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Q & A: NPR's Michel Martin on Shirley Sherrod

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Distinctly Catholic

This week at Q & A, we will be looking at the controversy surrounding the video, firing, and apologies directed at Shirley Sherrod, the Agriculture Department employee who spoke so movingly about the need to move beyond race, only to have her words distorted by a rightwing blogger. Our first interviewee is National Public Radio's Michel Martin, host of the show "Tell Me More."

The question: What does the Shirley Sherrod episode tell us about race and politics in America in the age of Obama?

Michel Martin:

In one sense the Shirley Sherrod story is quite simple: a right wing activist with an axe to grind was looking for something--anything---with which to slice and dice the Obama administration. But it is also revealing on any number of other levels--race, politics, media, generational politics even. It shows the current hypersensitivity of the Obama administration to any suggestion that it is either predisposed toward minorities, especially black people, or not interested in the concerns of whites. (And, to be fair, maybe that hypersensitivity is understandable given that the administration in general and Mr. Obama in particular has been hammered repeatedly on this point, even to the point of absurdity, like being criticized as "anti white" by the right wing talk show personality Glenn Beck.) It's also about generational politics; it was interesting to me how quickly Ben Jealous, the youngest NAACP leader in the organization's 100 year history, was willing to denounce Shirley Sherrod even when he didn't have all the facts. While it was refreshing to see an African-American leader depart from the lockstep defense of any and all conduct by an African-American, the incident also shows why so many African-Americans DO reflexively defend each other: Sometimes, even if you are paranoid, somebody really is out to get you.

But that's not what I wanted to talk about.

What was most surprising to me was how it demonstrates again how many Americans have no familiarity with the language of religious testimony. It was Jimmy Carter all over again. People who follow politics

and/or who are of a certain age remember how Carter was ridiculed by the secular press for talking about "lusting in his heart". He was talking about how sin can be casual, and there is a need to be vigilant against even casual sin, and to take it seriously. But for some reason many people didn't get that. And Shirley Sherrod was talking about the transformative power of faith. It was a testimony. And even though the conservative movement often positions itself as opposed to the godless secularists, somehow this point got missed. Strangely it was even evident in the edited version that Andrew Breitbart chose to put up on Youtube. Sherrod was talking about being redeemed. It is curious that in an overwhelmingly Christian nation, so many did not know what or who she was talking about.

Tomorrow's Interviewee: Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, Director of Media Relation at the USCCB

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