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Comparing Contemporary Islamophobia in the U.S. with Early American Anti-Catholicism of the Modern Era

Kathy Merkl

Introduction

The history of the United States is far from free of religious oppression, even though those who represented this nation in its earliest days had often fled religious persecution in search of a more tolerant home. In the 17th - 19th centuries, American Catholics were an oppressed people because they represented the religion of the pope and a non-Protestant form of Christianity. In the contemporary era, American Muslims are facing similar oppression, representing the religion of the Middle East and a non-Christian form of religion. Though the experiences and methods of oppression confronting each of these religious groups are unique, it can be valuable to examine the similarities in order to begin to work toward a bridge between the history of Catholics in America and the contemporary experiences of American Muslims.

Early American Catholics and Anti-Catholicism

Though many American Catholics are aware of the early Anti-Catholicism in the United States and the colonies, there seems to be a lack of knowledge as to what exactly that Anti-Catholicism looked like and, even more significantly, what that prejudice and oppression might resemble in our contemporary world. The significance of anti-Catholicism in the early United States is often overlooked when compared to the way that present-day Catholics are far from an oppressed minority. Today, American Catholics have almost completely been absorbed into what would be considered the average American stereotype; the white Anglo-Saxon protestant majority of the colonies and early U.S. is now, seemingly, replaced by the white Christian majority of the contemporary United States. Though Catholics are now included in this powerful majority, early Catholics had a long road to tread to gain this acceptance and inclusion.

Politics vs. Early American Catholics

Early American politics revolved around the idea of a new type of government that would be run by and for the people, not controlled by a single king or king-like figure. This, many early Americans feared, seemed to clash with the Catholic understanding of the pope as a single, dominant leader. It was difficult for Protestant men and women to see Catholicism as a system that could live under a society that required the separation of church and state. The term “papist” was used often in early American literature and discourse to highlight the distinction between Christians who were free from the tyranny of a king and Christians who were “subject” to the king-like rule of the pope back in Europe.

The first area largely populated by Catholics in the colonies was the colony of Maryland. Maryland Catholics were predominantly wealthy Catholics who had significant control in the governing of this colony at first.¹ The founder of the colony was a Catholic, and Maryland was the first colony to implement religious freedom laws.² These religious freedom laws titled, the Act Concerning Religion, later referred to as the Maryland Toleration Act, mandated that Catholics and Protestants must live peacefully together in the colony of Maryland.³ This did not make Maryland a Catholic colony, however.⁴ Several descendants of the founder of Maryland were deprived of ownership rights due to their Catholicism. This deprivation was so significant that only five generations after Maryland had been founded, the descendants of the founder converted to the Church of England. In 1704, the Anti-Popery Act was passed, preventing Catholics from holding any political office in Maryland.⁵ By the year 1717, Maryland Catholics were denied the right to vote in their colony.⁶ Catholics in Maryland would be unable to vote until the colonies were no longer colonies.⁷ Anti-Catholic legislation continued in Maryland with a law passed in 1854 requiring Catholics to pay a double tax, a law passed requiring priests to “post a bond for good behavior,” and a law that made the conversion from Protestant to Catholic punishable as high treason.⁸

November 5th was treated as a holiday in almost every single colony. This day, known as Guy Fawkes Day in England and Pope Day in the colonies, was celebrated with parades, fireworks, and the burning of depictions of popes. It often included the harassment and threatening of Catholics in the colonies, as well. This day was a celebration of Anti-Catholicism in the colonies. Although the founders of the United States refused to make Pope Day a national holiday, many Americans still celebrated this day up through the end of the 19th century.⁹

In New York and New England, there were laws banning Catholic priests from entering the boundaries of these colonies during the early 18th century.¹⁰ In these colonies, “anti-Catholicism served as a powerful bonding force” between Protestant colonists.¹¹ In New York in 1741, a minister named John Ury was falsely accused of being a Catholic priest; he was hung for

¹ Maura Jane Farrelly, *Anti-Catholicism in America, 1620-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 46.

² Herbert C. Smith and John T. Willis, "A Maryland Political History," in *Maryland Politics and Government: Democratic Dominance* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 18.

³ Farrelly, *Anti-Catholicism in America*, 59.

⁴ Martin I.J. Griffin, “The Apostate, Lord Baltimore—The Calverts—Was Maryland a Catholic Colony?,” *The American Catholic Historical Researches* 19, No. 2 (1902): 59.

