**Of Milestones and Millstones:**

**Race-Religion Intersectionality, American History, and the 2012 Election**

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Nancy Wadsworth

Associate Professor

Department of Political Science

University of Denver

[nancy.wadsworth@du.edu](mailto:nancy.wadsworth@du.edu)

303-895-7900

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Perhaps better than any other year, the 2012 presidential election campaign could serve as a historical place marker, signaling the apex of two centuries’ worth of slow changes that have occurred in the areas of race and religion in American political life. In 2012 voters faced an unprecedented choice between two mainstream party candidates whose personal backgrounds (racial, religious, and otherwise) previous generations would have found inconceivable in potential presidents. Yet both candidates seemed to represent prototypically American stories, and large percentages of voters decided they could relate well enough to at least one of them to give him their vote.

On one side stood the incumbent Democratic president, Barack Obama. A mixed-race African American whose Kenyan father had been Muslim, Obama self-identified as definitively Christian and Protestant. Facing him stood Governor Mitt Romney, a white Republican and sixth-generation member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, whose father had, less controversially, also been born outside the U.S., to Mormon-American colonists in Mexico.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Each candidate was flanked by a white, Roman Catholic vice-presidential wingman. Joseph Biden and Paul Ryan represented different emphases in American Catholic worldviews, especially regarding marriage and abortion. But neither presumptive VP’s Catholicism was raised as controversial to his eligibility to serve as president one day—as if John F. Kennedy never had to fight that battle before them.

The four candidates campaigned furiously, against a backdrop of other noteworthy cultural and demographic changes. Three Jews and six Roman Catholics now sat on the Supreme Court; not one Protestant among the nine for the first time in history. The court contained seven whites, one Latina, and one African American—not entirely representative of the diversifying public, but edging closer.

The citizenry, for its part, was more racially and religiously complex than ever. Whites now accounted for less than three-quarters (72 per cent) of the population, Hispanics nearly 16 per cent, African Americans 13, Asians nearly 5, and American Indians less than one per cent (United States Census Bureau 2011).[[2]](#footnote-2) Christianity remained the top religious affiliation in the nation, but Mainline Protestants, the dominant group a century earlier, now comprised less than a fifth (15%) of citizens. White evangelical Protestant and Catholic voters each represented almost a quarter of the electorate, with Latinos becoming a growing and sometimes politically cross-cutting force within both communities. Members of African American churches, approximately 8% of the religiously affiliated, remained a potent political influence, mostly in Democrats’ favor. Mormons, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, and other religious minorities, each representing less than 3% of the population, registered their voices along different points on the ideological spectrum (Jones 2012, 7).[[3]](#footnote-3)

The degree and content of Americans’ religiosity had also shifted considerably in recent decades, the nation having become both less religious overall, and less straightforward in its religiosity. A mere 35 percent of Americans continued to identify with the churches or denominational traditions in which they were raised (Jones, 8-10). White Catholic and Mainline Protestant churches had seen steep drops in their membership rolls, while the religiously unaffiliated, or “nones,” were, at one-fifth of the population and one-third of adults under 30, becoming the fastest-growing segment in the population (Jones, 8; (Anonymous 2012; Putnam and Campbell 2010).[[4]](#footnote-4) Of religious adherents in 2012 only two in five attended church services weekly or more; most people showed up less than once a month (Putnam & Campbell, 27).[[5]](#footnote-5) Two of the top three *most* religious groups in the country, Mormons and Black Protestants, had produced presidential candidates. The third, white evangelicals, had been well represented in the Republican primaries and would remain, as they had since 1980, a crucial GOP constituency, albeit one whose total electoral weight was declining.

On one level, then, the candidates and context of the presidential race might have been interpreted as an era of dazzling (or perhaps dizzying) milestones. Neither African Americans nor Mormons had ever come close to occupying the executive office before Obama and Romney, Protestants had always dominated the Supreme Court, and “nones” were unheard of in the religious marketplace of earlier eras. But amidst these advancements for racial and religious minorities, public conversation about, much less open controversy over, the race or religion of the candidates was surprisingly scant.

This was curious. A black man with an African surname, who had been accused by conservatives prior to and during his first term of being an imposter of one kind or another, nevertheless occupied the world’s most powerful political office. A white, millionaire businessman, whose campaign had explicitly strategized to win through maximizing white votes, nipped at his heels. But both candidates largely avoided explicit discussions of race or race policy during the campaign, not just on the stump but also in interviews. President Obama’s blackness, the source for much discussion in 2008 about difference, was no longer referenced as particularly relevant to his capacity to do the job. Romney’s whiteness wasn’t a popular subject, either—at least until he lost.

The relative silence on religion was similarly odd. A member of one of the historically most stigmatized religious minorities had beat out all other GOP primary contenders to hold the mantle for the conservative party. Yet inquiry into the *content* of Mitt Romney’s religious beliefs was rarely engaged by the media, Democratic operatives, other politicians, or in the presidential debates. Despite much ink having been spilled on the subject of Romney’s religion during his 2007 run, in 2012 public explorations of what exactly Romney and other Mormons believed were rare, and Romney himself bristled against detailed inquiries made in political context. Side-by-side profiles of the candidates largely ignored theology and doctrine, focusing instead on faith as background extras, as it were—as if religion merely reflected a disposition, personal character, or activities that influenced each man’s social and moral worldview (Ravitz 2012; Anonymous 2012, 21-25; Gilgoff 2012).

It was as if little that bore importantly on the place of religion or race in the United States was happening. Instead, the public discussions focused on how the candidates would repair the nation’s economy, steer its foreign policy, improve the people’s flagging morale, or perform as presidential leaders. But could it be true that these matters no longer interested Americans? Had a less religious, more racially diverse nation somehow become so “tolerant” of racial and religious minorities, so divested from racial and religious power battles that had long impacted American political life that it couldn’t be piqued by milestones like a black president’s second term or a Mormon’s real chance at a first? Had the novelty worn off, the public having become more familiar over the years with both public figures? Or had it simply been a matter of the two men’s personalities, Romney and Obama both being politicians who publicly downplayed their differences from the mainstream throughout their political careers?

None of these questions can be answered with a definitive yes. Because for all their cultural diversity, Americans have rarely, if ever, incorporated racial and religious minorities into the political mainstream without a serious fight.

The relegation of race and religion to the muted background of the 2012 election was not a simple matter of American voters transcending their historical biases. Nor is it that Americans don’t care about at least some aspect(s) of religion and race. Many of them care ferociously, as poll data consistently demonstrate, and their concerns inform their political orientations.[[6]](#footnote-6) By such indicators the United States is neither in a post-religious nor a post-racial era. But in the ordinary ways Americans talk about social life, and in the ways public media now serve as interlocutors for such conversations, people’s attachments, anxieties, fears and conflicts about race and religion have become more opaque than they have been in earlier generations.

The nation’s apparent collective shrug over the unprecedented participation of religious and racial minorities in the upper echelons of political office in 2012 does not indicate a paradigmatic change in American political culture. Rather, the illusion of easy tolerance simply shrouds an old millstone still hanging around the nation’s neck: The incorporation of racial and religious minorities in the U.S. has always progressed unevenly, benefitted groups unequally, and advanced by erecting walls that disproportionately restricted—and still distinctly disadvantage—citizens who are *simultaneously* racial and religious minorities. Just as millstones grind grain through one stone cylinder rolling tightly against another, the wheel of religious liberty in America has always pressed hard against the wheel of race to produce the meal of the body politic. Despite the national myth of America as a land of unbroken, all-encompassing religious freedom, religious progress has always been knotted up with its racial regimes. In a political culture that today tends to elide, rather than openly engage, Americans’ ongoing conflicts over race and religion, this tension has been increasingly muted, forced underground in mainstream public discourse. Sometimes at the edges, however, simmering conflicts burst into the light, as when a Wisconsin Sikh temple was attacked a few months before the election.

