Associate Editor's Note

An Agenda for Research on American Religion in Light of the 2016 Election

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In the 2016 presidential election, Americans who shared core religious beliefs and salient religious identities, but who differed in racial identification, sharply diverged in their voting patterns. While media accounts emphasized a generic "evangelical" support for Mr. Trump, it was actually White evangelicals and Catholics who supported him in record numbers; people of color in these traditions did not. Thus, the election provides an opportunity to critically examine both scholarly and popular assumptions about the link between religiosity and political preferences. Such a re-examination must involve a rejection of insider narratives that focus on religious belief as a primary causal mechanism that has a unitary and straightforward effect on political action, policy preferences, and social attitudes. I propose a research agenda that forefronts feminist and critical theoretical insights and argue that the most urgent research question for sociologists of religion is an intersectional one: "How do religion, race, gender, sexuality, social class, and other aspects of social location intersect to constitute people's understandings of their identities and interests?" Such an approach acknowledges religious belief as an important component of meaning-making, but calls on researchers to investigate how social location influences which aspects of religious belief are understood as relevant and to analyze the culture work that links specific beliefs to political preferences, social attitudes, and behaviors.

Key words: religion; politics; elections; feminist theory; culture.

I take no satisfaction in the fact that since early in the primaries I told everyone who would listen that Donald Trump could take it all. We (few) worriers soon found each other to talk to, because no one else would listen. Journalists and pundits, political insiders and opinion-leaders, friends and acquaintances, all kept saying that it "couldn't possibly happen" and "people will come to their senses." This, of course, really means that "people will come to see things my way"—always a poor bet.

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This political season made me understand that people who view liberal elites as smug and out of touch have a point. However, conservative opinion leaders and Republican Party insiders were also blind-sided by Mr. Trump's success. And so were a fairly large percentage of Americans who are not media or political elites and who are not particularly ideological; people who want to pay their taxes, vote, go to work, and generally get on with their lives.

Mr. Trump's Electoral College victory presents more than an opportunity to reassess our taken-for-granted assumptions about American politics—it shows that such a reassessment is of fundamental necessity. I believe that sociologists who study religion are, in some ways, uniquely poised to make a substantial contribution to this reassessment, and that we can shed much-needed light on the nature and causes of the support for Mr. Trump's candidacy and the coalition that carried him to the presidency.

In doing so, I argue that we can contribute to a broader, better, and more nuanced understanding of the role that religious discourse, symbols, and identity play in helping people to make sense of and respond to economic and political conditions. However, this will involve moving beyond an emic understanding of religion as primarily a matter of belief (cf. Chaves 2010) to fully embracing an intersectional approach (Frost and Edgell forthcoming; Edgell and Tranby 2007) that forefronts two kinds of analytical questions. First, how does social location—especially race, gender, sexuality, and social class—shape how people experience and articulate religious convictions? Second, how do religious leaders and institutions do the culture work that links specific religious beliefs to particular understandings of political and economic interests, social attitudes and policy preferences, and strategies of action?

UNPACKING THE COALITION

Mr. Trump won the election by putting together a partially overlapping coalition of voters that included working-class voters in the Rust Belt states who had previously supported Democrats, traditional Republicans in the suburbs and in rural areas outside the Midwest, evangelical Protestants, and White Catholics. Media accounts have focused on White working-class and working-poor Rust Belt voters, arguing that about 80,000 of those voters spread across a few crucial Midwestern States are what swung the Electoral College to Mr. Trump. While this is true, focusing on this fact alone can be misleading if it fosters the assumption that the rest of the vote distribution is stable, well understood, and taken-for-granted. *Many* of those in the Trump coalition are not people who would automatically think of themselves as having a common cause, and they were not all "obvious" Trump supporters.

All of Mr. Trump's core constituencies are primarily White. Many are themselves highly religious and some are not, but all share a preference for cultural Christianity, understanding Christian traditions as grounding our civic life and fostering national identity (see Edgell et al. 2016 for a brief review). Sociologists of religion can help us to understand not only the mobilization of evangelical Protestants in support of Mr. Trump, but also why appeals to a broader cultural

Christianity helped to mobilize people across all three elements of his supporting constituency and unite them through the articulation of a common set of interests and values.

APPEALS TO IDENTITY—NOSTALGIA, LOSS, AND RESENTMENT

The genius of Mr. Trump's campaign was its appeal to emotions. Emotions link identities to mobilization. Mr. Trump's message drew on sources of emotional appeal that spanned his coalition and solidified it into a common cause, linking a nostalgia for lost economic stability, racial dominance, and traditional family structures to resentment of current elites on *both* the left and the right.

The first appeal was to fears stemming from economic decline. In the 2016 electoral cycle, populist resentment over the economic devastation left in the wake of globalization resonated with a broader resentment of economic and political elites generated by decades of wage stagnation, job loss, and union busting— the legacy of decades of neoliberal economic policy. The vast majority of Americans, perhaps as many as 85%, have experienced a pervasive sense of economic tenuousness due to the flight of skilled working-class jobs, decline in workplace-based benefits, stagnating wages, and skyrocketing healthcare costs (Hacker 2008). The financial crisis of 2008 exacerbated the problems acutely. The appeal of Mr. Trump's economic message is far broader than the Rust Belt, but it was in the Rust Belt that the Democratic "firewall" fell apart. In part, this is due to the collapse of unions and small-town Chamber-of-Commerce Republicanism. In their place, local elites have pursued economic development policies unresponsive to both locally based employers and displaced union workers, breeding a generalized populist resentment that transcends party loyalty (Pacewicz 2016).

