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God and Country: Washington's Current Fascination with Christianity

As a Christian, navigating today's political landscape can be tricky. It becomes especially hard when political leaders publicly invoke Christian rhetoric as part of their platforms and beliefs. In this case, it is vital for the Christian to discern between the kind of rhetoric that seeks to further the Kingdom of God from that which seeks to elevate and bring power to human leaders. This critical essay intends to examine the use of Christian rhetoric in politics, focusing on that of the current presidential administration. By doing so, it is my hope that the reader can be all the more attentive to when political-Christian rhetoric reveals conflict with Christian values.

This critical essay will analyze four artifacts: Vice President Pence's 2020 R.N.C. speech, President Donald Trump's 2020 R.N.C. speech, President Trump's 2016 Liberty University convocation speech, and President Trump's 2017 Liberty University commencement speech. First, analysis will be done through Kenneth Burke's cluster criticism method. By using cluster criticism, a meaning can be concluded from the key terms of the artifacts. Second, meanings derived from Burke's method will be further analyzed through Henri Tajfel's social identity theory. Using social identity theory to further analyze this meaning through the framework of in-group/out-group dynamics will show how current Christian rhetoric in politics is not used to further Christian values as much as it is used as a tool for leaders to obtain power through the Christian vote.

Clarification of Objective

Due to the extremely polarizing nature of political criticism and how Christianity may intersect views around this type of criticism, I wish to say that it is not my intention, nor should it be concluded, that the purpose of this essay is to make a case for or against any particular political party. This critical essay seeks to speak more on the use of specific Christian rhetoric used by the Trump Administration rather than Christian rhetoric used by any political party as a whole. Although more attention is given to the current presidential administration which happens to represent the Republican Party, the intention of focusing on the current presidential administration is due to this administrations openness to adopting and invoking Christian values and beliefs. This is not to say, however, that the Republican party has never properly invoked Christian values, that certain Christian values cannot be found to influence certain stances of the Democratic Party, or that if these values were one day to be as openly adopted by the Democratic Party, that they would be integrated better or worse than those in the Republican Party. The issue of Christian rhetoric in politics being used for power can present itself anywhere and should always be criticized, broken down, and fully understood, no matter who seeks to use it.

Cluster Criticism

Cluster criticism is a method of rhetorical criticism coming from the work of literary theorist Kenneth Burke. In the cluster criticism method “the meanings that key symbols have for a rhetor are discovered by charting the symbols that cluster around those key symbols in an artifact” (an artifact being a piece or pieces of examined media)

(Foss, 63). The major contribution of cluster criticism in this essay is in the use of this method showing how key terms may have a different implied meaning based on their respective cluster terms. This means a key terms implied meaning through its cluster terms can be different than the same key terms meaning if it existed alone. By analyzing the key terms and their respective cluster terms, an explanation of the artifact is able to be found. Additionally, by examining the juxtaposition between god-terms (terms presented as favorable) and devil-terms (terms presented as unfavorable), new meaning can be assigned to each term.

Artifacts and Key Terms

As stated earlier, four artifacts will be analyzed in this essay as they all relate to each other: two 2020 Republican National Convention speeches, one by Vice President Pence and the other by President Trump; a 2016 Liberty University convocation speech given by President Trump; and a 2017 Liberty University commencement speech also given by President Trump. Although each artifact will be referenced individually for sources, the consistent and similar rhetoric used in each piece will allow for one consolidated meaning to be applied to each artifact. Through these artifacts, four key terms are presented: *God/Lord*, *President Trump/I*, *freedom*, and *Biden/Democrats*.

Key Term: *God/Lord*

The key term *God/Lord* shows up thirty-six times in the four artifacts, with seventeen of those times being in President Trump's Liberty University commencement speech. The most common cluster terms around *God/Lord* include terms that show God

to be a giver of rights and *freedom*. In both the vice president's and president's R.N.C. speech, God is the one who is credited with giving rights. These "God-given rights enshrined in our Constitution, including the Second Amendment right to keep and bear arms," are to be understood as not just significant of ideal American values, but significant because they are presented as symbolic of God's character as they are God's will for the American people. ("Pence's"). Thus, as the Trump Administration is portrayed defending rights given by God, this administration is understood to be both chosen and favored by God, making it a top consideration for the Christian voter.

Key Term: *President Trump/I*

The key term *President Trump/I* appears sixty-seven times in the artifacts and the vice president's speech alone contains the term forty-nine of those times. President Trump's use of the word "I" is only counted in artifacts as it pertains to him speaking about his own roles as president.

A majority of the cluster terms around this this key term portray *President Trump/I* as a "believer in America," a promise keeper, a "[defeater] of any foe," a defender of American rights and values, a defender of the American people, and even of religious rights/Christianity. For this critical essay, the significance in this term is in how *President Trump/I* takes it upon himself to be the defender of Christianity and religious liberties. In his 2016 convocation speech, he states, "we're going to protect Christianity, and I can say that. I don't have to be politically correct...but we are going to protect Christianity" ("Speech"). He reiterates similar language in his 2017 commencement speech where he states,

“as long as I am your president, no one is ever going to stop you from practicing your faith or from preaching what’s in your heart...[I] will always stand up for the right of all Americans to pray to God and to follow his teachings. America is beginning a new chapter” (“Commencement”).

