



A Religion Problem

Classification and Pathologization of the Religio-Political Other

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Introducing the Taxonomic Problem(s)

- The contested site of ‘religion’:
 - Defining/Classifying ‘Religion’: Raises the problem of essentialism.
 - Typically formulated in binary oppositions: Authentic/Fake, (Super)Natural/Invented, True/False, etc.—Religion
- The contested site of axiological normativity:
 - Assessing the “proper” (i.e., objectively True) in relation to questions of value and taste
 - Typically formulated in binary oppositions: Good/Bad, Right/Wrong, Healthy/Unhealthy, etc.—Value/Taste

In both cases: The privileging of the first pole over the second raises epistemological questions concerning “proper” foundations and authority in matters pertaining to classification (e.g., legal, academic, cultural) with religio-political implications; the conflation of these two contested sites in popular (political) culture sets the stage for a rhetoric of “warfare” with the possibility of a “privileging of the self through the pathologizing of the Other” (*Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory*, Barbara Herrnstein Smith)

I. The Politics of Religion

- **1. Politics of Religion:** Lawrence O'Donnell introduces Mitt Romney's (political) religion problem; Romney knows it and has invented a religion problem for Obama.
- **2. Grafting Romney:** Mitt Romney states: "there is in this country a war on religion"; "there is a desire to *establish* a religion in America known as secularism"; "I know that based upon reports, the Obama administration gave this a lot of thought , a lot of discussion."
- **3. Inventing a Problem/Religion:** Lawrence O'Donnell states: 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 Kerry; similarly, Romney projects his religion problem on to the (religio)-political other; "a much-used page of the Republican playbook"
- **5. Cue the Poll:** Gallup: "showing voter reluctance based on a candidate's religion." Atheist: 49%, Muslim: 46%, Mormon: 22%, Jewish 9%, Baptist: 7%, Catholic: 7%

I. The Politics of Religion

- **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” this new religion and attribute it to Obama? Part of Romney’s religion problem is that he is a member of a “new religion” “Established religions . . . don’t easily warm up to new religions”
- **8. Sex Sells:** On the sexual “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”; “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.*”

1-10 above are transcriptions of *The Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell* in a segment called *The Rewrite*, on MSNBC (aired on April 3, 2012)

II. In(ter)vention, Irony & Romney

- Political intervention by means of a rhetoric of war(fare) on religion
- Desire to *establish* a religion of secularism
- The irony of attributing a desire to *both* declare a *war* on religion *and establish* a religion
 - Evokes the First Amendment's Establishment Clause
 - “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion . . .” (U.S. Constitution, Amendment I)
- The ironic (or self-referential) problem of flirting with a transgression of the spirit of Article VI, clause 3 of the U.S. Constitution
 - “no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public trust under the United States”
 - How? By calling into question Obama's supposed motivations with respect to the Establishment Clause
- Effects a privileging of the (religio-political) self at the expense of the devalued, suspicious, pathologized (religio-political) other

II. In(ter)vention, Irony & O'Donnell

- Political intervention by means of a critique of Romney's rhetoric of war(fare) on religion
- Desire to critique Romney's *invention* of a "whole new" religion of secularism "that doesn't even exist"
- The irony of attributing a strategy of othering to Romney as a deflection of his own political religion problem, while engaging in a wholesale othering not only of Romney and Mormonism but also "the extremely religiously intolerant electorate," which O'Donnell cannot tolerate
- Apology: The offense generated by his remarks and the overwhelmingly negative social media attacks, required O'Donnell to apologize for his statements about Mormonism .
- The (ironic) point: his "preaching" about religious toleration; we should not vote based on (ir)religious affiliation—the politics of religion elides into a religion of politics.

III. Classification, Invention & Propriety

- My contingent reading of O'Donnell's reading of Romney's reading of Obama on religion:
- Neither Romney's "invention" nor his strategy is all that inventive
 - The religion of secular humanism and/or secularism has been a contested legal site at the level of the Supreme Court since at least the sixties when similar arguments were made regarding the Establishment Clause and the "existence" of secularism as a religion in our public schools.
 - The *Humanist Manifesto* (1933) claimed the title of religion.
 - Consequently, the binary oppositions authentic/fake or natural/invented (religion) are called into question.
 - This either/or formulation appears to ignore the culturally constructed context of classification and how specific discursive communities "divide up" (or "invent") the world differently without an absolute standard against which to determine its veracity.

III. Classification, Invention & Propriety

- Academic:
 - Theorists, historians, and philosophers of religion cannot agree on the (essentialist) borders of 'religion' or the "proper" authority to adjudicate (and, thus, police) such limits:
 - "‘Religion’ is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define."
(“Religion, Religions, Religious,” Jonathan Z. Smith)
 - “[T]he 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.” (*Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture*, David Chidester)
- Legal:
 - Based on the absence of uncontested decisions among Supreme Court justices with respect to rulings about the boundaries of religion, we find a similar undecidability; although, this does not appear to preclude judges from deciding with whom the proper authority resides to make determinations regarding what religion “is.”

III. Religion and Popular Culture

- Taking the Playful Nature of Popular Culture Seriously
 - Religion and popular culture as academic fields have been subjected to a rhetorical devaluing not unlike the political strategy on display in the video.
 - As in other asymmetrical binary oppositions, popular culture has been traditionally relegated to the status of the devalued other of high culture.
 - The outcry on various social media sites (as well as the satirical commentary on *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart) due to this video segment underscores the ‘serious’ influence of popular culture on matters of religion and politics (traditionally ‘sacred’—as in set apart—spheres).
- Thus, as a site of identity construction and political influence, popular culture appears to be no less ‘serious’ for its ‘playfulness.’

The Problem Of/With Religion

- In/conclusion:
- Whether the target of religio-political pathologizing is an individual, a group, a culture, or a field of study, this appears to be *symptomatic* of a foundational problem—a problem of (a desire for) foundations that obscures its self-authorization as a process of contingent textual production and an effect of language.
- Textual productions that do not signal their contingent, instituted “origins” may be susceptible to an unquestioning reification (i.e., objectification) of its categories.
- Consequently, the problem of ‘religion’ may be viewed and addressed as a structural problem *with* ‘religion’ in American culture, politics, and law requiring an analysis of the complexities involved when defining and classifying ‘religion.’