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# Romancing the Difference: Kenneth Burke, Bob Jones University, and the Rhetoric of Religious Fundamentalism

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Camille Kaminski Lewis. *Romancing the Difference: Kenneth Burke, Bob Jones University, and the Rhetoric of Religious Fundamentalism.*

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Reviewed by Brian Jackson

In February 2000, George W. Bush made an early campaign stop at Bob Jones University, an institution that until that very year had prohibited its students from interracial dating. The school's community had no idea his visit would thrust BJU into the national gaze, making it a scapegoat for public political anxieties. Republicans (like Bush's opponent John McCain), Democrats, and journalists alike jumped into the mix to assault BJU publicly and thereby make Bush guilty by association. Though revisions of the interracial policy had already been in the works, Bob Jones III, president of BJU at the time, went on *Larry King Live* in March and officially lifted the campus ban on interracial dating. In the process, he told the television audience that though he and his predecessors believed the ban had scriptural warrant, it was ultimately less important than freedom of religion and the overall evangelical message BJU wanted to convey to the secular world.

Jones's rhetorical move on *Larry King Live* deserves scrutiny, and Camille K. Lewis, Chair of the Department of Rhetoric and Public Address at BJU, gives it and other BJU strategies a thorough treatment in *Romancing the Difference*, an academic monograph that will appeal mostly to scholars of religious communication. Though her position at BJU may compromise her study for some readers, Lewis does what many scholars and media pundits cannot bring themselves to do: give the symbolic messages of a fundamentalist organization a sympathetic and generous hearing. In *Romancing the Difference*, Lewis uses rhetorical theory to account for the way BJU uses its museums and other outreach methods to avoid being victimized by the secular world. In fact, these sectarian strategies become more than avoidance; they are, for Lewis, "courtly" (7) in that BJU

uses its public discourse to “woo” the secular “Other,” ostensibly through conversion (8). Such a sympathetic study should interest those of us who teach and work in a religious institution that, like BJU, tries to “romance” outsiders, often for similar purposes. Lewis herself believes her study will open a way for us to work for “a more egalitarian public sphere” by including the voice of the “religious separatist” (11).

To understand what Lewis means by “romance,” we need to understand how she uses the often-bewildering theories of philosopher Kenneth Burke (1897–1993) to show how BJU goes about its courtly wooing. Burke is a hard scholar to pin down. Traced through his dense and provocative works, his subject could be broadly conceived as “human motive” and the challenges that come from being symbol-using animals. Since Lewis is a rhetorician—a student of rhetoric, the classical and contemporary art of using symbols to promote social cooperation—she is interested in how Burke gives us tools to understand how a fundamentalist institution might use symbols effectively or otherwise to persuade secular outsiders to adopt certain values or attitudes. She looks at two of these conceptual tools in depth: the “tragic”—the tendency we have to make victims of those who transgress the moral order—and the “comic”—Burke’s “corrective” for the tragic tendency, a critical practice that leads us to accept our imperfections and see transgressors as “mistaken” rather than “evil” (1, 3). Tragic rhetoric seeks out society’s dangerous elements and makes symbolic scapegoats of them, as the Democratic party did to BJU after Bush’s visit (96). Comic rhetoric, though not very present in the public dialogue about BJU in the 2000 election, seeks to upend the value system that leads to scapegoating in the first place.

Interestingly, Lewis concludes that sectarian rhetoric *vis-a-vis* BJU is neither tragic nor comic, but *romantic*—that is, it seeks neither to make the secular world an enemy nor to ironically excuse its wrongs but to woo it through “that irresistible beauty that joins the Other to the sectarian ethic far outside the dominant frame” (128). In one chapter titled “The Romantic Pied Piper,” Lewis describes how BJU, as “the lovely sectarian” (62), “stands beyond the dominant” (39) and “plays a beautiful tune, not to entice the rats to their destruction, but to woo the citizens” (40) to “embrace a beautiful divinity” (46). Here, as in other places in the book, Lewis lets the theoretical poetry of her terms suggest the meaning: in its public discourse, BJU tries to impress nonevangelical outsiders and invite them to be saved.