Here, President Trump is presenting himself as the defender of religious (Christian) rights, and as a result, Christianity. The last sentence also is interesting as it implies that the America before Trump was not one that prioritized or recognized religious liberties and Christian rights. The recognition of Christian rights is attributed to the president as he credits himself with “beginning a new chapter” (“Commencement”).

Analysis of Key Term: *Freedom*

The key term *freedom* appears nineteen times in the four articles with fourteen of those times in Vice President Pence’s R.N.C. speech. According to the cluster terms surrounding the key term, *freedom* is almost entirely something that is either being defended (seven times) or attacked (three times). God-terms around *freedom* include those who defend it, being patriotic “heroes who...took their stand for life, liberty, freedom and the American flag,” and President Trump, “who believes in America” (“Pence’s”). Devil terms around *freedom* include those who attack it, mainly Democrats, the Democratic agenda, “the radical left...[depriving] our people of freedom,” and the vice president even used ISIS as an example to represent an “assault on our most cherished values, freedom of religion and the right to life (“Pence’s”).

Freedom also intersects with the character of *God/Lord* in Vice President Pence’s closing remark, where he says,

“so let’s run the race marked out for us. Let’s fix our eyes on Old Glory and all she represents. Let’s fix our eyes on this land of heroes and let their courage inspire. And let’s fix our eyes on the author and perfecter of our faith and our freedom and never forget that where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. That means freedom always wins” (“Pence’s”).

The rhetoric in this closing paragraph very closely resembles Paul’s writing in Hebrews 12:1b-2, which says,

“and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God”

and 2 Corinthians 3:17, which says “now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (NIV). The specific and intentional rhetoric used in this case subconsciously resonates with the listener, specifically the Christian listener, who may recognize the scriptural reference without realizing how the rhetor uses the link between the two referenced passages to force a heavy emphasis on freedom. What is also noticeable in Vice President Pence’s closing remark is how fixing “our eyes on Old Glory and...on this land of heroes,” is held to the same importance as fixing “our eyes on...the Lord” (“Pence’s”).

Through this analysis, it becomes understood that the rhetor is referring to *freedom* as a core tenet of Christian-American ideals, and that *Biden/Democrats* is incapable of promising such *freedom*. In fact, not only are they incapable, they are actively trying to remove this *freedom* from the American people. Additionally, by invoking scripture taken out of its original context to fit a narrative of Americanized *freedom*, the rhetor implies that to fix our eyes on the Lord, i.e., to

be Christian, means to be a patriotic defender of “Old Glory and...this land of heroes” (“Pence’s”).

Key Term: *Biden/Democrats*

The key term *Biden/Democrats* is used eighty-three times in the artifacts and is used as a devil-term. The most common examples in the artifacts contain this key term being used in a way that is opposite of *President Trump/I*. This term is commonly depicted as enabling violence as “[*Biden/Democrats*] would double down on the very policies that are leading to violence in American cities” (“Pence’s”). Additionally, *Biden/Democrats* “doesn’t recognize Americas perceived greatness,” portraying him as unfit to lead the American people, and If he were, he would be “the destroyer of American Greatness” (“Pence’s,” “Trump’s R.N.C.”). *Biden/Democrats* is also linked to China and socialist/communist ideals in order create as much of a distance between *Biden/Democrats* and *President Trump/I* as possible. Further uses of this key term present the term as attacking America and American institutions, and relating Democrat-run cities to looters, rioters, criminals and mayhem. The consistent use of these cluster terms show *Biden/Democrats* as being antithetical to the core values presented in the other key terms.

Meaning of Key Terms

In the first the key term, *God/Lord* is depicted as being a giver of rights and freedoms. These rights are seen as being symbolic of *God/Lord’s* will for America and the American people. This is where the Trump administration tasks itself with upholding

and defending this will. *President Trump/I* is presented as a defender of American values from *Biden/Democrats*. *President Trump/I* is also understood to be the only person who is capable of defending religious liberties and keeping America from devolving into mayhem as depicted in the Democrat-run cities. This frames *President Trump/I* as the defender of *freedom* and presents him as the ideal choice for the Christian voter. The analysis of cluster terms around *freedom*, specifically in Vice President Pence's closing R.N.C. remarks, show the term to portray equal importance in fixing our eyes on *God/Lord* to fixing our eyes on *freedom*.

