

Christian Rhetorics: Toward a Hopeful Future

Mapping Christian Rhetorics: Connecting Conversations, Charting New Territories, edited by Michael-John DePalma and Jeffrey M. Ringer. New York: Routledge, 2015. 305 pp.

Renovating Rhetoric in Christian Tradition, edited by Elizabeth Vander Lei, Thomas Amorose, Beth Daniell, and Anne Ruggles Gere. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2014. 211 pp.

Reviewed by T J Geiger II, Lamar University, and Melody Pugh, United States Air Force Academy

In this dialogic review, we hope to highlight some of the vibrant work being done on religious rhetorics. Christianity is a topic that frequently provokes suspicion in higher education—and not without reason. Its complicity with normalizing and dominating discourses should give all critical observers pause. At the same time, *Mapping Christian Rhetorics: Connecting Conversations, Charting New Territories* edited by Michael-John DePalma and Jeffrey M. Ringer and *Renovating Rhetoric in Christian Tradition* edited by Elizabeth Vander Lei, Thomas Amorose, Beth Daniell, and Anne Ruggles Gere are two collections that invite scholars of rhetoric and composition to consider nuanced contributions of Christian rhetorics to diverse political, social, and pedagogical projects. These collections provide scholars and teachers with tools for connecting interests in religious rhetorics to concerns shared by disciplinary and departmental colleagues: notions of agency, instances of performativity, historical inquiries, gendered norms, methodological issues, classroom dynamics, and representations of students. While we would like to have seen more examinations of living rhetors both within and outside of the United States included in both books, and attention to religious rhetorics within conversations about human sexuality, taken together, *Mapping* and *Renovating* present rich historical investigations, inquiries into gender, studies of rhetoric within institutions, and considerations of religious rhetorics in writing, rhetoric, and literature classrooms.

Melody: I'm so glad that I have the chance to read these two collections with you, T J. They are both so rich that it's almost hard to know where to begin. So, as a starting point, I find myself wondering what, if anything, can be learned from the verbs that are used in the titles of these respective books?

T J: In some ways, the titular verbs (renovating and mapping) both rely on what came before and offer fresh expressions that enable new opportuni-

ties. Both terms carry a kind of Socratic energy—one that seeks to explain where we’ve been and predict where we’re going with regard to Christian rhetorics. In *Mapping*, the editors highlight the map’s ability to acknowledge, connect, and chart—a cartographic trinity. The familiar/fresh dynamic seems especially pronounced around questions of research methodology and theory. In “Coming to (Troubled) Terms: Methodology, Positionality, and the Problem of Defining ‘Evangelical Christian,’” Emily Murphy Cope and Jeffrey M. Ringer take up familiar research concerns, but they explore them in the context of rhetorical inquiry about evangelical Christian identity. Their thoughtful self-examinations and inquiries into participants’ self-identifications provide valuable resources for other investigators. Rich considerations of standard theoretical terms also prove fruitful: Richard Benjamin Crosby shows how religious terrain and performances offer complex grounds for agency, and William T. FitzGerald compellingly demonstrates that studies of prayer yield insights into the very nature of rhetoric.

Melody: Explorations of theory and method are two of the major contributions that *Mapping* brings to the table. This collection offers us a vision of not only how composition and rhetoric as a field has arrived at a place where religion can be an integral part of rhetorical inquiry, but also how distinctive elements of religious practice can offer us new pathways forward. As you rightly point out, FitzGerald’s assertion that rhetoric *is* a form of prayer is a wholly original way of thinking about the work of rhetoric. Similarly, I found my thinking challenged by Richard Benjamin Crosby’s articulation of dual agency in the preaching of Henry Yates Satterlee, the first Bishop of the National Cathedral. Crosby examines the complexities that arise when an individual locates (and even perhaps fully invests) him or herself within a religious institution, and in so doing, develops a creative agency that is beholden to a higher power. I find that this conceptualization of agency—a concept so vital to the current work of the field—adds a layer of nuance that clearly distinguishes agency from mere individualism.

T J: Yes, this issue of understanding where religious rhetorics have been in order to freshly understand rhetorical power seems especially evident in two threads woven together throughout these two collections: historical work and Christian women’s rhetorical activity. I was struck by the vibrancy and scope of chapters dealing with these issues. For example, I found Aesha Adams-Roberts, Rosalyn Collings Eves, and Liz Rohan’s “‘With the Tongues of [Wo]men and Angels’: Apostolic Rhetorical Practices Among Religious Women” especially thoughtful and engaging (*Renovating*). The coauthors take the ap-

proach of analyzing several rhetors inhabiting various identities side-by-side, an approach that illuminates multiple complex dynamics simultaneously.

