

The politics of nativism: Islam in Europe, Catholicism in the United States

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Abstract

The politics of nativism directed at Catholic immigrants in 19th-century America offer a fruitful comparative perspective through which to analyze the discourse and the politics of Islam in contemporary Europe. Anti-Catholic nnativism constituted a peculiar North American version of the larger and more generalized phenomenon of anti-immigrant populist xenophobic politics which one finds in many countries and in different historical contexts. What is usually designated as Islamo-phobia in contemporary Europe, however, manifests striking resemblances with the original phenomenon of American nativism that emerged in the middle of the 19th century in the United States. In both cases one finds the fusion of anti-immigrant xenophobic attitudes, perennial inter-religious prejudices, and an ideological construct setting a particular religious-civilizational complex in essential opposition to Western modernity. Although an anti-Muslim discourse emerged also in the United States after 11 September, it had primarily a geo-political dimension connected with the 'war on terror' and with American global imperial policies. But it lacked the domestic anti-immigrant populist as well as the modern secularist anti-Muslim dimensions. This explains why xenophobic anti-Muslim nativism has been much weaker in the United States than in Europe. I

Keywords

Catholicism, immigrant incorporation, Islam, nativism, secular modernity

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American nativism emerged in the 1840s as a socio-political movement directed at Irish-Catholic immigrants, who were considered alien and hostile to the 'naturalized' American culture and in this respect basically 'unassimilable'. Nativism always entails a dual process of naturalization of some group as the 'native' majority and of denaturalization of some other group as the 'alien' minority. The American case clearly indicates that there was nothing 'natural' about this process of social construction. First, White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) colonists and settlers had to be constituted as the natural majority, that is, as the native descendants of the American soil. In the process the true natives, namely Native-Americans, as well as African-Americans who in most cases could claim a longer presence in America than the more recent white European immigrants, were denaturalized as un-American.

Race served originally as the primary criterion for the construction of American nativism, as is evident from Tocqueville's discussion of native 'savages' and 'black slaves' in *Democracy in America*, in the final chapter of the first volume as a postscript on 'The Three Races in the United States'.² It is not the case that Tocqueville is insensitive to the fate of both groups. On the contrary, Tocqueville's almost clinically detached analysis remains one of the most damning portrayals of American racism and of the genocidal violence inflicted upon both groups by liberal democracy. But he conveniently justifies the separate treatment of the subject matter at the end of the book by arguing that both discriminated races inhabited the territory but were not part of democracy in America, which was the focus of his book. The fact that Native-Americans and African-Americans could not be part of American democracy disqualified them from belonging to the natural majority, while new white Protestant European immigrants could be immediately naturalized and become culturally the real 'natives'.

Originally, therefore, American nativism had not been structured through religious identities and was not directed against Catholics. It is true that virulent anti-popery and anti-popish prejudices against Catholics had been one of the few dispositions shared by practically all Protestant groups in colonial America, who tended to view Rome and the Catholic Church as the 'Anti-Christ' and the 'Whore of Babylon'. Revolution and independence, however, brought a rare interlude and a dramatic reversal in anti-popery. President Kirkland of Harvard, in his 1813 Dudleian lecture, could express the startling view that 'we may ... abate much of that abhorrence of papists which our fathers felt themselves obliged to maintain and inculcate'.³

Given the disabilities under which Catholics had to function in most of the colonies, they welcomed with enthusiasm the radically new dual constitutional arrangement of 'no establishment' and 'free exercise' inscribed in the First Amendment. In a letter to Rome in 1783, Catholic priests wrote that 'in these United States, our Religious system has undergone a revolution, if possible, more extraordinary than our political one. In all of them free toleration is allowed to Christians of every denomination'. John Carroll, the first American Catholic bishop, reflected the consensus of the period when he drew a wall of separation between his role as citizen and his role as spiritual leader of American Catholics. Catholic laymen, in the liberal tradition, drew a similar line between their public secular and their private religious roles.

