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ON RELIGION

In Untruths About Obama, Echoes of a Distant Time

By [SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN](#)

During the presidential campaign of 1928, a photograph began circulating in rural areas of the Southwest showing Alfred E. Smith shaking hands with a fellow politician on the roadway of a tunnel. The image depicted Smith as he was officially opening the Holland Tunnel, which had been built during his tenure as governor of New York.

The people thousands of miles away who received copies of the picture were given a decidedly different explanation: Smith planned to extend the tunnel under the Atlantic Ocean all the way to the [Vatican](#), so he could take secret orders from the pope. As just about any informed voter that year already knew, Smith was the first Roman Catholic ever to win a major party's presidential nomination.

At the remove of 80 years, it is tempting to laugh off such a crude attempt at fearmongering and character assassination. With Catholics unquestionably part of the American mainstream — one of the most coveted swing groups of voters in the current race for the White House — the misrepresentation of the photo might seem the artifact of a benighted past.

Except for two things.

The first is that the climate of anti-Catholic bigotry, which ran from the refined arena of *The Atlantic* magazine to the cross burnings of the [Ku Klux Klan](#), not only contributed to Smith's crushing defeat by Herbert Hoover but also helped keep any other Catholic from mounting a serious run for the presidency until [John F. Kennedy](#) in 1960. The hate campaign, in other words, worked.

As for the second point, scholars of Smith's career and of American Catholicism say nothing in presidential history since 1928 more closely resembles the smearing of Al Smith than the aura of anti-Muslim agitation that has swirled around [Barack Obama](#) these past two years.

The insinuations of disloyalty to America, the caricature of the candidate as less than genuinely American — these tactics could have come from the play book of Smith's basest opponents, the scholars say.

The biggest single difference may be the postmodern aspect of the attacks against Mr. Obama. He is vilified not for the religion he follows but for the one he doesn't, and much of his campaign's energy has gone into reiterating that he is a Christian. Either way, the underlying premise of the rumors remains that a Muslim is unfit to be president.

“What is similar in Smith’s time is that there was a widespread belief there was something dangerous about electing a Catholic as president,” said Allan J. Lichtman, an American University historian who is the author of “Prejudice and the Old Politics: The Presidential Election of 1928.” “You couldn’t be a good American and serve American interests if you were a Catholic, because you were beholden to a foreign potentate called the pope and Catholicism held autocratic tenets.

“Likewise today, there is a widespread belief that somehow you cannot be a good American and be a Muslim at the same time, that being a Muslim means you have loyalties outside the United States — and, like Catholics in the 1920s, they are dangerous loyalties to militant groups seeking to do harm. There’s no truth to the allegations, then or now, but they are tenaciously held.”

In Smith’s case, foes from the highbrow end of society, as well as K.K.K. bottom feeders, disparaged Catholic faith as incompatible with democracy. Admittedly, the smears against Mr. Obama have not achieved the comparable legitimacy in elite circles.

In the blogosphere and through mass e-mail, however, and even on Fox News and in Insight magazine, the disinformation has proliferated that Mr. Obama was raised as a Muslim, educated in a madrassa, influenced by an Islamist stepfather and sworn into the Senate holding a Koran.

These calumnies, no matter how often contradicted, have nourished virulent behavior at Republican campaign rallies. At an event for [John McCain](#) and [Sarah Palin](#) in Bethlehem, Pa., [National Public Radio](#) captured the voice of one participant shouting: “Obama’s a Muslim! He’s a terrorist himself!”

Robert A. Slayton, author of the Smith biography “Empire Statesman,” suggested in a recent interview that the religious bias against Smith and Mr. Obama served in part as a proxy for nativist resistance to an increasingly diverse nation. The United States in both the 1920s and the 2000s has been bitterly divided over mass [immigration](#) — by Jews and Catholics then, Hispanics and Muslims now.

Smith’s opponents conflated his Catholic faith with his Irish heritage, urban roots and even New York accent to cast him outside the Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, small-town norms of America. Mr. Obama, of course, is of mixed race and has a Muslim middle name, Hussein, which has been flourished by some Republicans as proof of his foreignness.

“The most remarkable parallel to 1928 has to do with the idea that Smith was one of ‘those people,’ that the people he represented weren’t real Americans,” said Mr. Slayton, a professor of American history at Chapman University in Orange, Calif. “And when Sarah Palin talks about the ‘real America’ now, I hear an echo of that.”

If there is a lesson from Al Smith about all this, then it came during a speech he delivered on Sept. 20, 1928, in Oklahoma City.

“This country, to my way of thinking, cannot be successful if it ever divides on sectarian lines,” he declared. “If there are any considerable number of our people that are going to listen to appeals to their passion and to their prejudice, if bigotry and intolerance and their sister vices are going to

succeed, it is dangerous for the future life of the Republic. And the best way to kill anything un-American is to drag it out into the open, because anything un-American cannot live in the sunlight.”

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