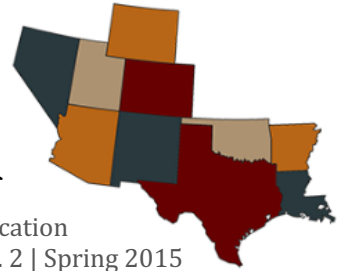


# Southwestern Mass Communication Journal



A journal of the Southwest Education Council for Journalism & Mass Communication

ISSN 0891-9186 | Vol. 30, No. 2 | Spring 2015

## Onward Christian Soldiers: How Arkansas Political Candidates Deploy Religious Texts to Motivate Voters

**Rich Shumate**

University of Arkansas- Little Rock

NO ABSTRACT

### **Suggested citation:**

Shumate, R. (2015). Onward Christian soldiers: How Arkansas political candidates deploy religious texts to motivate voters. *Southwestern Mass Communication Journal*, 30(2). Retrieved from <http://swecjmc.wp.txstate.edu>.

# The Southwestern Mass Communication Journal

*Spring 2015*  
*V. 30, No. 2*

The Southwestern Mass Communication Journal (ISSN 0891-9186) is published semi-annually by the Southwest Education Council for Journalism and Mass Communication.

<http://swmcjournal.com>

---

## **Also In This Issue:**

### **Anonymous Sources: More or less and why and where?**

Hoyt Purvis, University of Arkansas

### **Are You Talking To Me? The Social-Political Visual Rhetoric of the Syrian Presidency's Instagram Account**

Steven Holiday & Matthew J. Lewis, Brigham Young University  
Jack L. LaBaugh, Brigham Young University – Idaho

### **Comparative Advertising of Services**

Fred Beard, University of Oklahoma

### **Onward Christian Soldiers: How Arkansas Political Candidates Deploy Religious Texts to Motivate Voters**

Rich Shumate, University of Arkansas-Little Rock

### **The 2013 Steubenville Rape Case: An Examination of Framing in Newspapers and User-generated Content**

Mia Moody-Ramirez, Tonya Lewis & Ben Murray, Baylor University

### **Would Eye Lie to You?: Reexamining CBS' Reported Phone Response to "Murrow versus McCarthy"**

Ian Punnett, Arizona State University

Onward Christian Soldiers: How Arkansas Political Candidates  
Deploy Religious Texts to Motivate Voters

By Rich Shumate

University of Arkansas-Little Rock

**Introduction**

There is an old saying that two things polite people don't talk about around the dinner table are religion and politics, lest tempers flare and feelings get bruised. Certainly, then, deliberately combining religion and politics would seem at first blush to be beyond the pale, particularly in an officially secular country such as the United States, where the First Amendment of the Constitution commands Congress to "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Yet, on both the national and state levels, many candidates engage in religious expression as they court voters. This is true in the state of Arkansas, where, for example, in late 2013, U.S. Senator Mark Pryor aired a television commercial in which he held up a copy of the Bible, looked directly into the camera, and told voters it was his "North Star."

According to a survey of religious affiliations from the Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project, the percentage of adult Arkansans who identify themselves as evangelical Protestants is the highest of any state, at 53 percent, with an additional 10 percent identifying with historically black Protestant churches holding similarly conservative social views (Pew Research, 2007). Thus, political candidates in Arkansas are making their appeals in a state where 63 percent of the adult population subscribes to conservative Protestantism. Perhaps it is no great surprise, then, that candidates resort to using Christian-oriented texts and imagery during the

course of their campaigns. But to what degree do they do so, and how do they construct those appeals?

This research paper looks at the way political candidates for two statewide offices in Arkansas in 2014 – U.S. Senate and governor -- used Christian-oriented texts and imagery to communicate with and motivate voters, through a textual analysis of images and artifacts produced by these campaigns using two theoretical lenses, symbolic convergence theory and dissociation.

The five candidates in this study were U.S. Senator Mark Pryor, a Democrat running for re-election; U.S. Rep. Tom Cotton, a Republican running against Pryor for the Senate; Mike Ross, a Democrat seeking the state's open governorship; Asa Hutchinson, running for the Republican nomination for governor; and Curtis Coleman, also seeking the Republican gubernatorial nomination.

Pryor was running for a third term in the U.S. Senate as a Democrat in a state that had become substantially more Republican since he last ran in 2008. Cotton, a veteran of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan first elected to the U.S. House in 2012, opted to give up his House seat to challenge Pryor. The governor's post was open because the incumbent, Governor Mike Beebe, a Democrat, was term-limited. Ross and Hutchinson were both former members of the U.S. House, representing the southwestern and northwestern parts of Arkansas, respectively. Coleman, a businessman from Little Rock who ran unsuccessfully for the U.S. Senate in 2010, was trying to harness Tea Party support to win his first political office.

