)

While the Black Legend was first seen in British discourse, Silverblatt sees the United States as “this ideology’s most notable heir” (116), a sentiment echoed in the proto-American writings of the Adamses.

Beyond the Hispanic content, the Adamses brought more specifically Anglo-American anti-Catholic baggage. Jason K. Duncan shows how anti-Catholicism was widespread and codified into legislation in the Colonies (19). Anti-Catholic belief was so prevalent that Great Britain’s Quebec Act of 1774, which guaranteed free practice to Catholics in Canada, was considered as one of the Intolerable Acts by proto-American patriots (Duncan 33-34). However, anti-Catholic sentiment gradually began to wane over the course of the revolution, partially due to public sentiment after the important alliance of the Thirteen Colonies with Catholic France (Duncan 49). Mark S. Massa, S.J., traces the origin of colonial anti-Catholicism to white American identification with Protestant New England Puritan ideals, formed in the backlash to persecution from the Catholic Mary Tudor (7-8). Massa traces Protestant intellectual opposition to Catholicism stemming from Enlightenment values of work, individualism, religious liberty, free expression, separation of church and state, and resistance to nondemocratic authority. Massa even considers the “Enlightenment as religion for the founders of the American republic” (Massa 12), a religion antithetical to followers of Rome. Finally, Massa conceives sociologically of a Protestant American backlash against Catholics on the part of nativists looking for ethnic and racial outcasts to more clearly define boundaries of identity. In this context, Italians, Irish, and even Spaniards struggled to be accepted as “white” in Anglo-American society. Both the Black Legend and American anti-Catholicism offer valuable lenses for viewing the perceptions of the Adamses.
Adams directly contrasts Spanish decadence with North American commercial success, establishing an imperial juxtaposition that would run throughout his journal entries. Adams constantly complains of the smoky atmosphere in his lodging houses due to the lack of chimneys, of the dirty and cramped living conditions of ordinary Spaniards (“Cleanliness seems never to be tho’t of” [28 Dec. 1779, 416]), and of the perceived impropriety of mixing human and animal domiciles, describing the “Horrors” he experiences in lurid detail (27 Dec. 1779, 416). Importantly, his disgust transcends mere anecdotal agitation, leading to speculations of moral and economic underdevelopment. Commenting on the carriages in which his party travels, he notes, “The Calashes are like those in Use in Boston fifty Years ago…This Country is an hundred Years behind the Massachusetts Bay, in the Repair of Roads and in all Conveniences for travelling” (28 Dec. 1779, 416).

When he does see construction to improve a road, he reports it as “an Honour to the Nation” (1 Jan. 1780, 420). This kind of developmental comparison highlights two important facets of Enlightenment thought, the intersection of economic progress and moral virtue. To the degree that Adams sees his own national project as representing the ideal moral and economic developmental trajectory, Spain’s infrastructure and customs consign it to a lesser state of civilization. If one might attribute Adams’ observations in Spain to a general dourness of character or a disgruntled foreign traveler, his ebullience for French planning in the city of Couhé just days after having left Spain establishes a stark counterpoint: “The numerous Groves, Parks, and Forrests in this Country form a striking Contrast with Spain where the whole Country looks like a Mans face that is newly shaved, Every Tree, bush and shrub being pared away” (5 Feb. 1780, 434).

Adams’ contempt for Spanish Catholicism opens a window with which to interpret his economic observations. Adams holds up a mirror to Spanish religious institutions to investigate North American political and economic questions. On 6 January 1780, the important Catholic feast of Epiphany, Adams and his party happen to pass through the cathedral of León during High Mass, where he refused to kneel for the Bishop as the guide suggested. Instead, he writes, “I contented myself with a Bow” (6 Jan. 1780, 423). This kind of open religious disdain becomes increasingly combined with his despair at the lack of economic development. Adams repeats in numerous towns the connection he sees between economic ruin and religious grandiosity: “Nothing appears rich but the Churches, nobody fat, but the clergy… No Simptoms of Commerce, or even of internal Trafic, no Appearance of Manufactures or Industry” (30 Dec. 1779, 419); “But there is no Appearance of Commerce, Manufactures or Industry… Nothing looks either rich or chearfull but the Churches and Churchmen” (6 Jan. 1780, 423). The connection between economics and religion is well supported in Massa’s theory of American anti-Catholicism (12). The influences of the Protestant Enlightenment conflate the virtues of labor
with religious virtues, a conglomeration later coined by Max Weber as the Protestant work ethic. This ideology can be most clearly seen in Adams’ striking description of the fertile yet under cultivated Valley of Orduña in the Basque Country:

In this narrow Space [valley] they have crowded two Convents, one of Frailes the other of Monjas. I saw the lazy Drones of Franciscans at the Windows of their Cells, as We passed… It was a vexatious Thing to see the beautifull Valley of Orduna, devoured by so many Hives of Drones. (14 Jan. 1780, 431)

These poignant and personal meditations underscore the importance with which Adams regards building a prosperous nation on various fronts. The symbolism of the drone can also be seen as significant when juxtaposed against the beehive, a longstanding European symbol of industry with Masonic connections. Clearly, both Spanish religion and its lack of industrial and commercial vigor violated Adams’ British Enlightenment sensibilities. However, there remains the possibility of even deeper, more rooted prejudices.

Recent scholarly trends have attempted to push beyond a more simplistic understanding of the Black Legend as a phenomenon driven by outward anti-Spanish perception of religion and commerce. Walter D. Mignolo, in his Afterword to the volume Rereading the Black Legend: The Discourses of Religious and Racial Difference in the Renaissance Empires, argues that the Black Legend was a racialized phenomenon that can assist in understanding the larger emergence of race and racism in Western thought. Mignolo traces the reconfiguration of race from a theological conception in Renaissance Iberia as a reaction to Africans and Indians, to a secular, scientific conception in Enlightenment northern Europe (318). In doing so, he implicates the Black Legend in the failure of contemporary northern European scholars to adequately understand the Iberian colonial context of racial formation. In fact, argues Mignolo, the very Black Legend that blinds northern Europeans to the Renaissance origins of race and racism itself operates as a “mild form of racism among European Christians” (317) that marks “imperial internal difference” (315) of northern Europe against Spain. Ultimately, the editors of the volume argue for the key role of “race as racism” in the “emergence of capitalism as a new form of economic organization” (314). In this view, race is a constant undertone of anti-Spanish religious and economic critique.

Along those lines, María DeGuzmán, in Spain’s Long Shadow: The Black Legend, Off-Whiteness, and Anglo-American Empire, argues that white Anglo-American identity was constructed by contrasting Americanness with figures of Spain as an Orientalized, racialized, and primitivized vanquished empire. DeGuzmán argues that images of Spain functioned as a mirror to the United States —the older empire fell in direct proportion to the new
empire’s rising self-projection (xvii). Though the argument focuses principally on literary treatments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, her conception of these “figures of Spain” has eighteenth-century precedent, making it applicable to the Adamses’ diaries. Key to DeGuzmán’s argument is the claim that the dominant American project of whiteness functioned rhetorically by asserting Spanish “off-whiteness” (xxvii) through figures of Moors, bringing a racialized dimension to the Black Legend (xxviii).

Though Adams does not specifically mention physical descriptions of Spanish people other than to note their general states of filth, he does demonstrate awareness of Spain’s racial past. In one of his anti-Catholic lectures, Adams notes the proximity of their party to the city of Santiago de Compostela and describes the legend of St. James, the pilgrimage, and the voto de Santiago, whose effects are still being felt: “Some time since, the People made a Vow, that if the Moors should be driven from this Country they would give so much of the Income of their Lands to St. James” (28 Dec. 1779, 418). He is happy to report that the Pope recently dismissed a lawsuit against the Duke of Alba for refusing to pay the vow: “This looks like a Ray of Light” (28 Dec. 1779, 418). While this anti-Catholic sentiment acknowledges the Moorish past of Spain, another report shows Adams’ acknowledgment of Spain’s contemporary racial difference. In Astorga, he leaves the following quick note: “Saw Numbers of Marragato Women, as fine as Squaws and a great deal more nasty” (4 Jan. 1780, 421). Maragato, a term used today to describe an ethnic group in the Province of León and in particular the comarca of Maragatería, has uncertain linguistic origins, but is presumed to be related to moros or the morisco heritage of the area. Adams’ use of the term indicates an understanding of this racialized difference, as he compares the maragatas to American Indian women using derogatory language. Though his descriptions of ordinary Spaniards show pity and disgust for their customs, it is only in describing these racialized maragatas that Adams goes so far as to call them “nasty,” a racist brutalized character trait. Thus, DeGuzmán’s theory of off-whiteness comes into play, albeit in a small way, in the comparison Adams makes between racial situations in his home country as well as abroad.

