

And A Rock Star Shall Lead Them: The Boundary Crossing Rhetoric of Bono's Jeremiad
Laurie A. Britt-Smith, Saint Louis University

Abstract

This presentation introduces the basic theoretical underpinnings of my in-progress dissertation, *American Prophet: Christian Literacy Practices and the Rhetoric of Social Justice*, as well as demonstrates the practical application of my research by focusing on one of my exemplar speakers, rock icon and activist, Bono. Using a model of the prophetic orator developed by theologian Walter Brueggemann, I analyze the rhetorical features of his speech and writing that promote vision and prompt action. Additionally, applying socio-cultural linguistic theory, which considers all aspects of communication to be forms of literacy, I examine the development of his rhetorical strategies, investigating how the acquisition of culturally specific literacies grants or denies his speech acts the cultural power to cross multiple social boundaries of community. Tying together conversations in literature, theology, cultural studies, and rhetoric/composition, the overall goal is to demonstrate how Christian teaching and social literacy practices intersect and energize rhetorics of social justice.

American public discourse (rhetoric), with its root in the highly sermonic style of the Puritan colonists, has always been partially based on a vision promising a continually improving society. As literary scholar Sacvan Bercovitch discusses in *The American Jeremiad*, although drawn from European sermonic rhetoric, the vision for the new world has always been more corrective rather than destructive in nature. Whereas the European version of the jeremiad generally was intended to invoke social change as a secular virtue, the New England version melded spiritual and secular virtues together. This particularly American jeremiad, or political sermon, served as a basis for much of the national rhetoric that would follow and is still echoed in movements for social justice and its attendant political reform.

Although American social identity is always in the process of reform, and any moment of reform can be studied for the intersection of religious and political rhetoric, this presentation is part of a larger project that examines how the jeremiad and rhetoric on

which it is based have been reshaped, re-imagined, and received during the last eighty years. In a country manipulated to think of itself as being divided into a red state/blue state binary, are there still individuals who can present a vision of social justice that the majority will respond to and work toward? Does our culture still respond to those who present prophetic rhetoric – providing a spiritual basis for secular change?

This piece focuses on one individual who has presented a new vision for social justice - a new jeremiad, rock icon and social activist, Bono. In addition to analyzing the rhetoric of this modern day prophet and how it is interpreted or misinterpreted, and enacted or blocked in American culture, it examines the development of his rhetoric using the theory of Discourse analysis posited by James Paul Gee, a socio-cultural linguist.¹ The application of this theory demonstrates how the acquisition of culturally specific literacies grants Bono's speech acts the cultural power to cross multiple social boundaries of community and how Christian teaching and social literacy practices intersect and energize his rhetoric of social justice.

The theoretical foundation for my study is found in three sources, Sacvan Bercovitch's *The American Jeremiad*, Walter Brueggemann's *The Prophetic Imagination*, and James Gee's work on Discourse theory and social literacy. Drawn from three different disciplines in the Humanities, literature, theology, and composition/rhetoric, each text offers an intriguing lens through which to examine the

¹ A socio-cultural linguist considers all aspects of communication/language, not just those codes which are spoken or written. Gee makes a distinction between a Discourse (sometimes called a cultural model) and the lowercase "d" discourses that make up the many forms of languages a Discourse community uses. Gee considers literacy to be plural because one cannot master any particular discourse (acquire literacy) without understanding how it inter-relates with other discourses within a given Discourse.

question of American political rhetoric and its intersection with religion.² Bercovitch offers a foundation for thinking about the importance of the political sermon to the vision of American identity, presenting a reassessment of the Puritan jeremiad and the role it played in the early establishment of American typology through the mid-nineteenth century, thus providing a springboard for thought on modern American rhetoric of social justice.³ Bercovitch places that type of rhetoric in tandem with and in connection to a specific type of spiritual literacy which is integral to American conceptions of social justice.

Walter Brueggemann's text provides the framework for examining the actual rhetoric of what he identifies as a prophet. The prophet in this sense is not one who foretells the future, but one who is concerned with provoking "elemental changes in human society" based on his/her understanding of the "strange incongruence between public conviction and personal yearning" and "the distinctive power of language" (9). In short, (s)he provides a new word, or rhetoric, to replace what has been the language of power. Brueggemann states, "The evocation of an alternative reality consists at least in part in the battle for language and the legitimization of a new rhetoric" (26).

Brueggemann discusses the characteristic of the prophet as one who can present an "alternative consciousness" by criticizing the dominant culture – which is a liberal tendency – while also energizing the community to move toward a promise of a better time and situation – which is, going back to Bercovitch, a conservative idea that is part of

² The term political here extends beyond the usual meaning of having to do with the legal system of governance to the more universal meaning – that which influences power relations within communities within a society.

