

Rhetoric and religion in sojourner truth's and frederick douglass's speeches



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Despite being one-hundred-fifty years old, Frederick Douglass's speech "The Hypocrisy of American Slavery" and Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I A Woman?" have survived the tests of history as some of the most influential speeches of their time. Both speeches are loaded with poignant statements, stunning uses of rhetoric, and extremely effective persuasive methods. Due to the fact that Truth and Douglass have vastly different appearances, experiences, and beliefs from their audiences of white Christians, Truth and Douglass are forced to make intentional allusions to Christianity and the Bible in an attempt to appeal to the only commonality between them: the emotionally-charged topic of religion. The use of religion to appeal to the audience's pathos and logos also exposes the hypocritical and cruel racism and sexism that many white Christians exhibited and excused.

Truth uses strong logos throughout her speech to reason with her audience, all while evoking religious figures and stories in order to appeal to the Christianity that ties her with the audience. Truth argues, "Dat little man in black dar, he say women can't have as much rights as men, cause Christ wasn't a woman! Whar did your Christ come from? Whar did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothin' to do wid Him" (Truth). Using strong logos here, Truth makes a strong point that exposes the hypocrisy of Christian patriarchy and sexism. The mention of Jesus Christ provokes strong feelings for this audience too due to the sacred nature of the figure. By debunking the man's statement about Christ, the man is left with no argument. He also looks like a bad Christian because of his blatant hypocrisy. The line "Man had nothin' to do wid Him" closes the argument extremely well, which leaves the hypocritical sexist Christians with no

chance to save the argument. After the Christ argument, the men brought up Eve, which to Truth says, “ If de fust woman God ever made was strong enough to turn de world upside down all alone, dese women togedder ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again!” (Truth). The story of Adam and Eve is extremely significant in Christianity and as well as being significant in societies in which Christianity is the prominent religion.

Because this story is inherently patriarchal and sexist, the same patriarchy and sexism will be present in the society as well due to the prominence of this Christian belief. The story of Adam and Eve is a staple for many sexists who want to use the Bible to excuse and even promote their sexism, but Truth turns this argument on its side. Again, with a strong use of logos and pathos due to the immense, inherent emotional connections to religion, Truth destroys the argument that Eve is less than Adam or less deserving of rights. She proves that Eve is just as strong, if not stronger, and an extremely important individual.

By referencing Christian stories and imagery, Douglass evokes subtle fear and guilt in the audience by tapping into their fears of the judgement of God. Douglass tells the people a story of warning: “ And let me warn you, that it is dangerous to copy the example of a nation (Babylon) whose crimes, towering up to heaven, were thrown down by the breath of the Almighty, burying that nation in irrecoverable ruin” (Douglass). Here, Douglass is referencing Babylon, more specifically the Tower of Babel, which is a story from the Old Testament of the Bible. While the original story had nothing to do with slavery, sexism, or other institutionalized prejudices, the allusion is powerful due to its Christian background. Any reference of religion is going

to be emotionally provoking, and possibly controversial if used in a way that goes against popular Christian belief. Douglass does an amazing job using imagery in conjunction with the religious allusion to emphasize that slavery, which is the the “ crime” that would grow so tall that it would “ tower up to heaven,” where God would simply have to breathe and the tower would crumble and destroy the nation underneath, like a massive avalanche of sin and crime. This powerful image conveys the consequences after death. God’s judgement, which is represented by God’s breath, will ultimately be the thing that destroys people or not. This image and the corresponding meaning behind it evokes a huge amount of fear from the audience because everyone is afraid of dying and not making it into heaven. It also conjures up a significant level of guilt, due to making people reflect on their beliefs and “ crimes,” as well as the consequences that arise from holding those beliefs and performing sinful, inhumane actions. Douglass continues summoning up religious imagery until the end of his speech: “ Your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to him mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages” (Douglass). The ending of this speech is incredibly powerful; this quote in particular is brutally honest, which makes it extremely impactful. It just calls out the hypocrisy of Christian religion openly, which is very controversial, especially at the time. Also, Douglass’s use of imagery at the end is poignant and haunting: “ a thin veil to cover up crimes” evokes more religious imagery with the veil, symbolizing a distorted version of Christianity covering up the crimes of slavery. The directness and passion that fuels the ending of this speech emphasize the hypocrisy of Christianity. Douglass utilizes <https://assignbuster.com/rhetoric-and-religion-in-sojourner-truths-and-frederick-douglass-speeches/>

