

“Religious Rhetoric Will Set You Free”: The Conceit of Liberation in Contemporary Religious Discourse

Christopher J. Oldenburg*

In addition to previewing the articles published in this specific issue of the Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric, this article presents a theme to better read these articles.

Keywords: Conceit of Freedom, Religious Rhetoric, Religious Discourse

Religious rhetorical appeals have long evoked the conceit of freedom to reinforce doctrinal and pastoral beliefs abiding in multifarious faith traditions. Moreover, such a conceit has also been employed to persuade audiences, both adherents of faith and various publics of theology’s effective promise of deliverance. Prophets, both sacred and secular, have employed the liberation motif to invent arguments for spiritual salvation as well as the natural, civil right to be free from forms of political and legal oppression. Today, the term “social justice,” its polysemy notwithstanding, embodies a religiously inspired imperative to work in solidarity with those suffering souls constrained and confined by an immoral society in need of reordering according to Gospel principles. Whether advanced and performed through codified systems like the Catholic practice of “liberation theology,” or manifested in more general messages of freedom from the yoke of sin, addiction, affliction, guilt, slavery, poverty, death, or perceived cultural forces of depravity and destruction, religious rhetoric is inextricably connected with conceptions of freedom. This special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* examines current, protean, and intersectional coordinates of religious rhetoric and the *topos* of emancipation. Where and in what ways do we witness the interplay between traditional stylistic and argumentative strategies of religious discourse and liberty alive and pulsating in contemporary culture? How has this rhetorical motif changed? What new avenues and environs does it pursue and inhabit? How might liberty, freedom, exoneration, and deliverance function as broader discursive and ideological formations that further advance the grand narratives of capitalism as it pertains to healthcare and perennial polemics in the so-called culture wars? Unfortunately, the opposite of rhetoric is not truth but violence. In what ways have rhetorical appeals to religion been misappropriated and employed for odious, divisive, and destructive purposes? The articles in this special issue address these and other related questions.

* Christopher J. Oldenburg (Ph.D. University of Memphis) is Professor of Communication and Rhetorical Studies and Chair of the Communication Arts Department at Illinois College. His research interests include the Rhetoric of Pope Francis, Social and Environmental Justice, Semioethics, and American political discourse. Oldenburg’s work has appeared in several peer-reviewed journals. He is the author of *The Rhetoric of Pope Francis: Critical Mercy and Conversion for the Twenty-First Century* (Lexington Books, 2018) He is the recipient of the Religious Communication Association Book of the Year Award 2019. Additionally, he has published four book chapters on the rhetoric and ethics of Pope Francis. Currently, he has co-authored the forthcoming book, *Rhetoric, Religion, and Tragic Violence: Sacred Succor and Rancor* published by Peter Lang.

The religious rhetoric evaluated in this special issue, with its dominant theme of freedom, progresses through the following trajectory: from the private to the public, from the individual to the masses, and from the pulpit to the street. In their article, “Men Don’t Retreat: Freedom, Dominion, and Masculinity in Christian Rhetoric,” Sarah Kornfield and Sage Mikkelsen provide an incisive feminist rhetorical analysis on Christian appeals to freedom in the works Texan Pastor Jonathan “JP” Pokluda. Kornfield and Mikkelsen identify three interrelated and exceedingly inventive topoi that are pellucidly articulated and aid greatly in illuminating the deleterious effects of the Christian misogynist tradition and its surreptitious contemporaneous iterations of phallogocentric discourse in the forms of metaphors, equivocations, symbolism, and tone. Specifically, the authors demonstrate how Pokluda’s pastoral advice appeals to freedom in ways that call the men of GenY and GenZ to the frontlines of the culture wars and into a conceptualization of Christian masculinity that would see every man a king in his castle.

Next, James W. Vining’s article, “We Demand Good News for the Poor: William Barber’s Liberation Theology Rhetoric Goes to (March on) Washington” affords a religious rhetorical analysis of the 2022 Mass Poor Peoples and Low-Wage Workers’ Assembly and Moral March on Washington and to the Polls, a contemporary renaissance of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1968 Poor Peoples Campaign. The modern iteration was orchestrated by key planner and master of ceremony for the assembly, pastor-orator, William Barber. Barber’s event lifted the voices of religious leaders who advocate for liberation of the poor and downtrodden of society as well as poor people from around the nation. Vining focuses on a contemporary form of prophetic public lament and lament as liberation. Vining provides an incisive rhetorical explication of lament’s discursive and religious functions when curated in the form of a wide-scale mediated event that continues the work of the historic “poor people’s campaign.”

Brandon Knight’s article “Freedom to Save the Body (of Christ): False Wisdom, True Wisdom, and the Rhetorical Chemotherapy of Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone” traces Cordileone’s pro-life arguments articulated in his homily at 2022 Walk for Life West Coast event. Knight argues that Cordileone’s reasoning is motivated and effectuated by the epistemology of true heavenly wisdom, casuistry, the use of prophetic epideictic voice, and the inventive metaphor of rhetorical chemotherapy to challenge his diocesan audience in upholding the culture of life.

In “‘Prayer Warriors Needed!’ The Warrior-Priest Archetypal Metaphor in American Cancer & COVID Rhetorics,” Christopher J. Wernecke argues this inventive archetype’s role is that of an obfuscating agent of ideology, operating to maintain the hegemony of capitalism in our healthcare system. Through the fusion of religious and martial metaphors, the warrior-priest archetype emerges to misplace agency, divert attention, and justify capitalistic systems of power in American healthcare. By examining the popular *Reddit* community r/HermanCainAward and two “viral” cancer narratives, the warrior-priest deceives Americans into believing that true “freedom” from these diseases is possible through a fight inspired by faith. In truth such a discursive form works to ensure the continuation of capitalism’s dominance over American healthcare by upholding cultural adherence to the delusional belief in capitalism’s liberatory capabilities.

Finally, my own essay, “The Gate of the Exonerated: Myth, Religious Transvaluation, and Public Vindication” provides a rhetorical analysis of the 2022 public installation of the Gate of the Exonerated, an entrance to New York’s Central Park that represents the city’s remorse for the 1989 wrongful conviction of the teenagers known as the Central Park Five. The unveiling ceremony marked the twentieth anniversary of the five men’s exoneration. In focusing on both the secular and sacred symbolism of the Gate, I argue the event functions as a religious, exculpatory encomium honoring wrongly convicted people through the Burkean strategies of transvaluation and

exorcism by misnomer. Such a rhetoric constitutes a public act of contrition, a collective, corrective commemoration, thereby demonstrating religious rhetoric's capacity to demand institutional accountability, admission of guilt, contrition, and vindication for social injustices.

With this special issue on the inextricable *topos* of religious discourse and freedom, we humbly enter the Burkean cathedral and offer up these diverse and protean articles as inquiries, arguments, and insightful contemporary critical paradigms that invite further questions, extensions, and explorations.