³ The rhetoric of social justice, being a large and somewhat unwieldy term, will be defined here as the speech and written communication used to persuade others to improve society through the elimination of poverty, disease, and/or political oppression.

the fabric of American society. The conservative faction withstands criticism of the status quo without the real promise or hope of some sort of improvement over the current situation being offered by the new vision; the liberal faction resists talk of promises and hope in the new vision being offered without criticism of what is occurring in the status quo. The prophet's rhetoric captures the motives of both sides and provides a way for them to work together.

Using the Mosaic covenant tradition found in Exodus as a model, Brueggeman establishes criteria for prophetic rhetoric, which is political and social as well as spiritual in nature. Moving beyond social theory and righteous indignation, prophetic rhetoric begins with discerning an alternative vision of Yahweh based in justice and compassion. It is the presentation of that alternative vision of "God's freedom" that energizes the community.

This model establishes three claims about the relationship between prophet, community, and the effectiveness of the rhetoric of his/her vision:

1. The alternative life is lived in a very particular historical and historicizing community.
2. The community criticizes and energizes by its special memories that embrace discontinuity and genuine breaks from what he terms "imperial reality." The prophet must present new realities that are counter to what is visible in the established order.
3. The notion of "God's freedom," which must be accompanied by a rhetoric of compassion and justice, is more than any one movement (community) can sustain for long. Any movement begins in a historical moment and emergent ministry, but

must move beyond any one ministry, or to tie into Gee - Discourse community, in order to create change in the society in which the ministry/community exists.

Brueggemann's emphasis on the relationship between the individual and the community provides an additional link to what I consider to be the heart of my study - analyzing the power and effectiveness of Bono's rhetoric by examining his literacy acquisition. He is an individual who, in addition to prophetic ability, has acquired multiple social languages which allow him to cross Discourse boundaries of multiple communities – many of which are usually at odds with each other. There are many prophets who present alternate visions of “God's freedom” (or social justice), but only a handful are able to move beyond their historical moment and circumstance to have significant influence in the larger society. The question is where does this rhetoric come from and why is it effective beyond the cultural model (or Discourse community) from which it sprung?

The work of James Paul Gee provides the foundation for that additional step of analysis. In order to understand socio-cultural literacy, one must go beyond the boundary of the traditional definition of literacy; the ability to read and write text. In addition to examining the acquisition of that specific language skill, this theory also focuses on the cultural resources and models that mediate the individual's participation in social practice. Literacy learning is a socially mediated process, and in order to understand another's literacy, one must examine the context of circumstances and events surrounding the development of that individual's acquisition of social literacy (which is the link to the first point of Brueggemann's model – the alternative life is lived in a very particular historical and historicizing community), the forms of mediation available, and the nature of participation across cultural practices.

No specific or singular language or language skill makes one literate, but rather literacy is the ability to maneuver the multiple social languages within a Discourse. One's primary Discourse comes from one's "original and home-based sense of identity" (Gee, *What is Literacy* 527). It is acquired not by overt instruction, but by casual social interaction with members of a primary socializing group, be it family members, peers, or any person one is intimately associated with (527). Once one moves beyond one's primary Discourse community, one begins to acquire the discourses of secondary Discourse communities. Gee defines literacy as always being plural because it is "the mastery of or fluent control over the language(s) of a secondary Discourse" (529). One of my goals is to examine the circumstances of Bono's primary Discourse and trace the development of the secondary Discourses that grant him social influence, or, to tie this idea to Brueggemann, to discover how the prophet acquires the ability to criticize and energize the community, satisfying, or failing to satisfy as the case may be, both the liberal and conservative factions within it.

The two Discourse communities that have the most significant influence on Bono's rhetoric are his spirituality and rock star celebrity status, two Discourses which are not only linked together, but also inextricably tied to a third Discourse community created by his Irish ethnicity. However, he is an American prophet in that he has and continues to influence American cultural dialogue, particularly in regards to justice issues. He understands that the basis of American society and rhetoric is the vision of the ever-improving society stating, "It is the land of reinvention. It was never about where you come from, it's always about where you're going" (Assayas 188). Of course, this perception of America is based on what his Irish heritage has taught him about America,

as it also influences how he processes religion, how he is affected by fame, and how he is received by his audience.

Bono's primary Discourse community was his mixed marriage Dublin home; Protestant mother, Catholic father. He has commented many times on how this upbringing, as well as the violence and political upheaval that religion has caused in Ireland, made him a spiritual person who absolutely loathes organized religion. He once stated, "I have this hunger in me . . . everywhere I look, I see the evidence of a Creator. But I don't see it as religion, which has cut my people in two . . . Religion to me is almost like when God leaves – and people devise a set of rules to fill the space" (Stockman 21). In his early teens he came into contact with a belief system that was a bit of a novelty in Ireland, Pentecostalism. He became friends with a young man whose charismatic Christian family's beliefs influenced his understanding of and appreciation for scripture, which continues to influence his song writing (Wenner 54). Shortly thereafter he temporarily joined an evangelical church where he made a commitment to Christ, if not to any one form of Christianity (Stockman 19). He was intrigued by the idea that God was interested in him, and that Jesus had commanded his followers to love others. He proclaimed in 1988, "To me, faith in Jesus Christ that is not aligned to social justice – that is not aligned with the poor – it's nothing" (53).⁴ From his earliest moments in the spotlight, Bono made declarations of both his faith and what would become his global mission twenty years later with DATA and the One campaign. Christian Discourse is firmly embedded into his primary literacy, an established part of his social identity. Paired with the acquisition of that Discourse was the seed of his prophetic rhetoric, based in a vision of God's compassion and justice.

