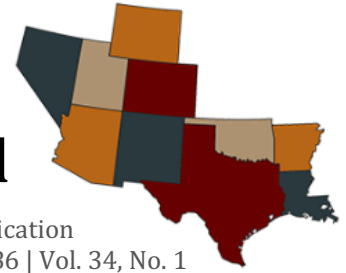


Southwestern Mass Communication Journal



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

ISSN 0891-9186 | Vol. 34, No. 1

Transcending Media Framing of Candidate Religiosity: The Religio-Rhetorical Discourse of John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama

Scott Anderson, Ph.D.
Arkansas State University

Jonathan M. Smith
University of Memphis

This essay explores the ways in which presidential candidates respond when the news media frame their religious beliefs as subversive to American democratic values. Using John F. Kennedy's "Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association" and Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union" speech as case studies for analysis, we argue that Kennedy and Obama employed what Kenneth Burke referred to as familial and dialectical substance to overcome their respective controversies. While Kennedy reaffirmed his national allegiance by associating religious freedom with American values, Obama created dialectical tension to frame the controversy surrounding his candidacy from an alternative perspective, which simultaneously provided Americans an opportunity to interrogate the importance of religious pluralism. Kennedy and Obama's speeches provide a valuable framework for examining the rhetorical strategies that presidential candidates may use to transcend the "religious issue."

Keywords: Media Framing, Religious Controversy, Substance, John F. Kennedy, Barack Obama

To a certain extent every U.S. president has dealt with issues surrounding religion. George Washington, our nation's founding father, was criticized for not taking part in the central sacrament of the Christian faith, communion. In church, his step-granddaughter recalled, he "always stood during the devotional parts of the service" (as cited in Novak, 1974, p. 3). It is troubling, by some accounts, that Harry Truman viewed the attainment of a nuclear arsenal and victory over Japan as divine intervention. In his *Memoirs*, the president explained, "God . . . was with us in the early days of adversity and disaster . . . and has now brought us to this glorious day of triumph" (p. 452). Even Dwight Eisenhower, considered one of the more successful and popular American presidents, is not removed from religious controversy. Although biographers have downplayed the significance, Eisenhower was raised a Jehovah's Witness, a characteristic he may have sought to disavow given the church's similarity to a cult in the eyes of white Christians (Bergman, 2009). Religion is clearly an important component of American government—we include Christian references in the "Pledge of Allegiance" and "In God We Trust" is written on U.S. currency—yet in America there exists a paradox of faith and politics: "we embrace religion and try to keep theology at arm's length" (Grinder & Shaw, 2016, p. 10).

Across the last century, the two presidential candidates who arguably faced the most religious adversity but went on to get elected were John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama. Voters in 1960 understood the significance of the "religious issue," since Kennedy was Catholic and no Catholic to date had held the executive branch. In 2008, allegations that Barack Obama was a Muslim, compounded by controversial remarks from his former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, threatened to derail his presidential bid. Whereas Kennedy had to respond to concerns that, if elected, the Catholic Church would cast his gaze away from the U.S. and toward papal interests, Obama had to clarify the nature of his ties to the black church and his relationship with Wright, who the news media rendered unpatriotic and anti-American (Whitehead, 2008). In short, both candidates were faced with the rhetorical challenge of overcoming media narratives that rendered their religion as subversive to our democratic process.

While the relationship between religion and presidential discourse is well documented (Boase, 1989; Coe & Chenoweth, 2015; Houck & Nocasian, 2002; Medhurst, 2013), few rhetorical studies examine how presidential candidates who classify as non-mainstream-Christians respond when the news media call their religiosity into question. Nneka Ofeoma Ofulue (2002) explained that presidents, and by comparison presidential candidates, must be seen to possess a "personal ethos" with regard to religion (p. 52). A president or candidate must justify "his or her ordination" and "is expected to embody and articulate national values" (Ofulue, 2002, p. 52). In this paper, we analyze Kennedy's "Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association" and Obama's "A More Perfect Union" speeches as attempts to overcome their respective controversies created by the news media. In doing so, this essay offers valuable insight to a growing body of literature that explores the ways in which presidential candidates address their faith when the news media render it un-presidential.

