The Rhetoric of Gay Christians: Matthew Vines and Reverend Nancy Wilson as Exemplars

Josu Miller
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Repository Citation
https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/grad_symposium/2014/april_21/9

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Research (GCUA) at Digital Scholarship@UNLV. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Symposium (GCUA) by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@unlv.edu.
The Rhetoric of Gay Christians: Matthew Vines and Reverend Nancy Wilson as Exemplars

Matthew Vines

Argument
In the conclusion of his speech, Vines’ rhetoric was prophetic because he admonished traditionalists for harming gay individuals with their biblical interpretations. However, Vines had to argue himself into his prophetic role, because traditionally gay individuals are excluded from religious traditions. He does this by establishing persuasive *ethopoeia* and by refuting traditional readings of the Bible.

Theoretical Development
My analysis of this speech complicates our understanding of the prophetic tradition, because, unlike previous scholarship, I contend that gay rights rhetoric can be prophetic. This is the first analysis that has ever applied the prophetic tradition to a rhetor that identifies as gay.

Ethopoeia is concerned with . . . the creation of persuasive ethos. It”

If a man or woman then their sexual orientation is a sign of the fall, a sign of human falleness and brokenness . . . Christians who are gay . . . are thus called to refrain from acting on those attractions, to deny themselves, to take up their crosses and to follow Christ.

Invitational rhetoric “offers an invitation to understanding— to enter another’s world to better understand an issue and say everything the individual who holds a particular perspective on it. Ultimately, its purpose is to provide the basis for the creation and maintenance of relationships of equality.”

“In Matthew 5, Jesus instructs that if someone makes you go one mile, go with them two miles. And so I’m going to ask you. Would you step into my shoes for a moment, and walk with me just one mile, even if it makes you a bit uncomfortable?”

Nancy Wilson

Argument
Wilson’s constitutive rhetoric creates her audience as *parhesiastea* (frank speakers) by addressing them as individuals that would act as such in the future. Specifically, she imagined her audience as a people that would boldly and frankly fight against Proposition 8, challenge violence against queers in Pakistan, spread the world of God to younger generations, and criticize those who condemned sexual and gender minorities.

Context
40th Anniversary of the Metropolitan Community Churches—the “first gay church”

Light as Truth, Proposition 8, Briggs Initiative, Anita Bryant, Bombings and Arsons, Pete Wilson’s vetoes, and HIV/AIDS

Theoretical Development
In rhetorical tradition, the term *parhesia* applies to an individual speaker. However, in religious traditions, the term *parhesia* can apply to a group of individuals. I align these two traditions to argue that Wilson constituted her audience as a group of *parhesia*—the *parhesiastea*.

Constitutive Rhetoric
Constitutive rhetoric creates a particular audience: the rhetor speaks that audience into existence. If “must constitute the identity” of a group of people “as it simultaneously presumes” that identity “to be prepurged and natural, existing outside of rhetoric.”

Analysis
“They [young people] are looking for people to change the world with, for a movement that cares about the things they care about—that is queer enough and radical enough to honor those who in 1968 risked lives and reputations to challenge the church, laws, nations so that those on the margins could have hope and community—people who knew then, as we know now, that Jesus does not discriminate.”

“Economy woes or challenges will not stop us. The religious right or fundamentalists in any culture will not stop us. AIDS will not stop us. Failure or success will not stop us. Death threats or bigots will not stop us. The light is on and it’s not going out.”

“We have a cloud of witnesses don’t we, watching tonight. Think of them right now. They are waiting for us to have the kind of courage it took to found MCC and to find it all over again, to fall in love with the impossible dream of a rainbow people of God. They hold up the light for many of us, and now it is our turn to hold it up for a new generation.”

Conclusion

**Quer/liberal approach as mutual reinforcing?**

Vines → Normalized Identity → Liberal Approach/“personhood” → Natural Rights Arguments

Wilson → Molarized Identity → Quer Approach/“queer hood” → Expediary Arguments

**The construction of a queer Christian archive**

“The history of GLBTQ discourse must be acknowledged, and engages, and taught, and written about—in short, circulated.”

“We ought not settle for scandalous visibility when there are major instrumental projects—including equal rights and protection in the workplace and in private life and a real fight against AIDS—that need real advocates, not mysterious figures from the past.”

Discussing how liberal and queer Christians counter traditionalists can serve instrumental projects by equipping rhetors with arguments they can deploy in public discourse to respond to traditionalist arguments.

