

INTRODUCTION

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THIS BOOK GROWS out of and contributes to a persistent scholarly curiosity about the relationship of rhetoric and religion, a curiosity that dapples the history of rhetoric from Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* to the work of contemporary scholars, a curiosity that persists in part, I believe, because scholars have found that examining this relationship produces useful insights about complex rhetorical acts like argumentation. *Renovating Rhetoric in Christian Tradition* focuses attention on rhetors who press into service an array of rhetorical strategies—some drawn from Christian tradition and some contributing to Christian tradition—to achieve their rhetorical ends. And it gives us more to be curious about: this collection brings together a range of arguments made during times and places of significant social rupture associated with Christian tradition—from the formation of Christianity (Bruce Herzberg) to contemporary questions about religious ways of being (Priscilla Perkins), from colonial Africa (Aesha Adams-Roberts, Rosalyn Collings Eves, and Liz Rohan) to present-day American classrooms (Beth Daniell).

These chapters demonstrate that as rhetors argue, they press into service a variety of strategies, including beliefs and practices that are cultural as well as religious, subtle, multiple, interdependent, and historically situated. Chapters in the first three parts of this collection attend to three particular areas of social rupture: the rise of Christian sects, the rise of female rhetors, and the rise of academic concern about American Christian fundamentalism. In each of these parts, readers meet rhetors who have taken the opportunity to renovate rhetorical resources associated with Christian tradition and, through their use of those resources, reshaped their discourse communities. Chapters in the fourth part, which centers upon rhetoric in Christian tradition, line out the complexities encountered by such rhetors (and those who study them) as they create and resolve moments of social upheaval in Christian tradition.

In the first part, “The Rise of Christian Sects,” contributors Anne Ruggles Gere and Elizabeth A. Rand consider how rhetors from “outsider” groups have created arguments with and against Christian tradition to assert the identity of

their sect. In this piece, Gere and Rand, like other chapter authors, contribute to a body of scholarship that explores how rhetors have made use of the rhetorical resources available in Christian tradition and how these rhetors sometimes mix those resources with other resources to create hybrid discourses. The rhetorician Patricia Bizzell provides an example of this kind of blending in her analysis of the 1263 Barcelona Disputation, a staged theological debate between the Jewish scholar known as Nahmanides and the Dominican friar Paul Christian.¹

As a Jew living under the rule of a Christian king, Nahmanides represented religious believers who troubled a culturally promulgated argument for the rationality of the Christian faith because “the Bible was the central holy text for [Jews] but they did not find the same meanings in it that the Christians did.”² In this contest Nahmanides found himself in a difficult situation: if he won, he risked “offending the high secular and religious authorities in attendance and bringing down more persecution of his fellow Jews.”³ And if he lost, “he risked seriously demoralizing a population who was already under severe psychological and physical assault from the majority culture.”⁴ Bizzell emphasizes that in this disputation, both Nahmanides and Friar Christian (also a Jew but one who had converted) made extensive use of their knowledge of Jewish and Christian warrants, evidence, and argumentative strategies.⁵ Bizzell argues that in rhetorical moments like this, many features of a rhetorical situation—religion and culture, language and argumentation, belief and rationality—intertwine to create a Gordian knot of meaning. Such mingling of features is possible, Bizzell concludes, because “as is often the case when we analyze mixed discourses, we discover that the discourses being mixed were not so separate to begin with.”⁶ As a result of its long history and global distribution, Christian tradition has been shaped by innumerable mixed discourses like these.

In her chapter “Constructing Devout Feminists: A Mormon Case,” Gere studies the rhetorical influence of Mormon women on the arguments for Utah statehood and for the acceptance of Mormonism as an expression of Christianity. She rehearses the terrible social stigma that Mormons, particularly women, endured as a result of the Mormon religious practice of polygamy. She describes how, in the face of this prejudice, Mormon women countered prevalent attitudes toward Mormons by arguing in support of women’s suffrage and by getting involved in the women’s club movement, even as these women maintained a distinctive Mormon religious identity. In this way they were able to demonstrate their affinity with other American women and their loyalty to American values. More than that, they renovated the concept of feminism to include women like them—deeply religious and passionately concerned about the status of women.

