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Politics of Religion in Popular Culture: Religious Rhetoric and Ironic In(ter)ventions

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"As Mark Taylor suggests in the epigram grafted above, the impossibility of grasping what religion is about may be the condition of religion's im/possibility, which thereby engenders a contested site for those attempting to define and classify religion. When this contested site is also the site of a strategic deployment of a rhetorical discourse with axiological pretentions, then, with Barbara Herrnstein Smith, one might suspect an event of self-privileging at the expense of some devalued other (including mass media and popular culture). When such a deployment is conducted by means of a religious rhetoric (or rhetoric *about* religion) with the purpose of intervening in the context of a mass-mediated presidential campaign, one's suspicions may be further extended to encompass questions of political strategy toward some desired end. If one were to juxtapose these ostensibly disparate areas, a narrative begins to unfold in which religion, politics, and popular culture come together in a taxonomic and axiological relationship that is anything but neutral. What may be at stake in this event is the possibility and potentiality of a pathologization by means of classification and, concomitantly, the utilization of a rhetoric of othering of individuals and by implication and extension the various religious, ethnic, gender, racial, sexual, in sum, cultural identities with which the individual is associated and through which the individual is subjected and classified,[7] regardless of the primary target of pathologization (i.e., the individual or the group). While alterity has long been a matter of interest in critical theory, post structuralism, postcolonial and subaltern studies, lately the notion of the other has been made explicit in popular culture via the opinion news industry and online social media. Indeed, the disparaging tonality and classificatory force of rhetoric of "othering" has been recognized as a strategic attempt to devalue and exclude some undesirable or devalued other. For instance, the protests instigated in a number of Middle Eastern countries surrounding the release of an anti-Islamic film posted on YouTube coupled with this strategy of othering have raised questions related to religion and free speech with geo-political implications and consequences. At the heart of these complex issues are questions related to First Amendment rights in the United States and their "proper" place in contemporary American culture."

Dr. Sabatino DiBernardo

Politics of Religion in Popular Culture:
Religious Rhetoric and Ironic In(ter)ventions

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Religion is a certain about. What religion is about, however, remains obscure for it is never quite there—nor is it exactly not there. Religion is about what is always slipping away. It is, therefore, impossible to grasp what religion is about—unless, perhaps, what we grasp is the impossibility of grasping.

Mark C. Taylor

Whether the debility is attributed to defective "organs" or defective "organization," to innate deficiencies or the "influence" of popular culture and the mass media, the privileging of the self through the pathologizing of the Other remains the key move and defining objective of axiology.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith

As Mark Taylor suggests in the epigram grafted above, the impossibility of grasping what religion is about may be the condition of religion's im/possibility, which thereby engenders a contested site for those attempting to define and classify religion. When this contested site is also the site of a strategic deployment of a rhetorical discourse with axiological pretensions, then, with Barbara Herrnstein Smith, one might suspect an event of self-privileging at the expense of some devalued other (including mass media and popular culture). When such a deployment is conducted by means of a religious rhetoric (or rhetoric *about* religion) with the purpose of intervening in the context of a mass-mediated presidential campaign, one's suspicions may be further extended to encompass questions of political strategy toward some desired end. If one were to juxtapose these ostensibly disparate areas, a narrative begins to unfold in which religion, politics, and popular culture come together in a taxonomic and axiological relationship that is anything but neutral. What may be at stake in this event is the possibility and potentiality of a pathologization by means of classification and, concomitantly, the utilization of a rhetoric of othering of individuals and by implication and extension the various religious, ethnic, gender, racial, sexual, in sum,

cultural identities with which the individual is associated and through which the individual is subjected and classified,[7] regardless of the primary target of pathologization (i.e., the individual or the group). While alterity has long been a matter of interest in critical theory, post structuralism, postcolonial and subaltern studies, lately the notion of the other has been made explicit in popular culture via the opinion news industry and online social media. Indeed, the disparaging tonality and classificatory force of rhetoric of "othering" has been recognized as a strategic attempt to devalue and exclude some undesirable or devalued other. For instance, the protests instigated in a number of Middle Eastern countries surrounding the release of an anti-Islamic film posted on YouTube coupled with this strategy of othering have raised questions related to religion and free speech with geo-political implications and consequences. At the heart of these complex issues are questions related to First Amendment rights in the United States and their "proper" place in contemporary American culture.

