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America's History of Fear

By Nicholas D. Kristof

A radio interviewer asked me the other day if I thought bigotry was the only reason why someone might oppose the Islamic center in Lower Manhattan. No, I don't. Most of the opponents aren't bigots but well-meaning worriers — and during earlier waves of intolerance in American history, it was just the same.

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Screeds against Catholics from the 19th century sounded just like the invective today against the Not-at-Ground-Zero Mosque. The starting point isn't hatred but fear: an alarm among patriots that newcomers don't share their values, don't believe in democracy, and may harm innocent Americans.

Followers of these movements against Irish, Germans, Italians, Chinese and other immigrants were mostly decent, well-meaning people trying to protect their country. But they were manipulated by demagogues playing upon their fears — the 19th- and 20th-century equivalents of Glenn Beck.

Most Americans stayed on the sidelines during these spasms of bigotry, and only a small number of hoodlums killed or tormented Catholics, Mormons or others. But the assaults were possible because so many middle-of-the-road Americans were ambivalent.

Suspicion of outsiders, of people who behave or worship differently, may be an ingrained element of the human condition, a survival instinct from our cave-man days. But we should also recognize that historically this distrust has led us to burn witches, intern Japanese-Americans, and turn away Jewish refugees from the Holocaust.

Perhaps the closest parallel to today's hysteria about Islam is the 19th-century fear spread by the Know Nothing movement about "the Catholic menace." One book warned that Catholicism was "the primary source" of all of America's misfortunes, and there were whispering campaigns that presidents including Martin Van Buren and William McKinley were secretly working with the pope. Does that sound familiar?

Critics warned that the pope was plotting to snatch the Mississippi Valley and secretly conspiring to overthrow American democracy. "Rome looks with wistful eye to domination of this broad land, a magnificent seat for a sovereign pontiff," one writer cautioned.

Historically, unreal suspicions were sometimes rooted in genuine and significant differences. Many new Catholic immigrants lacked experience in democracy. Mormons were engaged in polygamy. And today some extremist Muslims do plot to blow up planes, and Islam has real problems to work out about the rights of women. The pattern has been for demagogues to take real abuses and exaggerate them, portraying, for example, the most venal wing of the Catholic Church as representative of all Catholicism — just as fundamentalist Wahabis today are caricatured as more representative of Islam than the incomparably more numerous moderate Muslims of Indonesia (who have elected a woman as president before Americans have).

In the 19th century, fears were stoked by books written by people who supposedly had "escaped" Catholicism. These books luridly recounted orgies between priests and nuns, girls kidnapped and held in secret dungeons, and networks of tunnels at convents to allow priests to rape nuns. One woman claiming to have been a priest's sex slave wrote a "memoir" asserting that Catholics killed boys and ground them into sausage for sale.

These kinds of stories inflamed a mob of patriots in 1834 to attack an Ursuline convent outside Boston and burn it down.

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Similar suspicions have targeted just about every other kind of immigrant. During World War I, rumors spread that German-Americans were poisoning food, and Theodore Roosevelt warned that “Germanized socialists” were “more mischievous than bubonic plague.”

Anti-Semitic screeds regularly warned that Jews were plotting to destroy the United States in one way or another. A 1940 survey found that 17 percent of Americans considered Jews to be a “menace to America.”

Chinese in America were denounced, persecuted and lynched, while the head of a United States government commission publicly urged in 1945 “the extermination of the Japanese in toto.” Most shamefully, anti-Asian racism led to the internment of 110,000 Japanese-Americans during World War II.

All that is part of America’s heritage, and typically as each group has assimilated, it has participated in the torment of newer arrivals — as in Father Charles Coughlin’s ferociously anti-Semitic radio broadcasts in the 1930s. Today’s recrudescence is the lies about President Obama’s faith, and the fear-mongering about the proposed Islamic center.



But we have a more glorious tradition intertwined in American history as well, one of tolerance, amity and religious freedom. Each time, this has ultimately prevailed over the Know Nothing impulse.

Americans have called on moderates in Muslim countries to speak out against extremists, to stand up for the tolerance they say they believe in. We should all have the guts do the same at home.

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