Using the theoretical constructs of Kenneth Burke, we argue that Kennedy and Obama used familial and dialectical substance respectively to transcend their controversies. Substance is a pattern of discourse, or what Burke (1945) called the intrinsic and extrinsic qualities that comprise something, in both tangible and intangible form (p. 23). While Kennedy succeeded through inclusive appeals to shared values, the dialectical nature of Obama's address created a pedagogical foundation that had the potential to educate America about Reverend Jeremiah Wright and the black church, a religious institution the

majority of Americans knew little about. In pursuing these claims, we begin by examining the media coverage surrounding both campaigns to demonstrate the emergence of narratives that centered on Kennedy and Obama's religion as subversive to American democracy and to mainstream Christian values. After providing a theoretical discussion on substance, our analysis proceeds in two sections to illuminate the familial and dialectical nature of the Kennedy and Obama speeches respectively. We conclude by discussing the extent to which each mode of substantiation represented what Burke might call a "transcendent" move to resolve conflict whereby Kennedy and Obama were able to overcome the conflicts they faced.

THE "RELIGIOUS ISSUE"

Whether or not it receives significant attention, the religious issue looms in many presidential elections. At the time he campaigned in 1960, the focus on Kennedy's religion eclipsed all previous presidential contests by comparison (McClerren, 1965). Even with the new sense of cultural acceptance that coincided with the election, Kennedy's candidacy—and his well-publicized popularity—brought about a storm of controversy and aroused efforts by numerous groups who sought to undermine his credibility. Michael O'Brien (2005) explained that Kennedy's nomination "rekindled anti-Catholic agitation" (p. 473), which manifested in the form of propaganda literature and public discourse that spread at an alarming pace. In fact, "over three hundred different anti-Catholic pamphlets, books, and tracts were circulated to an estimated readership of twenty to twenty-five million voters" (Warnick, 1996, p. 183). Most criticism came from the National Council of Citizens for Religious Freedom, or the "Peale group" as they would come to be known, who stipulated that "no matter what the senator claimed, his church insists that he is duty-bound to submit to its direction" (O'Brien, 2005, p. 474). On September 8, 1960, the organization, led by Dr. Norman Peale and Dr. Harold Ockenga, published statements in the *New York Times* that questioned Kennedy's ability to work autonomously from the Catholic Church. *The New Republic* insisted that Kennedy was "duty bound to [the church's] direction," inciting fears that "not only would [Kennedy] be under 'extreme pressure,' but . . . as . . . a good Catholic he would accede to these pressures" ("Protestants in Politics," 1960, pp. 3-4).

The proliferation of messages about Kennedy's ties to the Catholic Church dogged him along the campaign trail prior to and throughout the general election. Anticipating skepticism from an early date, the Kennedy camp planned to address his religion from the start. In fact, Kennedy made multiple attempts to quell the religious issue prior to his speech in Houston.¹ James MacGregor Burns (1960) explained that the religious issue unfolded in three stages: The first was the *Look* magazine interview of March 3, 1969, when Kennedy discussed his religion with Fletcher Knebel; the second "consisted of the events in April and May 1960, encompassing the Wisconsin and West Virginia primaries and an address to the American Society of Newspaper Editors"; and the final was the speech at Houston which, Burns (1960) noted, was "dramatic and decisive" (pp. 21-22). Despite Kennedy's insistence on the absolute separation of religion and politics on the two earlier occasions, assessments ranged from laudatory to inauthentic. Not until the speech in Houston did Kennedy succeed in putting the religious issue to sleep.

¹ To be certain, as far back as 1956, the Kennedy camp released what became known as "the Bailey Memorandum," which was written by Ted Sorensen and sought to dispel the "Al Smith Myth" that Smith, a Democratic candidate for president, was not elected because 1928 was a republican year, rather than because of his Catholic religious beliefs (Massa, 1997, p. 6).