We must think about religion and race intersectionally. Through that prism, we can see that rather than suddenly leaping forward, the needle of American consensus about race and religion has simply moved further in recent years along an old continuum of *contingent and uneven inclusion* of minorities. The miracle of American politics is that many formerly marginalized, even persecuted groups can eventually be incorporated into the center of the power apparatus. But progress always comes at a price: minorities must demonstrate allegiance to the structural and ideological norms of American politics—the civil sacraments, so to speak. Groups formerly designated as “other”, or at least some of their individual members, can be folded into the mainstream, but this typically entails that they vacate—or seem to vacate—the *substantive* *content* of their difference for the sake of public consumption. Despite the apparent accommodation to racial and religious diversity at the highest levels of elective office, American assimilationism only welcomes groundbreakers to the degree that they kowtow to the masses by reiterating a supposedly neutral standard of inclusion. As old “others” are integrated on these terms, new groups come to occupy the new boundary of threat, of difference that is imagined as too incommensurate with “Americanness” to be fully assimilated. And, as it has been since European settlers first dropped anchor, the hegemonic center tends to imagine the greatest danger to come from people who are racial and religious minorities at the same time.

Not only have the boundaries of racial and religious difference been policed in tandem, the very *categories* of race and religion in the U.S. have been constructed in relation to one another; ground together in the millstone. A look at the 2012 presidential election reveals how racial and religious hierarchies, norms, and expectations crafted long ago impacted dynamics between the candidates, and continue to influence the character of our public conversations about—and avoidance of—these challenging topics. The interwovenness of race and religion in the nation’s privileged ideals as well as its pathologies always shadows the civil sacraments through which the nation reproduces itself.

I develop the above argument via three related premises.

The first is that humans have always made meaning of the world through myths. On this point I follow Craig Prentiss (2003), who has written about “myth” in religious studies. In popular usage the term is frequently associated with falsehood. But studied in the context of human discourse (discourse defined here as spoken and symbolic communication that creates meaning and produces effects), myth emphasizes the ways stories are used in society to explain things. A myth is “a narrative that not only claims truth for itself but is also seen by a community as credible and authoritative” (4-5). Communities may understand the truth conveyed by a myth in literal or metaphorical terms, but what matters is that the story is received by members as authoritative, as “setting a paradigm for human behavior” (5).

Broadly, both race and religion themselves may be understood as operative myths guiding human thought, decision-making, and behavior. Although each had concrete and ubiquitous effects in the world and many people embrace them as concrete truths, religion and race are, at base, complex sets of ideas conveyed by stories. Those stories differ across communities, but both the cosmologies delivered by religion and the typologies delivered by the notion of race derive from epistemological frameworks through which humans seek to explain who they are, what they know, and how they *ought* to act. Race and religion may not be composed *entirely* of myths (though we know that biologically the term “race” has been considered scientifically meaningless since about the mid-1970s), but myths are certainly woven through them; indeed, are part of the way the categories function as real for people.

Second, as a result of the nation’s evolving history, race and religion are best understood as profoundly *interwoven*, co-constituted meaning-making categories in the United States, involving myths that often cross-pollinate. Put simply, each meaning system has profoundly influenced the other in historical time and political space. Therefore the categories, as well as the groups, institutions, and identities impacted by those categories, cannot neatly be peeled apart because they invariably blend together, in some measure or another, and often in complex ways. Especially with regard to their respective impact(s) on American political development (the long-term trajectories of our political values and institutions), neither religion nor race in America can be properly understood without some reference to the other. The entwined histories and ongoing legacies of race and religion, and their inevitable cross-fertilization with other major sociocultural attributes like gender, sexuality, and class continue to impact the lives and viewpoints of candidates, citizens, and noncitizen residents.

The third premise extends from the first two. Because race and religion, and many of their attendant myths, have been profoundly intertwined with American national identity itself, they are fundamentally, indeed almost *cellularly* embedded in citizens’ competing visions of the proper concerns of politics, often in unconscious ways. Guiding myths, like national identity itself, are reconfigured in different periods and contexts, but central to their power and efficacy is that people don’t tend to think of them as myths. Rather, we take them for granted as part of the way things are or should be. Therefore, all kinds of political issues—economic equality, mobility, and success; the ideal function(s) of government; the value of labor; notions of citizenship eligibility; the right to insure against job loss, poverty, age, and disability; childbearing, gender roles, and marriage; and even foreign policy—are so shot through with racial and religious ideological freight, that even if citizens do not identify *individually* with certain categories (like white or Christian), our orientations to many subjects are informed by those collective histories and the myths that run through them. Religion and race are so intricately—and intimately—constitutive of people’s orientations to national political life that they are best understood not so much as standalone political topics, subjects up for debate and discussion, but rather as built-in *filters* or *lenses* through which people often interpret, discern, argue, and judge, whether they realize it or not. Religion and race infuse political outlooks, party platforms, and the heavily coded language citizens use to express personal and group values.

Below, I delineate four specific aspects of race-religion intersectionality in the United States that help illuminate how, on one hand, the nation has progressively evolved with regard to faith and race (and ethnicity, which is related to both); and how, on the other, American political culture perpetuates conservative status quo patterns that have persisted since the founding. These can be summarized as: (1) the settler contract, wherein different groups were racialized partly through the vehicle of religion; (2) the racial inequality of religious freedom; (3) the pairing of religion and race in different group narratives of American belonging; and (4) minority race-religion intersectionality as a site of anxiety. In elaborating these, I employ examples from the Mormon and African American faith traditions, as well as others, to suggest how profoundly Romney and Obama, as public figures, reflect the distinct interwovenness of racial and religious histories, identities, and conceptual frameworks. A discussion of the implications of these dynamics on contemporary racial and religious minorities and on American political discourse more broadly concludes the essay.

1. White Settlers and Their God

The late Roy Harvey Pearce, a keen analyst of American colonists’ orientation to indigenous peoples, noted that for English settlers in North America,

order was a principle to be expressed in the progress and elevation of civilized men who, striving to imitate their God, would bring order to chaos. America was such a chaos, a new-found chaos. Her natural wealth was there for the taking, because it was there for the ordering. So were her natural men. (Pearce 1967 [1953], 4)

These lines capture a seventeenth century worldview that lodged in the bone marrow of the nation’s identity, reproducing itself in new variants over generations. European colonists, as the passage indicates, were also colonizers, and they depended on religious and racial conceptual frameworks to execute their mission. English (and also Spanish) settlers in the New World staked their territorial and political claims in the name of a religious worldview that, in its modern iteration, justified their dominion over the land’s original occupants and, later, over other “non-white” groups that arrived on America’s shores forcibly or voluntarily (Murphree 2004; Jordan 1974; Horsman 1981). Old and new knowledge systems combined in these efforts: Religious frames fueled white settlers’ convictions about identity and providence, and early modern scientific notions of race were later annexed onto them to explain who was endowed with rights and who wasn’t, where civic and political order lay, and who and what needed to be set in order by the chosen (Fredrickson 2002).