⁵ Robert Emmett Curran, "'Catholics, by the Very Principles of That Religion Can Never Be Faithful Subjects': The Peaking of Anti-Catholicism and the Seven Years' War," in *Papist Devils* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 206.

⁶ John Garner, "Religious Disqualifications in the Franchise: Roman Catholics," in *The Franchise and Politics in British North America 1755-1867* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 131.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁸ Curran, *Papist Devils*, 222.

⁹ John Albee, "Pope Night in Portsmouth, N. H.," *The Journal of American Folklore* 5, No. 19 (1892): 335.

¹⁰ Curran, *Papist Devils*, 202.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 202.

the capital crimes of being a priest and planning a slave revolt.¹² Later, an Irish woman, a slave, and an entire family were hung due to accusations of being involved in an alleged Catholic plot to burn buildings in New York.¹³ Thankfully, the spirit of freedom that followed the Revolutionary War gave way to a more tolerant attitude toward Catholics in the United States.¹⁴

Society vs. Early American Catholics

Catholics were originally considered dangerous members of American society. In 1754, the colonies were concerned that Maryland was not controlling its Catholic population. Catholics, “by the very nature of [their] religious beliefs had to be controlled for the well-being of the rest of society.”¹⁵ Due to this danger, colonists called for the expulsion of the Jesuits from Maryland and the repossession of any land owned by Catholics.¹⁶ Rumors about Catholics spread throughout the colonies and any mention of priests roaming the land or hiding in the shadows struck fear and hatred into the hearts of colonists.¹⁷ Catholics were rumored to be conspiring with the French to overthrow or attack the colonies.¹⁸ Many Catholics faced violence in the early United States due to the prejudice of fellow Americans. In 1834, an Ursuline convent in Charlestown, MA was burned down because of rumors of immorality and corruption.¹⁹ In 1844, 30 houses belonging to Irish Catholics were burned down in Kensington, NY.²⁰ Many of the rumors and claims that provoked violence were preached in Protestant churches throughout the US.

Theological Beliefs vs. Early American Catholics

Churches all over the early United States preached anti-Catholicism. Unitarian and orthodox Calvinist churches targeted Catholics in homilies and advocated anti-Catholicism amongst worshippers.²¹ Across the newly formed United States, religious hatred was “extravagant.”²² In 1842, the American Protestant Association (APA) was founded, and it put forward several fake papal encyclicals to confuse Catholics and turn Protestants against them. These encyclicals spread rumors that Catholics were storing arms in churches and monasteries to prepare for a revolt against other Americans.²³ False rumors about Catholics and priests influenced the anti-Catholicism fervor throughout the early United States. Some of these rumors in the 1840’s accused the American Catholic bishops of burning Protestant Bibles. This accusation caused great anger toward Catholics and influenced the writing of John Dowling’s *The Burning of the Bibles*, in 1843. The text is a tirade about the ways that “Romanism” or

¹² Ibid., 203.

¹³ Ibid., 203.

¹⁴ Farrelly, *Anti-Catholicism in America*, 117.

¹⁵ Curran, *Papist Devils*, 220.

¹⁶ Ibid., 220.

¹⁷ Curran, *Papist Devils*, 220.

¹⁸ Ibid., 220.

¹⁹ Farrelly, *Anti-Catholicism in America*, 143.

²⁰ Ibid., 150.

²¹ Ibid., 139.

²² Ibid., 144.

²³ Ibid., 180.

“popery” was trying to destroy Protestantism.²⁴ The book presents some misinterpretations of Catholicism, stating that Catholics worship saints.²⁵ Dowling claims that the term, “the King James Bible,” is an incorrect and offensive way of naming the Protestant Bible, and that the Protestant Bible contains the most accurate (original) biblical message.²⁶ The text was meant to stir up anti-Catholicism in the United States and to turn Protestants against Catholics in an attempt to protect Protestant Bibles.

Modern American Muslims and Islamophobia

In the 20th and 21st centuries, American Muslims have been the recipients of hatred and fear from fellow Americans embodying Islamophobia. Islamophobia is defined as “the history, presence, dimensions, intensity, causes, and consequences of anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim sentiments.”²⁷ Through political, social, and theological means of oppression, contemporary Americans have targeted American Muslims and promoted anti-Muslim rhetoric through all forms of media. The attacks on Muslims have stirred up Islamophobia to create an often unsafe environment for modern American Muslims.

