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23 February 2021

The ‘Good Book’ vs. Facebook – Religion’s Adaptations in the Internet Era

A Criticism of: Digital vs. Paper Bible: Which is Best For You? By Greg Gudorf

Introduction

Throughout history, religion has struggled to retain its converts. From the English fleeing Europe to start a new country in 1607 due to religious persecution in their homeland, as well as Martin Luther, Joseph Smith, and Henry VIII starting their own churches; to the Catholic church scandals of the modern era, churches have had storms to weather that would rival those that spurred Noah to build an ark. According to the *Emerging Technology from the arXiv* team of the MIT Technology Review (1994) there has been an 18% reduction in religious affiliation from 1990 – 2010, 25% of which is attributed to the internet. Churches have survived internal fraction, televangelism, as well as the refutation of scientists, leaving them contemplating if God can truly compete with Google. In this new era of electronic devices that compete for our time, attention, and information, how do religious organizations utilize digital media to perpetuate and sustain their constituency?

Artifact

This analysis will examine the content and corresponding website sections (including advertisements and additional opinion columns) of an online opinion article entitled “Digital or Paper Bible: Which is best for you?” by Greg Gudorf (2017), which is embedded on a Christian lifestyle, education, and multimedia resource website entitled *Pureflix.com*—specifically as part of their “Insiders” article series. Mr. Gudorf is the current CEO of eSalt Media Technologies

(a/k/a PureFlix.com), an online website (and purveyor of associated products) whose self-stated mission is “influencing culture of Christ through media.” It is also quite relevant to note that according to the Pureflix.com website, Mr. Gudorf is also the founder of The Gudorf Group, Inc., and “works directly with Start-Ups, Innovations, and Re-Starts providing advisory, *strategic planning, business development and product management support* (italics mine) in consulting and advisory roles.”

The examination of this text and associated rhetoric illuminates rhetorical criticism as it analyzes the social and personal dynamics as well as the imbalance of power between individuals who stand to benefit from it. Additionally, it explores the ways that, like phishing, data collection, embedded social media marketing, spam, and other online tools, that allegedly not-for-profit organizations are mirroring the tactics utilized by commercial companies to remain competitive and stable in a “modern” market.

Method

In order to examine the aforementioned artifact, I employed Ideological Criticism methodology. According to Sonja Foss (2018), an artifact is appropriate to the chosen method if it “contains the kind of data that are the focus of the units of analysis of the method”. As one of the units of analysis are values, and the artifact was created by a religious organization (which are centered around specific values), this makes ideological criticism the most well-suited variation of rhetorical criticism for this analysis.

Another aspect of Ideological Criticism is that “Echoing historical criticism, ideological criticism insists that every reader comes to the text with expectations and preconceptions, hope and imagination (Bultman, 1960).” (Aichele and Burnett et al., 1995).

In the rest of this section, I describe my specific method of analysis by breaking them down into the following parts:

1. Identify the presented elements of the artifact (Foss 2018). Presented elements are “basic observable features of the artifact” (Foss 2018), or what is initially presented on the surface (Newbold).
2. Identify the suggested elements linked to the presented elements (Foss 2018). Suggested elements “showcase the meanings of the artifact’s presented elements and how these meanings serve as the basis” (Begley 2002) for the inferred ideology.
3. Formulate an ideology (Foss 2018). By grouping your ideas and determining trends in the presented and suggested elements, it is possible to elicit the tenets and ideology of the rhetor.
4. Identify the functions served by the ideology (Foss 2018). According to Bygrave (2003) “Even where rhetoric is a static repertory of tropes, these are tropes which persuade someone to do something...”.

The primary observable goal that became evident from the above referenced steps is to promote a religious Christian lifestyle that discourages followers from looking elsewhere for information (isolating them) as well as recruit new followers for a sustainable future which is detailed in the findings below.