While the elder John Adams made the trip as an opinionated, worldly adult, the clear, often direct, influence seen on his young son’s thinking may be the most important legacy of the trip. The twelve-year-old traveler seems to have written parts of his diary alongside his father, or at the very least with strong influence from his opinions. These links can be seen in Quincy Adams’ disapproval of Spanish actors in the opera in Ferrol (13 Dec. 1779, 12), in the imitation of his father’s wonder at the size of pillars in the Burgos cathedral (11 Jan. 1780, 28), in the repetition of his father’s continuous annoyance at the lack of chimneys in the guesthouses (3 Jan. 1780, 25), and in the negative reporting on a bridge named for swine (15 Dec. 1779, 13).
If a direct textual relationship between the diaries can be established, so can ideological influence. While the young Quincy Adams does not comment on the lack of industry, agriculture, and commerce, in some ways his anti-Catholicism exceeds that of his father. Quincy Adams narrates the same Epiphany scene at High Mass in the León cathedral, reporting: “The bishop passed. Our Guide told us to kneel. I did. He gave me his Benediction but I did not feel the better for it” (6 Jan. 1780, 27). Quincy Adams goes on to express disregard for what he sees as the Spaniards’ lack of proper celebration of Christmas: “They dress up and go to mass but after that’s over all is. So if they call this religion I wonder what is not it; after Mass, almost all the Shops in town are open’d” (25 Dec. 1779, 17-18). This comment is rendered especially ironic, given the complete lack of holiday celebration in American Protestant tradition of the time. After this negativity, however, Quincy Adams tries to censor himself, showing a kind of rehearsed self-consciousness: “But stop. I must not say anything against their religion while I am in their country but must change the subject” (25 Dec. 1779, 17-18). Quincy Adams articulates a similar hesitation after he was awoken by church bells and the muleteers’ mass attendance delayed their morning departure: “[W]e were not much obliged to them for it. However, let them do as they please, for I believe that is the best way” (27 Dec. 1779, 19). Whether this self-editing comes from the boy’s moral conscious or by more direct textual intervention from an adult in the party (perhaps the elder Adams) is not known, but these faults in the text reveal a conflicted sense of the young boy’s reception of his father’s culture.

In other situations, his opinions are unencumbered by such equivocations, as shown in his description of his lodgings:

As for the People they are Lazy, dirty, Nasty and in short I can compare them to nothing but a parcel of hogs… Poor Creatures they are eat up by their priests. Near three quarters of what they earn goes to the Priests and with the other Quarter they must live as they can. (3 Jan. 1780, 25)

In this way, his linking of economic with religious sentiment follows his father’s (and his society’s) anti-Catholicism, but with a youthful disregard that perhaps reveals the adults’ true sentiments. As with his father, Quincy Adams’ negativity toward Spanish customs and religion could be attributed to mere unpleasantness of unfamiliar and unexpected travel. Nevertheless, Quincy Adams’ later travels to the Low Countries demonstrate positivity towards the Protestant community there, where he even takes notes on a good sermon he heard (6 Aug. 1780, 41). Moreover, just like his father, the budding young statesman seems unable to let go of his negativity towards Spain once outside its borders. In an otherwise unrelated description of an old palace in Antwerp, Quincy Adams goes out of his way to comment about the assassination of William I, Prince of Orange, the leader of the Dutch independence movement against Spain, who was killed after Spanish
King Philip II placed a bounty on his head. Quincy Adams writes that the assassin, Balthasar Gérard, “was soon after executed and died so hardened as to say he would do it if it were to be done again. That villain is inrolled by some Roman Catholick Monasteries amongst their Martyrs” (7 Aug. 1780, 43). Clearly, Quincy Adams harbors deep and abiding anti-Catholic beliefs, playing into Black Legend stereotypes about Spanish cruelty and barbarism. As I have proposed, these beliefs can be seen as a product of both his society’s conventions and influence from his father.

That a small boy abroad for the second time would write down such anti-Catholic thoughts is one of the most striking features of the diaries. However, biographical details can shed light on the internal struggles of Quincy Adams. William Earl Weeks describes a troubled young statesman, asserting that, “No American had been better prepared to be secretary of state” (6), but revealing immense pressures placed on the young boy in his rigorous religious, intellectual, and moral education that was carefully curated by his demanding parents (Weeks 13). John and Abigail Adams, born into elite, white, politically-influential colonial families, had grandiose visions for their son’s role in this new country: “They saw the United States as the manifestation of divine will; to serve the republic was to serve both God and the cause of humanity” (Weeks 14).