This was the situation encountered by Tocqueville in his visit to America in 1830. In his portrayal of American Catholics he actually tried to use this evidence to refute the

widespread thesis of incompatibility between 'Republicanism' and 'Romanism', as well as the widely held perception on both sides of the French republican-laicist and monarchist-Catholic divide that Catholicism was incompatible with modern democracy and with individual freedoms. American Catholics, Tocqueville observed, assented to the doctrines of revealed religion without discussion, while leaving political truths and civil matters open to free inquiry. 'Thus, the Catholics of the United States are at the same time the most submissive believers and the most independent citizens.'

The mass immigration of impoverished Irish Catholics in the 1840s, however, clashed with a renewed Protestant *crusade* to Christianize the Republic which emerged out of the Second Great Awakening. In fact the fusion of evangelical Protestantism and American nationalism which the historian Perry Miller depicted as 'romantic nationalist evangelicalism' was already well in place at the time of Tocqueville's visit. In his classic study of the Protestant crusade, Ray Allen Billington singles out 1830 as the year in which anti-Catholic Protestant nativism emerged into the public sphere. It was the year in which *The Protestant*, the first openly anti-Catholic newspaper, was published in New York. It was also the year in which the Reverend Lyman Beecher, President of Yale and founder of 'the New School' of New England Calvinism, began his series of anti-Catholic sermons linking Catholicism and despotism as threats to the 'Christian' Republic. In one of his sermons, while visiting Boston in 1834, he warned:

The Catholic Church holds now in darkness and bondage nearly half of the civilized world ... It is the most skillful, powerful, dreadful system of corruption to those who wield it, and of slavery and debasement to those who live under it.⁷

Soon thereafter a Protestant mob burnt the Ursuline Convent school of Charlestown, Massachusetts. But the fusion of theological anti-Catholicism and populist anti-immigrant nativism first took place in the 1840s with the massive arrival of Irish immigrants. Immigrants from Catholic countries, whether religious or not, became now for the first time clearly distinguishable by class and ethnicity from their fellow American citizens and thus could become also embodied representations of dreaded Catholicism. The Reverend Horace Bushnell, the leading American liberal theologian, warned Protestant America: 'Our first danger is barbarism, Romanism next'. He could have added: 'Both happen to be Irish'. Unlike Scottish-Irish Protestants, who formed a majority of WASPs in the South, Irish Catholics, despite the whiteness of their skin and their English linguistic competence, could not pass as WASP.

Protestant anti-Catholic nativism soon began to acquire a socio-political shape in the American Republican Party of the 1840s and the Know-Nothing movement of the 1850s. Following an American Republican Party rally in Philadelphia on 3 May 1844, the Irish industrial district of Kensington went up in flames. On 6 August 1855, in Louisville, Kentucky, election day turned into 'Bloody Monday' after the *Louisville Journal* had incited the Know-Nothings 'to put down an organization of Jesuit Bishops, Priests and other Papists'. A few weeks later Abraham Lincoln warned that if the Know-Nothings came to power the Declaration of Independence would read: 'All men are created equal except Negroes, foreigners and Catholics'. The Know-Nothings, however, soon

disappeared as the moral energies of the Protestant crusade became absorbed in the anti-slavery movement and in the Civil War.

From the 1880s to the 1920s, as foreign immigration of European Catholics and Jews grew to even larger numbers, the familiar combination of themes of the Protestant crusade reappeared: evangelical revivalism aimed to once again Christianize America and save the world for democracy; the 'social gospel' and progressive reform movements, linking temperance, women's suffrage and child labor legislation, renewed anti-Catholic nativism, which found expression in the foundation of the American Protective Association in 1887 and in campaigns for immigration-restriction laws. Both liberal Progressive and conservative evangelical Protestants tended to view Catholics as a national danger. Billy Sunday and other revivalist preachers never tired of warning their congregations of the menace which the 'hordes of foreigners' were posing to Christian America and of blaming the 'foreign vote' for blocking Prohibition.¹⁰