Findings

Presented Elements: Within the content of the article, Gudorf repeatedly uses nouns and adjectives to elicit and underscore specific values, such as *God, Christian, Bible, resource, value, ritual, meaning, meaningful, faith, positive, sins, Father, Son, Spirit, fruit, insider, keepsakes, precious, verses, thankfulness, gratitude, and strength*. By his repetition and placement of several of these words, he is emphasizing and reiterating that being a Christian is positive and valuable, and that the Bible is your main resource for the meaning of life; especially

if you want to have a fulfilling and happy one (and who doesn't?). Gudorf goes on to employ expressive verbs such as *ritual*, *connect*, *experience*, *focus*, *worship*, *died*, *judgement*, *sinned*, *living*, *believe*, and *overcoming*, provoking readers to imagine that if you want to have “real” connections with others (as opposed to loneliness and superficiality) as well as getting through your hardships (overcoming), then organized religion may just be the answer you have been looking for. Throughout, there is never a question or explanation of *why* you should read the bible, only the assertion that this is the best, and only, path in life. The two “options” presented sound as if you have a choice, but in reality, the only choice is in the method you choose to worship, not in the belief system.

Another item that is curious is the repeated use of the word “modern”, as in “modern Christians” – targeting a specific demographic, or marketing group. Clearly wanting to be “modern” is seen as a positive trait in this instance, implying that the participants are up-to-date and knowledgeable about current events which are often seen as contemporary or youthful. This alludes to the ideology that being stuck in the past or traditional are, conversely, negative connotations.

Contained within the text are photos of beatific, smiling young women; light streaming behind them in metaphoric illumination – the comparison to traditional pictures of the Madonna are clear. Both women are outdoors, appearing carefree and happy, similar to marketing commercials for women’s products that promise a worry-free existence and relief from everyday strife only requiring your use of their product. A photograph of the bible, as if it someone were in deep study and only recently walked away, is featured prominently; seemingly to emphasize that deep reading of the scripture is both expected and not to be undertaken frivolously. Gudorf helpfully embeds content within the text as well; highlighting key phrases for emphasis and

embedding hyperlinks to other religious blogs and content, as well as registration for subscriptions, to enable the reader to further support and supplement the dogma, thus lending an air of credibility and affiliation to the message – or “strength in numbers”. Concluding with “...if you’re interested in learning more about how a digital experience can bring you closer to your faith...” followed by a link to yet another download, the

However, the surrounding website and content cannot be discounted, for it is here that the author (via his organization) leverages some of the most useful strategies of all. If the reader’s eye wanders from the margins of the article itself, they will find links to obtain more information regarding Christianity itself, interactive polls to divulge more about your relationship with God (no options for other beliefs) – the polls themselves guiding and assuming your affiliation as well as leading to yet more links regarding becoming further embedded in your faith. You may also aid in recruiting new members by “tagging” a person “who needs a prayer”, thus engaging new people and building traffic to the website and providing them with contact information for potential recruits that are currently emotionally vulnerable and open to resolving their assumed crisis via others who are knowledgeable about Jesus. You are also given the option to share the content via nearly all possible social media sites – Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Google Plus, and good old-fashioned email. Adjacent to the main text is a newsfeed of trending articles about common topics – suffering, dealing with anxiety, overcoming “hard times”, marriage, and love: and – surprise – all of the answers are a bible verse on the specific subject. Are there other paths to resolving personal issues and difficult circumstances? Not that Pureflix.com would have you believe, at least.

You may also request a free copy of the *End Times Movie Guide*, featuring dark and foreboding men (in contrast, no women – perhaps inferring that only men are qualified for judgement) on the cover, implying that negative and unpleasant things could be awaiting on

judgement day for those who have not reconciled with Jesus. Other free content (via pop-up ad) is an instant download of a 'devotional' that "includes nine devotions that each features a movie, discussion questions, prayers, and actionable ways to practice living by the Spirit."

One of the most interesting things to note is the heading entitled "Education." This area provides resources and links to homeschooling resources and tips and tricks to avoid secular influences during your studies; should you choose to attend a non-religious institution. One of eSalt Media, LLC's umbrella organizations is a homeschooling resource center that sells Christian-based materials.