While the threat of Kennedy's electability centered on the potential for a sitting U.S. president to take orders from the Pope, the news media trended a multifaceted narrative about Obama's religion. "In something of a paradox," Barry Hollander (2010) asserted, Obama faced two religious issues during the early stages of his 2008 campaign: the rumor fueled by email hoaxes and partisan websites that he was secretly Muslim alongside the concern over his relationship to his former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright (p. 64).² Wright, who condemns oppressive institutions and implores African Americans to support a vision of faith unlike white evangelical Christianity, reminded Americans how far the country must still go on the journey to equality, and his invocations reopened wounds thought by many to have healed over time (Ross & El-Buri, 2008; Saslow, 2008; Walker & Smithers, 2009). According to Clarence Walker and Gregory Smithers (2009), Obama's association with Wright jeopardized his presidential bid, and Obama's chief strategist, David Axelrod, recognized that Wright's rhetoric undermined Obama's "well-cultivated post-racial image" (as cited in Tesler & Sears, 2010, p. 4). Voters showed a similar concern, and in many instances Americans found Wright's statements alarming (Broder, 2008; "Obama's Ex-Pastor Speaks Out," 2008). The negative attention surrounding Kennedy's potential allegiance to the Catholic Church and Obama's association to Jeremiah Wright created a set of unique rhetorical challenges that summoned each candidate to respond publicly. Kennedy, on September 12, 1960, from the Rice Hotel in Houston, Texas, delivered his speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, a group of Protestant ministers. On March 18, 2008, Obama delivered his "A More Perfect Union" address at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Turning briefly to a theoretical discussion of substance will allow one to more fully appreciate the rhetorical strategies at play in each speech.

METHODS OF RHETORICAL SUBSTANTIATION

To understand substance, one must think in broad and expansive terms. Derived from the "Stance family," the literal meaning of sub-stance would be something that "stands beneath" or "supports" an individual or object (Burke, 1945, pp. 21-22). Tied closely to the concepts of identification and persuasion, substance represents the "nucleus" of Burke's theory of discourse (Durham, 1980, p. 352). Viewed this way, substance comprises a speaker's "motivational ground of ideas" and the dynamic relations among them (Burgess, 1985, p.108). For example, speakers who advocate a separation of church and state may substantiate their arguments in the language of secularism, religious liberty, and the U.S. Constitution. Substance can thus be viewed as a grouping of a series of simple ideas that belong in the same vein because they "go constantly together" (Burke, 1945, p. 22), or what William Rueckert (1963) referred to as an "equational cluster, a set of interlocked terms all of which imply each other" (p. 154). In short, substance is a pattern in discourse that underscores the structure of an individual's beliefs about a particular issue.

Burke divided substance into four categories: geometric, familial, directional, and dialectical. This paper is concerned with familial and dialectical substance in the speeches of Kennedy and Obama. Why focus on familial and dialectical substance alone? Analysis reveals a preference for Kennedy and

² As Kyle Cheney (2016) explained, as early as 2004, while campaigning for a seat in the Illinois Senate, Republican candidate Andy Martin portrayed Obama as a closet Muslim, which spiraled into conspiracy theories that sought to raise doubts about his birthplace and religion. This incident essentially marked the origin of the Obama as anti-American sentiment.

Obama to characterize their religion through familial and dialectical language respectively; they are inherent in the theme of each speech. Familial substance stresses ancestry in the biological sense as the descent from maternal and paternal sources. Since the concept of family is often “spiritualized,” it can also include social groups that comprise individuals of the same nationality or shared beliefs (Burke, 1945, p. 29). In this sense, familial substance refers to an internalization of communal or tribal values (Crusius, 1986). The group driven by familial substance will generally have a network of identifiable elements such as a common founder, a link to a covenant or constitution, or share a consubstantial bond in a particular historical act.