### **Literature Review**

Religiosity has a long history in American public life. As early as 1774, the First Continental Congress installed chaplains in both of its houses, and prayer was offered at George

Washington's first inauguration in 1787 (Medhurst, 2009). More recently, in 1976, Jimmy Carter, a Southern Baptist Sunday school teacher from Plains, Georgia, courted evangelical voters by making overt references to his personal faith during his campaign for the White House. For Carter's gambit to work, a natural constituency would have to exist that could be swayed by such an appeal, and conditions would have to be right for the public to be amenable to it (Hahn, 1980). However, there is a flip side to this coin; namely, the fear that naked appeals to evangelical voters might turn off non-evangelicals who were uneasy with putting someone with Carter's religious views in the White House. Carter navigated this by establishing, through his rhetoric, a double standard which held that it was appropriate to vote for someone because of his religion but inappropriate to vote against him for the same reason (Hahn, 1980). In using this approach, then, candidates who want to court religious voters with overtly Christian messages must also be careful to make those appeals in ways that will not alienate voters who are uneasy with such appeals.

Hart (1977) explained America's civic piety as a contract between government and organized religion, in which each side agrees to maintain pretense of separation between church and state. Under this contract, government refrains from being overly religious, while organized religion refrains from being overly political, and both sides keep the terms of the contract away from the public. Thus, a country that is simultaneously religious and secular can reconcile the cognitive dissonance flowing from this inherent paradox.

Medhurst (2009) developed a framework for discussions of mixing religious themes and imagery into civic discourse, which asks if talk about religion is either necessary or desirable in American politics; what aspects of religion are relevant to the political process if such talk is necessary or desirable; if some aspects or uses of religion are simply inappropriate; how to

reconcile the constitutional issues of free speech and free exercise of religion with the equally constitutional issues of no religious test and no establishment of religion; and how religious and democratic attitudes toward truth, knowledge, virtue and belief can be reconciled.

In 2007, during his first campaign for president, Republican Mitt Romney gave what has been dubbed the “Faith in America” speech in an effort to deflect concerns about his Mormonism (Medhurst, 2009). In the speech, Romney defended the inclusion of faith in public life (answering yes to Medhurst’s first question), although he insisted he would not try to interject his own Mormon faith in the public sphere if elected president (attempting to address the fourth.) Analyzing the media’s reaction, Medhurst found substantial criticism of Romney’s remarks and a consensus “that religious questions are not generally appropriate for a political campaign” (Medhurst, 2009, p. 210). However, this media reaction was at odds with polls showing that a vast majority of Americans find faith and religious belief important to leadership and believe they are appropriate topics for debate (Medhurst, 2009). This type of polling information is what, almost certainly, creates the assumption among candidates in Arkansas and elsewhere that they can benefit by engaging in the ritual of using religious themes in their political communication with voters.

A campaign is, in essence, a courtship between candidates and voters, and “potential supporters must be aware of the candidates in terms of characteristics that the supporters deem important” (Nesbit, 1988, p. 19). Political consultants describe this process as “cue value,” which involves creating narratives that distinguish candidates from their opponents (Nesbit, 1988). In a state such as Arkansas, where evangelical Protestants are a majority, using Christian texts and imagery is a way to build “cue value” and facilitate the courtship between candidate and voter.

So if religiosity has an important and enduring place in American political life, how can its use by candidates be analyzed? In this study, symbolic convergence theory and its associated critical method, fantasy theme analysis, are employed. Symbolic convergence is a dynamic process through which people, by sharing particular fantasy themes in texts or oral messages, create a common social reality to explain their collective experience, using narrative accounts, metaphors, irony and word play (Bormann, 1982). Symbolic convergence theory is based on two assumptions – first, that communication creates reality and, second, that the meanings individuals attach to symbols converge to create a shared reality or community consciousness (Foss, 2009). As used here, fantasy doesn't mean something imaginary or not grounded in reality; rather, it refers to “the imaginative and creative interpretation of events that fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need” (Bormann, 1982, p. 52). Through this process, values are tested and legitimized for the group, and individual fantasy themes then work together to build a rhetorical vision that creates a symbolic reality for the participants (Bormann, 1972).

This phenomenon was cited by Bishop (2006) in his analysis of how fantasy themes found in news coverage of Fred Rogers (“Mr. Rogers”) created a rhetorical vision of him as the world’s nicest grown-up. An analysis by Duffy (2003) of fantasy themes created by racist hate groups online found that they were effective in creating a community, despite employing narratives that were historically inaccurate and immoral. “For those participating in the drama of these rhetorical visions, they constitute a shining vision of hope and renewal. Individuals who feel marginalized by society, victimized by an unfair economic system, and beset by forces beyond their control can participate in a stirring drama of Biblical proportions. They can be one of the Chosen People” (Duffy, 2003, p. 307).

The process of assessing rhetorical visions in political discourse is also informed by Lakoff (2002), who isolated two models around which political discourse revolves: the Strict Father model, which is derived from the traditional nuclear family and holds strength, discipline, and self-reliance as paramount, and the Nurturing Parent model, in which values such as love, empathy, and nurturance hold sway. Conservative Christians apply the Strict Father model to politics by linking their religious system of moral accounting with free-market economics, believing that if each person observes the rules and pursues his or her own self-interest, individual self-interest will be maximized. By contrast, the Nurturing Parent model holds that empathy and compassionate actions supplant strict rules. These two different ways of looking at the moral universe, then, help shape different rhetorical visions for conservatives and liberals – and, by extension, Republicans and Democrats – across a wide variety of issues. This led to the following research question with regard to the two statewide campaigns in 2014 in Arkansas that were studied here:

- RQ1: Do the rhetorical visions of the Democratic candidates reflect the Nurturing Parent model and the rhetorical visions of the Republican candidates reflect the Strict Father model?

