

Some of you may not know Cosma Shalizi, one of the most interesting intellectuals and interdisciplinary scientists of our time. Well, the last post in his blog, [Three-Toed Sloth](#) asks an anthropological question about the cultural origin of the demonization in some quarters of the Democratic candidate to the American presidential election. Here is his post:

“What, you actually thought it was a coincidence that Election Day and Halloween are so close?

“On the one hand, Barack Hussein Obama: is he the candidate of [a nefarious African conspiracy](#) of cannibalistic pseudo-Christian Muslim witches, or the candidate of [Lucifer](#) himself?

“On the other hand, Cindy McCain is [just like any other female human](#) (via [Pandagon](#)).

“— Pretty much every agrarian society has a fairly lively belief in witchcraft, of the [putting-a-hex-on-your-neighbors-goat-or-genitals](#) variety. Interestingly, however, this does not always translate into its elites actually taking it seriously as a threat. In early medieval Europe, for example, the quite sensible official theory was that, God being infinitely more powerful than the Devil, Christians didn't have to actually worry about magic, and magicians were to be condemned for what they wanted to do, rather than what they could do. The transformation of elite thinking to fearing that magic actually works was a fairly involved and curious process, hinging on the merger of the idea of witches and magicians with the also-very-old stereotype of the organized [subversive conspiracy](#) of murderous infidel perverts. (The story is well-told in Norman Cohn's *Europe's Inner Demons*.) Whether the modern American versions are lineal descendants of intellectually respectable European [demonology](#), or rather an independent evolution from the same kind of folk beliefs, I don't know. It's also a mystery to me how this complex of fears and myths can have any hold on people who sincerely believe and understand the most elementary tenets of Christianity. (It would make perfect sense if you thought that Satan was another god, and maybe stronger than yours.) But I suspect that is due to my own lack of understanding of moral psychology.

“What I can see is that very few ideas like this — which ones which, however stupid, speak strongly to our fears — ever really go away. In comparatively happy times, these fantasies may be able to do no more than terrorize the inhabitants of the cultural slums, rather than occupying the center and enacting a reign of blood. But the cultural slums are still where too many of us live, pending [deliverance](#).”