Suggested Elements: The primary suggested elements bolster a common theme regarding the importance and merits of social conformity:

- Christianity will make you happy, and that you are part of an "insider" club that can overcome anything. The mores of diligence, virtue, strong vs. weak and anguished vs. happy were strongly implied.
- Individuals require a sophisticated and structured network of religious community in order to succeed in life at all levels; and that secular influence should be avoided or shunned altogether. According to Charles Jones (2010), religious leaders are concerned about the loss of one of their biggest in-person leverage tools. "The discussions about online church have gotten pretty intense over the last couple of years. But among all of the theological discussion, few are asking questions about the way we think: What will moving what should be our most profound community online do to our ability to relate personally? Will it cause us to understand communication as synonymous with community? More importantly: Is the belief in some corners that online community is equal to physical community a result of intense use of social networking? The movement may be evidence of the changes our

technophilia has already brought about—ditto for recent attempts at online communion and baptism.”

Clearly the real or perceived loss of the emotional pull of connectedness and sense of belonging is seen as a threat, along the order of a Fortune 15 SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis. Loneliness and isolation are huge motivators, often compelling individuals to acquiesce to things they would normally avoid due to insecurity or codependence. One only needs to look to TV commercials for beauty and personal hygiene products or the cost of mega-weddings to confirm the power of not wanting to be shunned (which is also a traditional religious punishment in many sects).

Formulate Ideology: There are many facets under a common theme. First and foremost, the overarching message is that God should be your primary focus and resource for everything; and that you should share this with your friends. As the questions were fairly leading, they definitely implied that the question is not if you have a relationship with God, but what it specifically is or should be. The many references to homeschooling and the Bible being the sole text for all answers leads the reader to infer that one need not look elsewhere for anything, and that your children are much safer and better off being educated away from secular influences. According to Kenneth Burke, a major function of rhetoric is “its capacity to effect rebirth or a new identity for individuals. This rhetoric of rebirth involves movement through the three stages of pollution: an initial stage of guilt or tension; purification, cleansing, or catharsis, and redemption; a state of cleanliness in which a new identity – physical, spiritual, or psychological – is gained.” (Foss and Griffin 1992).

It is clear from the visual imagery that the organization wishes to portray women as idealistically good-tempered and serene, and that males are the ones who interpret and enforce

the rules and ultimate judgement. There is overwhelming guidance towards homeschooling and removing all outside (non-religious) contact and content; which would imply that any type of association with individuals or groups that are not Christian is “bad” and perhaps even dangerous – after all, you might end up being judged by the ominous men on the cover of *End Times*, or worse. The links promoting the bible as the sole resource for all of your woes, as well as the stark contrast in verbiage (sin and judgement vs. thankfulness and strength) encourage the reader to think of the bible as an insurance policy against anything that could possibly happen to them. *You don't need to look anywhere else; we have the answers to everything you will ever need.*

Functions Served by the Ideology: Financial motivation appears to be the largest aspect, and in this case, it is relatively simple to “follow the money”. Without funding, there is no church, nor a means to promote it. And how do you get funds? Marketing and fundraising in the classic style: subscriptions, selling content, and impressing upon your client base (in this case, “followers”) the concept that your product is the only one that really works. You avoid all mention of the competition, and never discuss them: they don't exist. (Do you see Pepsi mentioned anywhere on Coca-Cola's website? Of course not.)

How does a church sustain numbers to ensure a consistent revenue stream for the future? No matter how great your “product” is, you cannot trust that the current customers will sell it for you via word-of-mouth alone so that you have profits in perpetuity. Continuous marketing targeted at various demographics is key (this is where Guldorf's marketing background serves him well). Even better if your audience is captive and has little to no option to look elsewhere for a large part of their day: enter homeschooling. Homeschooling has grown from roughly 13,000 students in the 1970's, to an estimated 1,700,000 – 2,100,000 K-12 students in 2003 and has grown 7-12% per year since then (Cooper 2005). Cooper also goes on to cite that 75% of homeschooling families attend religious services – and doing the math, 75% of nearly 2.1 million

people is no insignificant number of people (and potential donors). Homeschooling is a trifecta of marketing genius. You have your current customers purchasing extra items regularly (additional revenue) as well as doing your marketing for you to the upcoming generations who do not have a choice until they leave their parents' home. This ensures roughly 12 solid years (on average) of sales and embedded content without competition. If you are lucky, this offshoot of "social media influencers" will be the anti-Kardashians (who themselves have recently joined the ranks as well), tagging and linking their friends and family to your content; suggesting that your 'product' might be the answer for them, too. After all, their friends wouldn't steer them wrong, would they?