The second appeal was to racial resentment and xenophobia. Popular media accounts sometimes offer this as an *alternative* to economic fears in explaining Mr. Trump's electoral success. However, these should instead be understood as complimentary explanations. Mr. Trump's campaign affirmed and upheld an already existing and powerful cultural narrative that appeals to a vast number of White conservative Americans, uniting many traditional suburban Republicans with many White evangelicals and White working-class Americans. This is a narrative about political and economic elites having turned a deaf ear to the concerns of White Americans to court the favor of "special interests" and promote the "political correctness"—codes for the multi-racial coalition, which includes many well educated liberal Whites, that has supported the Democratic Party. In this narrative, White people are "working people" while others rely on welfare handouts or cross the border illegally to steal jobs.

Mr. Trump did not invent the link between White racial resentment and Whites' economic fears (Anderson 2016); but he did take full advantage of it. He ran a campaign telling his largely White voters that "the establishment" has forgotten them because its elites have been too busy courting the votes of Black and

Latino Americans, and too busy worrying about looking good in the eyes of sophisticated Europeans by championing open borders, to care about protecting the jobs of White Americans.

The third emotional appeal of the Trump candidacy was to a preference for traditional gender roles. In Mr. Trump's particular case and given his overtly predatory behavior, this included an open endorsement of particularly virulent forms of misogyny. But 42% of women voted for Mr. Trump, and were willing to ignore the uglier aspects of his record with women. Why? One part of the explanation is that White middle-class liberal feminism in the United States has always focused on women as individual political and economic actors, and worked for equal access and equal reward. Other feminisms (e.g., Black feminism in the United States and some forms of European feminism) are more pro-family and pro-child, and more responsive to women's deep embeddedness in families and communities. For many women who voted for Trump, the relevant issues were not breaking the glass ceiling or equal pay, but family stability in the face of economic decline and support for valued traditional gender identities. And while this appeal may have resonated most strongly with White evangelicals, it likely appealed more broadly within the conservative coalition that elected Mr. Trump.

A CALL FOR RESEARCH

Sociologists of religion have a crucial role to play in understanding the causes and implications of Mr. Trump's rise to the presidency, for three reasons.

First, we are uniquely positioned to analyze the depth and complexity of the emotional response to Mr. Trump's campaign. Others have begun the difficult work of analyzing the role of anger and resentment in driving our current political polarization; for example, there has been excellent work on both political ideology (Hochschild 2016) and white racial resentment (Anderson 2016). Emotions are sometimes treated as irrational or nonsensical in the context of an interest-based political process, but sociologists of religion can analyze how emotional appeals in the context of a national political ritual (a presidential campaign) revivify a sacred understanding of American identity (Taves 2011) while providing an opportunity for savvy political and cultural entrepreneurs to claim the sacred center in the name of their own political, economic, and racial interests (Alexander 2006). Research in this area can begin with relatively simple questions: What sacred things do Mr. Trump's supporters believe to have been violated (cf. Jones 2016), and what do they hope to see re-sacralized under his presidency? What things are sacred to the thousands of protesters engaged in repeated anti-Trump marches and rallies all over the country? How did contests over "special things" (Taves 2011) forge new coalitions and weaken older bonds during the course of a long primary and general election campaign season? What is the role of spectacle and ritual in forging and mobilizing a new political coalition?

These questions have importance beyond understanding the election itself. Mr. Trump has taken the next logical step in a strategy of direct, grass-roots mobilization of the conservative base begun by the Christian Right in the 1980s and carried on by the Tea Party in the 1990s and early 2000s. His direct appeal to constituents through social media and large-scale rallies calls for a reinvigorated study of populist political ritual as a constitutive ground of coalition-building and identity-mobilization in the American context.

Second, sociologists of religion can take the lead in reshaping our understanding of evangelical support for Mr. Trump's candidacy. Most of the coverage in the popular media has reproduced emic claims that evangelicals supported Mr. Trump because of religiously based moral concerns over abortion. But as I have argued elsewhere (Edgell 2016), although Black and Hispanic evangelicals are just as concerned about abortion as are White evangelicals (more so in the case of Hispanics), it was *only* White evangelicals who swung to Mr. Trump. Likewise, Hispanic Catholics voted for Ms. Clinton, while White Catholics voted for Mr. Trump by a large margin (Edgell 2016).

To put it simply, there was no "evangelical vote" in the 2016 presidential election, and no "Catholic" vote. There was a *White* evangelical vote and a White Catholic vote (largely ignored). The empirics of the situation call for analyses that critically examine the intersection of religious beliefs with racial identification and racial interests.