This rhetorical strategy is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, the history of inter-cultural contact and the modes of classification of the foreign, different, strange other may provide a long list of taxonomic categories utilized as a means of differentiation and, thus, self-identification—not the least of which is the differentiating function played by religion. On its face, this should not prove problematic, since without difference and alterity there is no language, signification, or, for that matter, identity. However, when the long and contested classificatory history of religion as a cultural construction (and means of differentiation) goes unnoticed, ignored, and/or construed as a matter of authentic or real (read: True) religion versus inauthentic or invented (read: False) religion couched in a rhetoric of warfare, one may be justified in suspecting an unspoken axiomatics at work.

In the current political climate, which is a continuation of that leading up to the last presidential election, even a cursory juxtaposition of opinion news shows from across the political spectrum confronts the viewer with numerous examples of a rhetoric of conflict; namely, "war"—for example, wars against women, minorities, the poor, the middle and working class (es), the rich, drugs, guns, and religion, among others. Although each of these various conflicts in which we as a populous are ostensibly engaged merits considerable critical attention, this paper will focus on one site of increasing significance in popular and political culture by virtue of its mass-mediated attention to an endemic American problematic: a "religion problem" and, subsequently, the appropriation of (an ironic) religious rhetoric as a weapon of warfare against the religio-political other. The political context in which this matter became especially contentious for the presidential candidates may be viewed as symptomatic of a more general historico-theoretical problem *of/with* religion traced through the construction and classification of religion as a separate, essentialized, and reified sphere of culture in the West with its own rights enshrined in the Bill of Rights.[8]

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[7] As Paul Bowman explains, "it is not just humans who are said to have an identity. Cultural practices are often held to have a stable identity. Moreover, *cultures 'themselves'* are often said to have an identity. There are debates about 'national identities', 'cultural identities', 'regional identities', class identity', ethnic identity', 'gender identity', and so on. There are also said to be 'Eastern' and 'Western' cultural identities." With respect to these "stable identities," Bowman's desire is to "short circuit many of the assumptions about not only subjective identity but also the supposed identity of cultural practices and indeed cultures themselves." Paul Bowman, *Deconstructing Popular Culture*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 61.

[8] For a critical analysis of the construction of the religion-secular dichotomy and their essentialization and reification, see Timothy Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Consequently, this taxonomic problem affords the philosopher and theorist of religion and popular culture a locus through and within which to explore the condition(s) of possibility and axiological motivation(s) of such rhetoric concerning the "proper" place of religion in American culture as well as its implications for popular culture as the devalued other in contemporary academic discourses. Using as its primary text an episode of a popular political opinion show on MSNBC, *The Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell* in a segment called *The Rewrite*,[9] which aired during the presidential campaign, this video text (outlined below) will provide one example of the aforementioned entanglements of religious rhetoric, politics and strategic othering.

I. Politics of Religion

1. **Politics of Religion**: Lawrence O'Donnell introduces Mitt Romney's (political) religion problem, and argues that Romney knows it and has, thus, invented a religion problem for President Obama.
2. **Grafting Romney**: Mitt Romney thinks:
   a. "there is in this country a war on religion"
   b. "there is a desire to establish a religion in America known as secularism"
   c. "that the Obama administration gave this a lot of thought; a lot of discussion."
3. **Inventing a Problem/Religion**: Lawrence O'Donnell states that:
   a. Romney has "as bad a religion problem as anyone who has ever run for president and is trying to create a religion problem for President Obama . . . a political religion problem"
4. **Strategizing**: O'Donnell compares this strategy to the swift-boating of John Kerry; similarly, there is a projection of Romney's religion problems on to the other; "a much-used page of the Republican playbook"
5. **Cue the Poll**: Gallup: "showing voter reluctance based on a candidate's religion."
   a. Atheist: 49%
   b. Muslim: 46%
   c. Mormon: 22%
   d. Jewish 9%
   e. Baptist: 7%
   f. Catholic: 7%
6. **Non-Existent Religion**: O'Donnell concludes that Romney "doesn't just attack President Obama's religion, he invents a whole new religion; a religion that doesn't even exist, and attributes it to President Obama."
7. **New Religion**: Why "invent" and attribute this new religion to Obama?
   a. Part of Romney's religion problem is that he is a member of a "new religion"
   b. "Established religions . . . don't easily warm up to new religions"
8. **Sex Sells**: O'Donnell "spices up" the history/origin of Mormonism
9. **Rationale**: Romney must accuse the President of creating a newer religion than his own, since he can't "get away now with accusing Barack Obama of being a secret Muslim" (a

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[9] http://www.bing.com/videos/watch/video/romney-rewriting-obama-on-religion/6bpmjbo: April 3, 2012

strategy that was utilized in Obama's first presidential campaign—and some still believe).
"So, instead of calling Barack Obama a Muslim, he is calling him an atheist."

