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Obama's verbal slip fuels his critics

[Christina Bellantoni](#) ([Contact](#))

ST. LOUIS, Mo. - Sen. Barack Obama's foes seized Sunday upon a brief slip of the tongue, when the Democratic presidential nominee was outlining his Christianity but accidentally said, "my Muslim faith."

The three words -- immediately corrected -- were during an exchange with ABC's George Stephanopoulos on "This Week," when he was trying to criticize the quiet smear campaign suggesting he is a Muslim.

But illustrating the difficulty of preventing false rumors about his faith from spreading, anti-Obama groups within one hour of the interview had sliced it out of context and were sending it around via email. They also were blogging about it.

Mr. Obama, who is a Christian and often proudly speaks about how his faith has influenced his public service, said he finds it "deeply offensive" that there are efforts "coming out of the Republican camp to suggest that perhaps I'm not who I say I am when it comes to my faith."

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The exchange came after Mr. Obama said that Republicans are attempting to scare voters by suggesting he is not Christian, which McCain campaign manager Rick Davis said was "cynical."

Asked about it on ABC, Mr. Obama said, "These guys love to throw a rock and hide their hand."

"The McCain campaign has never suggested you have Muslim connections," said Mr. Stephanopoulos, who repeatedly interrupted Mr. Obama during the interview.

"I don't think that when you look at what is being promulgated on Fox News, let's say, and Republican commentators who are closely allied to these folks," Mr Obama responded, and Mr. Stephanopoulos interrupted: "But John

McCain said that's wrong."

Mr. Obama noted that when Republican vice presidential nominee Gov. Sarah Palin "was forced" to talk about her pregnant 17-year-old daughter, he issued a forceful statement to reporters that the line of inquiry was "off limits." But he said the McCain campaign tried to tie him to "liberal blogs that support Obama" and are "attacking Governor Palin."

"Let's not play games," he said. "What I was suggesting -- you're absolutely right that John McCain has not talked about my Muslim faith. And you're absolutely right that that has not come."

Mr. Stephanopoulos interrupted with, "Christian faith."

"My Christian faith," Mr. Obama said quickly. "Well, what I'm saying is that he hasn't suggested that I'm a Muslim. And I think that his campaign's upper echelons have not, either. What I think is fair to say is that, coming out of the Republican camp, there have been efforts to suggest that perhaps I'm not who I say I am when it comes to my faith -- something which I find deeply offensive, and that has been going on for a pretty long time."

Asked to comment on the accidental misstatement illustrating the difficulty of the issue, Obama spokesman Bill Burton offered this comment: "I'm not surprised that the only outlet doing this story is The Washington Times."

You can view the full context of Mr. Obama's comments on ABC here.