White evangelicals comprise a distinct subculture (Smith 1998). This subculture contains core beliefs that may be phrased in ways that are racially neutral (Emerson and Smith 2000), but which resonate with other White Americans as a cultural code for Whiteness that works in part because of the racially neutral phrasing (Tranby and Hartmann 2008). In other words, many White evangelicals surely voted for Mr. Trump because they want him to appoint conservative Supreme Court justices who will overturn *Roe vs. Wade*. But White evangelicals also voted for him because their identity as *White* became increasingly salient as Mr. Trump played on fears of White political, economic, and cultural decline.

Sociologists of religion can help us understand why Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics who share core religious beliefs diverge in political behavior, policy preferences, and attitudes toward out-groups. In statistical analyses, this strategy involves looking for how religious belief and identification interact with race (and other aspects of identity) in shaping both attitudes and behavior (Edgell and Tranby 2007; Frost and Edgell forthcoming). In qualitative analyses, this involves understanding how religious discourses and symbols help individuals to frame and understand their political and economic experiences and link those experiences to valued aspects of identity, and analyzing why people respond to particular discursive and rhetorical appeals by religious and political leaders. For example, analysis of the "culture work" that religious leaders perform can shed light on why Whites prefer race-blind religious discourses that make it difficult, if not impossible, to have conversations about structural aspects of racial inequality (Becker 1998).

Third, sociologists of religion can also take the lead in analyzing how and why conservative Protestant rhetoric, symbols, and discourses resonate so widely

beyond the evangelical base. This is particularly important for understanding both the role of conservative gender ideology and xenophobia in appealing to the constituency who supported Mr. Trump.

Sociologists of religion can speak to why 42% of female voters supported Mr. Trump—despite his disturbing boasting about sexually predatory behavior and his tolerance of "Trump the Bitch!" t-shirts at his rallies. Conservative religious discourse on the family plays a formative role in preferences for patriarchal, heteronormative family forms (Lakoff 2002); much of the White evangelical support for Mr. Trump was in defense of valued gender identities that his supporters feel have been marginalized and disrespected. But this is not the whole story, because with 42% of female voters breaking for Mr. Trump, it is clear that his views of women resonated beyond White evangelicals.

In our recent Boundaries in the American Mosaic Project survey, 51% of respondents told us that being Christian is either "very" or "somewhat" important for being a good American, and 55% either said that America is a Christian nation and that is a good thing or that it is not a Christian nation and that is a bad thing. The gap between those percentages and the 25% of Americans who identify as evangelical Protestant is important for those who want to understand the coalition that swept Mr. Trump to power. A cultural preference for Christianity has a lot to do with the preference for the kinds of traditional gender roles that seemed to make Mr. Trump appealing—and which may have made Ms. Clinton unappealing.

Moreover, a desire to reverse the decline of White Christian cultural and political hegemony (Jones 2016) may explain the appeal of Mr. Trump's preference for strong boundaries against racial and national outsiders. Cultural preservationists (Edgell and Tranby 2010) who understand American national identity and civic culture as based upon a Christian heritage are less accepting of a range of outgroups, especially Muslim-Americans, the nonreligious, and homosexuals (cf. Edgell et al. 2016). Sociologists of religion can elucidate the connections between religiosity and strong nationalist sentiments by examining the history and complexities of American's preferences for public religious expression and their beliefs about the religious roots of American collective identity (Williams 2013).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The 2016 presidential election provides an opportunity for sociologists of religion to reexamine the way we think about and approach the study of religiosity and its role in shaping social attitudes and motivating political behavior. The appeal to evangelical voters went hand in hand with an appeal to those who favor traditional gender roles, xenophobic restrictions on immigration, disenfranchisement of voters of color, and distrust of economic and political elites. It is the right time, empirically, for an intersectional analysis that was already overdue on theoretical grounds (Edgell 2012).

I have argued that sociologists of religion can make a contribution to understanding the political landscape by pursuing a research agenda that centers the

critical analysis of the intersection of race, gender and sexuality, social class, and religion. This analysis should have two main foci. First, we should work to understand how social location shapes understandings of religious beliefs and experiences of religious identification. Second, we should investigate how religious leaders do the cultural work that links particular religious beliefs to social attitudes, understandings of political and economic interest, and strategies of action.

It is obvious that economic resentment is a big part of the story of the 2016 election cycle, including a rejection of neoliberalism. But what is not so obvious is how White people understand and narrate their economic marginality, why they link it to nativist policies and resentment of non-White Americans, and what role religious leaders play in forging these linkages. We can investigate to what extent ostensibly race-blind discourses from the religious right work as a cultural code, evoking nostalgia for a time when America was more prosperous, Christian, and White dominated (Jones 2016). We can also investigate how conservative Protestant discourses about gender and family resonate beyond their base and how that shapes the political preferences of those who may not actively practice religion or identify with any specific religious group. In this way, we can bring our understanding of religion as a socially located and formative influence on identity to bear on urgent questions of national importance. And we can turn our discipline away from an uncritical embrace of insider understandings and toward a critical analysis that can shed light on how religion not only shapes morality but also helps to constitute and defend political, economic, and racial interests.

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