10. **Conclusion**: "In the Politics of Religion in this country, the only thing that's worse than being a Mormon or a Muslim in the eyes of our *extremely religiously intolerant electorate is being an Atheist*."

II. In(ter)ventions, Ironies, and Pathologies:

Although there are a number of matters to address in this video, the key issues at stake for the purposes of this paper revolve around notions of political intervention, religious invention, and the privileging of the self by means of pathologizing the other. In summary, according to Lawrence O'Donnell's critique, Romney has a "political religion problem." In order to combat his problem as the "religious other" (to some standard Protestant Evangelical and/or Fundamentalist Christian normativity), he needs to intervene by inventing a religion problem for Obama and, thereby, deflecting and projecting his own "religious" vulnerability on to the President (an old Republican play; not to mention an even older *tu quoque*). Since the press would not let him get away with othering the President in the manner of the previous presidential election (i.e., Obama as a secret Muslim), he needs to "invent" another, even more questionable, religious orientation that has its sights set on assaulting "traditional" religion in order to have any strategic political effect. Consequently, there is an intervention by means of an invention of "a whole new religion; a religion that doesn't even exist" in order to combat Obama's "war on religion." In the process, Romney claims to unmask some conspiratorial (if somewhat ironic or contradictory) desire to establish a religion of secularism in the United States.

The contradiction of a desire that seeks to engage in a "war on religion" by promoting another "religion" might be slightly assuaged if one assists Romney by qualifying his claim with the notion that this is a war on "traditional" or "conventional" religion in the United States; namely, some normative version of Christianity that is acceptable to the electorate (or a certain conservative segment). The irony here (in the extended sense) is that Romney's religious affiliation, and thus Romney's political religion problem, is that Mormonism, too, falls afoul of what counts as "acceptable" or "proper" Christianity for some within the Republican party.[10] It should be emphasized that this strategy completely discounts Obama's self-identification as a Christian; in the politics of religion one's own self-classification appears to be of little to no concern or strategic political use to one's opponent. Indeed, one's own testimony is irrelevant, since the candidate may always be viewed as lying about his or her "real" religious (also, sexual, political, ethnic, racial) orientation.

Nevertheless, the absence of an epistemological and axiological absolute, universal, objective, foundational standard against which such rhetorical claims may be supported or refuted provides the condition of possibility for such tactical maneuvers to be advanced. Indeed, with respect to this absence of an absolute, foundational ground, we are left with a sense of a contingency by virtue of which

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[10] Here we are reminded of certain segment of Evangelical Christians, among others, for whom Mormonism is viewed as a "cult." Interestingly, the addition of a Catholic to the Republican ticket in the last election (another strategic possibility) was viewed as a way to soften this "Mormon problem"—thereby indicating some religio-political movement since President Kennedy.

"objective" epistemological and axiological positions may be called into question.[11] However, this condition of possibility only sets the stage by playing in the ballpark of undecidability. Keeping in mind that politics within a democratic system requires decisions (whether or not one may philosophically ground them), this approach would not carry as much tactical or rhetorical force if it stopped at simply pointing out differences of position and policy. What becomes strategically vital is a forceful rhetoric of warfare; one of combatting the imminent threat of the religio-political other within one's borders. This is not the alterity of difference; rather, it is the asymmetrical advancement of a difference that carries an axiological judgment in the manner of an exigency of warning and pending calamity.   What is of value in this approach is the value of value-othering (again, an interesting self-referential move coming from the party of "values"—family or otherwise). In other words, a religious rhetoric deploying a pathologizing of the religio-political other can only succeed by virtue of the absence of some universalizable standard of value (i.e., an objective axiology); thus, the rhetorical force of its narrative of devalorization is based on some essential quality putatively possessed by one's political "enemy" that disqualifies by virtue of its qualification.