Melody: This is a striking commonality between the collections. In *Mapping*, Lisa Zimmerelli and Lisa Shaver each reflect on how female preachers and deaconesses in the 19th and early 20th centuries used rhetorical strategies to craft agentive spaces by which women could shape and expand the activities of the church within mainstream society. *Renovating* includes related discussions—by Vicki Tolar Burton; Karen K. Seat; and Adams-Roberts, Eves, and Rohan—of somewhat more reluctant (but no less effective) Christian women who adapted and subverted traditional religious rhetoric in an effort to craft public leadership roles within church structures that resisted the full significance of their work.

In fact, this complexity of individuals locating agency both within and in response to institutional power structures and belief systems is one of the common threads I see uniting the chapters in *Renovating*. Renovating, of course, means restoring, but the word also carries connotations of reinvigorating and refreshing. To that end, I appreciate the way that this collection opens by paying close attention to the rhetorical work accomplished by lesser known religious sects, such as the Latter Day Saints and Seventh Day Adventists. The authors of these chapters, Anne Ruggles Gere and Lizbeth A. Rand (respectively), offer a vision of the complexities, clashes, and contradictions that can exist within and among the adherents to a single religion.

T J: You're absolutely right. And this attention to individuals operating within institutions also appears in contributors' analyses of school scenes. I find myself wondering about the implications of these collections for rhetorical education and the teaching of writing. *Renovating* provides a significant contribution to the way I think about Christian rhetorics in the classroom. Elizabeth Vander Lei's "Ain't We Got Fun?": Teaching Writing in a Violent World" shares nuanced reflections on the nature of the pedagogical enterprise, the affective lives of students and teachers, and the role of writing classrooms in furthering deliberative and participatory democracy. She challenges me to imagine ways to forge a classroom—and dream of a world—where as many voices as possible are encouraged and valued and where participants feel not only an obligation to deliberative conversation but also take delight in each other and the work before them (and to acknowledge when those efforts fall short). In a similar way, Beth Daniell's "A Question of Truth" opens up new avenues for dialogue about the rhetorical nature of religious belief. By engaging with historical biblical criticism by figures like Marcus Borg as well

as central rhetorical concerns about knowledge construction, Daniell helps writing teachers build a vocabulary for talking about faith in complex ways.

Melody: I agree. One of the most powerful things about Vander Lei's chapter is her unflinching willingness to turn a critical lens on her own assumptions about what constitutes appropriate academic engagement and her willingness to be reflexive about the subjectivities that we—as instructors—privilege. I think we see a similar self-reflectiveness in her chapter, “Where the Wild Things Are’: Christian Students in the Figured Worlds of Composition” (*Mapping*), where she examines the conceptual metaphors that have so longed served to divide religious and academic rhetorics. I see in Priscilla Perkins’s “‘Attentive, Intelligent, Reasonable, and Responsible’: Teaching Composition with Bernard Lonergan” a similar willingness to acknowledge the possibility that can arise when we ask students to engage religious belief, even if students are not always able to fully realize that potential in their own thinking (*Renovating*). In calling our attention to the ways that students Tina, Sara, and Shruti all grapple with discussions of religion in very personal and individualized ways, Perkins does a great service to those of us who are trying to expand our vision of the ways that students may be operationalizing their religious commitments within the writing classroom.

T J: While I found myself not thinking quite so much about the classroom as I read *Mapping*, I did find myself challenged by Thomas Deans’ “Sacred Texts, Secular Classrooms, and the Teaching of Theory” (*Mapping*). When I teach, I tend to assign texts about religion or contemporary statements from religious individuals and communities, but not primary sacred texts. When Deans describes his use of Gospel scenes to teach literary theory, I began imagining how to use such texts to engage students around questions of interpretive practice and argument making. He asks students to keep in mind their initial reading reactions when they encountered a story from one Gospel as they read a different story from another Gospel, which works to make clear the value of reading from multiple vantage points—even those texts that students hold dear or that are held sacred by many—and to make clear the idea that their understandings of texts can change.