Using symbolic convergence theory and Lakoff's framework, Page and Duffy (2009) analyzed political campaign advertising in a 2006 Senate race in Missouri between Democrat Claire McCaskill and Republican Jim Talent, isolating 14 separate fantasy themes. Their goal was "to understand and assess the rhetorical visions of the candidates and describe the social reality the candidates are asking voters to embrace" (Page and Duffy, 2009, p. 131). Using fantasy themes to understand rhetorical vision involves analyzing the themes and looking for patterns, with those patterns appearing most frequently identified as major themes that become



the subject of the analysis and those patterns appearing infrequently discarded as unimportant elements of the rhetorical vision (Foss, 2009).

Page and Duffy looked at fantasy themes broadly related to morality, rather than focusing specifically on religious themes, although some of the fantasy themes did touch on religious impulses. However, their approach in applying symbolic convergence theory to political advertising, as well as their use of Lakoff's Strict Father and Nurturing Parent models, can be adapted to look more specifically at Christian-oriented religious themes in political communication.

In this study, symbolic convergence theory leads to three additional research questions:

- RQ2: How are the candidates using Christian-oriented messaging and imagery to create fantasy themes, and what fantasy themes are they creating?
- RQ3: What rhetorical visions are the candidates trying to create with those fantasy themes?
- RQ4: Do party labels affect candidates' use of Christian-oriented messaging and imagery?

Another method candidates use to make religious appeals in a fashion that broadens their voter base and respects constitutional limits is dissociation. Dissociation, as it pertains to communication, involves altering the presentation of a message "to remove an incompatibility arising out of the confrontation of one proposition with others, whether one is dealing with norms, facts, or truths" (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 413). Through this process, an appearance of reality is created that is distinct from the reality itself, which can then allow the recipient of a message to reconcile contradictions arising within that reality (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). In essence, dissociation is a solution that can be employed when

incompatibilities require alternation of conventional thinking (Perelman, 1979). Lee and Lee (1939) identified the use of what they termed “glittering generalities” in propaganda, in which words that can mean different things to different people – including terms such as “democracy” and “Christianity” – are deliberately employed to make people more receptive to messages, which facilitates the dissociation process.

An example of dissociation in a political context took place in California in 1998, when Ron Unz, the sponsor of a ballot initiative to outlaw bilingual education, used rhetorical dissociation to blunt opposition from the immigrant community by moving the debate away from the benefits of students learning in their native language and, instead, shifting the debate to the benefits of forcing them to learn English (Cisneros, 2007). “By transcending the traditional framework of language policy as a tool of assimilation into the white, American mainstream, Unz was able to paint his initiative as an alternative that truly served the best interests of immigrant minorities by ensuring them English instruction” (Cisneros, 2007, p. 4). Dissociation has also been used in the debate over same-sex marriage, where organizations opposed to marriage equality framed their messages as abstract discussions about the meaning of marriage, rather than social animus toward gay and lesbian Americans (Cloud, 2014). In the 2012 U.S. presidential race, the campaigns of both Democratic President Barack Obama and his Republican challenger, Mitt Romney, used dissociation in their religious appeals along a binary of faith versus works (Maddux, 2013). While evangelical Christian activists in the 1980s and 1990s judged candidates by their willingness to embrace particular positions on issues such as abortion, evolution, and homosexuality, in 2012, the campaigns of both Romney and Obama took a different approach; namely, stressing how Christian merit is based on acts of mercy. Thus, both

campaigns sought to build a broader base of religious voters by minimizing doctrinal differences (Maddux, 2013).

Dissociation, then, can be a powerful – perhaps even vital – tool for candidates trying to make religious-based appeals if their own religious faith or political positions appear to be at odds with the moral concerns of those voters mostly likely to be swayed by a religious appeal. Likewise, candidates who want to make appeals to the public’s religiosity can broaden them for consumption by the largest possible audience. Dissociation resolves the incompatibility between making an appeal based on faith without making an overt expression of faith that might alienate some voters, thus allowing candidates to make a faith appeal without mentioning faith itself.

This study examines the use of dissociation to answer a final research question:

- RQ5: How are the candidates using dissociative logic in their Christian-oriented messaging, including use of the terms “faith,” “values,” and “Arkansas values,” to create an appeal that goes beyond rigid dogma?