While familial substance unites listeners, dialectical substance has the potential to create division by placing individuals, concepts, and ideas in opposition. In doing so, a speaker will incorporate the best of both sides of a dichotomy in an “ambiguous kind of unity” that does not favor either position (Weiser, 2009, p. 137). This ambiguity, Durham (1980) explained, enables speakers and audiences to relate one experience to another; it provides “the spark” that allows oppositional forces to live in harmony, thus making the paradox explicit (p. 360). Since dialectical substance has the potential to generate a face-to-face disagreement between two or more parties (Crusius, 1988), it holds a unique capacity to transform conflict into a pedagogical exchange among auditors. Michael Mendelson (2001) referred to this dialogical approach as “controversia,” a method that “proceeds by placing multiple claims in juxtaposition and then by negotiating the conflicts among them” (p. 278). For Obama, the juxtaposition of divided sentiment concerning his perceived religious affiliation and his association with Jeremiah Wright is represented best through dialectical substance. Rather than explain these issues in universal terms, Obama describes the contradictions inherent in each so to allow listeners to interrogate the tensions therein. Before examining the dialectical nature of “A More Perfect Union,” we turn first to Kennedy’s deployment of familial substance in Houston to reaffirm his allegiance to American values.

FINDINGS OF ANALYSIS

Familial Substance in the “Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association”

With the prospect of a Catholic president, voters wanted reassurance that Kennedy would maintain the traditional unified system of values outlined in the Constitution. To assuage public concerns magnified by stories in the press that cast doubt on his candidacy, Kennedy deployed familial-based elements such as tradition and togetherness in the attempt to reaffirm his allegiance to American values. Kennedy’s use of inclusive appeals through familial means was logical given the context surrounding the occasion. Americans have been historically predisposed to make connections between nation and family. Traditionally, the concept of “family” insinuates blood relations, shared economic standing, collective cultural and traditional beliefs, and cohesive religious and political beliefs, shared living quarters, and a system of values (Lakoff, 1995). While Kennedy does not explicitly call for the American people to recognize the country “as a family,” his arguments are undergirded by a discourse that Burke might classify as familial. He addressed the characteristics of an ideal country and leader, the power of history and tradition, and the implications of discontinuity, where he addressed the dangers of divisive national issues in order to unite Americans under a mutual belief in true, Constitutional Americanism.

When addressing the idea of Americanism, Kennedy (1960) described a “kind of America” in which he believes to foreground for listeners the connection between religious freedom and American

values (1).³ Kennedy advocated for the absolute “separation of church and state,” opposition to public funding for church schools, and the imposition of religious will on “the general populace,” which helped him to promote religious diversity and the need for proactive measures against religious intolerance (pp. 1-2). He summed up his discussion of Americanism by encouraging his audience to “promote...the American ideal of brotherhood” (2). Kennedy’s discussion of Americanism is clearly familial in nature because he encourages shared belief systems, advocates for unity, and speaks of Americanism spiritually by presenting it as the kind of America in which every citizen is guaranteed to rights bound up in our nation’s Constitution.

Building on his discussion of Americanism, Kennedy created an image of a fatherly figure to further substantiate his message in familial terms. Across America’s history, U.S. presidents have been idealized as iconic, fatherly figures that embody national values (Morris, 1973). Similar to his statements about Americanism, Kennedy described the kind of president he “believes in”; or, perhaps, the kind of “fatherly figure” he feels should head the country (2). The kind of presidency he envisioned is “a great office” bound by common American values and never the pawn of a religious group, or confined to members of one exclusive religion (2). Kennedy’s discussion essentially represents his belief that a president should support and actively work to enforce the guarantees of the Constitution. For Kennedy, the ideal head of the national family is a leader who not only embodies American values but also works as a force that guides citizens to coalesce around the precepts the forefathers set forth in the Constitution.