Melody: You know, I had to think hard about whether or not it would be appropriate for me to use the sacred text in ways similar to Deans (*Mapping*) and Daniell (*Renovating*). Similarly, I’ve thought hard about when it might be appropriate to use Bruce Herzberg’s exploration of the Jewish roots of the Apostle Paul’s rhetoric (*Renovating*) to help Christian students think more expansively about the interconnections between the rhetorics of many different religious traditions. Like you, I am inspired by the successes of these

teachers and scholars, but I also worry that I might not be as successful as they have been were I to include sacred texts in the classroom. These articles rightly suggest that religious texts are (to use the language of Scripture) a “two-edged sword,” and I think they are correct: Deans points out that use of sacred texts in the classroom “can provoke anxiety” (86), and Daniell argues that when people are concerned about questions of the “truth” of Scripture, “the underlying issue is more often than not how people read” (106). In particular what I found myself wondering is this: how can we ensure that students understand that we are not trying to threaten or change their belief systems, but (as both Vander Lei and Daniell point out) trying instead to be hospitable through our use of these texts? Can we invite student engagement in ways that emphasize exploration and discovery so as to renovate and invigorate students’ thinking about their own rhetorical and religious practice, whatever that may be? Such clarity about our purposes has never seemed more important to me than it does now, at a time when students from many religious faiths, and even those who do not have a religious faith, are struggling to understand how (and whether) their spirituality is welcome within the classroom.

T J: Your wondering, I think, will be shared by many readers. You raise such an important point. Answers to questions about student uptake of teachers’ efforts around religious rhetoric in the classroom (if, indeed, there are any real answers) are necessarily partial. But I find potential answers in the spirit of the collections. There’s a gracious capaciousness contained in the songs sung by these choirs of contributors. There’s room enough at the table (or in the edited collection pages or in the classroom) for many voices and stories, and differences can be held in creative tension. More practically and specifically, I think these chapters model an intellectual honesty that is critical if students are to buy into any project teachers would have them undertake, so being honest with students about our own commitments and how we come by them may be one important way forward. Vander Lei, Daniell, Deans, and others share glimpses of their own stories, their experiences with religion in their own lives. I enjoyed Deans sharing in his chapter his experience of presenting on a Gospel passage at an academic conference, hearing a homily on the same passage, and receiving a novel and creative interpretation of the passage from Deans’ ten-year-old son. While these occasions could have produced interpretive whiplash, because Deans adds these experiential moments to his chapter, readers are graced with fruitful and still-too-rare accounts of writing teachers’ own diverse experiences with religious discourse.

Melody: If I hear you correctly, you're suggesting that the chapters in these collections model a productive openness to examining and acknowledging the ways that religious rhetorics can be both limiting and liberating. Am I right?

T J: Exactly!

Melody: I walked away with a similar sense that the authors of these pieces are very realistic about the potential and the limitations of the rhetorical moments they explore. Both collections demonstrate that religion (and systematic theologies in particular) is a multifaceted and complex rhetorical agent that works simultaneously on and alongside its adherents. Religion can manipulate and interpolate; it can be an exigence, a tool, and even a partner in accomplishing particular social and spiritual ends. Certainly religion can limit its adherents, but if the authors in these collections are to be believed, religious discourses can also be a tool that rhetors use to accomplish their social goals—some of which may run counter to the expectations and desires of the very religious systems that produce these discourses.

T J: At the same time, in the case of both collections, I yearned for greater attention to religion's capacity to construct rhetorical boundaries that exclude and expel. Readers of these books will acquire a strong sense of Christianity's rhetorical power and of how individuals, communities, teachers, and others may be formed—or may themselves act—within religious contexts that make available certain life options and persuasive possibilities. However, it's not possible for me to watch the news or skim my Facebook newsfeed without seeing religious warrants mobilized to oppose the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender folks. You mentioned earlier the idea of sacred texts as a "two-edged sword," and for many, that is exactly how they have experienced Christian scripture: not as texts that encourage adherents to, as the old spiritual goes, "lay down [their] swords and shields down by the riverside," but as a sword wielded against them. While both collections tackle the civic implications of Christian rhetorics and pay special attention to their connection to gendered ideologies, no chapter within either book takes up LGBTQ-Christian issues in a direct way, and that seems a missed opportunity—even a heartbreaking absence.

Melody: I think this is a really important point, and one that may be connected to the largely historical and methodological emphases of these collections. You rightly point out that LGBTQ-Christian issues are one of the most pressing concerns faced by Christian churches in the U.S. today, and these issues are one factor that shape how North American Christianity, particularly

Christianity in the U.S. defines itself in relation to other global Christianities. To really grapple with the questions raised by these tendencies toward exclusion and embrace (to extend Vander Lei's use of Miroslav Volf in her article in *Renovating*), I think we need to be ready to look more closely at the rhetorical activities of living Christian rhetors, both in the United States and globally—those who use religion to liberate or oppress, either publicly or in the course of their daily lives. Current research shows that among religious adherents in the U.S., attitudes toward LGBTQ individuals (particularly with regard to marriage equality) are rapidly changing, but this may not be true globally. To better understand the role that rhetoric plays in facilitating these complex trends, and to better understand what these changing attitudes can teach us about how individuals craft idiosyncratic beliefs in relation to theological systems, we need to examine not just historic religious trends, but also the activities of those who are using and transforming religious rhetorics in contemporary life.