This is to say that meaning-making practices central to settler nation building have, from the start, had *interwoven* racial and religious schemas at their very core.[[7]](#footnote-7) As has by now been well documented, notions of human fitness, civilization, morality, cultural value, autonomy, and political legitimacy were profoundly informed in early-modern European societies by a combination of Western philosophical binaries (e.g., Greek/barbarian; citizen/slave; friend/foreigner) and Christian classifications of humanity (e.g., Christian/heathen; saved/condemned; pure/soiled) (Fredrickson 2002, Ch 1-2).Through the confluence of these dominant conceptual frameworks Jews, initially, were the first to be categorized even within Europe as implacably, biologically “other” to European Christians, at the level of blood. Skin color-based arguments were not far behind. When goodness is associated in biblical vocabulary with purity, angels, spirit, light, and white; and evil with darkness, devils, carnality, dirt, and blackness, it is not difficult for Europeans to project depredation onto darker-skinned and non-Christian peoples they encountered. The concept of race as a set of *indelible* characteristics distinguished modern racism from its antecedents in ethnocentrism and xenophobia (1-13).[[8]](#footnote-8)

As cross-cultural contact increased through the spread of European early capitalist empires, religious and Western rational epistemologies enabled Europeans to define themselves as superior to Africans, Native peoples in the New World, and others. European Christianity itself had been racialized over centuries: it was employed by architects of empire who, in pursuit of their own self-interest and subservient to their own fears of otherness, found ways to explain the “natural” inferiority of other human beings in ways that resonated with popular myths. Nervous colonists encountering whole continents occupied by these others confronted the need to justify their own right to remain, and as they did so their very *definition* of “civilized” came to depend on racially and religiously loaded notions of savagery applied to the *others inside*.[[9]](#footnote-9)The anchoring philosophies of the pre-revolutionary period, from John Winthrop through John Locke and Tom Paine, claimed that Europeans, defined in part through their Christianity, were the only peoples capable of exercising sovereignty and civil government in the Americas. Seeing Native peoples as living in something close to a state of nature, where Western modes of private property and agriculture did not exist, early Enlightenment philosophy and American settlers constructed a fiction of the land as *terra nullius*, legally empty (Pateman, 53-6). They imagined themselves as endorsed by God to transform both geographical and cultural space from a savage to a civilized state, through religion, laws, government, property, and “productive” agriculture.

The social contract conceived by white settlers in the U.S. to erect a democratic government is best understood, then, as fundamentally a racial and religious (and also deeply gendered) contract (Mills 1997; Pateman 2008, 35-78). Indeed, Europeans did not *become* white until they deemed themselves above others, who were, by early modern Europeans’ definition, unchristian, savage, heathen, “backward,” or all of the above. From that self-constructed standpoint of cultural superiority, war, conquest, religious conversion attempts, and eventually the full weight of the American political, economic, and legal systems could be leveraged against Natives to enforce dominant notions of national identity and mission (Tinker 1993; Jordan 1974; Jordan 1968).[[10]](#footnote-10) Though we can critique religious and racial essentialism in hindsight, it is hard to imagine European colonialism having produced different results. In a religious nation, with religiously infused myths like Manifest Destiny built into its early founding, religion was not a background factor but, rather, the primary lens through which settler Americans explained race and the power hierarchies organized around it.

This is not to suggest that Christianity *itself* mandated the persecution of groups not considered white in early colonial or any other historical contexts; culturally informed *interpretations* of scripture did. [[11]](#footnote-11) White supremacist Christians used notions of polygenesis (the theory that God chose one race over other inferior races he created), the story of the Curse of Ham, and other narratives to justify the forced employment of black slaves into a “mud sill class” at the socioeconomic bottom (Fredrickson 2002; Goldenberg 2005; Morone 2003).[[12]](#footnote-12) Of course, counter-readings of Christian social commandments did exist, and evangelical revivals generated by the Great Awakenings propelled notions of spiritual equality in the eyes of God. Some believers, like William Wilberforce and other radical abolitionists, challenged the racial taxonomies and resulting practices being justified in religious language by other Christians (Olson 2007, 685-701). Over time, African American Christianity became a critical countervailing tradition that challenged racism in white religious and political worldviews. Yet into the late nineteenth century even most white Christians who supported emancipation were Christian supremacists who believed that God had chosen them to promote and recruit people of color to a superior way of life (Morone 2003; Harvey 1997; Lincoln 1999). Few could tolerate full incorporation of freed blacks on a politically equal status.

Later on, emerging pseudo-scientific racial taxonomies were annexed onto religious frameworks, reinforcing, through Enlightenment epistemologies, American whites’ conceptualization of communities of like and not-like. Scientific “discoveries” about race—from early ethnology to environmental determinism to craniology—tended to coincide with what most whites had already been taught through religious myths. But as with all social schemas, racial conceptual apparatuses and their attendant political expressions were never firmly fixed. They fractured, collapsed, and were reconstructed in different ways over time. Beyond the colonial period American whites became white again and again in relationship to new, incoming or newly emancipated others that threatened contemporary definitions of whiteness. In different eras the dominant religious frameworks, whether definitively Protestant, as in the nineteenth century, or the broader Judeo-Christian tradition, in the twentieth, were leveraged to the interests at hand. But because white supremacist commitments were so often articulated *through* religious frameworks, thereby anchored within the consciousness of ordinary white citizens, they had a tendency reverberate over generations.

In sum, as a European settler nation founded in part as a haven for religious people, race, religion, and nation have been coarticulated in the United States from the beginning (Goldschmidt and McAlister 2004, 5). Religious narratives, such as the biblical idea of a chosen people, have contributed to the production of racial meaning itself–and fortunately also to the *contestation* of racial hierarchies by different groups (11). The development of American religion(s), then, is never a story that glides on its own track, but rather a testament to religious groups’ interactions with (among other social issues) the nation’s racial dilemmas, struggles, and ongoing tensions. It is impossible to identify where religion ended, if it ever did, and scientific rationalism began, or where the exact boundaries that define race, religion, and nation exist, because in this particular nation the lines are fundamentally blurred and in flux. Many of the United States’ deepest failures and signal accomplishments have occurred precisely where race and religion meet (Noll 2008). Because both factors have so thoroughly shaped Americans’ experiences of civic membership, moral values, and conceptions of the nation they must be understood as the profoundly interwoven elements they are.

2. Religious “Freedom” under White Supremacy

The second aspect of race-religion intersectionality that bears on the trajectory of American political life is the problem of religious freedom under a white racial order in which racism was codified in law and executed through both government policy and cultural practices (King and Smith 2005). Like freedom itself, religious freedom in the United States applied, for all intents and purposes, only to white Protestants until the twentieth century. Not all whites benefitted equally; religious minorities, such as Quakers in Pennsylvania or Baptists in Virginia, were subject to religious qualification laws and taxes supporting the dominant sect in their state. Such policies continued in most states long past the ratification of the national constitution (Waldman 2008; Gordon 2002, 77-8). But most of the European descendants who argued over and eventually wrote disestablishment and protection of religious freedom into the constitution never intended the law to encompass groups considered fundamentally barbarous, uncivilized, and unchristian—all terms conflated with non-whiteness in the U.S. In short, the modern idea of religious liberty as a universal natural right had a “silent but potent Protestant subtext” that, in combination with prevailing racial assumptions, effectively disenfranchised people of color of religious protections (Gordon, 82).

Thomas Jefferson illustrates the paradoxes enfolded in the unequal application of religious freedom. One of the great Enlightenment minds, the architect of the religious liberty clauses in the Virginia and U.S. Constitutions, and himself a Deist, Jefferson’s views on religion cut against the grain of many in the founding generation (Waldman 2008, 72-85). Where Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and other legislators wanted to insert mentions of Christian allegiance, God, and Christian moral law into framing documents like the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson voiced objections to such measures (Waldman, 87-93; Gordon,74). “The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others,” he famously wrote. “But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg” (Notes on State of VA, Query XVII). The religion clauses of the First Amendment were adopted into the Bill of Rights in 1791, after considerable argument and compromise, partly as a result of Jefferson’s agitation. But for 150 years the common understanding was that the First Amendment prevented only the federal government from interfering with local church/state relations, where some states had establishment cultures and some did not (Gordon 77-8). Constitutional protections under the Bill of Rights were not extended to all citizens over and above local (state-level) laws until 1947 under the doctrine of “incorporation” under the Fourteenth Amendment (Gordon, 77).

