Catholic statement because of the nation's Protestant religious background.

Due to the nation's bloody history of oppressing Catholics, and most notably nineteenth century Catholic immigrants, Christian citizens should reevaluate political arguments grounded in an American "Christian" foundation. Analyzing the impact nineteenth century Catholic immigrants had on the nation's religious identity offers crucial context to modern political discourse. To effectively analyze this impact, this paper is structured into three sections: first, I define religious identity and briefly explain its relationship to the United States; second, I offer a historical overview of both nineteenth century Catholic immigrants and the U.S.'s religious history; and third, I explain connections between nineteenth century Catholic immigrants and the U.S.'s religious identity in both a historical and modern context.

Identity

It is imperative to define religious identity in broad terms, as it is complex and often subtle. Religious identity encompasses more than which organized religion an individual affiliates with. More accurately, religious identity is the "sense of belonging" one has to a particular group or set of beliefs (Martin & Nakayama, 2010, p. 192). Further, religious identity is distinct from other types of identity, such as racial or gender, because it is often difficult to categorize someone religiously based on exterior factors. Though some religions have clearly identifiable clothing, such as a Muslim hijab, it is generally difficult to distinguish religious persons, such as a Catholic or a Mormon, simply by looking at them. The complexity of religious identity is illustrated in Martin and Nakayama's deconstruction of the statement "I am Jewish." This statement could mean several things, from racial identity based on one's Jewish parents, religious affiliation due to one's belief in Jewish theology, or even ethnic association related to one's location or upbringing (Martin & Nakayama, 2010).

Religious identity is vital to the U.S. It has defined the nation from its beginning, from European Christians who traveled to the British colonies in North America, eager to fulfill their missionary duties and save the perceived natives' barbaric souls, to the English

Puritans who established a model colony in Massachusetts so that they could exemplify pure Protestantism to the rest of the world. Though the U.S. government officially separated itself from any established religion in the late 1700s, it nonetheless has been shaped by religion in critical ways, as reflected in its treatment of non-Protestant religious groups. Catholic immigrants of the nineteenth century faced the nation's Protestant identity head-on, and this collision forced a painful reexamination of the nation's claim of religious freedom and separation of church and state. This reexamination is demonstrated in the openly anti-Catholic politics, literature, and violence of the nineteenth century. Thus, this reaction to Catholic immigrants offers insight into the nation's religious identity.

Background

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the U.S. saw a dramatic population increase in Catholicism as millions of Catholics migrated to the nation. According to Christian historian Clyde F. Crews, the number of Catholics in the U.S. expanded from 195,000 in 1820 to 18 million in 1920. Many of these immigrants were impoverished or faced political oppression and were from Ireland and Germany. Notably, many Irish immigrants who traveled to the U.S. were sickly and poor, as they had escaped the potato famine that ravished their country. Catholic immigrants sought economic prosperity and religious freedom in the U.S., encouraged by tales of mass opportunity and security. However, most immigrants found themselves concentrated in cities and part of the working-class that held little political power (Crews, 1994).

Despite their low socioeconomic standing, Catholics made a remarkable impression on America. Their leadership expanded throughout the nineteenth century, and by the early 1900s, there were approximately 11,000 priests and 40,000 nuns in the U.S. (Crews, 1994). Historian James Kenneally credits these sisters for "holding the Church together" as they "exercised...major influence on the growing immigrant population" (as cited in Crews, 1994, p. 73). Poor communities often pooled their money and built Catholic schools, colleges, and elaborate cathedrals, such as St. Patrick's Cathedral in