Study Overview

In the United States, there is a perception that the gay rights debate situates Christians against gay rights advocates. According to this perception, Christians oppose gay rights, because the Bible condemns homosexuality as a sin, and those who support gay rights do so using purely secular arguments. This perception of the gay rights debate is flawed and overly simplistic, because simply not all Christians oppose gay rights. In fact, there are multiple interpretations of biblical texts that support homosexuality and have caused a gay rights debate within the church that is as complex and intricate as gay rights debates outside of the church. Within this debate, gay Christians must negotiate their own identities.

The Biblical Debate About Homosexuality

The Traditional Approach — “The Texts of Terror”

The Genesis creation story, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, the prohibitions of Leviticus, Saint Paul’s letters to the Romans and the Corinthians, and 1 Timothy 1:10. “If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death.” — Leviticus 20:13.

The Liberal Approach — Matthew Vines

Examples of Liberal Responses to Traditionalists

**Genesis:**

- There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”- Galatians 3:28

- Sodom and Gomorrah:
  - The sin is inhumanity.
  - The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was sexual violence.

- Leviticus:
  - It is a set of ceremonial laws which do not apply to individuals today.
  - It denounces same-sex temple prostitution
  - It is a prohibition against using another army when that army surrenders.

The Queer Approach — Reverend Nancy Wilson

The Eunuchs, David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi, and Jesus and his “Beloved Disciple.”

Ruth loved Naomi as Adam loved Eve.

*Genesis 2:24; Ruth 1:14*

“*I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan: You have been very pleasant to me: Your love to me was wonderful, surpassing the love of women.” — 2 Samuel 1:25-26

Wilson’s constituve rhetoric creates her audience as *parhesiastea* (frank speakers) by addressing them as individuals that would act as such in the future. Specifically, she imagined her audience as a people that would boldly and frankly fight against Proposition 8, challenge violence against queers in Pakistan, spread the world of God to younger generations, and criticize those who condemned sexual and gender minorities.

**Context**

40th Anniversary of the Metropolitan Community Churches—the “first gay church”

Light as Truth, Proposition 8, Briggs Initiative, Anita Bryant, Bombings and Arsons, Pete Wilson’s vetoes, and HIV/AIDS

**Theoretical Development**

In rhetorical tradition, the term *parhesia* applies to an individual speaker. However, in religious traditions, the term *parhesia* can apply to a group of individuals. I align these two traditions to argue that Wilson constituted her audience as a group of *parhesia*—the *parhesiastea*.

Constitutive Rhetoric

Constitutive rhetoric creates a particular audience: the rhetor speaks that audience into existence. If “must constitute the identity” of a group of people “as it simultaneously presumes” that identity “to be prepurged and natural, existing outside of rhetoric.”

Analysis

“They [young people] are looking for people to change the world with, for a movement that cares about the things they care about—that is queer enough and radical enough to honor those who in 1968 risked lives and reputations to challenge the church, laws, nations so that those on the margins could have hope and community—people who knew then, as we know now, that Jesus does not discriminate.”

“Economy woes or challenges will not stop us. The religious right or fundamentalists in any culture will not stop us. AIDS will not stop us. Failure or success will not stop us. Death threats or bigots will not stop us. The light is on and it’s not going out.”

“We have a cloud of witnesses don’t we, watching tonight. Think of them right now. They are waiting for us to have the kind of courage it took to found MCC and to find it all over again, to fall in love with the impossible dream of a rainbow people of God. They hold up the light for many of us, and now it is our turn to hold it up for a new generation.”

Conclusion

**Quer/liberal approach as mutual reinforcing?**

Vines → Normalized Identity → Liberal Approach/“personhood” → Natural Rights Arguments

Wilson → Molarized Identity → Quer Approach/“queer hood” → Expediary Arguments

**The construction of a queer Christian archive**

“The history of GLBTQ discourse must be acknowledged, and engages, and taught, and written about—in short, circulated.”

“We ought not settle for scandalous visibility when there are major instrumental projects—including equal rights and protection in the workplace and in private life and a real fight against AIDS—that need real advocates, not mysterious figures from the past.”

Discussing how liberal and queer Christians counter traditionalists can serve instrumental projects by equipping rhetors with arguments they can deploy in public discourse to respond to traditionalist arguments.

References:

- Wilson indicates that this term was first used by Walter E. Johnson to apply to biblical texts that were used to condemn gay and lesbian individuals. However, the term was originally coined by Phyllis Trible to refer to biblical passages that invoke gender violence. See Robert Evans, David E. Gowan, Michael T. Washington, Joseph V. Nye, and Phyllis Trible, Sex and Spirituality, Second Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).