In the same document that he defended religious freedom, Jefferson described both the Native peoples of North America and the blacks brought to the colonies through slavery as mentally, physically, and culturally inferior to whites, despite having some admirable traits (Query XIV). While the Jeffersonian racial paradox is well known, the implications of racial exclusion alongside professed religious inclusion in the new nation are less often discussed. The protections granted to American citizens did not extend to the tribes Jefferson, as president, sent Christian missionaries to convert and whose land he commanded federal officers to reclaim, despite its protection under treaty (Jefferson 1803). Nor did religious rights extend to the hundreds of slaves he bought, held, sold, and never freed on his Virginia plantations, despite his stated objections to slavery as a political institution. Jefferson encapsulates the contradiction that modern racism developed *alongside* the radical premises of political liberty in the United States, not as an exception to it. In conceiving themselves as free and equal under universal law, democratic leaders wrote blacks, Indians, and others into their social contract as less than human exceptions, as unqualified to practice religious freedom as any other freedom (Fredrickson 11-12).

Legal historian Sarah Gordon (2002) notes that the Protestant subtext of religious protection under the constitution did not fully surface until battles over Mormon polygamy in the mid-nineteenth century forced federal authorities to clarify their legal reasoning for banning a religious practice. Through that struggle we see the way in which racially-loaded myths about what constituted “civilized” religious practices informed how far the American government was willing to extend the supposedly sacred value of religious freedom. Some white religious groups, it turned out, did not quite qualify as “civilized” unless they conformed to dominant Protestant codes of behavior, and if they refused to conform, the aspersions cast upon them carried racial overtones. Religious practices among nonwhite groups were automatically encoded, in these lines of reasoning, as barbarian. This point requires some review of early Mormon history.

Despite having been formed and anchored in the United States since 1830, for most of their history Mormons existed at the boundaries of national inclusion due to the religion’s unique scriptures, theology, and practices, including communal property-ownership and plural marriage. As peculiar religious others vis a vis American Protestantism, they were what Rudiger Heinze calls “liminal outsiders,” often existing in an in-between status, both “not-quite-other and too close to home” (Heinze 2009, 60-1). Mormons spent most of their first two decades running from angry mobs that wanted to do away with them. Towns in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois named them enemies and killed their leaders. Like many other settlers, Mormon pioneers saw the open Western land (which, of course, was never truly uninhabited) as a New Jerusalem, a Zion to a persecuted people called to fulfill a spiritual destiny on earth. In this context, it is not surprising that the Saints adopted a kind of ethnic minority identity based on customs, shared experience, resistance to the imposition of mainstream values, and genealogy (Murphy, 454).

Mormons’ endorsements of theocratic leadership and plural marriage in the Western territories ultimately rendered them unassimilable to the dominant culture—until they conformed on these measures (Mazur 1999). Mid-nineteenth century northern republicanism emphasized civic virtues and collective morality in the name of taming the unruly energies of a free citizenry, especially at the wild Western frontier (Slotkin 1985). Both the abolition and anti-polygamy movements were driven by fervent republican activists with the hard hand of the federal government behind them.[[13]](#footnote-13) In this climate, party leaders, jurisprudes, and legislators argued that “general Christianity” or notions of Protestant morality coded in Christian common law underlay American law. Once the federal government applied its muscle against Mormon polygamist practices, legal apologists representing the state quite un-self-consciously reasoned that religious liberty was contingent on observing certain religious norms. A civilized nation, they claimed, disestablishes church from state enabling citizens to exercise their free will in choosing religion rather than be tyrannized by religious governments. But civilized societies also practice monogamous marriage, voluntary labor, and domestic order understood in Protestant terms. Christianity, they asserted, *enables* political freedom; religious protection clauses are meaningless without it (75-6).

Mormons in Utah territory initially rejected receiving common law into Utah territorial law, in the name of protecting their religious practices under the constitution. Antipolygamists concluded that such dissent proved Mormons to be “barbarians” who rejected Christianity and civilization. Legislators and justices ultimately reiterated those views in the Morrill Act of 1862, which prohibited plural marriage in the territories, and disincorporated the Mormon Church.

“Double Condemnity”

Legal anti-polygamy rationale explicitly articulated the interlocking racial and religious assumptions folded into mainstream Protestantism. In the mid-1830s Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story, for instance, repudiated Jefferson’s religious pluralism (a pluralism which, as we have noted, never seemed to applicable to most people of color). Story argued that the goal of religious toleration was “to exclude rivalry among Christian sects,” not to “countenance, much less to advance, mohametanism [Islam], or Judaism, or infidelity, by prostrating Christianity” (Gordon, 75, f41). Republicans condemned Mormon plural marriage as not truly Christian, drawing on the Protestant argument that Old Testament polygamy was superseded by New Testament morality. Polygamy was “barbarism revolting to the civilized world,” as Justin Morrill put it (64). On this count, Mormons were placed at about the same level as Indian “savages” in terms of religious legitimacy.

These repudiations of religions deemed anti-Christian depended on racialized epistemologies. Categorization of some groups as uncivilized, barbarian, or non-Christian relative to Protestant standards implies the not-quite-whiteness of the stigmatized group, given that Europeans applied such terms to all people of color during empire expansion. As mentioned in section 1, racial inferiority was initially designated on the basis of religious criteria; indeed, claims of racial and religious inferiority were practically interchangeable. If Africans, Native peoples, or later Asians and Middle-Easterners observed non-Christian traditions, they were deemed pagan and, by definition, uncivilized, dangerous, and racially backward. Such practices permitted the forcible imposition of Christianity upon those groups, against all the constitutionally enshrined tenets of religious liberty. What we might call “double condemnity” of a group through race and religion simultaneously is precisely how political elites could write religious protections into the First Amendment and execute vicious displacement policies that disregarded tribes’ spiritual and cultural ties to land.

The implications of a lack of religious protection for groups categorized through double condemnity frameworks played out across the first century and a half of American history. African Americans and Native Americans especially, but also Asians, Middle-Easterners, and other groups labeled non-white were subject to persecutions *simultaneously* rooted in racial and religious ideology. In some instances the state was directly implicated in the oppression, as when the U.S. government contracted with churches to missionize Indian tribes, create English-only Indian schools, and divide the tasks of forced assimilation, effectively imposing the dominant religion on a minority group in violation of religious freedom (Tinker 1993). More often it simply stood aside, as when slaveholders forbade the practice of native African religions and Islam; churches barred blacks from participation or forced them to sit in the galleys; the Ku Klux Klan ran rampant murdering people in the name of Christian racial purity; or state Supreme Court justices decided they knew what “white” was when they saw it, and it didn’t encompass Hindus.[[14]](#footnote-14) The political state was slow to remedy religious persecution when it came to racial minorities because the cultural nation did not see racial minorities as benefitting from the same religious protections; the nation’s representatives in government more often than not endorsed normative Protestant values in a white supremacist racial order.

As Mormons discovered the hard way, even some white American religious minorities did not receive full protection of their religious practices if those practices conflicted in any serious ways with the dominant culture’s core worldview. However, if a group could access either inclusion into whiteness or formal protection of its religious difference under the law—and preferably both—it could win a meaningful measure of autonomy. But pathways to inclusion contingent on whiteness put white religious minorities far ahead of religious minorities of color far in terms of rights and recognition.