In this vein, there is also now the 'YouVersion' and 'GloBible' that are essentially the Kindle of Biblical text, which provide a more interactive experience to keep the reader actively involved. According to Tim Hutchings (2017), these versions explore "the significance of the material form of a sacred text as a vehicle for religious socialisation (sic) and raises important questions about the potential for digital media to re-shape traditional relationships of power in Evangelical Christian communities. Similar to this method is the emergency of the new potential for digital media to re-shape traditional relationships of power in Evangelical Christian communities." In translation, the "relationship of power" is shifting from having followers physically in church and focused to attempting to guide and shape their electronic habits as well. And furthermore, it begs the question: what type of a relationship is a "relationship of power", exactly, and is it healthy? Would you describe your personal relationships that way? Who does a "relationship of power" benefit?

Conclusion

Philosophically, by limiting their exposure to outside influences, as well as promoting good vs. evil and a happy vs. a hard life, the Christian ideology also leverages the common trials and tribulations we all experience with a ready-made answer: the bible. By providing a singular resource for everything, this reduces options and the desire to look elsewhere – i.e., the Amazon of spirituality. You only need one holy search engine: the testament. This also attempts to prevent what Brandon Spektor (2018) refers to as “religious tinkering” – the tendency of individuals online to explore and select their beliefs a la carte, as it were. Especially because, according to Spektor, the more time people spend on the internet, the more likely they are to conclude that there is more than one religious option or path.

It is strategic for religious organizations to utilize the same processes that Fortune 500 companies do in order to meet their goals and retain market share – digital subscriptions, social media “influencers”, product placement, and the pop-up ads that everybody loves to hate. In the race for consumer dollars, where in-person shopping is increasingly being left in the dust, so to speak, the electronic techniques deployed by churches and groups must stand out and provide you with an “elevator speech”, grabbing your attention in the few moments that most people allow themselves to skim material. After all, there is no collection plate online, and nobody sitting next to you to shame you into putting something in the offering: now only PayPal and presumably God know if you tithe.

It says much about the reading habits of the modern day as well; that while churches purport to want to make a deep connection, the reality is that they must utilize clickbait and headlines just like The Onion and The Daily Mail in order to keep readership at sustainable levels – which seems to contradict their message of fulfilling relationships and a deeper relationship with God. To put it in modern terms, is God going from being the original social

media influencer to spam, and is the cutthroat nature of online marketing turning religion into a commodity, just to stay afloat? Even more importantly, is digital religion essentially the new form of televangelism – using links instead of sound bytes to attract followers; and is having to compete for market share in conflict with what the goal of a church should be? To use an analogy: should our teachers be fundraising, or teaching our children, or does that put the fox in charge of the proverbial henhouse? And should our religious leaders have to compete so dramatically for our attention that they are now marketing managers instead of spiritual guidance experts? Most importantly, we need to examine if the needs of the most vulnerable parts of our society are being best served, and the core intent of the church and scripture remains in its original form, lest the aforementioned imbalance of power become predatory. As with most online interactions, *buyer beware* is becoming the norm.

The internet is fraught with bogus claims, sketchy sites, and predators lying in wait for the vulnerable. It is clear that it may not be in the best interests of the truly needy to obtain guidance from those whose motives may be of the ulterior kind, and quite probably, little to no training in theology itself. In fact, it could be detrimental both financially and psychologically. There is no PayPal protection guarantee for your emotional well-being. Whether or not they will overshadow their brick-and-mortar church counterparts as Amazon has done to theirs remains to be seen.

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