Based on the analysis of the artifacts and keeping in mind the god-term (*President Trump/I, God/Lord, freedom*) vs devil-term (*Biden/Democrats*) dynamics, it becomes clear that *freedom*, an utterly important right granted by *God/Lord*, is almost always something being defended by *President Trump/I* or attacked by *Biden/Democrats*. This then leaves the Christian voter with the understanding that if they want to keep their religious liberties and *freedoms*, they must place their trust in the Trump Administration, so that *President Trump/I* may defend these God-given *freedoms* from the attacking *Biden/Democrats*. In this case, an in-group unites around a desire to remedy a conflict "created" by a defined out-group. This is best explained through the use of social identity theory.

Analyzing of Key Term Meanings with Social Identity Theory

Henri Tajfel's social identity theory is based around the dynamics of "us vs. them" and will aid in understanding how the artifact's meaning shows the rhetor(s) using Christianity as a tool to obtain power. According to social identity theory, every

individual has an identity that they assign to themselves. As they encounter people with similar identities and beliefs, they tend to form groups around these similar values, and enhance them by elevating both their self-image and their in-group. Tajfel then explains that,

“we can also increase our self-image by discriminating and holding prejudice views against the out group...Therefore, we divided the world into “them” and “us” based through a process of social categorization. This is known as in-group (us) and out-group (them). Social identity theory states that the in-group will discriminate against...[and] find negative aspects of an out-group, thus enhancing their self-image” (McLeod)

This helps to explain the use of god-terms vs. devil terms. In the case of the artifact, the in-group (*President Trump/I*, supporters, Christians supports) unites around a desire to remedy a conflict (attack on *freedom*) “created” by the out-group (*Biden/Democrats*). The way in which the in-group/out-group dynamic manifests itself, however, becomes problematic. As the in-group continues to see the out-group as an enemy, The in-group begins to become fearful of that out-group, acting in ways that may become extreme as to ensure survival of the in-group. Jef Huysmans, Professor of International Politics at Queen Mary, University of London speaks on the issue of in-group/out-group dynamics and the fear it can create in “The Politics of Insecurity: Fear, Migration and Asylum in the EU.” He states that,

“the identity or unity of a group is created and re-enforced when its members are competing with another group of people. This dialectic relation between in-group and out-group turns existential when the out-group transfigures into an enemy. Expectations of violence and the need to secure the survival of the in-

group rationalize and re-enforce bonding between the members of the in-group”
(Huysmans, 130-131).

Huysmans’ explanation of expectations of violence and securing the need for survival are presented almost perfectly in a section of President Trump’s 2016 Liberty University convocation speech, where he says,

“we've got to protect [Christianity] because bad things are happening, very bad things are happening...We don't band together, maybe. Other religions, frankly, they're banding together. And if you look at this country it's got to be 70 percent, 75 percent, some people say even more, the power we have, somehow we have to unify. We have to band together. We have to do really in a really large version what they've done at Liberty because Liberty University has done that...and that's what the country has to do that around Christianity. So get together, folks, and let's do it because we can do it” (“Speech”).

By analyzing this remark through Huysmans approach, it is clear that this rhetoric serves to elicit a specific response from the listening audience. Although no clear enemy is named, a common enemy is implied as “very bad things are happening” to Christianity (“Speech”). Here, a vague expectation of violence is shared, and the in-group is presented with a means of securing survival: banding together against that violence. Perhaps the most concerning part of the remark is in the phrase “the power we have” (“Speech”). Here, unity is not presented as something that the Christian should do in the name of Christ, but is something to be done in opposition to a threat. Additionally, as the rhetor seeks to foster this unity, he acts as a natural leader of that unity. Since power is consolidated through this unity, that power ends up being consolidated around the rhetor, being his to use.

Conclusion

This critical essay analyzed four artifacts through Kenneth Burke's cluster criticism method: Vice President Pence's and President Trump's 2020 R.N.C. speeches, President Trump's 2016 Liberty University convocation speech, and President Trump's 2017 Liberty University commencement speech. Four key terms were then presented from these artifacts: *God/Lord*, *President Trump/I*, *freedom*, and *Biden/Democrats*. By analyzing the cluster terms around these key terms, and how they fit into god-terms/devil-terms, a meaning from the artifacts can be found. The meaning is that *freedom*, an utterly important right granted by *God/Lord*, is almost always something being defended by *President Trump/I* or attacked by *Biden/Democrats*. The Christian voter then must choose whether or not they want to place their trust in the Trump Administration, so that *President Trump/I* may defend these God-given *freedoms* from the attacking *Biden/Democrats*.

By using Tajfel's social identity theory to explain in-group/out-group dynamics and Huysmans' expanding into relations of enemy forming, fear, and unity as a means of survival, the purpose for which current Christian-political rhetoric is used becomes realized. The analysis shows that the consistent and commonly used rhetoric of Christian values by political leaders is not invoked to point back to Christ in order to further His Kingdom, but instead, these values are used as a tool to influence an in-group to consolidate power around a rhetor or leader. Again, the issue of Christian rhetoric in politics being used for power can present itself anywhere and should always be criticized, broken down, and fully understood, no matter who seeks to use it.

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