### **Methodology**

Texts and artifacts generated by all five campaigns between August 2013, when Cotton became the first of the five candidates to announce his candidacy, and April 2014, when the study concluded, were collected and analyzed. The artifacts included TV advertisements aired by the campaigns, which were collected from YouTube and campaign Web sites; promotional videos posted on campaign Web sites; texts, including promotional texts and press releases, posted on campaign Web sites; interviews given by the candidates, obtained either from the campaign Web site or from the news organization that conducted the interview. Because one of the goals of this study was to ascertain the degree to which Christian and religious themes were being employed, the sample collected included all available artifacts. In all, 20 artifacts were

collected and analyzed from the five campaigns: four each from Pryor and Cotton; three each from Ross and Hutchinson; and six from Coleman.

To discover fantasy themes and delineate a rhetorical vision, evidence related to the content of the communication is collected, including video or audio tapes, manuscripts, observations and recollections of participants (Cragan & Shields, 1981). Analysis of the collected evidence must take into account that visual and textual documents are created in a specific context by particular people with particular purposes, generating intended and unintended consequences (Manson, 2002). In this analysis, all of the texts and artifacts are constructed in the same context (a political campaign), by the same types of people (candidates and political handlers), for the same purpose (to win an election.) Therefore, these texts and artifacts have the commonality needed to warrant comparison because they all represent an active decision by a campaign to try to send a message or create an impression. These texts and artifacts were also easily obtainable and amenable to textual analysis.

A key question to ask in deciding what to look for in gathering data is whether the artifacts can address, in both an ontological and epistemological sense, the intellectual puzzle being solved (Manson, 2002). With that question in mind, this study looked for instances of overt Christian messaging, such as use or display of the Bible or direct quotes from Scripture; non-overt religious messaging, such as references to God that were not specifically Christian or scenes of people praying; and faith/values messaging, such as references to faith and values that were not specifically religious but had a religious inference.

Texts and artifacts were examined to identify instances in which candidates chose to produce religious-based messages and define the fantasy themes and rhetorical visions arising from them (RQ2 and RQ3); distinguish between texts and imagery generated by Democratic

candidates and those generated by Republicans (RQ4); differentiate between the degrees of religiosity exhibited in the texts and imagery (RQ2, RQ3 and RQ5); and determine if party affiliation affected a candidate's adherence to either the Strict Father or Nurturing Parent model of political discourse (RQ1).

### **Findings**

All five of the candidates used Christian and religious texts and themes in their campaign communications. However, there were distinct differences in the degree to which candidates employed religiosity, how they constructed religious-based fantasy themes, the rhetorical visions they tried to create, and their use of dissociation.

Of all of the candidates, Pryor employed the most overt Christian messaging. The opening ad of his campaign, which aired throughout December 2013, was entitled "What I Believe." In it, Pryor was shown sitting in a chair in a dimly lit living room, dressed in an open-necked, buttoned-down red shirt with what appeared to be a Bible open in his hands. "I'm not ashamed to say that I believe in God, and I believe in his Word," Pryor said. The screen then faded to black and the words "Mark Pryor" appeared on the screen. Then, Pryor returned in a tighter shot, with the Bible now closed. "The Bible teaches us that no one has all the answers, only God does, and neither political party is always right," he said. The camera faded to black again, and the words "What I Believe" appeared on the screen. When the shot returned to Pryor, he was holding the Bible by the edge, gesturing with it toward the camera. "This is my compass, my North Star," he said, as the camera panned in more closely. "It gives me comfort and guidance to do what's best for Arkansas. I'm Mark Pryor, and I approved this message because this is who I am and what I believe."

From his first sentence, Pryor was clearly trying to get the audience to identify with him by saying he was “not ashamed” to be a Christian and pronouncing his belief in the Bible, establishing the fantasy themes as a candidate who was devout, faithful, and righteous. Then, in the next sentence, he conflated his religious pronouncements with politics by saying the Bible teaches “neither political party is right” and it was his “compass,” establishing the fantasy theme as a candidate whose politics were grounded in his Christian faith. Then he brought these points home once again when he extended the mandatory tag line – “I’m Mark Pryor, and I approved this message ...” – to add “because this is who I am and what I believe.”

Pryor’s overt Christian messaging also extended to his campaign Web site. Under a navigation tab entitled “Meet Mark,” a biography of the senator appeared in which the word “faith” was used in the headline and four times in the body text. “Mark’s Christian faith has instilled in him values that shape his life,” the first sentence read. The third paragraph noted “Mark’s faith was the bedrock of his life when he fought a life-threatening type of cancer nearly 20 years ago.” Also, “Mark’s deep sense of responsibility in how we govern stems from his personal foundation of faith.” The first sentence of the final paragraph read, “Values grounded in his Christian faith, tested by his own successful battle with cancer, and applied on a daily basis to his work on behalf of the people of Arkansas, Mark Pryor ignores partisan politics to do the very best for the people of Arkansas.” As in the television ad, Pryor portrayed himself as a candidate who was faithful and grounded, which informed his work as a senator.

Another example of Pryor’s religious posturing was a March 17, 2014, interview with the Web site Politico, which centered on his pedigree as a member a famous Arkansas political family. (His father, David, is a former governor and U.S. senator.) “In Proverbs, it says a good name is worth more than great riches,” Pryor said. “I feel like that ought to be my verse for life

because I've really been blessed with a good name" (Hohmann, 2014). His paraphrased quote is from the Bible, specifically Proverbs 22:1: "A good name is to be more desired than great wealth." So even when answering a question that had nothing to do with religious faith, Pryor chose to use a Biblical quotation, portraying himself as a candidate who was grounded and thankful.