Jews provide a case in point. Although some Jewish immigrants were attracted to the possibility of greater religious freedom in America, their inclusion into the American body politic as religious equals was at best tentative, given that the racist frameworks Americans had inherited from Europe pivoted on the othering of Jews. With “Americanness” so strongly associated with white Protestant Christianity through most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Jews were, like Mormons, treated as suspicious others at best. An institutional effect of this was that the U.S. immigration apparatus at the turn of the nineteenth century classified incoming Jews as a distinct, nonwhite or not-fully-white racial group, based partly on their religious difference (Gordon 2012). After World War II, however, as the varieties of scientific racism practiced by Nazi Germany and culminating in the Holocaust were globally discredited, conditions changed. The specters of communism and fascism enabled the construction of new (outside) others, and the loosening of racialized framings of American national identity at home. Such shifts enabled Jewish religion and ethnicity to be decoupled from race, thereby allowing Jews to assimilate into whiteness. Active participants in the assimilation process, many Jews adapted their religious and cultural practices to conform to American ideals of religious-civic life, though, of course, not without encountering discrimination (Gordon 2012, 81; 95).

Other ethnic religious minorities followed a similar pattern. Mennonites, Swedenborgians, Amish, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, Christian Scientists, and other religious minorities of European descent certainly endured stigma and even outright persecution, and their associations were frequently questioned. But this was not because their religious differences effectively defined them as *racial* inferiors. These groups were often marked as peculiar ethnics—pre-modern, perhaps, obeisant to obscure traditions, bedecked in strange garb and religious accoutrements, even speaking other languages—and resented or lampooned for the accommodations they required from neighbors schools or state bureaucratic offices. But by *aligning with and having access to* *white identity*, these groups came under the umbrella of religious protection—or at least were able to take it a bit more for granted, whereas groups too firmly defined as both religious and racial outsiders (see section four) could never ascend to the full privileges of whiteness in America, and have thus had to fight the law for religious protections.

To summarize: In the United States, official policy on religious freedom before the law, and political practice have often been two different beasts. Far from guarding equal religious protection under the Constitution, the American government has sometimes violated religious freedom by using law. This is in part an *inevitable* result of the fact that groups marked as non-white never enjoyed the same culturally embedded recognition of basic value or constitutional protection that white religious minorities did. We turn now to a discussion of how religious groups, including and especially religious minorities, write their own explanatory narratives (myths) about race, and how they square them with the broader nation’s struggles over race.

3. Religious Minorities and Racial Myths

Given how profoundly the scar of racial inequality has imprinted American political development, it is unsurprising that many religious minorities developed distinctive mythologies to explain ubiquitous racial hierarchies in U.S. society. This mode of meaning-making, of inventing racial stories that run through particular faith systems, is a third dimension of race-religion intersectionality. Shifts in religious groups’ accounts of race provide further insight into how racial ideas, and histories become embedded in religious groups’ collective experience and sometimes political outlook.

Examples of this in the United States and its territories abound. The African American Christian tradition has its own rich reservoir of stories about chosen people seeking Exodus from a place of persecution, and the search for redemption in a promised land (Glaude 2003, 124-139; Glaude 2000; West 2003; Harvey 2005). The Nation of Islam offers its own distinct myth of how the American Negroes came to be, and this vision has informed the racial politics of its leaders (McCloud 2003, 101-123; Paden 2012). Whites in the Christian Identity Movement ascribe to a British Israelism, which teaches that white Europeans are descendants of the biblical Israelites, but modern Jews are not, and all non-Caucasians descended from pre-Adamic beasts (Barkun 1994).[[15]](#footnote-15) Sometimes even members of a minority group marginalized *within* a religion will challenge that religion’s ethnological myths by drawing on different cultural resources to produce alternate interpretations of scripture and doctrine, thereby opening horizons for their group (Murphy 1999). The Mormon iteration of this is instructive.

“White and Delightsome”

The mythic resources available to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints gave them a distinctive means for “interpreting, reinforcing, and reformulating social barriers stemming from racial ideology” (Prentiss 2003, 136). Through sacred texts, church doctrines, and the statements of their prophets, Mormons developed a complex myth system that explained for adherents why Native Americans, on one hand, and American blacks, on the other, had lower social status than whites within and outside the church. However, Mormons also believe in ongoing prophecies and revelations handed down by God to the highest church elites, which makes their doctrine somewhat malleable. Between social changes brought about by the civil rights movement, inside pressures for the church to reconsider some of its interpretations of scripture, and new revelations, Mormons eventually adjusted some of their racial mythologies to the realities of a more racially egalitarian society. Religiously indoctrinated biases, however, can take generations to evolve.

The Book of Mormon offers a geographical origin story chronicling a mythic, centuries-long conflict in North America in which skin color featured prominently. The story involves two brothers, Nephi and Laman, both alleged descendants of the biblical Joseph. After their father, Lehi, built a ship and sailed the family from ancient Israel to North America, the family merged with other recent Israelite arrivals in the Americas and built a thriving civilization. At one point, however, God punished the descendants of Laman (Lamanites) for rebelliousness. The curse was “removal of the Spirit of God” and dark skin to identify them.[[16]](#footnote-16) God commanded, says Mormon scripture, that they would remain “loathsome” unto the light-skinned Nephis until they repented, and Nephis who intermixed with them would also be cursed (Prentiss, 128; Murphy 455-61). These curses were apparently variable, however, because different verses in the Book of Mormon describe individual Lamanite groups who repented of sin and were freed from the curse during their lifetime (Alma 23:18; 3 Nephi 2: 15-16).

Through this ethnology Mormon religion explained Lamanites to be the ancestors of the Native tribes these nineteenth century Mormon migrants encountered as they sought a geographic home. Note that Mormon racial myths reinforced existing mythologies of whiteness in the larger American Christian culture: notions that existing hierarchies made sense; that Indians’ skin color was a sign of inferiority; and that Indians were “idle” and sinful people, excluded from God’s favor. However, because the Mormon origin myth prophesies that Lamanites would be restored by God during Christ’s second coming and their skin made once again “white and delightsome,” Mormons felt great incentives to missionize Native Americans. Indeed, the church invested much energy indoctrinating them into Euro-American economic and cultural practices, thereby also helping fulfill the racialized hegemonic project of assimilation *through* religion in the nation writ large. Indians, in a sense, were written into Mormons’ religious past, present, and future—second-class people today but equal in a utopian millennial future.

Partly because their religious mythos gave them an ongoing sense of connection (albeit paternalistic) to Indians, whose souls they wanted to win, early Saints may have been less hostile to the tribes they encountered than other groups were. This made neighboring whites suspicious. They accused Mormons of conspiring with Indians to rebel against the U.S. government (Prentiss, 130). The ironies here are hard to escape: while Mormons had constructed a set of racial myths that raised themselves above Native Americans (at least in the short-term), any kind of cross-racial outreach the majority culture perceived as threatening the social hierarchies entailed in westward expansion reinforced images of white Mormons as *conspiring* with racially suspicious outliers.

Mormons’ historical relationship to African Americans suggests a similar syncretism between dominant cultural values and the unique mythological structures of Mormonism. As with the Indian question, the church paired popular racial myths in the larger culture with its own theological twists. Mormon theology included two other curses against blacks: 1) They were made “black” by God as a result of their alleged descent from Cain, the murderous brother of Abel; and 2) their different skin color was punishment for not having behaved bravely in a heavenly battle in the premortal existence over the appointment of Jesus as savior (Prentiss, 134-5).

But considered over the whole of its history, the church demonstrated a degree of ambivalence about blacks. On one hand, Joseph Smith wrote items into the original Doctrine and Covenants as early as 1833 rejecting slavery (Section 101: 79-80). Both he and Brigham Young argued at different points in their careers that slaves should ultimately be freed. In the midst of an 1843 presidential run a year before his assassination Smith said he favored abolition (Prentiss, 132). Yet Mormon leaders including Smith and Young (the latter being more explicit in his anti-black views) publicly reiterated the standard nineteenth century biblical justifications for black subordination, such as the Curse of Ham theory and notions of slavery as compatible with Christianity.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Despite such a discouraging portrait of dark-skinned people’s plight, early Mormons were also accused of conspiring with abolitionists and blacks to foment slave rebellion. Yet Smith and others disagreed with abolitionist’s strategies, taking the milquetoast position that it was best to uphold existing pro-slavery laws until God chose to remove “the curse” on blacks.[[18]](#footnote-18) Leaders of Utah territory even allowed southern Mormon slaveholders into the territory, and Young legalized it in 1852—hardly abolitionist positions—though few Mormons owned slaves. (Slavery was abolished in the territory when the U.S. Congress outlawed it in 1862.)