Kennedy continued to cite historical examples to create a vision of America that values religious pluralism. He referenced the forefathers’ sacrifice for religious freedom, the historic battle at the Alamo where Americans of multiple faiths fought side-by-side, and the establishment of the Constitution, Bill of Rights, and Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom. When Kennedy discussed tradition, he beseeched listeners to “follow in that tradition” and endorse the shared system of values that it represents (3). Kennedy substantiated his remarks on tradition in familial terms when he referenced a “founder shared in common,” a “covenant or constitution,” and various historical events from which the “consubstantiality” of the U.S. is derived, terminology that Burke (1945) might ascribe to this category of substance (p. 29). Kennedy referred directly to the forefathers who fought to break free from British rule because of religious prejudice, and he referenced the aforementioned landmark historical moments that have shaped the United States to the present day in 1960.

By way of indirection, Kennedy proceeded to relegate the controversy surrounding his religious beliefs to media aggrandizement, thus attempting to reorder the hierarchy of American values. There are “far more critical issues in the 1960 campaign,” Kennedy asserted, which have the potential to “infect” the country (1). Religion, he explained, should not be recognized as one of the “real issues” since “war and hunger and ignorance and despair know no religious barrier” (1). Therefore, it is not religion that wields the power to facilitate outside influence but rather the attempt by the news media to create a divergence of perspectives regarding what is truly important to the American people. This discussion allowed Kennedy to shift the criticism brought against himself back onto his critics, the news media, who was the real threat to incite division and outside influence. To that end, Kennedy sought to

³ Future references to this speech and “A More Perfect Union” will be made parenthetically by page number as they appear on AmericanRhetoric.com

reestablish American values through negation and subsequently outlined the elements essential to true, constitutional and familial values Americans have traditionally shared and revered.

Dialectical Substance in “A More Perfect Union”

Similar to Kennedy, Obama substantiated his claims in familial terms. The difference for Obama, however, centers on the tendency to place ancestral appeals in dialectical tension. To render listeners consubstantial in the pursuit of a prosperous America that would grow and evolve over time but remain inclusive to all its citizens across the ages, Obama opened the speech by citing the nation’s forefathers and the preamble to the Constitution: ““We the people, in order to form a more perfect union”” (1). “Two hundred years ago,” Obama continued, “a group of men gathered and . . . launched America’s improbable experiment in democracy” (1). “The document they produced,” he continued, “was eventually signed, but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation’s original sin of slavery, a question that divided the colonies and brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least 20 more years” (pp. 1-2). While appealing to the nation’s heritage worked to transcend any racial or religious barrier, Obama simultaneously invited listeners to view America’s founding document in light of its contradictions. That is to say, while the Constitution promised equal citizenship under the law, it did not afford that promise equally to all Americans.

To establish dialectical tension for listeners, Obama juxtaposed the principles set forth in the Constitution against the inability of the forefathers to create doctrine that would accommodate America’s racial and ethnic others. Similar to the controversy that manifested following Wright’s sermons, which by themselves rightly offended Americans but lacked historical context, parts of America’s foundational principles were flawed as a product of their time, a limitation Obama would attribute to our nation’s “improbable experiment in democracy” (1). Similar to the ways in which America “could be and should be perfected over time” (2), Wright is fallible but someone Obama “can no more disown than . . . the black community. . . . [or his] white grandmother” (4). By establishing a connection between Wright and the country’s founding principles on the basis of contradiction, Obama utilized this comparison to implore Americans to give Wright a pass, or at least attempt to try to understand his remarks within their broader context. In humanizing Wright and creating a parallel between the reverend and America’s forefathers on the basis of contradiction, Obama encouraged listeners to educate themselves more about Wright before jumping on the bandwagon.

Utilizing an educational method rooted in the Ciceronian tradition, Obama adopted a strategy that begins with “narrowing the gap” between opposing interests “for the purpose of conciliatio[n]” (Mendelson, 1997, p. 40). Rather than condemn Wright, Obama deployed a series of rhetorical questions to establish a pedagogical foundation for listeners. Obama asserted: “Did I know him to be an occasionally fierce critic of American domestic and foreign policy? Of course. Did I ever hear him make remarks that could be considered controversial while I sat in the church? Yes. Did I strongly disagree with many of his political views? Absolutely, just as I am sure many of you have heard remarks from your pastors, priests, or rabbis with which you strongly disagree” (3). While remaining religiously inclusive, Obama implicated all religions for potentially espousing subversive beliefs, thus creating a bond between listeners and Wright particularly and with religious controversy more generally. In doing so, Obama established the pedagogical grounds for the speech by “provid[ing] a positive equivalent for the area of commonality which even opponents must share” (Burke as cited in Smudde, 2010, p. 36). In short, Obama first had to demonstrate that no religion is free of controversy, thereby allowing listeners

of different faiths to acknowledge their individual biases, before he could provide the resources necessary for a dialectical exchange.