From this perspective, Obama is "granted" a certain religiosity; however, the type of religion being *established* (and this is important) is one that is deemed improper, inappropriate, or even more derogatorily, malevolent to the "traditional" and "conventional" religious standards and values of the "those like us" (read: true, good, wholesome, God-fearing Americans). It is just such value-othering made possible by the contingencies of value that Barbara Herrnstein Smith theorizes and describes (i.e., the "defining objective of axiology") as the "Other's-Poison-Effect."[12] As she argues, this matter of taste may extend to "'tastes' for anything, from artworks to lifestyles and from types of food to types of explanation or even types of logic."[13] To this list one might add tastes for religious and political affiliation as well as rhetorical strategies in defense of such ungrounded and contingent tastes.
It should be noted at this point that it precisely this question of *qualification* and/or *disqualification* based on one's religious affiliation (even one that is "invented" and attributed to the other) that is unconstitutional (at least in spirit) and that appears to be perilously close to a transgression (at least in spirit) of the oath and affirmation required of our elected governmental officials to support the Constitution in which it states that "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States" (Article VI, section 3 of the Constitution). This Article notwithstanding, in the political climate during the presidential campaign, accusations of being other than white, Christian, capitalist, and morally "traditionally" conservative appeared to render (or constructed)

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[11] Regarding this crucial issue of self-(retroactive)-authorization without a ground with respect to foundations, founding documents, the law, and justice, see Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" in *Acts of Religion*, Gil Anidjar, ed., (New York: Routledge), 2002.

[12] As Barbara Herrnstein Smith describes it, "The historical-psychological-ideological complex operating here might be referred to as "The-Other's-Poison Effect," meaning not only that one man's [*sic*] meat is sometimes the other's poison but that one man sometimes gets sick just *watching* the other fellow eat his meat and, moreover, that of one of them is also a cultural theorist (left-wing or conservative as otherwise measured), he or she may be expected to generate an account of how the other fellow is himself actually being poisoned by the meat he likes and eats. It is no surprise, perhaps, that the often self-consciously *historicist* accounts referred to here operate in strict complicity with the *universalist* accounts developed by Hume, Kant, and the tradition of aesthetic axiology. . ." Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 26

[13] Ibid., 39.

the other as of questionable lineage, morals, and value. Thus, irrespective of the constitutional protection of one's religious and/or irreligious sensibilities regarding one's qualifications to hold political office, it has become commonplace to engage in a religio-political discourse of othering in which a religious "test" of sorts occurs, nonetheless, by means of calling into question one's religious (imputed or otherwise) orientation and, thereby, one's qualification(s) to hold office.

Consequently, rather than solely differentiating one's political subject position from an other's political subject position, the requisite strategic move, exacerbated and greatly amplified by means of a mass-mediated social environment, is such that a more radical axiological othering must occur if the desired outcome—political victory—is to be achieved. If successful, the net political effect of this strategy should be an unveiling of Obama as the *real* religious other with all the political, religious, and im/moral perils that this may engender for the nation, if one were to support a secularist or atheist (O'Donnell's interpretation) for President of the United States. The situational irony appears in the form of a guiding desire to purchase political capital by "exposing" a conspiratorial intention to violate the First Amendment's Establishment clause by the Executive attempt to "establish" a religion of secularism and in the process itself flirts with a violation (at least in spirit) of Article VI of the Constitution.

If this rhetorical reversal were not ironic enough, a close reading of this text highlights a rhetorical and ironic/self-referential reversal not only in Romney's putative strategy but also in the host's critique and performative contradiction of this religio-political pathologizing of the other (indeed, more than one other in this case). Rather than contenting himself with a political analysis of the possible strategy of "creating a religion problem" for Obama based on a possible causal relationship between the polls and the rhetoric, O'Donnell's critique replicates precisely this rhetoric of religio-political othering that is being condemned. In other words, O'Donnell's criticism could have ended with his imputation to Romney of a strategic, religio-political othering of Obama without, then, returning the favor in *ad hominem* fashion regarding Joseph Smith and Mormonism and, thereby, engaging in a similar strategy of religio-political pathologization. Not only does he pathologize by means of tracing Mormonism's origin to some sexual encounter as the psychological self-privileging genesis of a Mormon "revelation" but also returns the accusation of *Mormonism* as of recent "invention." Moreover, O'Donnell not only reverses the direction of this politics of religion but also extends it to the pathologization of half of the electorate as "religiously intolerant."