In “A Rhetoric of Opposition: The Seventh-day Adventist Church and the

Sabbath Tradition,” Rand considers the oppositional rhetoric of Seventh-day Adventism, a strand of Christianity that defines itself largely through its opposition to the Sunday-worship practices of mainstream Christianity and its critique of the collusion of government and religion, particularly legislation that designates Sunday as a special day for rest, leisure, and worship. Rand notes that as a consequence of their strident opposition to the cooperation of government and religion, Seventh-day Adventists have also critiqued populist ideas of American exceptionalism and the American dream, further isolating themselves from mainstream American culture. This oppositional stance, Rand argues, fulfills an important rhetorical function, what the scholar John Shilb has called a “rhetoric of refusal,” and actually demonstrates deep concern for the well-being of their fellow citizens.

The second part, “The Rise of Female Rhetors,” offers three chapters that challenge the assumption that religious communities protect orthodox belief and practices at all costs—an assumption rooted in an erroneous idea that for religions (though Christianity and American Christian fundamentalism are pointed to in particular) “‘Truth’ is static, constant, and universal.”⁷ Scholars have portrayed orthodoxy as a restricting force on rhetors in religious discourse communities who may be fearful that they will be shut out of the community.⁸ For example, in her description of the limits of rhetoric to persuade “apocalyptic” Christian fundamentalists, Sharon Crowley posits that “people who are invested in densely articulated belief systems” are unlikely to respond to rhetorical argumentation—to change their minds—because the cost of changing their belief system is too great, “because it is all they know, or because their friends, family, and important authority figures are similarly invested, or because their identity is in some respects constructed by the beliefs inherent in the system. Rejection of such a belief system ordinarily requires rejection of community and reconstruction of one’s identity as well.”⁹ But are religious discourse communities so rigidly bounded? Are they as static as some have imagined them to be?

While not denying the pressures exerted by all “densely articulated belief systems,” be they religious, cultural, or ideological, chapters in *Renovating Rhetoric in Christian Tradition* draw attention to rhetors in Christian discourse communities arguing more freely than some might expect, given their assumptions about the pressures of orthodoxy on religious rhetors. The rhetors showcased in this collection sometimes respect and sometimes challenge orthodox practices and beliefs of their discourse communities. In so doing, they alter those practices and beliefs to serve their arguments and, in the process, they renovate their religious community. Chapters in this edited volume contribute to a body of scholarship that showcases a historical line of rhetors who experience religious belief as a dynamic process of meaning-making—a process that

they experience, in part, by making arguments. An example of this kind of scholarship is Lisa Shaver's *Beyond the Pulpit: Women's Rhetorical Roles in the Antebellum Religious Press*. Shaver documents "women's rich, expansive rhetorical legacy"—in particular, the writing that antebellum Methodist women who published "brief everyday descriptions of women's activities" in widely distributed periodicals of the Methodist Church.¹⁰ By studying these publications, Shaver argues, scholars come to understand "how the church provided sites for women's rhetorical development."¹¹ Shaver documents, for example, women drawing "rhetorical proofs from their own scriptural interpretations," asserting logical conclusions based on Methodist theology, and relying on traditional interpretations to "endorse their public activism."¹² In this process, women reshaped both their religious faith and their religious community.¹³ Shaver notes that despite the rhetorical resourcefulness displayed by these humble religious women, they have been overlooked by scholars who "often steer clear of religious institutions."¹⁴

Like Shaver's research, chapters in *Renovating Rhetoric in Christian Tradition* complicate the idea that to argue successfully in a given discourse community, a rhetor—even one with relatively limited social or political power—is not obligated to adopt unconditionally a community's ways of thinking, believing, and doing in order to gain rhetorical agency within that community. Rather, rhetors can gain rhetorical agency by refurbishing a community's ways of thinking, believing, and doing to suit their rhetorical goals. Three chapters focus on women rhetors in the Protestant tradition of Christianity who altered community-imposed limitations on their rights and opportunities by using the very words, ideas, and rhetorical strategies that had been used to suppress them. These chapters focus particularly on how women rhetors used widely held assumptions about the value of Christian devotion to overcome opposition to their religious, social, and political activism.

In "Preaching from the Pulpit Steps: Mary Bosanquet Fletcher and Women's Preaching in Early Methodism," Vicki Tolar Burton directs readers' attention to a historical and cultural moment during the rise of Protestant sects when a woman's right to speak was under debate. In particular, Burton details Mary Bosanquet Fletcher's argument for Methodist women's right to preach, arguments that rely on an ethos that blends female modesty and sharp (masculine) intellect. Throughout her adult life, Bosanquet put her arguments into action by creating hybrid sacred spaces through her judicious choice of where and when to preach. Furthermore, while Bosanquet willingly preached to those who sought her out, she also pursued approval for her preaching from church authorities, notably John Wesley, who responded favorably to her reasoning.

