

The Religious Rhetoric of Scapegoat Reliance
By Brent Kice¹

Religious rhetors must ask themselves to evaluate the rhetorical styles they use to influence their congregations. Recent events with religious messages at the center, such as the *Snyder v. Phelps* U.S. Supreme Court case and the March 2011 burning of the Koran in Gainesville, Florida, require attention regarding the rhetorical structure of specific religious messages that many identify as hateful. Religious rhetoric can become a powerful tool, especially when used as a means of control. For instance, prophetic rhetoric used by individuals such as Jim Jones or David Koresh establishes a system of social control that removes critical thinking and independent thought from religious members. In this manner, members of a congregation become dependent upon the religious leader. In so doing, religious leaders utilizing control over their members use a religious Rhetoric of Scapegoat Reliance.

Snyder v. Phelps represents one of many instances where members of the Westboro Baptist Church, headed by Fred Phelps, in Topeka, Kansas travel to events such as funerals to display signs with slogans such as “God Hates Fags,” “Fags Burn in Hell,” and “Fags Doom Nations,” in an attempt to spread a message that deaths and natural disasters are God’s punishment for homosexuality in the world (Westboro Baptist Church). In the referenced court case, the father of a marine who died in the Iraq War sued the Westboro Baptist Church for protesting at his son’s funeral. Louis Theroux’s documentary “The Most Hated Family in America” about the Westboro Baptist Church begins with a scene of the Phelps children jovially singing altered lyrics to the tune of Lee Greenwood’s “Proud to be an American” that

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a reasonable person would most likely deem hateful, or at the very least inappropriate. This particular opening scene is deeply disturbing due to the children's apparent enjoyment of singing the song, leaving the viewer of the documentary wondering if those children truly understand the impact of the message they are singing. In the case of the Westboro Baptist Church, the Church is comprised of mostly one family, resulting in a situation where children learn from both their adult family members and adult Church leaders simultaneously.

The Dove World Outreach Center, headed by Terry Jones, gained international attention by threatening to burn a copy of the Koran, and finally carrying out the act at the conclusion of a mock trial where the Church presented evidence with Jones acting as judge and found the Koran guilty of crimes against humanity.

Some might argue that all religions, to an extent, depend on a Rhetoric of Scapegoat Reliance, but I am attempting to differentiate religious structure that encourages personal reflection through the combination of faith and critical thinking on one hand and a religious structure that removes critical thinking by placing all decision making and thoughts of revelation in the hands of a message issued by a charismatic leader that focuses on a scapegoat. Indeed, religions such as Christianity and Islam are based on the teachings of charismatic leaders, such as Jesus Christ and Muhammad, respectively, but the religious Rhetoric of Scapegoat Reliance in this essay is concerned more with how a charismatic leader relies on rhetorical extremes to discourage self-reflective critical thinking among his or her congregation.

A religious Rhetoric of Scapegoat Reliance adheres to three criteria: first, pronouncement of god and devil terms; second, use of a scapegoat; with, three, negative clusters.

God and devil terms represent the two opposite extremes of language usage within a

particular social system. Naturally, a rhetor would wish to associate her or his message with a god term and dissociate his or her message with a devil term in order to be received favorably by an audience. Kenneth Burke and Richard Weaver identify a god term as corresponding with extreme importance upon which all other terms are based within a particular social realm (Burke, "Philosophy" 262-63; Burke, "Religion" 2-3; Weaver 212). Weaver states, "By 'god-term' we mean that expression about which all other expressions are ranked as subordinate and serving dominations and powers. Its force imparts to others their lesser degree of force, and fixes the scale by which degrees of comparison are understood," (212). On the other hand, Weaver describes a devil term by stating, "There seems to be some obscure psychic law which compels every nation in its national imagination, an enemy" (222).

A scapegoat functions in a manner similar to a devil term with an added characteristic of blame. A rhetor relying on a scapegoat traces all problems within a society to one specific group or idea. This rhetorical strategy unites a group of people together by dissociating the group with all remnants of the social scapegoat. Burke identifies Hitler's usage of "the Jew" as a scapegoat that acted as a "projection device" for Germans to link economic and social poverty to in order to receive "purification by dissociation" (Burke, "Symbols" 219). Burke further explains, "If one can hand over his infirmities to a vessel, or 'cause,' outside the self, one can battle an external enemy instead of battling an enemy within. And the greater one's internal inadequacies, the greater the amount of evils one can load upon the back of 'the enemy,'" (Burke, "Symbols" 219).

Due to the prominence of devil terms and scapegoats within a religious Rhetoric of Scapegoat Reliance, the words that surround these prominent key terms play an important role in describing the worldview of the rhetor. Burke refers to these "associational clusters" as "the basic 'facts' of [a message]" in order to produce a form of "statistical" analysis ("Literary

Symbolism” 283; “Literary Form” 20). Naturally, a scapegoat will be associated with negative clusters, such as damaging adjectives, and will reveal how a rhetor sees himself or herself in relation to the world. Therefore, a religious Rhetoric of Scapegoat Reliance identifies God/the Bible and the Devil as the two ultimate extremes, and, in turn, associates a particular scapegoat with devilish characteristics that are revealed through the negative clusters that surround the scapegoat within a message.

Both Churches rely on god terms of “God” and “the Bible” as ultimate truths providing congregation members with justification for the content of their messages. As previously mentioned, the Devil is the polar opposite of God and the Bible, and each Church provides a scapegoat that the Church associates with the Devil and achieves identification among members of its congregations by having its members dissociate with the scapegoat. In this instance, the Westboro Baptist Church uses homosexuality as a scapegoat, and associates the scapegoat with negative clusters such as “oppose,” “hate,” “soul-damning,” “nation destroying,” and “filth” (Westboro Baptist Church). The Dove World Outreach Center uses Islam as a scapegoat, and associates the scapegoat with negative clusters such as “of the devil,” “oppressive,” “lies,” “deceptions” (Dove Charismatic Ministries, Inc.).

On the surface, both Churches appear to act as hate groups more than religious organizations. However, other religious rhetors can use these rhetorical strategies to achieve specific mindsets in their congregations. With this understanding in mind, individuals should be vigilant in assessing the rhetorical structures of religious rhetors. Whereas strict adherence to god and devil language can unite an audience together effectively, rhetors can use also in an unethical manner when the reliance on scapegoating to support a message evolves into the scapegoating itself becoming the core message and means of identification. When this type of scapegoating

takes prominence, members of a congregation will lose sight of a self-reflective faith that involves critical thinking and move toward a faith of blame that requires no self-reflection.

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