After acknowledging Wright's imperfections and simultaneously implicating listeners across all faiths, Obama continued to present a characterization of the pastor different from the narrative offered by the news media. In recognizing his positive qualities, Obama explained, "the truth is, that isn't all that I know of the man. [Wright] is a man who helped introduce me to my Christian faith, a man who spoke to me about our obligations to love one another, to care for the sick and lift up the poor" (3). "He is a man who . . . over 30 years," Obama extolled, "has led a church . . . by housing the homeless, ministering to the needy, providing day care services and scholarships and prison ministries, and reaching out to those suffering from HIV/AIDS" (3). By placing Wright in juxtaposition, Obama afforded listeners the opportunity to partake in what Burke might call a "linguistic approach to education" (as cited in Smudde, 2010, p. 17), or what Mendelson (1997) has referred to as "controversia," an operational method that insists that everything must be argued and that no conclusion is absolute. The tendency to portray Wright in contradictory form stems from "a practice based on the recognition that in all matters of human controversy there are opposing positions . . . that can be reasonably defended" (Mendelson, 1997, p. 18). In doing so, Obama invited listeners to survey Wright not as good or bad but in contradistinction.

Reasoning inductively, Obama first characterized Wright in dichotomous form, and then proceeded to present Trinity United Church of Christ as paradoxical religious entity. "Trinity," Obama stated, "embodies the black community in its entirety—the doctor and the welfare mom, the model student and the former gang-banger" (4). "The church contains in full the kindness and cruelty," he continued, "the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and . . . bitterness and biases that make up the black experience in America" (4). Wright, Obama explained, "contains within him the contradictions—the good and the bad—of the community that he has served diligently for so many years" (4). By shifting back and forth between alternatives, Obama encouraged listeners to contemplate Trinity from the standpoint of its diverse parishioners. The effect, Burke (1945) might say, is dialectical because it invites auditors to "see something in terms of some other" (p. 33). By contextualizing Wright and Trinity in their entirety, Obama provided a foundation for listeners to interrogate the tensions therein. Through this dialectical interchange, one perspective does not seek to "outwit the opponent" but instead wants to be affected by it and incorporate it in the hope that both sides learn from each other and reach a conclusion that transcends the limitations of any single perspective (Burke as cited in Smudde, 2010, p. 23).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Kennedy and Obama's speeches provide an exemplar of the capacity for presidential candidates to transcend religious controversy. Rhetorical transcendence, for Burke (1969), occurs "when a work takes on a new dimension of insight" (p. 311). Moments of transcendence, Burke (1969) explained, have the power to lift "the situation to terms of universal mankind" (pp. 311-312). Persuasion in these moments is immensely powerful because of the profound identification between speaker and audience. As Burke (1969) stated: "Identification in itself is a kind of transcendence. For instance, since the individual is to some extent distinct from his group, an identifying of him with the group is by the same token a transcending of his distinctness" (p. 326). Thus, in the "Address to the Houston Ministerial

Association” and “A More Perfect Union” we see speakers who sought to consubstantially join their audiences in the criticisms they faced and then attempted to transcend the controversy by relegating the “religious issue” to one that contradicted the precepts set forth in the Constitution, in Kennedy’s case, and by treating contradiction as a normal and routine element of American culture as Obama demonstrated. Kennedy and Obama positioned themselves not as outsiders worthy of criticism and skepticism, but as leaders striving to uphold true American values. They demonstrated an acute consideration of context and a transcendental use of substantiation; however, they did so in different and unique ways. Whereas Kennedy faced division and sought to unify, Obama emphasized the normalcy of division and sought to educate.