In "'With the Tongues of [Wo]men and Angels': Apostolic Rhetorical Practices among Religious Women," Aesha Adams-Roberts, Rosalyn Collings Eves,

and Liz Rohan describe how four women from different times and places fashioned an apostolic ethos as an alternative to the prophetic ethos available only to men in their culture. Drawing authority from the rhetor's humility and her conversion story, an apostolic ethos enables disenfranchised rhetors like these women to be effective preachers and teachers within their communities. Tracing the various experiences of four women in three diverse historical, cultural, and religious settings, these authors demonstrate that this ethos has been a regular feature of arguments made by Protestant women. This distinctive ethos is underrepresented in scholarship on rhetoric and religion, scholarship that emphasizes instead a prophetic ethos used by socially prominent male speakers.

Karen K. Seat focuses on the rhetoric of American women of the same time period who argued to establish the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church in her chapter entitled "Rhetorical Strategies in Protestant Women's Missions: Appropriating and Subverting Gender Ideals." Methodist women established this society by altering conservative ideologies of gender—in particular, sexist assumptions about the intellectual capacity of women and the kind of work that was appropriate for them. Because these revised ideologies retained enough of the original thinking to seem familiar, they appeared rational and nonthreatening to initially reluctant male religious leaders. Able to demonstrate success as both social organizers and foreign missionaries, these women shifted Protestant ideas about proper social order and contributed to the liberalizing of mainline American Protestant theology. The women represented in these chapters, as well as other rhetors represented throughout this volume, demonstrate that while discourse communities may provide rhetors with rhetorical identities, strategies, and theoretical frameworks, they are not necessarily constrained by those resources; rather, rhetors can renovate those resources, sometimes in radical ways, refining and adapting the resources to match their rhetorical needs.

As rhetors renovate Christian tradition, they seem to act in some ways that seem similar to those of the student "agents of integration" described by the scholar Rebecca Nowacek in her book of that title. Regarding how people make use of their knowledge and skill to accomplish rhetorical purposes, Nowacek proposes that "as individuals move from one context to the next, they receive cues, both explicit and implicit, that suggest knowledge associated with a prior context may prove useful in the new context."¹⁵ As rhetors in Christian tradition take up rhetorical resources and fit them to argumentative need, rhetors inevitably alter both the resources and themselves.¹⁶ For example, when Martin Luther King Jr. concludes "I Have a Dream" speech with the words of "My Country 'Tis of Thee," he takes up the song that Marian Anderson sang on the same steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1939 and fits those lyrics and their rich history to the occasion of the March on Washington.¹⁷ When King follows

those words with the “Let Freedom Ring” anaphora, he takes up words that the African American preacher and civil rights activist Archibald Carey spoke to the 1952 Republican Convention, and he refurbishes them by heightening their musicality and matching them to his own speech cadences.¹⁸ When King concludes the anaphora by adding “Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi,” he connects Carey’s words to contemporary civil rights battles. Immediately following this anaphora, King concludes by imagining heaven as a multiracial choir holding hands and singing a Negro spiritual. This image invokes a Christian theology that was shaped by King’s arguments for an experience with nonviolent civic protest. What is true of King and his argument for racial justice is also true of the rhetors and the arguments showcased in this edited volume: as they remake rhetorical resources, they remake themselves.

The experiences of rhetors remaking themselves through argumentation supports Nowacek’s more fully embodied model of transfer that “puts the individual as meaning maker at the center of conceptions of transfer and integration” and draws us into the topic of the third part of this book, “The Rise of Concern about American Christian Fundamentalism,” a part that features three chapters exploring how teachers of rhetoric and composition might create an environment that would encourage students to become “agents of integration.”¹⁹ Assumptions about transfer permeate the composition scholarship about religious students—a body of scholarship that has focused particularly on students who have allegiances to Christian fundamentalism. Early studies presumed negative transfer, specifically that students were inappropriately transferring genre knowledge from their religious experiences, such as witnessing talk, to their academic writing.²⁰ Later studies suggest the possibility of positive transfer, arguing that students can and should draw on their prior rhetorical experiences in religious communities to solve the rhetorical problems that they encounter in the composition classroom. In this model of transfer, students’ religious faith serves as rhetorical resource that they can draw upon when writing.²¹ Some research on transfer, however, raises questions about the ease of transferring genres, rhetorical strategies, or even knowledge from a religious community to a composition classroom.²² Indeed, Rebecca Nowacek’s study highlights the varied and subtle factors—religious identity being one—that influence a student’s ability to “see” and “sell” connections between even seemingly similar academic contexts to their professor readers.²³ Nowacek describes a student “Betty” as caught in a double-bind, a situation in which “individuals experience contradictions within or between activity systems but cannot articulate any meta-awareness of those contractions.”²⁴ Unwilling to compromise her identity as a Quaker, Betty altered the assignment, writing in a genre other than one the professor describes on the assignment—a decision that carried no small amount of risk. While Betty’s instructor rewarded her

innovation with an acceptable grade, we are left to consider how easily it might have been otherwise.

