



O'Reilly Said Harlem Restaurant Is 'Respectful'

O'Reilly Expressed Surprise There Was No 'Craziness' Among Patrons

By SUSAN DONALDSON JAMES

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It wasn't the first time a comment by Bill O'Reilly attracted a firestorm.

The talk show host's seemingly flattering comments about a famous black-run restaurant in Harlem illustrate his ignorance of black culture, some black leaders and scholars say.

"I couldn't get over the fact that there was no difference between Sylvia's restaurant and any other restaurant in New York City," said O'Reilly on the Sept. 19 edition of his nationally syndicated radio show.

"There wasn't one person in Sylvia's who [was] screaming, 'M-Fer was, I want more iced tea,'" he told National Public Radio's Juan Williams. "[It] was like going into an Italian restaurant in an all-white suburb in the sense of people were sitting there, and they were ordering and having fun. And there wasn't any kind of craziness at all."

Sylvia's has been serving soul food in Harlem since 1962. Its founders, Sylvia and Herbert Woods, are fixtures in the black community. For decades, the restaurant has been a regular campaign stop for presidential candidates.

The last time a radio talk show host uttered racially charged comments, he was fired.

CBS took shock jock Don Imus off the air after an uproar in the spring when he called the Rutgers women's basketball team "nappy-headed hos."

The Rev. Al Sharpton, who had shared that dinner in Harlem with O'Reilly, said at the time of Imus' firing, "We cannot afford a precedent established that the airways can commercialize and mainstream sexism and racism."

Sharpton said through a spokesman that he was "surprised" at O'Reilly's remarks and will confront the host on his television show tonight.

"Nothing Mr. O'Reilly said at the dinner itself was offensive," said Sharpton spokeswoman Rachel Noerdlinger.

Fox News Channel's Bill Shine told Newsday the flap is "& nothing more than left-wing outlets stirring up false racism accusations for ratings."

O'Reilly is not necessarily a racist, according to law professor Anita L. Allen, of the University of Pennsylvania, who has studied and written on race relations. Rather, she told ABC News, he is ignorant, the product of a still-segregated country where black and whites seldom socialize.

'We Do Use Table Napkins'

Allen, who is black, said O'Reilly "doesn't realize dinner can be a civilized affair and we do use table napkins."

"It's 50 years later and we're still overcoming the days when blacks couldn't sit at a lunch counter at Woolworth's," said Allen. "More of us live in the white world, but many white people still avoid contact with black people in the ordinary habits of swimming, eating, dancing and listening to music."

Allen said she is always surprised when she invites students to her home and learns that it's the first time they have ever dined with a black person. "We are not all screaming and singing rap music," she said. "It really is sort of pathetic."

"During the '30s and '40s, whites would leave Manhattan and go to Harlem for one wild evening of jazz," said Allen. "It's still a major deal to go uptown and to be above 120th Street. People feel very proud of themselves. There is not enough contact between the races."

David Canton, assistant professor of history at Connecticut College who specializes in black culture, said O'Reilly's comments represented "colorblind racism."

Canton draws a distinction between "overt racism" □ like the use of the n-word or Imus' comment □ and "colorblind racism," which is "more complicated."

"O'Reilly is surprised that he can go to a black restaurant supported by blacks that runs as efficiently as it does," said Canton. "African-Americans do not operate businesses and the few who do have screaming and crazy behavior. Positive behavior is whitelike."

Presidential hopeful Joe Biden, D-Del., ran into trouble earlier this year when he commented that his black opponent, Illinois Sen. Barack Obama, was "articulate."

That remark carried a subtext, according to Canton: "Blacks do not speak well."

"But we know that is a function of class," said Canton. "Poor whites in Appalachia do not speak as well as urban, young Americans either."

Reinforcing Stereotypes

Films, newspapers and even mainstream hip-hop music reinforce stereotypes that blacks have foul mouths and behave badly, he said.

"But there is a lot of progressive hip-hop that does not sell to consumers and doesn't get the air time. When we think of black youth, we think of 50 Cent and that gangsta-rap image."

Canton, a black man who belongs to a ski club and whose son plays violin, challenges these stereotypes.

"Why, when we look at crime stories, are they disproportionately African-Americans?" he asked. "Look at the pop minstrels of the 1930s and [TV's] 'Amos and Andy' of the 1950s. There is never a fair and balanced portrayal."

"It's the same for Italians," he said. "All the shows are like the 'Godfather' or the 'Sopranos' □ they all rob, kill people and eat spaghetti."

In the classroom, Canton challenges the "vision of race in America." He is one of four black teachers in a 165-member faculty at Connecticut College.

"I tell many of these suburban kids that you have been socialized as racists and sexists, and we are here to talk about it," he said. "It doesn't mean you are a bad person or have a bad parent or minister."

Cherisse Cruz, a 20-year-old from New York City and one of his students, said that Canton encouraged his class to

educate others.

"I'm not a big fan of Bill O'Reilly," she said. "It was just as disturbing for me as a Hispanic. And I am from Harlem and have been to Sylvia's. The whole assumption that African-Americans are uncivilized people was shocking and disturbing to me."

"I don't think Americans should have to listen to this," she said. "He should be taken off the air."

A Teachable Moment

Melissa Harris-Lacewell, a professor of politics and African-American studies at Princeton University, agrees that O'Reilly's comments should be a "teachable moment."

"Where does this come from?" she said. "When we live separate lives next to each other, the court was right in Brown [vs. Board of Education.] It breeds inequality."

"I don't know if O'Reilly should get a pass as a journalist on that level of ignorance," she said. "He's meant to be more curious about the world than his own experience."

Others were less circumspect about O'Reilly's comments. Seth Moglen, an associate professor of English and Africana studies at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, said O'Reilly's remarks were "disturbing," "deliberate" and "destructive."

"It was anything, but innocent," said Moglen. "It's a dangerous kind of speech that is veiled with respectability."

Though he stops short of saying the provocative journalist should be censored or fired, he argues that O'Reilly's employers should not give him a stage for speech rooted in racism and violence.

"What makes this so serious is that while he is pretending to say something positive about an important institution and black life in Harlem," said Moglen, "but what he really is doing is recycling a set of deeply toxic stereotypes rooted in slavery and violence in the U.S. This is nothing trivial at all."

Moglen, who is white, picks a part O'Reilly's language. The talk show host is really saying blacks are different from white people, obscene and "outside the moral and cultural mainstream of American life."

"He thinks he can get away with this," said Moglen. "I don't think we should be thought police, but there are very real implications of violence in these stereotypes and they do real damage."

"I hear from white students every day that it is fine for them use [the n-word], because they heard it on a rap song or they were just joking when they call a woman a whore," he said.

Could Help Race Relations

But Carol Swain, who was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for her book, "The New White Nationalism in America: Its Challenge to Integration," said O'Reilly's comments open the door for reversing the stereotypes.

"I don't think we should be offended," she said. "He has a huge audience of people who are similarly naive, and this might actually help race relations."

"It shows the isolation of some white people, but if you get to really know blacks you will not be as fearful of the culture," said Swain. "We are people just like them, and we go to the bathroom the same way and eat the same way. We are not a strange species."

Swain says the mood of political correctness has gone too far. When people, like O'Reilly, are allowed to make fools of themselves "you can understand where they come from."

"We all say things at times that are inappropriate and misinformed and outright ignorant," she said. "If people started censoring themselves out of fear of offending, it cuts down on communication and forecloses dialogue."

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