T J: Right! My own religious tradition, the Episcopal Church, has been undergoing a renovation regarding what it believes about human sexuality, a renovation that has unfolded through debate and discussion since 1976 when its decision-making body, General Convention, passed a resolution affirming the pastoral claims of gays and lesbians. In summer 2015, I was present when that renovation resulted in General Convention overwhelmingly voting to make the sacrament of marriage available to same-sex couples, a vote that came only days after the Supreme Court decision establishing civil marriage equality as a fundamental right. The morning of that decision, friends and I were gathering for the daily worship that takes place during General Convention when it was announced that a change to the musical prelude would let us mark with dance and celebration the good news from the Supreme Court. Clapping and dancing with joy in the aisles and rows, with many others, I sang, "We are marching in the light of God." A secular, civil court's affirmation of marriage equality provoked a profoundly spiritual experience among several participants in a Christian community preparing for worship. To share this story in this review is not an attempt to privilege my own experience, but to suggest that, for a long time, I think such a moment would be illegible within dominant frameworks for analyzing Christian practice and belief within composition and rhetoric. And if it were legible, it might be primarily rendered by rhetorical scholars as a moment celebrating liberal social gains, and the quality of the experience that participants might understand as distinctly spiritual could be lost.

Melody: What a powerful story. It's a timely reminder to be vigilant in seeking what Matthew W. Althouse, Lawrence J. Prelli, and Floyd D. Anderson, in their article "Mapping the Rhetoric of Intelligent Design: The Agentification of the Scene" (*Mapping*) call the "dialectic between both perspectives" (177), the academic and the religious. By using Kenneth Burke's pentad, these scholars show that spiritual and academic practice of rhetoric can be mutually illuminating: just as distinctively religious approaches to religious inquiry can open up new methodological and theoretical approaches to thinking about the academic practice of rhetoric, so existing rhetorical theories can offer us very useful ways of thinking anew about the spiritual claims made by rhetors.

T J: The collections we're reviewing do offer resources that could aid scholars in understanding the rhetorical ecology in which these kinds of religious dynamics are taking place. Two pieces in *Mapping* strike me as especially useful for considering the issues surrounding my desire for more scholarly engagement on rhetoric and Christian thinking about human sexuality. The question of why and how Christian rhetors are witness to social realities and how that witnessing changes is an issue William Duffy helps me think about in "Transforming Decorum." His historical and sophistic evaluation of Walter Rauschenbusch's efforts to promote a socially and economically progressive Christian stance may support others who seek to chart changes within contemporary Christian communities, changes with implications for our political life. Also, Beth Daniell's "More in Heaven and Earth" surveys both social science research and historical biblical criticism to argue that the religious landscape in the U.S. is more textured (and that Christian identifications are more diverse) than is typically imagined.

Melody: Absolutely! *Texture, diversity, nuance*: this is the nature of religious practice, and I am so thankful that these collections do the work of capturing that variety. Since 2011, Vander Lei and Michael-John DePalma have been encouraging scholars to look for places where religion can be a resource in rhetorical education, and in *Mapping*, Heather Thomson-Bunn calls for more scholars to do what Daniell has done, to combine empirical research and existing scholarship. Yet, as someone who studies the ways that religiously engaged students (many, but not all, of whom favor marriage equality, believe in evolution, and support progressive social causes) understand their academic literacy practices, I found myself longing for a discussion of how students are agentive in the classroom, and how they may be both mirroring and enacting changes in what constitutes normative religious belief. The religious students that I've talked to interact with social groups and popular cultures more diverse and multifaceted than at any time in history. They are working to make

sense of their own faith commitments within these diverse environments, and in so doing, they are accruing rhetorical expertise and simultaneously creating new conversations—new rhetorics—about what it means to practice religious faith in U.S. I wonder if perhaps these collections have given us license to make normative something previously novel: the rhetorical and the religious constantly in conversation, mutually constitutive rather than always already competitive?

T J: That seems a beautiful way to put it. These collections offer a vision that seeks to make normative the generative interaction of religion and rhetoric, a vision that is fundamentally hopeful about where this interaction can lead.

Beaumont, Texas and Colorado Springs, Colorado