Politics vs. Contemporary American Muslims

Muslim Americans have faced political ridicule throughout their presence in the United States, most recognizably during the last two centuries after the founding of the first American Muslim mosque in the early 1900’s. The political struggles of Muslim Americans increased dramatically with the rise of Islamophobia following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. “Since 2010, seventy-eight anti-Muslim bills or constitutional amendments have been introduced in 31 states and the U.S. Congress.”²⁸ Six of these propositions have been fully made into law. Many of these bills related to the area of Islamophobia were concerned with Sharia law.²⁹ The misunderstanding of the term, *Sharia law*, has brought about significant prejudice against Muslim Americans. On May 6, 2010, an Oklahoma senator proposed a bill that outlawed Sharia law in the courts. One bill proposed in Arizona would have banned “karma,” and one bill in Tennessee declared that “adherence to sharia is evidence of an act in support of the overthrow of the United States government.”³⁰ On January 27, 2017, Executive Order 13769, commonly referred to as the “Muslim Ban,” came into effect. The order was titled *Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States*, and it detained more than 700 travelers and revoked 60,000 visas. The ban was fought by many Americans and multiple branches of government until it was overturned on March 16, 2017.

²⁴ John Dowling, *The Burning of the Bibles: Defense of the Protestant Version of the Scriptures Against the Attacks of Popish Apologists* (Philadelphia: N. Moore, 1843).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Erik Bleich, "Defining and Researching Islamophobia," *Review of Middle East Studies* 46, No. 2 (2012): 180.

²⁸ Gadeir Abbas, "Anti-Muslim Legislation and Its Hopeful Demise," *Human Rights* 39, No. 2 (2013): 9.

²⁹ Ibid., 9.

³⁰ Ibid., 9.

Since the 19th century, Islam has been considered an un-American religion, even though Islam has been present in the Americas since the very beginning of colonization.³¹ In several instances, high profile Americans have issued hateful statements toward Muslims, helping to encourage Islamophobia throughout the U.S. American President Woodrow Wilson referred to Western-European nations as stronger and nobler races.³² Mark Twain called Muslims filthy, brutish, unprogressive, and superstitious after his visit to the Holy Land.³³ Our current President, Donald Trump, called for “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States” during his presidential candidacy. Islam is seen as a political religion in the United States, since “Muhammad founded a state and governed it.”³⁴ This is the reason Bernard Lewis gives for why the term, “Islamic Terrorism,” is appropriate while “Christian Terrorism” and “Jewish Terrorism” are not.³⁵

Society vs. Contemporary American Muslims

Today, non-Muslim Americans unite in one of the most common prejudices that gushes out of our society, Islamophobia. Due to the false perception of Islam as a foreign religion and misunderstandings of what the Islamic faith proclaims, Islam is often associated with violence in American media and politics. This association began around the time of the Crusades and grew with the Twin Tower attacks.³⁶ Due to the misunderstandings of the Islamic faith tradition, Americans also associate Islam with the mistreatment and oppression of women.³⁷ Because of its increased association with violence after September 11th, Islam is now seen as a major threat here in the United States. The American policies and laws discussed above are all in response to the belief that Muslims are a threat to the rest of the country.³⁸

One of the ways in which contemporary American Muslims have faced Islamophobia is through violence inflicted upon them. There have been many reports of violence toward Muslim and Arab Americans due to the prejudice that arose after the attack on the Twin Towers. Several Muslim and Arab men have been shot and killed because of Islamophobia and the hatred that surfaced after September 11th.³⁹ One example of this occurred in 2012, when a man approached a mosque in Chicago, shooting a pellet gun at the building while hundreds of worshippers were inside.⁴⁰ Islam is considered a foreign religion in the United States, even though Muslim men and women have been a part of society since the time of the first colonies. Muslims have contributed to the flourishing of the United States through music, sports, business, academia, and other areas throughout the history of the nation. Even though the number of American Muslims

³¹ Amir Hussain, *Muslims and the Making of America* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 1.

³² Deepa Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2012), 32.

³³ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 121.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

³⁹ Erik Robert Love, *Islamophobia and Racism in America* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2017), 1-34.

