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## Distinguishing between disagreement and bigotry

*It's easy to wrongly presume that opposing views are malicious*

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I am a Roman Catholic, and I study education for a living. Knowing that, you may think that I view the anti-Catholicism that runs through a lot of American history — much of which played out in education — as pure bigotry. You would be wrong. Having studied history, and the writings of people who feared Catholicism, I have concluded that many were not blinded by hate, but motivated by reason. I reached that conclusion by doing what we all must do: avoid the powerful, emotionally satisfying temptation to assume the worst in people, engage the substance of their arguments, and questioning my beliefs.

Roman Catholics have always been a religious minority in the United States, but what has been the majority's deepest concern, it seems, has not been theological, but political. Catholicism, probably until the administration of John F. Kennedy, the nation's first Catholic president, was thought synonymous with foreign power, not government by and for free people.

Lyman Beecher was a renowned Presbyterian minister who, among many things, spoke forcefully for public education, while speaking against Catholic schooling. Beecher had serious doctrinal disagreements with Catholicism, but in his 1834 tract "A Plea for the West," he made clear that the threat he saw was political, not religious.

He wrote, "I have no fear of the Catholics, considered simply as a religious denomination, and unallied to the church and state establishments of the European governments hostile to republican institutions."

Beecher and others had good reason for concern. Catholic belief is grounded in the authority of Rome. And since Martin Luther posted his 95 theses, Europe had been convulsed by rulers allied with and against the Church. They battled each other and internal opponents, while Rome exerted political power.

There were bigots in America, of course, and critiques often got ugly — think Thomas Nast's cartoon "The American River Ganges," showing bishops rising like crocodiles from the water, threatening to eat the nation's children. But fear that the Church might try to influence American government didn't always come from blind hate. It just needed knowledge of history.

That said, rational concern is not synonymous with accurate perception or prescience.

While Catholics, like all immigrants, struggled to adjust to their new home, there is no evidence that they were part of any widespread effort to upend representative government. Most Catholics

came to America for a better life, and a crucial part of achieving that was adopting American culture and values, including government by the people. Had more Protestants recognized that and not given into fear, and had many Catholics not assumed bigotry on the part of many Protestants, perhaps decades of painful division could have been averted.

The lesson for modern America, coming off a hyperpolarized election spawned by years of talking past — and sometimes demonizing — others, is clear: We must stop assuming that our opponents have bad intentions, even if they seem to judge others negatively. Many may be bigots, and racism and xenophobia clearly exist, but we should not default to emotionally satisfying, but unproven, accusations of bigotry that make it too easy to ignore and demean quite possibly kind, rational people. We must also accept that we are fallible, and what we believe — and feel — may be wrong.

For those who did not vote for Donald Trump — and I am one — this may mean not assuming the worst about those who oppose easy immigration from Mexico, or for Muslims. One need not be racist to conclude that if immigrants take jobs for lower pay than American citizens, immigration through Mexico — especially in violation of the nation's laws — should be curtailed. Similarly, because many perpetrators of terrorist acts identify as Muslim, it is not self-evidently bigoted to conclude that Muslim immigration should be heavily scrutinized.

Of course, those who have concluded that immigration must be choked off must question themselves. Easy immigration — not to mention trade — drives prices of goods and services down, helping all Americans. And there is no evidence that the vast majority of Muslims in, or trying to enter, the United States want anything other than what Catholic immigrants wanted: to become peaceful, productive citizens of a free United States.

It may not be immediately satisfying, but for peace and unity we must listen to, not just label, those with whom we disagree.

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