The ratification of Prohibition in 1920 turned out to be the final Pyrrhic victory of the Protestant crusade. The old evangelical coalition came together briefly just one more time at Al Smith's 1928 presidential campaign in order to block the entrance of popery into the White House. For all practical purposes, however, anti-Catholic nativism died with this election. To be sure, old Protestant prejudices lingered on and Protestant-Catholic conflicts flared again in the 1940s and 1950s. But those were no longer the typical church-sect, majority-minority conflicts of the past, but rather the first signs of normal interdenominational conflicts. By the 1950s, the religious others – Catholics and Jews – had been incorporated into the system of American denominationalism. A process of dual accommodation had taken place. America became a 'Judeo-Christian' nation, and Protestant, Catholic and Jew became the three denominations of a revised American 'civil religion'. ¹¹

While not as lengthy or as virulent as the American anti-Catholic nativist campaigns, similar *Kulturkämpfe* erupted in Protestant England, Holland and Germany throughout the second half of the 19th century. All manifested the same combination of Protestant confessional, modern liberal and nationalist prejudices against Catholicism as a retrograde, fundamentalist and alien ultramontanist religion. Similar anti-Catholic caricatures appeared frequently in popular newspapers in all four countries, often depicting Catholic religious practices alongside the magical superstitious practices of 'oriental' and 'primitive' peoples. Catholicism was clearly viewed as the inner Orient, a primitive atavistic residue within modern liberal Western civilization. What aggravated the *Kulturkampf* in the United States, however, were the anti-immigrant populist nativist campaigns and mobilizations.

This detailed historical narrative of a seemingly unrelated past is instructive because it reveals a structure that is strikingly similar to the politics and the discourse on Islam in contemporary Europe. One observes a process through which quasi-perennial religious-theological Protestant anti-Catholic prejudices became fused with a modern liberal reconstruction of Catholicism as an anti-modern, anti-democratic, uncivilized fundamentalist religion. This discursive construct in turn became attached to 'Catholic' immigrants, so that undesirable immigrants from 'Catholic' countries, irrespective of the fact whether they were actually practicing Catholics or not, now became embodied representations of popish, barbaric, despotic

Roman Catholicism. As such, as metaphoric-metonymic embodiments of Catholicism, irrespective of their actual practices or beliefs, Catholic immigrants posed a radical threat to Christian America, to the Democratic Republic and to modern civilization. As 'Catholics' they were viewed as essentially 'alien', hostile to American values and therefore as unassimilable. This was a perception, moreover, shared by the entire spectrum of Protestant socio-economic, ideologico-political and religious-theological strata.

One finds a strikingly similar dynamic in Europe today. For all kinds of historical reasons which cannot be explored in the context of this article, Islam has been constructed as an essentially fundamentalist, anti-democratic and anti-modern religion and civilization, in a sense replacing Catholicism as 'the other' of modern, liberal, Christian-secular Western Europe. ¹³ Disprivileged first- and second-generation immigrants from Muslim majoritarian countries, who for all kinds of socio-economic, political and cultural reasons have found the road of integration into various European societies full of obstacles, now have become in the eyes of their 'European' neighbors representative embodiments of 'Islam'. It is the undifferentiated conflation or fusion of the categories of 'immigrant', 'Muslim' and 'Islam' in European discourses which serves to ground the politics of anti-Muslim nativism in contemporary Europe and to a much lesser extent, as I will indicate later, in the United States.

No other immigrant group in Europe – let's say, Poles in Ireland, Indians in the United Kingdom, Thais in Sweden, Vietnamese in Germany, Romanians in Spain, Ethiopians in Italy, etc. – is viewed primarily through their religious identity even when de facto many of them may be more pious and have a closer identification with their religious tradition than many Muslim immigrants. European discourses, moreover, do not tend to conflate immigrants from Poland, Colombia, Congo, and the Philippines as 'Catholics', or immigrants from Ukraine, Romania and Ethiopia as 'Orthodox', or immigrants from Thailand, Sri Lanka and Mongolia as 'Buddhists' in the same way as they conflate immigrants from Indonesia, Pakistan, Turkey, Morocco and Senegal as 'Muslims'.

There is nothing natural about this classification, as is made evident by the fact that only a few decades ago immigrants from Turkey in Germany were viewed as Turks and not as Muslims, immigrants from Pakistan in the UK were viewed as Pakistani and not as Muslims, and immigrants from the Maghreb in France were viewed as Moroccans, Algerians or Tunisians, or generally as Maghrebis, and not as Muslims. But today throughout Europe immigrants from Muslim countries not only are primarily classified as Muslims, but they have come to represent 'Islam' with all the baggage which the orientalist discourse of Islam carries in Christian secular Europe and all the associations which 'the war on terror' carries in the modern West.