Early on in the Church, there was actually no restriction on black men entering the priesthood. (There are two levels of priesthood in the highly patriarchal LDS church; both allow only males.) In fact, two African Americans, Walker Lewis, about whom little is known, and Elijah Abel were admitted to the priesthood in Joseph Smith’s lifetime. Abel was a friend of Smith’s and by 1836 was—astonishingly, given attitudes at the time—selected to the second-highest governing body in the church, the Quorum of Seventy (Prentiss 133). For most of the church’s history blacks, like Indians, could join the church and were believed able to be admitted to the Celestial Kingdom (afterlife) as good penitents. The racial prejudice these converts were met with in churches varied, but blacks did constitute a visible minority within the religion.

However, from about 1849 under Young’s presidency until 1978, blacks were formally banned from joining the priesthood. This meant that they could not have a temple marriage, the ordinance that contracts Mormons into celestial marriage, which adherents believe is a permanent, heavenly union. Too, mixed marriages were highly discouraged (though there was no written ban), and descendants of mixed marriage were likewise banned from joining the priesthood, justified primarily on views that the curse on blacks prevented full inclusion. In line with the church’s institutional ambivalence, however, a number of major Mormon leaders seemed to hold out the possibility of a religious loophole for observant blacks: Smith, Young, Woodruff, and other presidents taught that these blacks would receive full glory in the celestial kingdom despite not attaining priesthood on earth. Beyond the slavery questions, the journey to including African Americans as full members of the church was anything but linear.

There is some disagreement about why the ban on blacks in the priesthood was ultimately lifted. Some maintain that it was a result of pressure influenced by the civil rights movement, others that it was because the policy restricted temple-building efforts in Brazil where blacks constituted the majority. Either way, a fresh revelation (the Revelation on Priesthood) in 1978 enabled church leaders to finally lift the ban.[[19]](#footnote-19) The statement suggested that believers had long been praying for it and God finally answered:

Aware of the promises made by the prophets and presidents of the Church who have preceded us that at some time, in God's eternal plan, all of our brethren who are worthy may receive the priesthood, and witnessing the faithfulness of those from whom the priesthood has been withheld, we have pleaded long and earnestly in behalf of these, our faithful brethren, spending many hours in the Upper Room of the Temple supplicating the Lord for divine guidance.

He has heard our prayers, and by revelation has confirmed that the long-promised day has come when every faithful, worthy man in the Church may receive the holy priesthood, with power to exercise its divine authority, and enjoy with his loved ones every blessing that flows there from, including the blessings of the temple. Accordingly, all worthy male members of the Church may be ordained to the priesthood without regard for race or color.[[20]](#footnote-20)

After the statement, some church leaders opined that the racial views and statements of earlier church leaders no longer mattered.[[21]](#footnote-21) The past, in effect, had been wiped clean by the revelation. Unlike other Christian denominations that entered into apology and reconciliation processes to address racism in their past, LDS church leaders have issued no apologies (Alumkal 2012; Wadsworth 2013). The church now claims a growing member of blacks and others of color in its ranks—indeed, it is one of the world’s fastest-growing religions, in no small part through its evangelism enterprises in the Third World—and officially discourages racial prejudice among its members.

These details about the LDS church’s racial history illustrate a number of points that bear on American political life more broadly. The Mormon experience reminds us, first, that most religious groups in the United States possess, whether in the folds of their doctrine, theology, or just in their day-to-day practices, some means of explaining to themselves and their children how racial categorizations and hierarchies work and what, if anything, those hierarchies have to do with the God(s) they worship. Religious myths are compelling ways of delivering such explanations, being authorized by the sacred texts. But as social and political circumstances shift, so can those stories morph, disappear, and reappear in different forms over time, as has been the case with Mormon theology. Other white-majority groups, including Southern Baptists, Mennonites, Pentecostals, Methodists, Quakers, Jews, and Catholics have also had to grapple with what their religions once taught about people of different races and ethnicities, and how to address that past and move forward.

Much more difficult than changing church doctrine or policy, however, can be transforming internalized attitudes. For instance, just because the Southern Baptist Convention in 1995 formally apologized in considerable detail for its support of slavery does not mean that embedded prejudices impacting the outlook of its members were instantly dissolved.[[22]](#footnote-22) White racial privilege is an especially difficult condition to shake, being almost cellularly internalized, but also intertwined in the U.S. with the nation’s own civil religion (Bellah 1975). The groups with the most political, religious, and cultural power for a very long time saw themselves as white, and saw whiteness as a natural and even religiously valid status. Through this worldview, people of color were regarded as outsiders at best. Even white religious minorities—perhaps *especially* they, because their social status was usually vulnerable—gravitated to myths that situated themselves as racial superiors rather than finding identification and solidarity with their persecuted brethren of color.[[23]](#footnote-23)

4. Fear of the Religious Racial Other

Fortunately, both Christianity and liberal-democratic philosophy contain strong enough egalitarian ideals through which proponents of greater racial and religious equality could work to expand the boundaries of inclusion. As the sphere of religious diversity widened over generations beyond normative Protestantism to incorporate Jews, Catholics, and non-traditional Christians like Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons, eventually others outside the Judeo-Christian milieu were able to access a more racially diverse religious pluralism (Eck 2002).

Even so, where religious minorities also happen to be racial minorities, considerable anxiety has remained. On one side, the U.S. political system’s relationship to Native Americans, whose traditional cosmologies juxtapose Western orientations toward space, land, and time, is perpetually anxious and never finished (Mazur 1999; Tinker 2004; Klein 2012). On another, new immigrants continue to raise the specter of a difference too radical to integrate. If the hegemonic, white Protestant center was always nervous about European religious minorities coded as not-quite-white, it was outright paranoid about Chinese, Japanese, Hindus, Muslims, Afro-Caribbean groups, and others. The existence of Chinese laborers in the 19th century, for example, inspired fury over threats to slavery and the existing racialized order, fueling claims of “coolies’” perpetual, unintegratable foreignness. The Chinese, many whites feared, were “a pagan nation,” which “would eventually supersede…Christian influences” (Jacobson and Wadsworth, 7). Consistent with the double condemnity that conflated and denigrated religious and racial otherness, the very terms Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh, like the term Chinese, translated in a white power structure as simultaneously racial and religious designations.

These sites of anxiety persist today, albeit in more coded forms. From the perspective of American racial and religious history, is hard to imagine a political figure that could fray the nation’s nerves as much as Barack Hussein Obama and still become president. But, as is perhaps true with all groundbreakers in American political life, part of Obama’s genius is his skill in narrating his own presence as epitomizing the victory of deeply held American ideals like equality, diversity, and success against all odds. Positioning himself in both his presidential campaigns as a synthesizer of the nation’s competing values, eager to unite diverse citizens under common goals, Obama contributed deftly to the ongoing construction of national myths. Mitt Romney also, though differently, drew from and retold the nation’s meaning-making stories to make sense of his presence in politics. A comparison of how the intersectionality of race and religion reverberated differently across the two men’s candidacies illustrates the milestones and millstones of the histories we have covered thus far.