⁴ See also Friskics-Warren, 160-61.

Flash forward to a young man in a rock band who adds to the scope of his literacy through experience in the music industry, acquiring the social languages of musical and visual rhetoric, learning how to best handle the pressure of being a celebrity, dealing with the expectations of the professional media and fan. In our pop culture obsessed society, the mastery of that secondary Discourse – rock star – grants him a very powerful type of influence. As a rock star, there is an expectation that he will challenge the establishment while still having the ability to deflect responsibility off of himself. In *Rolling Stone* he stated, “I don’t fear politicians or presidents. *They* should be afraid. *They’ll* be accountable for what happened on their watch” (Wenner 64). In many ways, he is an updated version of Shakespeare’s fool – the wise man in motley, or in his case, omnipresent sunglasses and a leather jacket.

Eventually all of his acquired Discourses, and there are many which can be discussed, and their attendant languages come together and we have a prophet: one who can understand and speak the social languages of many different communities and has acquired the social literacy (power) to motivate them all toward a vision of social justice. Of course, no prophetic vision is without its critics, and Bono has managed to rack up legions of them.⁵ He is continually criticized by those on the far right for being too secular and on the far left for being too accommodating to the status quo. Those criticisms are not without reason. However, one of the remarkable characteristics of effective prophets is that they do not compromise their particular vision. Bono’s vision is to end what he calls, “stupid poverty.” The kind where people die of starvation when there is plenty of food. The kind that causes the “monthly tsunami sized disaster” that is

⁵ See Friskies-Warren discussion of music critic David Marsh, pg. 162.

AIDS in Africa.⁶ He warned leaders at the 2006 National Prayer Breakfast, “Our age will be remembered for three things: the war on terror, the digital revolution, and what we did – or did not do – to put the fire out in Africa.”

There are those who insist that musicians have no business playing the role of prophet or social conscience; a position Bono is well aware of, and often ironically incorporates into his songs. If he “bugs yah,”⁷ he apologizes, and continues to speak/sing his ideas anyway. He unquestionably has learned to attract the large scale attention the crisis in Africa warrants, an ability given to him by everyone who has ever bought his music, watched a video, or paid for a concert ticket. Our culture responds to those talented few who are at the top of the music industry, and there are millions of people who seek him out, appreciating and responding to his message. American culture can be cynical, greedy, and fame obsessed, and we grow increasingly wary of politicians and preachers. Still there remains this unshakable sense that we can and should do better. Is it any wonder that we respond to a famous, incredibly wealthy, sometimes cynical speaker who chides and challenges our political and religious leaders? The prophet exists in a specific cultural, historical moment. In this moment, for better or worse, Bono is just the person needed to preach the American jeremiad, to get the message of God’s compassion and justice, of the continually improving society, to the people.

WORKS CITED

Assayas, Michka. Bono in Conversation. New York: Riverhead, 2005.

Bercovitch, Sacvan. The American Jeremiad. Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 1978.

⁶ These quotes and more information are available at www.one.org and www.data.org.

⁷ A reference to the song, “Bullet the Blue Sky” *The Joshua Tree* album.

Bono. "Bono: Keynote Address at 54th National Prayer Breakfast." The Hilton Washington Hotel, Washington DC, 2 Feb 2006. 28 Oct 2006 <<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/bononationalprayerbreakfast.htm>>.

Brueggemann, Walter. The Prophetic Imagination. Philadelphia: Fortress P, 1978.

Debt, Aids, Trade, Africa/ DATA. 29 Oct 2006 <<http://www.data.org/>>.

Friskics-Warren, Bill. "U2: Trying to Throw My Arms Around the World." I'll Take You There: Pop Music and the Urge for Transcendence. New York: Continuum, 2005.

Gee, James Paul. An Introduction to Discourse Analysis; Theory and Method. New York: Routledge, 1999.

---. "Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction and What Is Literacy?" Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook. Ed. Ellen Cushman, Eugene R. Kintgen, et al. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001. 525-43.

One: The Campaign to Make Poverty History. 29 October 2006 <<http://www.one.org/>>.

Stockman, Steve. Walk On: The Spiritual Journey of U2. 2nd ed. Orlando: Relevant Books, 2005.

Wenner, Jann S. "Bono; the Rolling Stone Interview." Rolling Stone 3 Nov 2005: 48-67, 102-03.