The dynamic is similar in this respect to the construction of American anti-Catholic nativism. Perennial Christian European anti-Muslim prejudices have become linked to a more recent civilizational construction of Islam as a fundamentalist illiberal, undemocratic, anti-modern and therefore anti-Western religion. Those prejudices in turn are now directed at immigrants from Muslim countries, who thus become embodied representations of the ideological construct. But in the European case the order of the dynamic fusion was the reverse of the one which took place in the United States in the 19th century. In the United States the anti-Catholic discourse preceded the mass

immigration of Catholics. In Europe, by contrast, the anti-Muslim discourse first emerged long after the arrival of immigrants from various Muslim countries.

The common 'Muslim' identity of the diverse immigrant groups only emerged much later, in the 1990s, as the result of a dual parallel process of European integration and globalization of Islam. On the one hand, it was the process of European integration and the search for a common European identity, supposedly grounded on characteristically European values, that first made evident the common Muslim non-European identity of the diverse immigrant groups residing in various European countries. The heated debates concerning the preamble of the contested European constitution revealed that Christianity and the secular Enlightenment competed as the two most obvious markers of European identity and of self-professed European values. Once Islam was constructed as the other of both Christian Europe as well as secular Europe, naturally Muslim immigrants were going to have difficulties passing as European.

On the other hand, processes of globalization are contributing to the reemergence of the *ummah* as a global imagined community of Muslims, particularly in *diaspora* contexts outside of *Dar el Islam*. A dual mutually reinforcing process of Muslim denominational identification has taken place. It is not only that others view them as Muslims, but that immigrants from Muslim countries also view themselves increasingly as Muslims and as members of a global *ummah*. ¹⁴ Moreover, as Nilufer Gole has emphasized, one can observe a shift from a Muslim to an Islamist identity, insofar as the religious self for individual Muslims is being relocated from the private to the public realm. Through interpenetrations Islam is serving in fact as the main reactive catalyst for the formation of a European public sphere. ¹⁵

As liberal democratic polities, all European societies respect and protect constitutionally the private exercise of religion, including Islam, as an individual human right. It is the public and collective exercise of Islam as an immigrant religion that most European societies find difficult to tolerate, on the grounds that Islam is an essentially illiberal and un-European religion. Thus, one can witness the widespread opposition to 'ostentatious' public representation of Islam, be it in the form of the ubiquitous female veil, menacing minarets or neighborhood mosques across Europe. The stated rationales for such opposition vary significantly among countries and among social and political groups. For the anti-immigrant xenophobic nationalist right the message is straightforward. Muslim immigrants are unwelcome and unassimilable simply because they are 'foreign'. Catholic conservatives may actually reject such a nativist and usually racist attitude, pointing out that they in fact welcome immigrants of all races and regions of the world, but they would prefer to select Catholic immigrants in order to preserve the Catholic identity of a country such as Italy or the Christian identity of Europe.

Secular Europeans tend to look askance at such blatant expressions of racist bigotry and religious intolerance coming from xenophobic nationalists and religious conservatives. But when it comes to Islam, secular Europeans also tend to reveal the limits and prejudices of modern secularist toleration. One is not likely to hear among liberal politicians and secular intellectuals explicitly xenophobic or antireligious statements. They will insist that they welcome each and all immigrants, irrespective of race or religion. But they will tend to add, 'as long as they are willing to respect and accept our modern,

liberal, secular European norms'. The explicit articulation of such norms may vary from country to country, from laicist France to corporatist Germany. But in fact one sees similar trends of restrictive legislation directed at Muslims, in liberal Holland as much as in secular Lutheran Denmark, precisely in the name of protecting their liberal, tolerant traditions from supposedly illiberal, fundamentalist and patriarchal customs, reproduced and transmitted to younger generations by Muslim immigrants.