The rhetorical vision Pryor created was of a man whose life and work as a senator were grounded in a sincere and deeply-felt Christian faith. The images and language were very direct and personal, but they were not specific to any particular denomination. Indeed, from an analysis of his campaign texts alone, one could not determine to what faith tradition he adheres, beyond the fact he is a Christian. Pryor's rhetoric, in which he links his faith to his desire to serve Arkansans' interests in the Senate and ties it to his battle with cancer, clearly followed the Nurturing Parent model.

Pryor's Republican opponent, Tom Cotton, did not employ Christian or religious themes to nearly the same degree as Pryor. And when he did, they were mostly employed to make rhetorical points against Pryor, rather than talking about his own faith.

In a television ad entitled "Phony as a Three-Dollar Bill," which aired in April 2014, Cotton disputed an earlier attack ad from an outside group, the Senate Majority PAC, which charged that earlier in his career, Cotton had worked as a consultant on behalf of insurance companies. After highlighting media coverage from the *Washington Post* and *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* disputing the charges made in the ad, Cotton's ad ended with this tagline: "After 24 years in politics, Mark Pryor has become unfaithful to the truth." There were, of course, any number of ways the Cotton campaign could have called the ad untruthful, so the choice of the word "unfaithful" was telling, given Pryor's emphasis on his faithfulness. Rather

than rolling out a fantasy theme of himself as a faithful candidate, Cotton chose instead to paint the opposite picture of his opponent – even though Pryor’s campaign was not actually behind the ad Cotton was criticizing.

Cotton also chose to develop a contrast with Pryor on specific political issue near and dear to many politically active religious conservatives – a bill pending in Congress to change the Affordable Care Act to prohibit the federal government from forcing an individual to purchase health insurance covering services to which they have a moral or religious objection, including abortion and contraception. Cotton was a co-sponsor of this measure in the House; Pryor did not take a position.

In a radio interview with Tony Perkins, head of the conservative Family Research Council, on January 10, 2014, Cotton said, “Freedom of religion is about more than the way we worship in church on Sunday morning or on Wednesday night. It’s about the way we live out our lives, and that includes our lives in the workplace, or our lives when we choose our health insurance plans. And I think it is deeply offensive that the (Obama) administration, through Obamacare regulations, are forcing people who are opposed to abortion to pay for it or subsidize it, whether it’s for themselves or for others. That, I think, deeply violates every American’s freedom of conscience, even if you don’t object to abortion, because if they can violate your freedom of conscience on this matter, then it might be your freedom of conscience on another matter next ... If the government is willing to violate the freedom of conscience of Catholics, then Baptists or Methodists or Lutherans or anyone else could be next. And that’s why we have to stand for the freedom of religion for every faith in America.” Thus, Cotton was creating a fantasy theme as a candidate who stands up for religious freedom. And while he used language to broaden the message beyond an evangelical audience by mentioning Catholics and Lutherans,



he also clearly aimed for evangelicals by talking about worshipping on “Wednesday night,” which is a common time for church services in many evangelical denominations.

Though Cotton didn’t mention Pryor in this interview, on the same day it aired, his campaign posted a press release in which he called on Pryor “to stand on the side of religious freedom rather than protecting President Obama’s prized health care law at all costs.” Thus, while portraying himself as a candidate who will stand for religious freedom, he cast Pryor as a candidate who won’t, while also managing to tie this fantasy theme to Obamacare, a central issue in the Senate campaign.

While Cotton used religious themes to draw contrasts with Pryor, he did not directly use them to talk about himself; indeed, Cotton’s campaign highlighted his military service to the exclusion of his personal faith. However, in a television ad called “Infantry,” which aired in November and December 2013, Cotton’s mother, Avis Cotton, gave her son a testimonial. She was shown sitting in front of a Christmas tree, holding a photo album in her hands. “It was Christmas. I was a newlywed and alone,” she said. The shot cut to a woman’s hand moving over a photo album containing old pictures. “Lynn (Cotton) was in Vietnam, but Christmas was harder when our son was in Afghanistan,” she said. The shot then moved to a montage of photos taken of Cotton in uniform while he was in the U.S. Army. “Tom has a passion to serve our country ...” Mrs. Cotton’s message here was that her son was a candidate willing to make sacrifices -- to the point of choosing to be away from his family at Christmas -- in the service of his country.

The rhetorical vision Cotton created would seem at first blush more about Pryor than himself: Pryor as a candidate was unfaithful, untruthful, and unwilling to stand up to defend religious faith. Yet, Cotton used those characterizations to contrast himself with Pryor, in effect

creating a rhetorical vision that, unlike Pryor, he would be a strong, dedicated senator upon whom Arkansas Christians can depend. Cotton used religious discourse indirectly to reflect on Pryor, rather than talking about his own faith. His rhetorical vision clearly adhered to the Strict Father model – a masculine image of strength, rather than a more feminine image of nurturing.

