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# Envisioning America

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## Envisioning America

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In the contentious debate about the "Ground Zero mosque," Anthony Burke Smith hears echoes of a not-so-distant history when the controversial building was a church and the faith was Catholicism.

"For a long time, Catholic places such as churches and convents were depicted as places of suspicion and danger for much of mainstream America," said Smith, an associate professor of religious studies at the University of Dayton. "Much of the animosity for Muslims today is an echo of the animosity Catholics faced in the 19th century and the early 20th century.

"How Catholics were portrayed and the stereotypical images used to characterize them sound familiar to what is going on today. Media images of religious minorities are important to examine not only for what they reveal about the minority group but for what they illuminate about American culture itself."

In the case of Catholics, Smith argues in his new book *The Look of Catholics: Portrayals in Popular Culture from the Great Depression to the Cold War*, published by University Press of Kansas, the period between the 1930s and 1950s witnessed a "Catholic moment" that helped change negative perceptions of Catholics through Catholic-themed films such as *Going My Way*, and through the works of Catholic artists such as film director John Ford.

Because of the involvement of Catholics in film, television and photojournalism, Smith said, Catholics were also able to create and circulate their own compelling images in a way that changed not only how the mainstream viewed Catholics, but also contributed to a dramatic change in how Americans viewed the nation and its role in the world.

"Catholics became deeply involved in forging a Cold War-era vision of America organized around cultural unity at home and American leadership abroad," he said.

Prior to the Cold War era, the American view of the nation's role in the world was as a New World, Protestant alternative to the corruption of Old World Europe, Smith said. However, during 1940s, Americans began to see the nation as a global defender of freedom against totalitarianism.

"Many popular images of and by Catholics became commercially and critically successful," Smith said. "These were images that spoke beyond Catholics; they were speaking to all Americans. They remade American mass culture in ways that placed Catholic perspectives at the center of what it meant to be an American in the new global era that emerged in the 1940s and Cold War period.

"These popular films are very much about the American identity. Bing Crosby's portrayal of a Catholic priest as a modern-day 'Everyman' illustrates how much America had changed to become a much more inclusive national community."

At a time when the United States assumed a new role as a worldwide leader against totalitarianism, Catholics' identification with a church that crossed national boundaries was no longer the same liability as in the 19th century, he said.

Smith said while the rise of Cold War-era American culture brought Catholics into the mainstream, the cost of that movement was displacement of the Catholic emphasis on social justice evident in popular representations in the 1930s, especially seen in the films of John Ford.

"Catholicism was a potent force in Ford's movies as an indirect influence reshaping a familiar American story of the struggle between insiders and outsiders," he said. "That struggle translated the historical memory of Catholics' fight against ethnic and religious prejudice into an expanded sense of a larger American community that included Catholics."

At the same time, influential *Life* magazine frequently and favorably depicted Catholics in photo essays as typical or even exemplary Americans, Smith said. In fact, *Life* used Catholics as examples of "family bliss" in a "harmonious, middle-class America."

"We see that Catholics did not passively assimilate, there was nothing passive about Catholics actively shaping the American culture into which they were assimilated," Smith said. "They were reshaping the culture into one in which Catholics could have a home."

Smith said the social prejudice and animosity to difference, immigration and religious minorities are recurring ideas in American history, and are "intimately bound up with wider debates on the character of American identity."

"In many ways, at the beginning of the 21st century, we now see a disengagement from the previous history as outsiders that formed the basis of earlier depictions of Catholics," he said. "There is an erasure of historical memory and a loss of the memory of struggle that shaped this image of a more inclusive America."

"Some Catholics now sound like the very people their grandparents struggled against," he said. "At this moment in our history, the emphasis of some Catholics on a personal morality based on individual behavior, divorced from social and economic realities is a far cry from the concern for the common good that once characterized many Catholics."

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