Rhetorical substantiation provided both candidates the resources to renew their ethos as presidential contenders. Their ability to create identification on the basis of familial and dialectical substance reenergized their candidacies in two important ways: First, it afforded them an opportunity to implicate their critics in the criticism brought before them. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the speeches provided a platform for both candidates to offer American voters an alternative outlook of their respective controversies and a chance to enhance their perception in the public eye. In doing so, they attempted to transcend the controversy to a place where criticism and conflict could no longer reasonably exist, essentially an effort at reordering the hierarchy of American values as dictated by the press, or what Duncan (1962) has called transcendence by “progression from a lower to a higher stage” (p. 323).

The blitz of news media coverage focusing on the “religious issue” during both campaigns manifested unavoidable exigencies for Kennedy and Obama. While our analysis of the speech in Houston and “A More Perfect Union” revealed a set of patterns and similarities with regard to the ways in which both candidates addressed religion, securing the nation’s highest elected office was more nuanced and far more complex than their ability to exploit the persuasive potential of substance on these two isolated occasions. Despite the rhetorical strategies employed in the speeches, Kennedy and Obama’s successful presidential bids likely consisted of a constellation of attributes that had the potential to resonate with voters or overwhelm the negative associations with their religious backgrounds for a variety reasons.

Taken together, however, the speeches reveal an interesting trend in presidential campaign discourse in response to media narratives that center on candidate religiosity: transcendent strategies that facilitate identification and work to enhance ethos may manifest in starkly different ways. Kennedy used familial substance to establish a culture of constitutional unity; Obama used dialectical substance to illustrate that contradiction is an inextricable component of American culture. Future candidates and political leaders who face religious controversy should not necessarily work to sway their audience one way or another; rather, they should employ strategies that create identification, transcend the conflict, and work to reframe situations in ways that seek to eliminate the controversy altogether.

REFERENCES

- Bergman, J. (2009). Religion and the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower. In G. Espinosa (Ed.), *Religion and the American Presidency: George Washington to George W. Bush*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Boase, P. (1989). Moving the mercy seat into the white house. *Journal of Communication & Religion*, 12(2), 1-9.
- Broder, D. (2008, March 23). The real value of Obama's speech. *WashingtonPost.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2008/03/21/AR2008032102554.html>. Accessed 15 May 2018.
- Burgess, P. G. (1985). The dialectic of substance: Rhetoric vs poetry. *Communication Quarterly*, 33(2), 105-112.
- Burke, K. (1945). *A Grammar of motives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Burke, K. (1969). *A Rhetoric of motives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Burke, K. (2010). Linguistic approach to problems of education. In P. M. Smudde (Ed.), *Humanist critique of education: Teaching and learning as symbolic action* (pp. 3-41). Anderson, SC: Parlor Press.
- Burns, J. M. (1960, November). The religious issue. *Progressive*, 21-22.
- Cheney, K. (2016, September 16). No, Clinton didn't start the birther Thing. This guy did." *Politico.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/09/birther-movement-founder-trump-clinton-228304>.
- Coe, K., & Chenoweth, S. (2015). The evolution of christian America: Christianity in presidential discourse, 1981-2013. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 753-773.
- Crusius, T. W. (1986). A case for Kenneth Burke's dialectic and rhetoric. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 19(1), 23-37.
- Crusius, T. W. (1988). Orality in Kenneth Burke's dialectic. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 21(2), 116- 130.
- Duncan, H. D. (1962). *Communication and social order*. New York, NY: Bedminster.
- Durham, W. B. (1980). Kenneth Burke's concept of substance. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 66(4), 351-364.
- Grinder, D., & Shaw, S. (2016). *The Presidents and their faith: From George Washington to Barack Obama*. Boise, ID: Elevate Publishing.
- Hochmuth, M. (1957). Burkeian criticism. *Western Speech*, 21(2), 89-95.
- Hollander, B. A. (2010). Persistence in the perception of Barack Obama as a muslim in the 2008 presidential campaign. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 9(2), 55-66.
- Houck, D., & Nocasian, M. (2002). FDR'S first inaugural address: Text, context, and reception. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 5(4), 649-678.
- Kennedy, J. F. (1960, September 12). Address to the greater Houston ministerial association. Rice Hotel, Houston, TX. Retrieved from <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jfkhoustonministers.html>
- Knebel, F. (1959, March 3). Democratic forecast: A catholic in 1960. *Look*.
- Lakoff, G. (1995). Metaphor, morality, and politics, or, why conservatives have left liberals in the dust. *Social Research*, 62(2), 177-213.
- Massa, M. S. (1997). A Catholic for President?: John F. Kennedy and the 'secular' theology of the Houston speech 1960. *Journal of Church & State*, 39(2), 307-328.
- Medhurst, M. J.(2013). Rhetorical functions of the Bible in American presidential discourse, 1977-2013: A taxonomy. *Journal of Communication and Religion*, 37(2), 1-23.
- Mendelson, M. (1997). Everything must be argued: Rhetorical theory and pedagogical practice in Cicero's *De Oratore*. *Journal of Education*, 179(1), 15-47.
- Mendelson, M. (2001). Quintilian and the pedagogy of argument. *Argumentation*, 15(3), 277-293.