Three chapters in this collection explore resources that instructors of rhetoric and composition might draw on when helping students make sense of the relationship of their religious identity and their academic work. In “‘Attentive, Intelligent, Reasonable, and Responsible’: Teaching Composition with Bernard Lonergan,” Priscilla Perkins looks to the work of Lonergan, a Canadian Jesuit philosopher, for an approach to ethos that encourages students to take the time to internalize their argument before they attempt to persuade others. Furthermore, Perkins argues, when students attend to what they are learning and how it affects them, they also learn to attend to the ways their arguments might affect their readers. Perkins describes the difficulties that Tina, a Christian evangelical student, encountered as she struggled against the idea that she might have something to learn from course readings or her classmates.

In my chapter, “‘Ain’t We Got Fun?’: Teaching Writing in a Violent World,” I rely on the work of two contemporary Protestant theologians, Stanley Hauerwas and Miraslov Volf, to suggest strategies that teachers and students might use when they encounter ideas that they find odd or offensive. I look to Hauerwas’s narrative theology for the idea that when we recognize that our stories are nested in the stories of our communities and when we think of our voice as speaking for, through, and against that community, we find the courage to challenge the power of seemingly univocal stories. I look to Volf’s argument against the idea of religion as a private matter to find reasons to enact intellectual hospitality that invites the other in so that we can find a way to talk together and to learn to trust one another. In “A Question of Truth: Reading the Bible, Rhetoric, and Christian Tradition,” Beth Daniell considers student questions that might indicate that students are transferring ideas and experiences from fundamentalist Christian communities into the college classroom. Noting that a wide range of students ask the kinds of questions commonly associated with Christian fundamentalist students, Daniell suggests that the study of rhetorical theory draws all students into an exploration of the relationship between language and truth. Daniell lines out strategies that teachers can use when addressing questions that arise during that exploration, strategies that respect the theological and theoretical allegiances of both students and instructors. Drawing on the work of rhetoricians, Christian theologians, and biblical scholars, Daniell considers the rhetorical nature of not only the act of reading but also of Christian tradition itself.

In the final part, “Rhetoric in Christian Tradition,” authors Bruce Herzberg and Tom Amorose contemplate the troubled relationship of rhetoric and Christian tradition, tracing the complexities of interpretation and the interplay of religious and rhetorical traditions. In “The Jewish Context of Paul’s rhetoric,”

Herzberg demonstrates the Apostle Paul's use of Jewish forms of argumentation, uses that are consonant with the rabbinic tradition that Paul had been trained in. Herzberg lines out scholarship on Paul's rhetoric, scholarship that signals clear allegiance to Christian tradition, that ignores or dismisses the idea that Jewish argumentative traditions could inform our understanding of Paul's argumentative practices. Herzberg clears the way not only for fresh scholarly interpretation of Paul's arguments but also for new consideration of the ways that rhetors who may no longer feel strong allegiance to a particular religious tradition refurbish elements of that tradition to make effective arguments.

Amorose concludes the collection with his chapter "Resistance to Rhetoric in Christian Tradition," in which he provides a clear-eyed review of the challenges faced by scholars who accept Stanley Fish's coronation of religion as the successor of "high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy."²⁵ Amorose develops a convincing case for the argument that Christian tradition has resisted renovating rhetorical practices and consequently missed opportunities to make arguments that can renovate the human heart. Throughout his chapter, Amorose provides an invaluable roadmap for future scholars, pointing out difficulties inherent in any approach that proposes broad and easy intersections of rhetoric and Christianity (and rhetoric and religion generally) and directing scholars toward more productive questions that account for the social, historical, and cultural landscape of arguments.

So although the chapters in *Renovating Rhetoric in Christian Tradition* provoke as many questions (or more) than they can provide answers for, we hope that they fire the curiosity of our readers, compelling them to ask and seek answers for their own questions about rhetoric and Christian tradition.