juxtaposition of words, like pairing “ religious parade and solemnity” next to “ bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy.” These words juxtaposed serve as emphasis to the hypocrisy, or as figurative punches to the systematic oppression that Christians excused. The rhythm of the laundry list of horrible descriptions that Douglass chooses to use also stress the anger and passion of the speaker, which in turn instills a certain level of fear in the audience. Douglass also employs a strategy of role-reversal to further expose the hypocrisy of white Christians. Many white Christian slaveholders referred to the slaves as being from “ a nation of savages.” However, Douglass implies that the slaveholders are more savage-like than the nation of “ savages” themselves, and they would be disgusted by the hypocrisy of slaveholding Christians. This language switches the role of who is civilized and who is considered savage-like.

Douglass subtly mentions religion by using extremely religious word choices in order to emphasize the emotional and spiritual repercussions of the practice of slavery, which instills a level of fear in the audience about the wrath of God and evokes powerful emotions that could help in changing their perspectives on slavery. Douglass calls the practice of slavery “ in the name of the Constitution and the Bible [...] the great sin and shame of America” (Douglass). By using the word “ sin,” it immediately provokes fear in the audience due to being afraid of the judgment of God. The explicit mention of the Bible as a piece of evidence to abolish slavery also emphasizes the potentially cruel judgment from God once in the afterlife for those who use the Bible to protect and justify slavery. Not only does this evoke feelings related to religion, but it evokes feeling of nationalistic pride and patriotism

due to the mention of the Constitution, which Americans hold highly revered. Douglass, who remains passionate and somewhat angry throughout the speech, attempts to connect slaves with his white Christian audience by reminding them that “ the Negro race [...] confess and worship the Christian God, looking hopefully for life and immortality beyond the grave,” just as the white Christians do. Emphasizing the fact that they worship the same God increases the humanity of the slaves and connects him with his audience. This is crucial to the effectiveness of his speech; if Douglass could not connect with his audience in any way, they would become shut off and not listen to any of his argument, regardless of the logic or any meaningful information he is saying. He continues speaking of Christianity to strengthen his argument: “ Is it that slavery not divine; that God did not establish it; that our doctors of divinity are mistake? There is blasphemy in the thought. That which is inhuman cannot be divine” (Douglass). Here, Douglass calls out the people using Christianity to justify slavery very effectively. His word choice of emotionally charged words like “ blasphemy” emphasize a disrespect of God and religion, and therefore instills guilt and fear in the audience for the “ blasphemy” of the “ divine.” At the end of his speech, he returns to referencing God to further drive the point home of fearing the judgement of God. Douglass refers to the practice of slavery as the nation’s “ hypocrisy [...] and crimes against God and man” (Douglass). It is significant that Douglass says that slavery is a crime against God before the fact that it is a crime against man. Clearly, he intentionally is attempting to emphasize that the judgment of God is on the side of abolition and equality, and that those who support slavery should be fearful of the wrath of God because slavery is

a “ crime against God,” which sounds like an offense to God on a personal level and therefore an act of blasphemy as well.

Both “ Ain’t I A Woman” and “ The Hypocrisy of American Slavery” exhibit incredible uses of rhetoric in an attempt to both connect and persuade white Christians to make moral choices and to change their perspectives. Religion is used to emotionally connect as well as to make the Christian audience reflect on their hypocrisy and morality, and to stir up fear and guilt in the audience to persuade them further. At a time at which black people were killed, enslaved, and demonized simply for the color of their skin, these speeches were not only stunning uses of rhetoric, but also stunning displays of bravery, morality, and perseverance.

Works Cited

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