This interesting reversal (and extension), while, perhaps, a possible interpretation of the attitudes of those polled, makes evident a strategic deployment not unlike the one being criticized by O'Donnell. It seems as if the temptation to other those with whom one disagrees is too seductive to resist even in the midst of calling into question such a "distasteful" politics of religion. Indeed, this raises further questions regarding the rhetorical complicity of popular media with strategic motivations of its own in the shaping of ideation formation.

III. Classification, Legalization, and Popular Culture:

As contested areas of the contemporary American landscape, religion and politics[14] coupled with (and/or motivated by) axiological desires serve to remind us of the rhetorical and ideological entanglements associated with classificatory constructions as well as the ineluctable process of slicing up of the world in terms of significatory units through which one negotiates reality as a system of linguistic differences. Due to the absence of some essentialized, universalizable foundation and cross-cultural semantic meaning, our linguistic units function as signifiers in the absence of some transcendental signified. In other words, these linguistic units are useful, pragmatic, inventions. The problem that this typically engenders is that the objectification/reification of these linguistic units conceals their diverse, contested taxonomic histories as well as, in many cases, their rhetorical appropriations against the other. Replicating this pattern to a certain extent, the video attempts to call into account the "invented" nature of the inauthentic religion of secularism (as inauthentic as another invented religion—Mormonism). However, unless O'Donnell is ironizing the entire process of religious invention (and the constructed category of 'religion'), the *established and commonly recognized religious traditions* included,[15] then, it fails to make explicit the culturally constructed and linguistic "nature" of religious symbolic systems— that is, religion—in general. It appears to be the case that in order to function as meaningful symbolic systems, religion(s) must operate within a constructed linguistic system of differences and, as such, are the effects (to a large extent) of language within their respective cultural systems.

This problematic is implicated by an unspoken axiomatics in light of O'Donnell's statement regarding secularism as Romney's "invention of a whole new religion; one that doesn't even exist."[16] Without getting into the ontological status of this metaphysical claim or the structural relationship between the sign and the referent, this formulation appears unaware of the history of such taxonomical matters of definition, classification, and the rhetorical uses to which they have been pressed into service with respect to 'religion' (and, concomitantly, the 'secular') whether in the self-classification of secular

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[14] This is not to say that the world "is" (in-and-of-itself in some corresponding, realist, and objective manner) divided up into such "things" as 'religion' and 'politics' or the 'religious' and the 'secular.' Regarding this matter, Fitzgerald states "None of these pairs of terms has an essential or even uncontested meaning and yet the way they have been set up tends to disguise the degree to which boundaries between them are porous and constantly shifting . . . 'religion' and other categories are not neutral descriptive or analytical terms but are on the contrary prescriptive and normative. They are rhetorical constructions, but they are widely used as though they are objective and factual, and thus conceal their own origins. Despite the appearance of common sense, a term such as 'religion' does not tell us what is in the world, but what we collectively think ought to be in the world. It is a classificatory device, a function of Euro-American world making, but it has acquired an appearance of being immutably in the nature of things." Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity*, 24.

[15] This may be the case given a possible textual clue in O'Donnell's critique that is framed in such a way as to place the "established religions" in the place of the unaccepting party; since, *they*, and not O'Donnell in this instance, "don't easily warm up to new religions."

[16] Some philosophers and historians of religion argue that "religion" in general does not "exist" or that the term "religion" is a scholarly construction for the scholar's classificatory purposes. For example, John Caputo argues that, "Any book entitled *On Religion* must begin by breaking the bad news to the reader that its subject matter does not exist. "Religion," in the singular, as just one thing, is nowhere to be found; it is too maddeningly polyvalent and too uncontainably diverse for us to fit it all under one roof . . . Indeed, the uncontainable diversity of "religion" is itself a great religious truth and a marker of the uncontainability of what religion is all about." John D. Caputo, *On Religion,* (London: Routledge, 2001) 1. Regarding the contested etymological nature of religion from an historian of religion, see Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious" in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies,* Mark C. Taylor, ed., (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

humanists, legal decisions attempting to distinguish between the religious and the secular, or scholarly research in this area. Although, in fairness, the sound-bite approach in social media is not particularly amenable to extended critical analysis, except that, in this case, a limited analytic and historical contextualization seems to be occurring. Nevertheless, following are just a few areas of consideration that should suffice to make evident the contested and somewhat problematic status of the "argument from invention."