The hazing process that Obama has endured, both as a presidential candidate and as president, pivoted on the interplay of religion and race as testing sites for what we might call culturally protectionist interests within the American polity. Concocting one public trial after another, the forces of racially and religiously normativity—of white and Judeo-Christian identities positioned as the normative standards of “Americanness”—reiterated the tenacity of these attachments. Obama endeavored, mostly successfully, to rise above them, but in doing so he had to navigate a delicate dance.

First was the matter of Obama’s association with his former Chicago pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, a community leader who tapped into the long tradition of black theology and dared to critique the impact of American policies on oppressed peoples. In Obama’s now-famous speech on race in Philadelphia in March, 2008, he attempted to address the underlying fears expressed through the frenzy over Wright, while distancing himself from Wright and some of the pastor’s positions.[[24]](#footnote-24) Before the Wright spectacle died down, Obama faced another wave of accusations from the birther movement, which alleged that he was born outside the United States and therefore ineligible for the presidency. This movement spread from extremist groups into the center of the GOP candidate field during Obama’s first term. Then in 2010, protesters objecting to the siting of an Islamic cultural center near the former World Trade Center baited the president to position himself as a leader who could understand the violation an Islamic presence near one of the 9/11 terrorist attack sites might be to patriotic Americans. These initiatives made their mark: By 2010, accusations of Obama’s racial and/or religious otherness (for they are inseparable in his person) had gained enough traction that almost 1 in 5 Americans reported that they thought he was Muslim, and less than 35% could identify him as Christian (Pew Forum 2010.)

Obama’s blackness, especially the variant of his father having been a Kenyan Muslim, rendered him vulnerable to charges of outsiderness in a way no American-born white person could conceivably be. But, given the historical millstone of race-religion intersectionality, accusations of his otherness never travel simply through race alone, especially when overt racism is much less viable in mainstream political parlance. Rather, claims of *religious* otherness provide a way for his detractors to imply that he exists somehow outside the American cultural and political consensus, without appealing to racist frames. This is how Obama could be quite successfully framed as a Muslim, implicitly in cahoots with the most suspicious religious and racial outsiders—terrorists, America’s “enemies”—while simultaneously being accused of being the wrong kind of Christian, an overly *black* Christian, conspiring with dangerous dissidents to damage America’s reputation. Obama’s racial difference articulated with many Americans’ fears about his potential religious difference, and vice versa, ad infinitum.

So far, Obama has navigated the onslaught of accusations of otherness through a number of strategies, each constrained by the fact that he has risen, against such overwhelming odds, to the highest office in the United States and therefore has to represent the populace at the widest level possible. First, he distances from the particularity of his difference as far as he can without drawing the wrath of key segments of his base (such as the African American community), by highlighting the elements of his identity that are more familiar to mainstream Americans. Such strategies include drawing on anecdotes about his white, Midwestern grandparents and mother in greater detail than his Luo father, or emphasizing the personal “faith walk” of his Christianity over the fact that he was initially drawn to the black church for its combination of faith and community (as he notes in his first biography). He also appeals to the diversity framing of America, as “the only place,” as he tells it, where his story would have been possible; where people once treated as outsiders can eventually be incorporated into *e Pluribus Unum*. Too, he and his leadership teams have consistently invited representatives of evangelical Christianity—the religion of the American heartland—to serve as spiritual guides, participate in dialogues, and play a visible role in public ceremonies.

These are all modes of accommodation to American mainstream racial and religious standards, and many on the left have criticized Obama for not situating himself more clearly as an advocate for the marginalized. But it is hard to imagine the first African American president (the son of an African, no less, who spent years of his childhood in Muslim Indonesia) doing otherwise and remaining in office. Compared with white officials, Barack Obama has been ill-positioned to condemn anti-Muslim or racist sentiments in substantive terms; he, too, is easily cast as an enemy or conspirator in reactionary, “pro-America” frames. Indeed, the previous president George W. Bush’s repudiations of anti-Muslim attitudes in the wake of 9/11 were received entirely differently. As an outspoken evangelical and a white Texan, Bush was not constantly accused of suspicious otherness.

In contrast to Obama, Mitt Romney didn’t have to bend over backward to appeal to the white, Judeo-Christian American mainstream. As a handsome, wealthy businessman descended from a long line of prominent Republican civil servants, Romney did not need to heavily downplay anything about himself in order to win recognition as a true American—except in the arena of religion. In addressing this difference he followed the similar trajectory that Obama and many other minorities have chosen, of minimizing his distinctiveness and appealing to familiarity in order to present an unthreatening image. Exemplifying this was his 2007 speech on religion.[[25]](#footnote-25) Patterned after Kennedy’s remarks in 1960, Romney’s speech reiterated that his candidacy was not defined by his religion; that church authority would never trump the presidential office; that he valued religious, racial, and ethnic diversity; and that his faith is primarily a personal spiritual resource, not reflective of obedience to an ecclesiastical authority. Romney also argued that asking a candidate to elaborate on the content of his religious beliefs amounted to the very kind of “religious test the founders prohibited in the constitution.”[[26]](#footnote-26) It followed from the 2007 speech that Romney’s go-to line in the 2012 campaign was that he was “an American running for president, not a Mormon running for president,” and when pushed on questions of Mormon theology (which was rare), he tended to respond angrily.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Relative to Obama as his political adversary, in some instances Romney rejected the race-baiting tactics of others in the GOP. When a Republican Political Action Committee in 2012 suggested reigniting interest in President Obama’s associations with Wright, Romney repudiated this strategy as well as ongoing birther accusations, calling them distractions from a necessary focus on jobs and the economy.[[28]](#footnote-28) Such public distancing from racism enabled Romney to navigate around the millstones of race-religion intersectionality on several registers. Appearing to reject racial prejudice, he aligned himself with his father George Romney’s racial progressivism within an earlier version of the Republican Party. But employing the language of color-blind policy frames that, for example, emphasized economics over social policy, Mitt also attempted to replace the narrowly racial (i.e., overwhelmingly white) identity politics of his party’s conservative wing with more universal, cross-cultural appeals.

Perhaps more cleverly, by signaling a refusal to play a Republican race card that had been fairly effective for Republicans in the past, Romney lessened the chances that people would inquire into his own religious tradition’s race history. Romney benefitted from and hid behind the constitutional protection of religious identities by claiming repeatedly that it was inappropriate for people to ask him to specify the content of religious beliefs. In this respect, religious difference, especially for whites, has enjoyed greater protection in the U.S. than racial difference—which is why Romney would never receive as much scrutiny as a candidate like Obama. Very few journalists had the gumption to probe deeply into Mormon beliefs or history, but the flipside is that most Americans seem to subscribe to a consensus that it is unseemly to do so. Moreover, because there are so few white religious denominations that don’t themselves have a sullied racial history, to pursue Mormons’ racially unpleasant past would risk pulling the race-neutral veil off nearly all American religious traditions.

Even as he tried to avoid “playing race,” Governor Romney sometimes gave himself—or at least his racial privilege—away. In September, as the debates drew near, Romney was caught on tape at a GOP fundraiser joking that he was not born in Mexico, but if his father had been born of Mexican parents he’d “have a better shot of winning this” because “it would be helpful to be Latino”.[[29]](#footnote-29) Romney framed his whiteness, in essence, as a political deficit. This was the same event at which Romney made derogatory comments about the so-called “47 percent” of Americans who don’t pay income taxes—highly racially loaded comments that would come back to haunt him when he lost the election. Granted, Romney’s cracks could be read as self-deprecating concessions about his difficulty appealing to voters of color who, along with women and young people, did in the end help him lose the election. But they also expressed the hubris of white and class privilege—also legacies of the millstone of race-religion intersectionality. In the wake of his loss, Romney all but doubled-down on his views, stating that too many Americans obviously were “takers” who “sought gifts” from an easy-spending Democratic “Santa Claus” president in league with (implicitly undeserving) poor people and racial minorities. Along with many in the GOP, he retreated to a position of racial resentment, while his religious difference and, indeed, the story of what might have been for Mormons had he won, faded into irrelevance.