In the race for governor, the lone major Democratic candidate, Mike Ross, employed direct religious imagery, although not to the extent Pryor did. At the beginning of a two-minute video entitled “What Do We Love About Arkansas?” posted by his campaign in April 2013, Ross’s voice was heard off camera: “What do we love about Arkansas?...” which segued to shots of a girl getting a drink out of a water fountain, crops in a field, and a sunset over a river. “... the land, our neighbors caring about neighbors, our faith ...” At this point, the video showed a pair of hands holding an open Bible with stained-glass windows in the background. “... our safety and everybody’s opportunity to get ahead.” Thus, Ross conflated Christian faith with other bedrock parts of Arkansas life, such as young children, agriculture, scenery, and neighborliness. He went on to say “my grandparents taught me the values of hard work and personal responsibility” and his parents, who were both teachers, “taught me the value of a good education.” Toward the end of the video, Ross can be seen in the left side of the shot, sitting around a kitchen table with an empty plate in front of him, holding hands with a young boy who was the focus of the shot and other unidentified people who were just out of camera range. The representation here was of Ross and (presumably) his family saying grace together before a meal. “As your governor, I’ll never stop fighting for the common sense Arkansas values that we were raised on and still believe in,” he said. Thus, the Christian act of showing gratitude was linked to “values” Arkansans “believe in.” The fantasy themes expressed here were that the

candidate was devout, faithful, and grounded. This video also dissociated an overt Christian message into a broader discourse of “values.”

The same shot of Ross saying grace at the kitchen table was used in his first television ad, which began airing in January 2014. In this ad, as the grace shot is shown, the words “Married for 30 Years” came across the screen, linking texts of faithfulness and groundedness to Christian faith. Ross did not narrate this ad; his voice was heard only at the end, saying, “I’ll never stop fighting for the common sense Arkansas values that we were raised on and still believe in.”

Ross’s rhetorical vision was that of a man who shares the same experiences and values of the people of Arkansas -- grounded in Christian faith – and would bring those values with him in his role as governor. The use of religious texts was personal but largely indirect and somewhat dissociative. The only direct mention of Ross’s own faith tradition was in the biography on his campaign Web site, which noted he and his wife are members of the Pulaski Heights United Methodist Church in Little Rock. Like Pryor, Ross’s rhetorical vision adhered to the Nurturing Parent model by linking his desire to help Arkansans as governor to his Christian faith.

Of all of the candidates studied, Asa Hutchinson, a Republican candidate for governor, made the least use of religious texts, and all of them were used dissociatively. In a promotional video posted on his campaign Web site, which was later adapted into his first television ad, Hutchinson said, “Arkansas’s next governor will have to stand up to Washington liberals like President Obama and Nancy Pelosi. I’m Asa Hutchinson, and I’ve fought for conservative ideals all my life, like tax cuts for middle class families. I’ve always defended the sanctity of life, never wavered. And I believe in the Second Amendment, just what it says. And Obamacare? I’ve always opposed it, always will. I’ll be a governor with Arkansas values and Arkansas common sense.” Thus, Hutchinson equated “values” with secular political issues, such as gun rights, tax

cuts, and Obamacare. With the exception of his comment about defending the “sanctity of life,” none of these issues was religious in nature. Yet, by linking them with the term “values,” which has an inherent religious connotation, he created a fantasy theme as a candidate grounded in something beyond mere political belief.

His campaign posted another promotional video on its Web site, entitled “Asa on Values.” He was shown sitting in a dining room, wearing a white buttoned-down shirt open at the collar, which set him off in the frame against a darker background. “My values were shaped growing up on the farm, where you learned the importance of hard work and initiative and responsibility, helping your neighbors, the importance of community and faith,” he said. “These are the values I learned, and they have shaped both my private life and my public service as well. And these are the values that I will take into my role as governor.” Here, Hutchinson made a direct link between “values” and “faith,” listing the latter as an ingredient of the former. Thus, he created the fantasy theme as a candidate grounded in values rooted in faith.

The rhetorical vision created by Hutchinson was as a man grounded in a faith that not only informed his stances on political issues but would also undergird his actions as governor. The religious discourse used here was more subtle and dissociative than Ross. The only mention of Hutchinson’s own faith tradition was in a biography of his wife, Susan, who “volunteered as a teacher at a Christian school in Bentonville until she was expecting their first child.” Hutchinson’s rhetorical vision adhered to the Strict Father model, particularly in his use of action phrases such as “stand up,” “fight,” and “defend.”

In contrast to Hutchinson and Ross, the other Republican in the race, Curtis Coleman, was more overt and specific in his use of Christian texts. His biography on his campaign Web site noted he “studied in the Master of Divinity Program at Southwestern Baptist Theological

Seminary in Fort Worth TX,” which is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention.

According to the seminary’s Web site, it “equips men and women with a strong theological foundation to fulfill God’s calling on their lives. Rooted in Scripture and branching out to fulfill the Great Commission, Southwestern’s motto is ‘Preach the Word, Reach the World’”

(Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014). The biography also noted Curtis and his wife, Kathryn are “active” members of Little Rock’s First Baptist Church. The fantasy themes articulated here were the candidate as devout, righteous, and faithful.