First, regarding the possibility of secularism (and/or Secular Humanism) functioning as a religion, Warren Nord explains, "The first Humanist Manifesto (1933) is, in its own terms, a religious document . . . The *Manifesto* assumes a scientific view of the world view and argues that religion should be understood not as a matter of belief in a supernatural God but as 'those actions, purposes, and experiences which are humanly significant.'"[17] Even though the second *Humanist Manifesto* (1973) no longer adhered to a "religious" self-classification, the first humanist Manifesto is sufficient to provide a precedent in this matter of classifying secular(ism) humanism as a religion prior to its contemporary politico-rhetorical "invention."

Second, regarding legal decisions in Supreme Court rulings on matters of religion and public institutions, the possibility of understanding and classifying secularism as 'religion' engendered by law suits that claim as much from Evangelical and fundamentalist Christians predate and strategically prefigure any contemporary strategic in(ter)vention of secular humanism as a "whole new religion" that "doesn't even exist."[18] Long before the last presidential election, this line of attack found its way to the Supreme Court. Secular Humanism has been a constructed site of contestation at the level of the Supreme Court since at least the 1960s. As Nord explains,

There are two quite different ways in which one might argue that secular humanism is a religion on *legal* grounds. First, we can simply quote the Supreme Court. In a famous (some would say infamous) footnote in *Torcaso v. Watkins* (1961) Justice Black wrote:

"Among the religions in the country which do not teach what would generally be considered a belief in the existence of God are Buddhism, Taoism, Ethical Culture, Secular Humanism and others." And in *Schempp* Justice Clark warned that the state may not establish a "religion of secularism" in the schools so supposedly secularism could be a religion. [19]

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[17] Warren A. Nord, *Religion & American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma*, (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 173. Here he is citing the *Humanist Manifesto I*, pp. 7, 9.

[18] See, for example, *Abington* v. *Schempp* wherein Justice Clark states: "It is insisted that unless these religious exercises are permitted a **'religion of secularism'** is established in the schools. We agree of course that the State may not establish a 'religion of secularism' in the sense of affirmatively opposing or showing hostility to religion, thus preferring those who believe in no religion over those who do believe.' We do not agree, however, that this decision in any sense has that effect . . . Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, *when presented **objectively** as part of a **secular** program of education*, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment" [emphasis added] (*School District of Abington Township* v. *Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 [1963]). In this case, we find not only the language of secularism as religion but also the legal impetus for the development of departments of Religion and Religious Studies as "objective" and "secular." Space does not permit a critical assessment of this condition of im/possibility with respect to a discipline in which both "objectivity" and the "secular," the legal 'foundation' upon which these departments became 'legalized' and thus gained entrance into public universities, has been put into question in postmodern and poststructuralist discourses.

[19] Nord, *Religion & American Education*, 178. Here Nord is citing from *Torcaso* V. *Watkins*, 367 U.S. 488, 495n. (1961) and *Abington* v. *Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203, 225

Moreover, tracing the historical trajectory of Supreme Court decisions regarding what gets to count (legally) *as* religion, Nord suggests:

The more compelling argument begins with the observation that for the last fifty years, the Court has been liberalizing its conception of religion—at least for some purposes. In *United States* v. *MacIntosh* (1931) Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes took the traditional position that the "essence of religion is belief in a relation to God involving duties superior to those arising from any human relation." But by 1940, Justice Frankfurter was explaining religion in terms of our "convictions about the ultimate mystery of the universe and man's relation to it," and in *McGowan* v. *Maryland* (1961), he wrote, "By its nature, religion—in the comprehensive sense in which the Constitution uses that word—is an aspect of human thought and action which profoundly relates the life of man to the world in which he lives."[20]

And, following this liberalized trajectory in a case of conscientious objector status, he further explains:

In *United States* v. *Seeger* (1965), Justice Clark notes that "over 250 sects inhabit our land. Some believe in a purely personal God, some in a supernatural deity; others think of religion as a way of life envisioning as its ultimate goal the day when all men can live together in perfect understanding and peace. There are those who think of God as the depth of our being; others, such as the Buddhists, strive for a state of lasting rest through self-denial and inner purification." Religious belief cannot be limited to those who believe in God. Appealing to Paul Tillich, Bishop John A.T. Robinson, and the Second Vatican Council, Justice Clark suggested that religion is grounded in "a power or being, or upon a faith, to which all else is subordinate or upon which all else is ultimately dependent." This being the case, the test for the religious grounds of conscientious objection to war is whether an individual holds a "sincere and meaningful belief which occupies in the life of its possessor a place parallel to that filled by the God of those admittedly qualifying for exemption."[21]

Justice Clark's view of various ways of being as "parallel" to religion, a para-religion, appropriates and utilizes a different (i.e., non-essentialistic) taxonomical classification of definition types (viz., a functionalist definition or, possibly, a Wittgensteinian family resemblance approach) as a guide for his legal decisions regarding the classification of a certain class of "beliefs" as "religion."[22]

Consequently, based on this very brief historical sketch of some legal decisions and developments, it appears to be the case that Romney's "invention" is not all that inventive, nor is his strategic intervention novel. Far from being the invention of a completely new religion, Secular Humanism has been among those 'irreligious' religions or 'secular' religions that have complicated or put into question the "neutral" application of First Amendment rights with respect to the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses.[23]

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[20] Ibid. Here Nord is citing: *United States* v. *Macintosh*, 283 U.S. 605, 633-34 (1931); *Minersville School District* v. *Gobits*, 310 U.S. 586, 593 (1940): *McGowan* v. *Maryland*, 366 U.S. 420, 461 (1961).

[21] Ibid. Here Nord is citing: *United States* v. *Seeger* 380 U.S. 163, 174, 176 (1965).

[22] Regarding this conventional and problematic association of "beliefs" with religion, see Donald S. Lopez, Jr. "Belief," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[23] Nord explains the implications as follows: "*Seeger* gave 'secular' opponents of war the same right to conscientious objector status as traditionally 'religious' individuals under the Free Exercise Clause. Profound moral beliefs can function religiously. But if the Court were to accept functional religions for Establishment purposes,

Third, regarding the classificatory work of religion scholars, and this is where the implications for popular culture are most salient, a tremendous amount of intellectual energy has been expended to determine (adjudicate, police) what gets to count as religion and who gets to decide. The historical condition of this (Western) problematic is based in part on a relatively stable signifier coupled with a relatively unstable signified and the conspicuous absence of a transcendental signified. Nevertheless, without rehearsing the taxonomic past of this endeavor and the etymological possibilities for *religio* (which typically presupposes that a diachronic investigation will resolve the issue), it will suffice for our present purposes to mention two very different approaches that should frame the contentious nature of what is at stake in matters of current classification and, more important for our present purposes, its implications for the study of popular culture.

According to Jonathan Z. Smith, "'Religion' is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define."[24] In contradistinction to this perspective, David Chidester argues that "the very term *religion*, including its definition, application, and extension, does not, in fact, belong solely to academics but is constantly at stake in the interchanges of cultural discourses and practices."[25] What these polar positions reveal is not only the contested nature of the definition of 'religion' but also the contested nature regarding the locus of "proper" authority in such matters of classification (i.e., the question of propriety and property; who "owns" or has proprietary rights regarding religion?). Both Chidester and Smith are historians of religion whose typical terrain is the realm of the diachronic.[26] However, while both address a synchronic view of religion and its utility in contemporary academic discourse, Chidester allows for the testimonies of non-academics to be taken into account, especially in the realm of popular culture. If everything turns on this question of propriety, then, who "properly" owns the "property" of religion such that this proprietor is able to determine, delimit, and police its classificatory borders? It appears that this question, as with the earlier question regarding axiological contingencies, is traced and sustained by undecidability with respect to a metacriterion.[27]

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then, religious conservatives argue, the implications would be momentous. The state could no longer privilege secular humanism over traditional religions in public schools, for this would constitute taking sides among religions. Of course, the Court has not taken this step but has instead applied what some observers take to be a double standard allowing functional religions at least some protection under the Free Exercise Clause but requiring a traditional definition of religion for the purposes of the Establishment Clause." Nord, *Religion & American Education*, 178-179.

[24] Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious" in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies,* ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 281.

[25] David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion in American Popular Culture*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 36.