⁴⁰ Jordan Denari Duffner, *Finding Jesus Among Muslims: How Loving Islam Makes Me a Better Catholic* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017), 32.

has increased significantly since the beginning of the 20th century, there have always been American Muslims making America what it is today.⁴¹

Theological Beliefs vs. Contemporary American Muslims

Islam is one of the most misunderstood religions in the United States. This misunderstanding has led to many of the political and societal struggles that contemporary American Muslims have faced. Though the theological beliefs of Muslims are very similar to Judeo-Christian beliefs, Islam is still seen as a vastly different religion in the United States. This viewpoint is predominantly caused by the lack of knowledge and education taught to the average American on Islam. Even though Muslims have been present in the United States since its founding, the Muslim religion is largely misunderstood.

Islam has been practiced in American society since the first Muslims arrived with the early colonizers. Early American slaves brought Islamic practices and beliefs with them over the Middle Passage. There have been mosques in the United States since 1915.⁴² Islam is not a new, foreign religion to the United States; it is one that has shaped the fabric of American culture and society, though there is still much ignorance surrounding the actual beliefs of Muslim people. Many differences between the culture and politics of the Middle East and those of Western Europe have been seen as differences associated with Islam. Due to this, the oppression of women in these countries is associated with the teachings of the Qur’an.⁴³ Since Islam is so misunderstood in the United States, there is great misunderstanding as to what the teachings of the Qur’an are. Many Christian Americans believe that women are oppressed more in the words of the Qur’an than in their beloved Bible; however, many Christian Americans overlook the parts of the Bible that call for subjugation of women and other ancient practices. It is easy for an American Christian to look past the discrepancies in the biblical text and claim that those were different times with different traditions, but it is very difficult for them to look past those similar discrepancies in Islamic writings.

Political Similarities in these Forms of Oppression

After examining the oppression of each of these two religious groups, it becomes clear that the groups faced very similar cruelty in these different time periods of U.S. history. Both groups were seen as unable to participate in forms of governing that the United States advocated. Contemporary Muslims are seen as incapable of living in a democracy under self-rule due to fellow Americans misunderstanding the role of Islam in politics.⁴⁴ Sharia law is misinterpreted as a legal system in opposition to our democratic republic.⁴⁵ In the late 1700’s, many Americans feared that Catholics could not truly be members of a republican nation.⁴⁶ Obedience to papal

⁴¹ Hussain, *Muslims and the Making of America*, 1.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴³ Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 31.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 55-59.

⁴⁵ Abbas, "Anti-Muslim Legislation and Its Hopeful Demise," 9.

⁴⁶ Farrelly, *Anti-Catholicism in America*, 78.

authority was misinterpreted as an obedience that would be held over obedience to the Constitution.⁴⁷

The American form of government with an elected president has been the cause of fear and hate speech toward both of these groups in American history. When Barack Obama was running for president, many Americans, believing that it was possible that Obama was a Muslim, were terrified at the thought of a Muslim president. This was due to their misunderstandings of Islamic beliefs and practices as well as the association of Islam with violence after September 11th. The idea of a Catholic president also terrified many Americans when John F. Kennedy was running for president in 1960. This fear was primarily due to misunderstandings about the role of papal authority in the lives of Catholics all over the world.

Societal Similarities in these Forms of Oppression

Societal prejudices toward contemporary Muslim Americans and early Catholic Americans have often stemmed from false allegations that are stirred up by media and mass communications. Society has seen both groups as the enemy during different periods in American history. England depicted Catholics as the enemy due to their own Protestant history of breaking away from the Catholic Church.⁴⁸ This depiction influenced the British colonists and created a divide between them and the Catholics who may have been plotting against England and siding with the French Catholics. Europeans depicted Islam as the enemy since the Crusades, and this greatly influenced the opinion of the U.S.⁴⁹ It is a devastating part of human nature to declare friends and foes, especially when both groups reside in one area working, learning, and living together.

The majority groups in America proclaimed both early Catholic Americans and contemporary Muslim Americans as ignorant. Catholicism was linked to poverty and ignorance when poor Irish Catholics began immigrating to the U.S. in the mid-1800's.⁵⁰ Even though the Catholics in Maryland were wealthy, Catholicism was blamed for the poverty that the Irish Catholic immigrants faced. Today, Muslims are seen as ignorant and “incapable of reason and rationality” in the United States.⁵¹ This began as early as the late 1800's in Europe and grew significantly after 9/11 in the U.S. In reality, Americans gained an immense amount of knowledge and science from earlier European communication with the Arab world.⁵²

Theological Similarities in these Forms of Oppression

By examining the ways in which the theological beliefs and practices of Muslims and Catholics have been distorted and misinterpreted to stand in opposition to the beliefs of the American majority, it becomes clear that this form of oppression can be the most detrimental to a

⁴⁷ Ibid., 76.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁹ Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 9.