The positive rationale one hears frequently among liberals in support of such illiberal restriction of the free exercise of religion as the prohibition of the female veil is the support of the emancipation of young girls, if necessary against their expressed will, from gender discrimination and patriarchal control. This was the platform on which the assasinated Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn built his electorally successful anti-immigrant platform in liberal Holland. While conservative religious people are rightly expected to tolerate practices they may consider morally abhorrent, such as homosexuality, liberal secular Europeans are openly stating that European societies ought not to tolerate religious behavior or cultural customs that are morally abhorrent, insofar as they clash with modern, liberal, secular norms. What makes the intolerant tyranny of the liberal secular majority justifiable in principle is not just the democratic principle of majority rule, but rather the secularist teleological assumption built into theories of modernity that one set of norms is reactionary, fundamentalist and barbaric, while the other is progressive, liberal and civilized.

Anti-immigrant xenophobic nativism, secularist anti-religious prejudices, liberal-feminist critiques of Muslim patriarchal fundamentalism and the fear of Muslim terrorist networks are being fused indiscriminately throughout Europe into a uniform anti-Islamic discourse which precludes the kind of mutual accommodation between immigrant groups and host societies which is necessary for successful immigrant integration. Today's totalizing discourse on Islam as an essentially anti-modern, fundamentalist and un-democratic religion and culture echoes the 19th-century discourse on Catholicism in the United States.

Due to secularist normative assumptions, Muslim organized collective identities and their public representations have become a source of anxiety, not only because of their foreign character as a non-Christian and non-European religion, but more importantly because of their religiousness itself as the other of European secularity. Islam becomes by definition the other of European secular modernity, an identification that becomes superimposed upon the older image of Islam as the other of European Christianity. Consequently, problems posed by the incorporation of Muslim immigrants become inextricably associated with vexatious issues concerning the role of religion in the public sphere, which European societies assumed they had already solved according to the secularist principle of privatization of religion. ¹⁶

A comparative look at Islam across the Atlantic seems to point to the fact that such an anti-Muslim nativist complex is not emerging in the United States precisely because both the association of immigration and Islam and secularist anti-religious prejudices against Islam are much weaker in the United States than in Europe. In Europe the identification of immigration and Islam has contributed to a superimposition of different dimensions of otherness that tend to exacerbate issues of boundaries, accommodation and incorporation. All too often, the immigrant, the religious, the racial and the socioeconomic

disprivileged 'other' appear to coincide. In the United States by contrast Muslims constitute a small minority, no more than 10 percent of the new post-1965 immigrants. Moreover, approximately one-third of Muslims in the United States are African-American converts, making the identification of Islam and immigration less relevant.

Furthermore, the Muslim immigrant communities in the United States are extremely diverse in terms of countries of origin, discursive Islamic traditions and socio-economic status. Consequently, the dynamics of interaction of Muslim immigrants with one another, with African-American Muslims, with non-Muslim immigrants from all over the world and with their immediate American hosts tend to be much more complex and diverse than anything one finds in Europe. This may help to explain why proliferating nativist anti-immigrant discourses and anti-Muslim discourses have not become fused in the United States in the last decade.

Even Samuel P. Huntington, the author who may have contributed the most to the discourse of a 'clash of civilizations' between Islam and the West, failed to mention Islam or Muslim immigrants in his American nativist manifesto *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America's National Identity*. ¹⁷ It is Catholic Mexican immigrants and the threat of Hispanization of the southwestern regions of the United States which, according to Huntington, represent the real threat to America's national identity. In a relatively failed effort to revive WASP nativism, Huntington claims that America's national identity and culture were shaped, apparently once and for all, by the 'original' White Anglo-Saxon Protestant settlers. In order to become assimilated all later immigrants would need to accept and adopt the language and the main values of the WASP settlers.