Weeks reports of repeated anxiety demonstrated in Quincy Adams’ diary, striving to fulfill his family’s ideology and duty while isolating himself from common social conventions (16). Even so, Quincy Adams never wavered in his belief in the “North American continent as the proper laboratory for the great experiment in human freedom, and early on he determined to devote his energies to the expansion of the nation’s limits” (Weeks 19). This ideological belief in American republicanism can already be seen in Quincy Adams’ Spanish travel writings. After regarding Spaniards as the “Poor Creatures” consumed by religious taxation, he continues to compare his own nation’s fortunes: “Thus is the whole of this Kingdom deceived and deluded by their Religion. I thank God that I was born in a Country where any body may get a good living if they Please” (3 Jan. 1780, 25). This narrow-mindedness towards Spanish cultural and religious difference begs an examination of the liberal Enlightenment beliefs at the core of these observations. Would the “Poor creatures” of Spain be allowed to take advantage of the “human freedom” available in Quincy Adams’ America, or was the new republic limited to those who looked and prayed like him?

Ruth Hill, in Sceptres and Sciences in the Spains: Four Humanists and the New Philosophy (ca. 1680-1740) offers a reevaluation of the conservative understanding of the Enlightenment and its supposed Iberian delay or even failure to launch (21). Hill examines nascent neoclassical and Cartesian scientific ideas in Enlightenment Ibero-American thinkers, questioning the basis on which traditional understandings of the Enlightenment are founded. As she succinctly concludes: “[O]ne Enlightenment model does
not fit all cultures” (23), arguing that the ‘conventional’ understanding of the Enlightenment makes the conceptual slippage that “European culture is French culture” (260). The northern European foundation of supposedly universal Enlightenment thought impacts the ideological currents of the founding period of the United States, in which the Adamses served as key protagonists. As global spheres of influences shifted in the wake of American independence movements, Old World models were inevitably transferred to New World situations, as Latin America became the pawn of the United States just as Spain and Portugal had been subjugated by northern European powers (Hill 259).

This understanding of the limits of the Enlightenment serves to encapsulate the stakes of the Adamses’ early interaction with Spain, especially given Quincy Adams’ extensive diplomatic relations with Spain and Spanish America. When John Adams and John Quincy Adams engage in economic anti-Catholic rhetoric, they may not be consciously aware of the racial and imperial implications of their statements, but a reading of their diaries through the lens of the Black Legend reveals repercussions of their Enlightenment thought that go far deeper than mere annoyance with pious muleteers and disdain for unproductive monks. The utter disregard for Spain shown by the Adamses economically, religiously, and even racially, demonstrates the way in which “[O]ne Enlightenment model does not fit all cultures” (Hill 23). The Adamses’ anti-Catholic diaries reveal an “enlightened” northern European and North American society bound by strict ideological notions of racist and religious exclusion, intolerance, and even dehumanization.

The anti-Hispanism shown in both Adamses’ diaries then stands as a dark omen for the later disillusionment that Quincy Adams would face about the idealism of the founders and the impossibility of its providential achievement. Quincy Adams was expected to be the standard-bearer of Enlightenment “republican ideals,” but was forced to compromise them as Secretary of State in order to achieve the Manifest Destiny of his ideal republic. With an eye toward territorial expansion of the United States, Quincy Adams may have recalled his early impressions of Spain during the drawn out process of negotiation with foreign minister Onís. Whether these recollections of Spain had any concrete influence in later decisions is impossible to say. Nevertheless, Quincy Adams’ participation in Black Legend writing shows more broadly his cultural understanding that endured far beyond the pages of his boyhood journal. That Quincy Adams later expressed trepidation at sacrificing American values in the process of manipulating the diplomatic situation with the same Spain he so criticized then stands as a bitter epilogue to the Iberian detour that began his writing career. Ironically, just as Adams had attempted to expose the ghosts of Spain in his bitter anti-Catholic commentary, his later negotiations with Spain brought up the ghosts of his own country, the question of slavery in American expansion of Enlightenment liberty. Quincy Adams later spent
decades in Congress as an abolitionist, atoning for the “original sin” of the American nation, slavery. While it may be useful to understand Quincy Adams as a tragic figure of lost republican idealism, his writings call in to question the bases on which that supposedly-universal Enlightenment virtue were formed. Ultimately, the participation of the Adamses in Black Legend writing is one small episode in the long history of empire and ideology whose heritage reached back long before them, and whose influence would extend into the present day.

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