In a speech announcing his candidacy for governor in February 2013, Coleman said, “if necessary, I will stand on the border of our state and say, ‘No. Not in Arkansas,’ to a federal government that would attempt to infringe or destroy those fundamental rights guaranteed to us by our Creator, including and especially the right to keep and bear arms.” In this instance, Coleman cast American political rights as gifts from God, rather than flowing from the Constitution. Thus, he cast himself not only as a candidate who is devout but as a candidate willing to fight, if necessary, to defend gifts given by the Creator.

On his campaign Web site, under a tab labeled “Marriage,” Curtis also made this statement: “God instituted and defined marriage as between a man and a woman before He instituted government. Government has no authority to redefine an institution that predated it.” In essence, Coleman asserted same-sex marriage cannot be a political matter because, in his view, God has already settled the issue. The fantasy theme here was not only that he was a candidate who would defend religious belief, but he was also an authority on its interpretation.

Coleman also issued the following press release saluting Christmas 2013: “Ten little toes on two little feet. A perfect little baby ... perfect in more ways than could be seen. ‘And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only

begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.’ John 1:14. Who besides the Father knew that crude Roman spikes would some day tear the flesh and sinew of those two little hands and two little feet? And so we can join with the shepherds and sing from our own redeemed hearts, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on Earth, peace, good will toward men! Your friendship is one of those special gifts for which Kathryn and I are so thankful ... and what has continued to fuel our desire to serve you and the people of Arkansas!’” Here, Coleman’s expression of his devout Christian faith was linked to his thankfulness for his supporters, which was in turn linked to his desire to serve as governor.

Coleman also issued this press release saluting the National Day of Prayer: “Our country’s rich heritage was born in prayer, and if we are to continue that which our Founders gifted us, we must continue to bathe our homes, our schools, our families, our government, and our nation in fervent prayer. Religious freedom and reliance on God are the cultural foundation for most Americans and Arkansans. It is enormously important that, as a nation, at least once a year we focus our hearts and minds on Almighty God, but it is equally important that prayer is the hallmark of our daily lives.” By linking the continuation of “that which our Founders gifted us” to “fervent prayer,” Coleman conflated politics with religion in a way that once again made him a voice of interpretive authority. The “cultural foundation” for Arkansas is “religious freedom and reliance on God,” asserting that those two things go together, even though religious freedom, for some people, might not include God at all. Coleman went on to prescribe daily prayer as “enormously important.”

More than the other four candidates, Coleman created a rhetorical vision of himself as a man who was devout, righteous, and faithful and was not afraid to express his deeply held beliefs with authority. His vision was direct, personal, and not the least bit dissociative. His own

personal Baptist faith was central and discernible. He painted himself clearly as a Strict Father, with strong opinions grounded in what he sees as absolute truths.

**Chart 1: Use of Fantasy Themes**

<b><u>Pryor</u></b>	<b><u>Cotton</u></b>	<b><u>Ross</u></b>	<b><u>Hutchinson</u></b>	<b><u>Coleman</u></b>
Candidate is devout	Opponent is unfaithful	Candidate is devout	Candidate's values are grounded in faith	Candidate is devout
Candidate is faithful	Candidate is a defender of faith	Candidate is faithful	Candidate's politics are grounded in values	Candidate is faithful
Candidate is righteous	Opponent won't defend faith	Candidate's politics are grounded in faith		Candidate is righteous
Candidate's politics are grounded in faith		Candidate is thankful		Candidate's politics are grounded in faith
Candidate is thankful				Candidate is a defender of faith
				Candidate is thankful
				Candidate is an authority on faith

**Chart 2: Use of Dissociation/Model of Discourse**

<b><u>Pryor</u></b>	<b><u>Cotton</u></b>	<b><u>Ross</u></b>	<b><u>Hutchinson</u></b>	<b><u>Coleman</u></b>
Little dissociation	No dissociation	Dissociation	Dissociation	No dissociation
Nurturing Parent	Strict Father	Nurturing Parent	Strict Father	Strict Father

**Discussion**

RQ2, RQ3, and RQ5 asked how the candidates used Christian-oriented messaging and imagery to create fantasy themes, what fantasy themes they created, what rhetorical visions

flowed from those fantasy themes, and how the candidates used dissociative logic in their Christian-oriented messaging, including use of the terms “faith,” “values,” and “Arkansas values,” to create an appeal that goes beyond rigid dogma.

Each of these five candidates employed Christian and religious texts and imagery and dissociation in distinct ways. Pryor offered a highly personal vision of a man whose life and work as a senator were grounded in a sincere and deeply felt Christian faith. Cotton offered an indirect vision of himself as a strong candidate for Arkansas Christians by creating a contrast with Pryor, whom he depicted as unfaithful, untruthful, and unable to defend faith. Ross, like Pryor, offered a personal, though more dissociative, vision of himself as a man grounded in Christian faith who shared the values of the people of Arkansas and would bring those values with him to the governor’s mansion. Like Ross, Hutchinson offered a vision of a candidate grounded in a faith that informed his political views and would undergird his actions as governor, but he didn’t articulate those values as specifically Christian. Coleman alone offered a muscular, unvarnished vision of himself as Christian of strongly held beliefs inseparable from his political worldview. Pryor and Coleman made the least use of dissociative logic; Hutchinson, the most. Cotton, uniquely, focused on his opponent rather than himself, making dissociation unnecessary.