In any case, Huntington's dissociation of the geo-political threats which Islam presents to the remaking of a world order dominated by the United States and the threats which Catholic Hispanic immigrants present to America's national identity indicate the extent to which geo-political civilizational discourses and anti-immigrant nativist discourses do not converge in the United States today. At least they do not converge to the same extent to which they do in Europe, where the contested issue of Turkey's entry into the European Union is inextricably linked with debates about the assimilation of Muslim immigrants.¹⁸

Surely, Islam and Muslim immigrants also emerged as a contested public issue in the United States after the terrorist attacks of 11 September. But the anti-Muslim discourse that emerged was primarily connected with 'homeland security' and the global 'war on terror', that is, with the security threats which Muslim 'terrorists' and the states that supported them presented to 'national security', namely to the power of the United States abroad and to domestic security. Much more rarely was it connected either with nativist issues of immigration or with the nature of Islam as an un-American and unassimilable religion.

In fact, Muslim immigrants in the United States had been relatively 'invisible' prior to September 11th precisely because as immigrants they had followed a relatively successful path of incorporation. ¹⁹ They tended to exhibit high levels of educational and occupational upward mobility, did not have high levels of residential concentration in the inner-cities, and tended to live in suburban areas, where the construction of mosques had not provoked noticeable controversies. Before the terrorist attacks of September 11th, only the African-American movement 'Nation of Islam' had been the source of sustained

controversies, but those were not related to immigration issues. After September 11th, Muslim individuals and communities in the United States were no doubt subject to increased state surveillance, most noticeably within mosques, to ethno-racial profiling, particularly at airports and other public security areas, and to legal and illegal detention as well as other forms of civil rights curtailment and discrimination. Those were initiatives from the US state security apparatus as part of the 'War on Terror', which fall within the recurrent historical practice of the exercise of quasi-dictatorial presidential power and states of exception and suspension of constitutional rights whenever the United States is at war.

Not only were such homeland security measures rarely connected with nativist antiimmigrant discourses, but they also failed to develop into a general ideological discourse against Islam as a religion. To a large extent this was due to the general pro-religious attitudes dominant in the United States as well as to the weakness of secularism as anti-religious ideology. Religion and immigration are today much more positively related in the United States than they are in Europe. In the first place, Americans are demonstrably more religious than Europeans and therefore there is a certain pressure for immigrants to conform to American religious norms. But additionally and more significantly, today as in the past religion and public religious denominational identities play an important role in the process of immigrant incorporation.

One can witness an ambiguous and tortuous process of public symbolic recognition of Islam as an American religion that resembles the processes of incorporation of Catholicism and Judaism. The presence of a Muslim imam along with a Protestant minister, a Catholic priest, and a Jewish rabbi in public ceremonies in Washington, in state capitals, and in large urban centers has become routine. If anything, the Muslim public presence in official ceremonies and in interfaith encounters has become even more prominent after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. But simultaneously, one can also witness a mainly Protestant nativist backlash against Islam. An anti-Muslim evangelical discourse had already emerged that was linked to militant premillennial Zionism as well as to the missionary competition between Christians and Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa.²¹ The global 'war on terror' naturally exacerbated this trend. Notwithstanding the carefully phrased official disclaimers coming from the White House and from President Bush, distinguishing between 'good Muslims' and 'bad Muslims' and insisting that it was a war against terrorists and jihadists, not against Islam, prominent evangelicals such as Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell and Franklin Graham did not hesitate to characterize the war as a religious 'crusade', the inevitable conflict between an essentially violent Islam and the Christian West.

But those were relatively marginal voices that did not find much echo in American public opinion and did not feed public controversies about Islam in America or about Muslim immigrants. There has been no significant controversy concerning the Muslim female veil in the United States, in any way comparable with those which have emerged in practically every European country. Even the more recent public controversies connected with the Cordova Project to build a Muslim Cultural Center in downtown Manhattan near Ground Zero or with constitutional amendments banning *sharia* law, such as the one passed in Oklahoma in November 2010 and similar ones proposed in Southern states with a small Muslim population, are more the expression of anti-Obama politics than of an emerging anti-Muslim nativism.²²

Notes

- For further elaboration and empirical documentation of the argument presented in this article see, José Casanova, 'Immigration and the New Religious Pluralism: A European Union/ United States Comparison', in Thomas Banchoff (ed.) The New Religious Pluralism and Democracy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) and 'Nativism and the Politics of Gender in Catholicism and Islam', in Hanna Herzog and Ann Braude (eds) Gendered Religion and Politics: Untangling Modernities (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
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