This kind of romantic outreach may seem odd since we often (perhaps mistakenly) think of fundamentalists as reactionary antagonists rather than suitors. And in fact, one of the challenges we face with this otherwise

admirable work is that Lewis does not define what she means by the term we find in the subtitle: “religious fundamentalism.” In light of popular scholarship on the history and rhetoric of fundamentalism by George Marsden, Sharon Crowley, and others, it seems we need a definition and a historical context so we will know how the suitor strategy fits into the pageant of religious rhetoric in contemporary America. Also left unexamined is the way BJU as an institution operates rhetorically in ways other fundamentalist discourse may not. (The popular *Left Behind* novels by Jerry B. Jenkins and Tim F. LaHaye would make an interesting comparison.)

However, the book’s intense and singular gaze, even with limited context provided, has its advantages. Kenneth Burke sort of blew the top off classical rhetorical studies by introducing what has been called “Big Rhetoric,” or the study of *any* kind of symbolic activity beyond persuasive speech or writing. That open space lets Lewis apply the principles of tragedy, comedy, and romance to photographs and artwork in BJU’s internationally celebrated museums—the lovely objects of the “secular gaze” (63)—as well as other symbolic expressions as prosaic as campus recycling and the help desk in the administration building. From the professionally orchestrated to the mundane, BJU uses beauty, conservatism, and a fundamentalist gospel as a “beautiful costume” to “lure the Other” and “attract their lonely Beloved’s attention” (86). The metaphor is not only romantic but medicinal. Just as Burke sees the poet as a medicine man, Lewis sees BJU as using rhetorical strategies to “cure” a culture diseased with worldly pursuits. Lewis analyzes the texts from Bible Study Luncheons (81–84) to illustrate how BJU faculty use the scriptures to show how their secular neighbors, whether they know it or not, are lonely and sickly and need “communion as [a] balm” (85). As inheritors of divine truth, the sectarian fundamentalist knows what ails the culture and also knows the cure.

As Latter-day Saint missionaries know, most of the time these sickly secularists do not want to take their medicine. And in fact, sometimes prospective proselytes interpret these curative efforts, however well-intentioned, as “malpractice” (70). Lewis knows this, and she is willing to take at least one step away from her institution—admittedly, it is not a big step—to argue that in order to offer up this cure, sectarians must make the medicine (in other words, the message of the gospel) palatable by adapting it to the dominant conservative culture in ways that actually weaken their position. In public pronouncements during the 2000 presidential election controversy, BJU officials sought to identify “with the secular by embodying their core ideals” (118). (Throughout this work one is never sure if “secular” refers to non-Christians or more broadly nonfundamentalists, like Catholics.) Often in public discourse, the whole romantic thing falls flat.

The outreach seems disingenuous and indecorous. And when fundamentalists fail to convince the secular public, they often retreat from the public sphere as they did after the Scopes trial in the 1920s. They become passive, and “political action is impossible within this sort of passivity” (122). Lewis then proposes a “romantic comedy hybrid,” a phrase that may at first evoke in the reader an image of a favorite movie. What she means is that BJU, and all other rigidly fundamentalist sects who wish to enter public discourse, should learn how to use critical laughter and the metaphor of friendship rather than courtship to engage with the secular Other (122).

I finished this helpful contribution to the study of religious rhetoric feeling sympathy for the rhetorical predicament of the fundamentalist. I feel sheepish saying so, since such feelings can be interpreted as condescension. But perhaps there was something “close to home” in the analysis. Here is a religious institution with certain principles that it will not—*cannot*—negotiate. Not only will it not negotiate these principles with the secular world around it, but it feels divinely charged to encourage that world to adopt those principles. Unfortunately, the world by and large rejects both the message and the messenger and therefore rejects what the institution knows will bring happiness and ultimate redemption. Because the principles themselves do not do their own persuading, the fundamental dilemma (pun intended) for a missionary religion is to discover the means whereby one makes the truth palatable, even beautiful, to outsiders. *Romancing the Difference* provides a much-needed case study in the fortunes of this precarious and exhilarating courtship.

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