[26] It should be noted that although both are historians of religion, neither seems to indicate that this matter can be resolved by means of historical etymology. Indeed, Chidester's position is that contemporary popular culture should have, or does have, a voice in matters of definition and usage; and Smith states, "The term 'religion' has had a long history, much of it, prior to the sixteenth century, irrelevant to contemporary usage. Its etymology is uncertain . . ." Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," 269.

[27] Again, this is not to say that one does not decide such matters but, rather, one's decision is not a grounded or foundational decision in the strict sense. Indeed, it is because of epistemological undecidability that such a question may arise. As a result, the undecidability about what religion "is" about (in the essentialist sense) further magnifies the problematic while concomitantly allowing itself, by virtue of this undecidability, to be utilized as a rhetorico-political weapon to pathologize one's other toward some political desideratum as is apparent in the video.

With these issues in mind, it is not difficult to understand what is at stake in issues of religious invention or the imputation of fraudulence and inauthenticity associated with such inventions. It is this conventional notion (or rhetoric of attack) that is put into question by Chidester in *Authentic Fakes*, utilizing all kinds of marginalized, "fake," comical, satirical, "inauthentic" religions to make his case for our inability to discount the "religious work" done by these nontraditional and unconventional religions (e.g., the Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, the Potlatch of Rock-n-Roll, the virtual religions on the internet, among others). In the process, he calls into question "commonsense" and "obvious" assumptions about what constitutes religion as well as what it might mean for 'religion' *not* to be in some way an invention. By treating the ostensibly "nonserious" realm of popular culture seriously, Chidester transforms the socially mediated site of cyberspace and other "entertainment" media into a site of contested cultural discourse. Popular culture through its various social media pathways is treated as all the more important because of its influential voice in matters of religious significance to those for whom these "invented" religions are symbolically and existentially meaningful irrespective of legal or scholarly recognition outside of the conventionally constructed canon of "the religions."

While we await a decision on the matter of proper adjudication, the term *religion* has thus migrated into areas of popular culture to classify all manner of non-institutional, unconventional, and 'secular' phenomena (from music to sports to politics to economics) as religion (i.e., popular culture *as* religion).[28] What we are witnessing within popular cultural discourses on a larger scale thanks to social media of various sorts is precisely this linguistico-semantic slippage in which what religion is *about* has been extended by venturing out into the world of the profane (i.e., *pro fanum*) as an element of popular culture. To what extent theorists of religion will allow these voices into the conversation concerning the functioning of non-traditional or unconventional religion is, yet again, a question of contingent valuations and rhetorical purposes and one that remains to be seen.

In closing, what are the implications of this analysis for the study of religion and popular culture? Both religion and popular culture as academic areas of study have parallel reception histories within academic institutions. Given the constitutional entanglements in matters of church and state, religion has received more legal attention and justification as a result of Supreme Court rulings regarding religion as an "objective" area of study in public universities,[29] even if it continues to be misunderstood and considered less-than-academic (i.e., "soft") within other disciplines (especially the "hard sciences"). Popular culture as an area of study within the academy has not fared much better in terms of its perception as a "proper" scholarly pursuit. Indeed, both fields of study have been subjected to a strategic devaluing not unlike the rhetorical political strategy on display in the video and, in a certain manner, recapitulates this politics of othering.

Consequently, an analysis of the religious rhetoric in the politics of religion in popular culture provides just one symptomatic site in which a more general problem of/with religion becomes evident; one that remains for all of us struggling to interpret and understand the constructed rhetorics surrounding religion and its associated binary oppositions in contemporary culture. By proffering a possible critique of the under-theorized appropriation of religious rhetoric as a strategy of othering and its associated

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[28] See for example, Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, eds., *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) and especially, as earlier noted, Chidester's *Authentic Fakes.*
[29] For example, see the legal distinction between the teaching *of* religion and the teaching *about* religion (Roberts v. Madigan, 921 F.2nd 1047 10th Cir. 1990).

attempt to determine/decide in some "objective" manner what should or should not count as "proper," "authentic" religion, what should or should not count as some "proper," "authentic" scholarly pursuit, and who has the authority to "properly" adjudicate and, thereby, self-authorize such a judgment, the notion of a neutral classification untainted by axiological valuations and ideological motivations should suffice to give one pause as well as to engender a certain suspicious subject position in relation to such declarations.

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