⁵⁰ Farrelly, *Anti-Catholicism in America*, 143.

⁵¹ Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 48.

⁵² Ibid., 49-52.

minority religious group’s wellbeing. In writings of early Americans, such as *The Burning of the Bibles*, Catholicism was often depicted incorrectly with theological misunderstandings fueling anti-Catholic fervor.⁵³ False claims about what Muslims believe began as early as the eleventh century with the Crusades.⁵⁴ There are many myths about Islam that have caused Americans to view it as an anti-American religion.⁵⁵

Since associations with the devil are synonymous with evil in both Catholicism and Islam, this language and theological “evidence” has been used to draw connections between these religions and the devil or the anti-Christ. Thomas Kidd, in *American Christians and Islam*, states that, “Evangelical Christians have seen Islam as the first of the devil’s tempting kingdoms, with Roman Catholicism as the second.”⁵⁶ Islam was seen in the late 20th century to be “a new foreign devil.”⁵⁷ Martin Luther used the term anti-Christ to refer to both Muhammad and the pope.⁵⁸ When the American Protestant Association was active, members employed biblical references to claim that the foreshadowed anti-Christ would be a Catholic.⁵⁹

Meaning for Today

After surveying the history of Catholics and Muslims in the U.S., it becomes clear that their connections have great meaning for contemporary Catholic Americans and Muslim Americans. Such investigation reveals unity in a similar history and foundation in this country. This shared past could help Catholics and Muslims to support one another in contemporary American society. One of the reasons that information about this connection, as well as communication and discussion between these two groups, is necessary is because many Catholics today are Islamophobic. According to the Georgetown Bridge Initiative, nearly half of all Catholics in America believe that Islam encourages violence more than any other religion, and 52% of white Catholics favor a ban on Muslims entering the country. 70% of Catholics in the United States claim that they do not know anyone who is Muslim, and 30% acknowledge having unfavorable views toward Muslims.⁶⁰ These types of statistics show the baffling problem of Islamophobia within Catholicism. Even though several leaders in the Catholic church, such as Pope Francis, have emphasized a need for dialogue and compassion toward Muslims, many Catholics find this very difficult to achieve. Pope Francis has stressed that, “Christians cannot truly be in relationship with God while being out of relationship with Muslims.”⁶¹

⁵³ Dowling, *The Burning of the Bibles*.

⁵⁴ Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 16.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 41-60.

⁵⁶ Thomas S. Kidd, *American Christians and Islam: Evangelical Culture and Muslims From the Colonial Period to the Age of Terrorism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁵⁷ Lawrence Pintak, “U.S. Coverage of Islam,” in *Reflections in a Bloodshot Lens* (London, UK: Pluto Press, 2006), 32.

⁵⁸ Todd H. Green, “The Historical Foundation of Islamophobia,” in *The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2015), 59.

⁵⁹ Farrelly, *Anti-Catholicism in America*, 149.

⁶⁰ Jordan Denari Duffner, “Danger & Dialogue: American Catholic Attitudes on Islam,” *The Bridge Initiative: A Research Project on Islamophobia*, September 3, 2016, accessed February 20, 2018, <http://bridge.georgetown.edu/danger-dialogue-american-catholic-public-opinion-and-portrayals-of-islam/>.

⁶¹ Duffner, *Finding Jesus among Muslims*, 9.

In this analysis there is evidence of similar methods of oppression endured, which give early American Catholics and contemporary American Muslims a common experience of prejudice and harassment suffered during different periods in American history. This common experience is just one of the ways in which contemporary Catholic Americans can find solidarity with Muslim Americans today. Hopefully, this will help begin the process of decreasing Islamophobia's presence in the U.S., just as Anti-Catholicism has decreased significantly since the 17th – 19th centuries. Through conducting this research, I am hopeful for a similar decline in Islamophobia. I know that with the support of present-day Catholics, Islamophobia could become a thing of the past even faster.

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