If we tug a racial thread in the tapestry of American political history, we will invariably discover religious threads tangled around it. Likewise, the nation can never disentangle its religious history from the legacies of a deeply racialized nation. As a Western colonial outpost settled by religious people, race was a major subtext of the American social contract itself, and dominant religion one among many administrators of the American racial order. As a result of those fundamentally intersectional dynamics, religious racial minorities were always doubly or trebly disadvantaged. With success so highly leveraged to race, even white religious minorities found ways to reproduce white supremacy in their own religious meaning-making systems. As a result, every religious group that has moved out from under the legacies of racism has had to dismantle the old racial myths woven into its history. Conversely, where race never recedes for people of color, while race and religion can be reduced to irrelevant background issues for whites by virtue of privilege.

Even in 2012, the bang and grind of America’s millstone still echoes across time, though we sometimes have trouble hearing it. The good news is that there are milestones. Despite all the charges of otherness hurled at him, a progressive African American president with a Muslim name managed to get reelected. And the candidate whose party tried to mobilize all the old religious and racial anxieties in the book to win, was handily defeated by an electorate in which “minorities” have increasing influence and numbers. To earn credibility, however, the president, like all religious and racial minorities before him seeking access to the mainstream, has had to scale down his difference and align with the mythic neutrality of a supposedly inclusive nation. As commentator Ta-Nahesi Coates put it, the irony of Barack Obama is that “he has become the most successful black politician in America by avoiding the radioactive racial issues of yesteryear, by being “clean” (as Joe Biden once labeled him)—and yet his indelible blackness irradiates everything he touches”.[[30]](#footnote-30) The risk of this draw of the falsely neutral center is that ongoing inequalities—racial, religious, class-based and otherwise—will not be addressed, because to do so meaningfully is both culturally and structurally difficult. To understand any of this, and to advance beyond it, we must understand the deeply intersectional realities of race and religion in American political life.

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1. It should be noted that George Romney’s foreign birth read much less controversially when he ran for president, nor did it cast Mitt’s own citizenship into question. Also rarely discussed during the election is that both candidates’ grandfathers, and Obama’s father, a Luo tribesman, practiced polygamy. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. With more Americans, especially Hispanics and Asians, counting themselves as mixed-race in the census, some racial categories were growing rapidly. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Non-Christian faiths represent about 6% of the adult population (Jones 2012, 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It should be noted that only a percentage of nones (under 5% of the U.S. population, according to the Pew numbers) explicitly identify as atheist or agnostic; others simply identify as “nothing in particular” or believing in God but having no religious affiliation. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Degree of religiosity is typically identified by several measures, including church attendance, devotional practices (e.g. prayer), level of conviction, and religious orthodoxy. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Between 2000 and 2004 the percentage of Americans who said it is important for the president to have strong religious beliefs hovered at 70%. In 2012 it was about 67% overall, and 81% of Republicans. About the same percentages disagree with churches endorsing particular candidates, however. See (Anonymous2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For an excellent discussion of religion as a form of meaning-making in political contexts see (Wedeen 2002, 713-728; Wedeen 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A racist attitude or ideology can be said to exist “when differences that might otherwise be considered ethnocultural are regarded as innate, indelible, and unchangeable. [Racism] finds its clearest expression when the kind of ethnic differences that are firmly rooted in language, customs, and kinship are overridden in the name of an imagined collectivity based on pigmentation, as in white supremacy, or on a linguistically based myth of remote descent from a superior race, as in Aryanism…It either directly sustains or proposes to establish *a racial order*, a permanent group hierarchy that is believed to reflect the laws of nature or the decrees of God.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Pearce (1965 edition) began *Savagism and Civilization* with the definitions of civilization, savage, and savagism from Noah Webster’s 1828 American dictionary. The definitions are profoundly tautological: “Civilization, n. The act of civilizing, or the state of being civilized; the state of being refined in manners, from the grossness of savage life, and improved in arts and learning. Savage, n. A human being in his native state of rudeness, one who is untaught, uncivilized, or without cultivation of mind or manners…” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Of course there were minority notions of New World community that approached Indians somewhat differently, as in the case of Quakers and some emergent Protestant denominations, but they rarely entertained notions of full political equality across race and, at any rate, were generally marginalized in the debates that led to founding. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Drawing on the work of historian Paul Harvey, I argue elsewhere that there are three main “religious racial traditions” that have existed in tension in the United States: (1) theological racism (in which religion is employed to justify racial hierarchy); (2) religious racial justice (e.g., the black church and other faith-based racial justice movements); and (3) racial interchange (moments of cross-racial interaction at the cultural level). See (Wadsworth 2008b) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The Curse of Ham drew from a passage in Genesis (9: 20-27) to hold that Canaan, one of the sons of Noah, and his descendants were cursed by God as a result of Canaan having seen his father drunk and naked. Many white Americans, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries, read the story to justify enslavement and persecution of people of black ancestry, seen to have been “marked” with darker skin. See also (Daly 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Gordon studies how republican energies geared toward abolishing slavery and plural marriage were fueled by intersecting norms governing race, gender, and family structure. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind, 261 U.S. 204, 1923. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This is not to equate a virulently racist movement like Christian Identity with American black religious traditions, but to suggest how varied religion-based racial myths can be. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The key passage in 2 Nephi reads “For behold, they had hardened their hearts against [the Lord], that they had become like unto flint; wherefore as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them.” Quoted in Prentiss 2003, 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Young, for example, repeatedly underscored the idea that blacks were cursed in various ways by God. But he also taught that “The Lamanites or Indians are just as much the children of our Father and God as we are. So also are the Africans” (Journal of Discourses Volumes 11-12). A pro-Mormon commentary piece that contains interesting transcripts and interviews with Smith and Young addressing race questions can be found at <http://www.mtgriffith.com/web_documents/earlyldsviews.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. In 1835, the church issued an official statement indicating that because the [United States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States) government allowed slavery, the church would not "interfere with bond-servants, neither preach the gospel to, nor baptize them contrary to the will and wish of their masters, nor meddle with or influence them in the least to cause them to be dissatisfied with their situations in this life, thereby jeopardizing the lives of men" (D&C [Section 134:12](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Doctrine_and_Covenants/Section_134#12)). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The Wikipedia entry on Black People and Mormonism is quite well-organized and –researched, and especially helpful for non-experts. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_people_and_early_Mormonism> Last accessed November 29, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For the full statement, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1978_Revelation_on_Priesthood> [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. [McConkie, Bruce R.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bruce_R._McConkie) (August 18, 1978). All Are Alike Unto God (Speech). A Symposium on the Book of Mormon, The Second Annual Church Educational System Religious Educator's Symposium. BYU, as found in: McConkie, Bruce R. (2006), I believe: a retrospective of twelve firesides and devotionals, Brigham Young University, 1973-1985, Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amresolution.asp?id=899 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For more on the ways in which white Americans have used race privilege to avoid cross-class alliances that could challenge economic and other power structures see (DuBois 1903; Roediger 1991; Lott 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Barack Obama, “A More Perfect Union,” Philadelphia Constitution Center. For a transcript see <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/03/18/obama-race-speech-read-th_n_92077.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. December 6, 2007. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16969460> [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. This is not to suggest that Mr. Romney entirely overlooked the unequal application of freedom, religious and otherwise, to Americans of color. His speech made mention of religious intolerance, abolition, and civil rights. He also noted that his father, George Romney, who was a true racial progressive among his generation of Republican office holders, had marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1112/83310.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/05/17/romney-campaign-rejects-using-the-rev-jeremiah-wright-against-obama/ [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/17/mitt-romney-helpful-to-be-latino\_n\_1891359.html [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)