

Race is Religion in U.S. Electoral Politics

Timothy McGee
timl.mcgee@gmail.com

“D-day, 1944. Allied troops save the world from oppression.” I am accustomed to blocking out the sound of Pandora ads but this dramatic beginning caught my attention, so I stopped to watch. It’s a political ad, featuring Philip Storer, a veteran who landed at Omaha Beach on D-Day. Storer says,

We fought to protect our freedoms. Today, our freedoms are threatened again. This time by wasteful spending and crushing debt. This is your fight. Will you leave your children a country as strong as the America you inherited? November 6th, defend your freedoms again.¹

Though an ad for Romney, it never mentions either presidential candidate. I soon began to wonder how I knew without hesitation that it was supporting Romney. The answer that occurred to me is that I knew it because everyone in the ad is white.

The answer surprised me but then I kept thinking about it. What would happen if the video was exactly the same but included an African-American veteran and pictures of a present day African-American family? It certainly wouldn’t be immediately obvious that it was a pro-Romney ad. The “America” inherited would have to take into account something like the “threatened” freedoms after WWII, namely the racist social structures combated by the Civil Rights movement, and that thought would complicate the uncritical retrieval of WWII by bringing up Vietnam and the larger post-WWII “new” imperialism led by the U.S.² Everything, it seems, hinges on the unspoken whiteness in the ad.

¹ The ad is sponsored by the “60 Plus Association” and can be watched on Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=s3Hzqwab0Ww

² David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2005). From the perspective of “new imperialism,” the “wasteful spending and crushing debt” could be interpreted as the remnants from the Bush era’s two wars and tax cuts for the wealthy.

As the election is drawing to a close (I'm writing on November 5th), a growing number of people are commenting on how much white racial politics are operating in this election. We have a Republican senator remarking that the Republican Party is going to have future struggles in the elections because "we're not generating enough angry white guys to stay in business for the long term."³ An article in Slate magazine puts this statement in a wider context, showing how the Republican campaign realized it needed 61% of the white vote to edge out Obama and thus the campaign focused itself on winning the election this way. The Slate article brilliantly captures Romney's famous "47%" remarks as a kind of post-racial racism: one speaks of "personal responsibility" over against "welfare recipients" and just allows the racial imagination to fill in the appropriate colors.⁴ And Chris Rock has astutely and humorously joined in, satirically observing that Obama is basically a white president (from the way he dresses, to his activities, and even his post-college activism in poor black neighborhoods: what a white thing to do).⁵

While race is coming to the surface in overt ways, we also have a redrawing of religious lines. Billy Graham decided that Mormons are no longer a "cult." In a profoundly confusing and revealing moment, Paul Ryan, a Catholic, running for vice president under the first Mormon presidential candidate, recently spoke to an evangelical Christian gathering about Obama's presidency as a threat to Christian America. He said that Obama's presidency promotes "a path that grows government, restricts freedom and liberty, and compromises those values—those Judeo-Christian, Western civilization values that made us a great and exceptional nation in the

³ <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2012/09/02/1125989/--We-re-not-generating-enough-angry-white-guys>

⁴ http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/scocca/2012/11/mitt_romney_white_vote_parsing_the_narrow_tribal_appeal_of_the_republican_single.html

⁵ http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=EDxOSjgl5Z4.

first place.”⁶ So, just to clarify this picture: a Catholic running with a Mormon candidate is welcomed to speak to evangelical Christians about how a Protestant Christian president is going to undermine the U.S.’s greatness by compromising the “Judeo-Christian, Western civilization values.” No longer are Mormons a cult and “papists” deemed un-American religious deviants with international ties outside of the U.S. The religious lines have been and continue to be redrawn to meet the political needs felt by an unspoken but operative whiteness that sees itself under threat (by immigration, Islam, secularism, a black president, China’s growing international presence, economic precariousness, etc).

To draw in the brilliance of Chris Rock, the virulence of this use of a masked racial identity as political identity inside of religious identity can be seen by the fact that even Obama, as “white” a black candidate as he is, is encountered and interpreted as unchristian, secular, Muslim, socialist, un-American, militantly black and an absolute threat to the "social order." Whiteness is masked by being articulated as a certain political normativity (“responsibility”) that is then seen as the essence of a "Judeo-Christian" American religion. The test for religious fitness is the approximation to this proper vision of responsible (white, Christian) citizenship. The hidden yet central exemplary "non-citizen" is black (the criminal, the unproductive, the welfare recipient, etc). Thus, Mormonism is closer to white, evangelical Christianity (more closely aligned as “responsible” citizenry) than black Christianity. Or, at any rate, this is the new projected order of religious and political identity coming out of the right.⁷ As I’ve been arguing, the unspoken but binding logic is race, in particular, white racial identity. This racial identity is

⁶ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/04/paul-ryan-social-conservatives-religious-freedom_n_2074129.html

⁷ There are major problems on the left here as well as it has in many white circles embraced a post-racial ideology that ignores and thereby continues to allow social structures that exclude, marginalize, and otherwise harm African-American communities. For a recent analysis of this aspect of Obama’s presidency, see Fredrick Harris’s recent opinion piece in the New York Times, “The Price of a Black President”: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/28/opinion/sunday/the-price-of-a-black-president.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

what allowed the D-Day ad to work and it is what holds together the reconfiguration of religion in U.S. politics right now.

If I may just draw out one more religious-racial reconfiguration by way of conclusion: the “Judeo-” in Paul Ryan’s statement about “Judeo-Christian, Western civilization” is vital. For, in our day, the “Semite” has been split between the good Semite (Jew, Israel) and the bad (Arab, Muslim). As Gil Anidjar has observed: “secularism is Orientalism. Race is religion. The evidence lies in the Semites.”⁸ Race is religion, and Barak Hussein Obama is black and international enough to be consistently described as a closeted “Muslim” (which, in the white racial imagination, is always foreign and Arab). The emphasis on “Judeo-” is important given the white, evangelical bond to Israel as well as the continuing suspicions around Obama’s religious identity and “foreignness.”

Regardless of who wins the election, we’ve seen and will continue to experience how race is religion and both are malleable given the exigencies of U.S. politics in the 21st century. Malleable by whom? That’s the question, and for a starter, we can point to that room in which Mitt Romney was, in the words of the Slate article, “speaking fluent White,” where dinners cost \$50,000 a plate, where Palestinians could be said to have “no interest whatsoever in establishing peace,” where everyone could laughingly agree that Romney’s campaign would be easier if he were Latino, and where the 47% of U.S. citizens who pay no income tax could be dismissed as irresponsible. That is who decides,⁹ and that power is what is under threat and reasserting itself in new racial-religious-political configurations.

⁸ Gil Anidjar, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 21.

⁹ Though it would be more natural to say “that group” or “those people,” I am leaving out the reference to particular “agents” to stress that what we are seeing is a reconfiguration of the very power to produce “the people,” to produce who counts as a political agent in the first place.