RQ4 asked if party labels affected candidates’ use of Christian-oriented messaging and imagery. Clearly, the two Democrats running in these races, Pryor and Ross, felt the need to use direct Christian messaging and imagery in their campaigns, while two of the Republicans, Cotton and Hutchinson, did not. The third Republican, Coleman, directly employed Christian texts in his speeches and press releases, but he did not use Christian imagery in his video materials. There was no direct correlation between party label and the degree of Christian-oriented messaging and



imagery. However, it should be noted that after the completion of this study, Coleman was eliminated in the Republican primary, and of the remaining four candidates, there was a correlation between party and the degree of Christian-oriented messaging used, with the Democrats using more than the Republicans.

RQ1 asked if Democratic candidates would adhere to the Nurturing Parent model and Republicans would align with the Strict Father model. The proposition was supported, although that finding cannot be generalized beyond these two Arkansas races.

### **Avenues for Future Study**

As a textual analysis, this study was limited to identifying and analyzing Christian imagery and texts used in these campaigns and extrapolating the rhetorical visions the candidates were trying to create. Thus, this analysis could not answer a larger, and perhaps more important, question: Do these rhetorical visions actually work in persuading voters to support the candidates? Clearly, all of these candidates feel the need to engage in this practice, on the assumption it is necessary because Arkansas's electorate is overwhelmingly Christian. But investigating if this assumption is warranted is an avenue for future study. This could be done with focus groups to gauge reactions to exposure to Christian texts, or perhaps with an experiment in which the reactions of voters shown Christian texts could be compared with those of a control group.

### **Election Results**

In the November election, after this study was completed, Cotton defeated Pryor and Hutchinson defeated Ross, part of a Republican wave that gave the GOP a clean sweep of every statewide elected office in Arkansas for the first time since Reconstruction.

### **References**

- Bishop, R. (2006). The world's nicest grown-up: A fantasy theme analysis of news media coverage of Fred Rogers. *Journal of Communication, 51*(1), 16-31.
- Bormann, E. G. (1972). Fantasy and rhetorical vision: The rhetorical criticism of social reality. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 58*(4), 396-407.
- Bormann, E. M. (1982). The symbolic convergence theory of communication: Applications and implications for teachers and consultants. *Journal of Applied Communication, 10*(1), 50-61.
- Cisneros, J. (2007, November) "*Bilingual in name only*": *Dissociation, conspiracy rhetoric, and the campaign for California Proposition 227*. Paper presented at the National Communication Association Conference, Chicago, IL.
- Cloud, D. (2014). The social consequences of dissociation: Lessons from the same-sex marriage debate. *Argumentation and Advocacy, 50*, 157-167.
- Cragan, J. F., & Shields, D. C. (1981). *Applied Communication Research*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.
- Duffy, M. E. (2003). Web of hate: A fantasy theme analysis of the rhetorical vision of hate groups online. *Journal of Communication Inquiry, 27*(3), 291-312.
- Foss, S. K. (2009). *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.
- Hahn, D. F. (1980). One's reborn every minute: Carter's religious appeal in 1976. *Communication Quarterly, 28*(3), 56-62
- Hart, R. P. (1977). *The Political Pulpit*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press.
- Hohmann, J. (2014, March 17). Democratic legacies on line in November. *Politico*. Retrieved from <http://www.politico.com/story/2014/03/democratic-legacies-2014-elections->

104702.html

- Lakoff, G. (2002). *Moral Politics* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lee, A. M., & Lee, E. B. (1939). *The fine art of propaganda; A study of Father Coughlin's speeches*. New York: Harcourt Brace and Company.
- Maddux, K. (2013). Religious dissociation in 2012 campaign discourse. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 16(2), 355-368.
- Manson, J. (2002). *Qualitative Researching*. (2nd ed.). London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Medhurst, M. J. (2009). Mitt Romney, "Faith in America," and the dance of religion and politics in American culture. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 12(2), 195-221.
- Nesbit, D. D. (1988). *Videostyle in Senate Campaigns*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press.
- Page, J. T., & Duffy, M. E. (2009). A battle of visions: Dueling images of morality in U.S. political campaign TV Ads. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 2(1), 110-135.
- Perelman, C. H., & Olbrechts-Tyteca, L. *The New Rhetoric*. (1969). Notre Dame, London: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Perelman, C. H. (1979). *The New Rhetoric and the Humanities*. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company.
- Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project: Religious Landscape Survey. (2007, August). Retrieved April 9, 2014, from <http://religions.pewforum.org/maps>
- Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary/About Us. (n.d.). Retrieved April 23, 2014, from <http://swbts.edu/about/>