- McClerren, B. F. (1965). Introduction in *The presidential campaigns of 1928 and 1960: The religious issue*. (pp. 1-6). Charleston, IL: Eastern Illinois University Press.
- Morris, R. (1973). *Seven who shaped our destiny: The founding fathers as revolutionaries*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Novak, M. (1974). *Choosing our king: Powerful symbols in presidential politics*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Obama, B. (2008, March 18). A more perfect union. Philadelphia, PA. Retrieved from <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobamaperfectunion.htm>
- “Obama’s Ex-Pastor Speaks Out About Church, Sermons.” (2008, April 28). *Cnn.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/04/28/wright.npc/index.html?iref=nextin>.
- O’Brien, M. (2005). *John F. Kennedy: A biography*. New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press.
- Ofulue, N. I. (2002). President Clinton and the white house prayer breakfast. *Journal of Communication and Religion*, 25(1), 49-63.
- “Protestants in Politics.” (1960, September 19). *New Republic*, 3-4.
- Ross, B., & El-Buri, R. (2008, March 13). Obama’s pastor: God damn America, U.S. to blame for 9/11. *Abcnews.com*. Retrieved from <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/DemocraticDebate/story?id=4443788&page=1>.
- Rueckert, W. H. (1963). *Kenneth Burke and the drama of human relations*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Saslow, E. (2008, March 18). Congregation defends Obama’s ex-pastor. *WashingtonPost.com*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2008/03/17/AR2008031702796.html?noredirect=on>
- Tesler, M., & Sears, D. O. (2010). *Obama’s race: The 2008 election and the dream of a post-racial America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Truman, H. S. (1955). *Memoirs: Year of decisions*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Walker, C., & Smithers, G. (2009). *The Preacher and the pulpit: Jeremiah Wright, Barack Obama, and race in America*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.
- Warnick, B. (1996). Argument schemes and the construction of social reality: John F. Kennedy’s address to the Houston ministerial association. *Communication Quarterly*, 44(2), 183- 196.
- Weiser, E. M. (2009). ‘As usual I fell on the bias’: Kenneth Burke’s situated dialectic. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 42(2), 134-153.
- Whitehead, J. W. (2008, April 30). Rev. Jeremiah Wright: Pariah or Prophet? *Huffingtonpost.com*. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-w-whitehead/rev-jeremiah-wright-paria_b_99484.html

Funding and Acknowledgements

The authors thank Robert Iltis, Jason Black, Kate Peirce, and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay. The authors declare no funding sources or conflicts of interest.

About the Authors

Scott Anderson is an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at Arkansas State University. Jonathan Smith is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication and Film at the University of Memphis.