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Front cover: Women holding garlanded ropes in the Earl of Rone procession, Combe Martin, Devonshire, 2001. (Copyright: "Earl of Rone"). See within: Tom Brown, "The Hunting of the Earl of Rone," Figure 1.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Theory of Vernacular Rhetoric: The Case of the "Sinner's Prayer" Online

Robert Glenn Howard

Abstract

This paper seeks to rigorously define and illustrate the analytic category of "vernacular rhetoric" through an examination of the "Sinner's Prayer" as it appears on an amateur web page. In the online environment, this invitation to a traditional prayer performance seems to be a strategy for converting non-Christians. Through the application of the concept of vernacular rhetoric, however, it becomes clear that the deployment of the prayer can also function as an invitation for the already-converted to "testify" to their faith. In this way, the apparently evangelic prayer form also functions as an invitation for the already-converted to perform previously held values. By applying the concept of vernacular rhetoric to this example of online discourse, its value as an analytic category becomes clear because it can address the performative nature of World Wide Web-based documents.

Introduction

This paper seeks to more rigorously define and illustrate the analytic category of "vernacular rhetoric" through an example of the "Sinner's Prayer" as it appears on an amateur web page. The invitation to this traditional prayer performance seems be a strategy for converting non-Christians. Through the application of the concept of "vernacular rhetoric," however, it becomes clear that the deployment of the prayer is also an invitation for the already-converted to "give testimony" to their faith. In this way, the perspective of vernacular rhetoric reveals that the explicitly evangelic prayer form also functions as an invitation for group insiders to perform previously shared values. Where this is the case, both the performance of the prayer and the invitation to its performance are examples of *epideictic* rhetoric. Persuasive language can be termed "epideictic" when a speaker articulates values already accepted by his/her audience in order to indicate group identity. The existence of epideictic discourse on the World Wide Web points to the performative nature of some online documents.

In research into network communication over the past few years, it has become popular to cite the remark of the symbolic anthropologist Clifford Geertz that "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (Geertz 1973, 5). For many researchers, Geertz's quote seems almost a prophetic vision of the "virtual" world of hypertext documents that would arise with the emergence of the public World Wide Web in 1992 (Castells 2001, 9ff). Envisioning all systems of meaning as a symbolic "web," Geertz gives credit for the idea to the early sociologist Max Weber's conception of *verstehenden* or "interpretive" cultural analysis (Keys 2002, 237ff). Geertz's work, however, was also heavily influenced

by Kenneth Burke; one of the most outstanding and widely-read scholars of rhetoric of the twentieth century.

In 1966, several years before Geertz, Burke stated that:

> Our presence in a room is immediate, but the room's relation to our country as a nation, and beyond that, to international relations and cosmic relations, dissolves into a web of ideas and images that reach through our senses only in so far as the symbol systems that report on them are heard or seen (Burke 1966, 48).

For Geertz, Weber, and Burke, the vast proportion of human experience is mediated by symbol systems. For Geertz, there is a performance of communication in every symbol, and every performance is also an action, and behind every action lies an implicit motive.

Similar to J. L. Austin's location of a performative or "illocutionary force" in all communicative action (Austin 1975, 148ff), Geertz's "webs of significance" link human motives to the communications that, in aggregate, generate the life-worlds that those individuals inhabit (Geertz 1973, 5). We spin these webs through our own actions and, even as we do, we perform our understanding of the very world that those webs signify. In making reference to these webs, Geertz is, by implication, supporting Burke's resolute claim that all human communication (all such web spinning) is *rhetorical* because it is *motivated* (Burke, 1973, 9ff).

If we are to understand "rhetoric" not only as the skills of persuasion but also as the architectonic principle of language that links action to symbol systems, then the study of rhetoric goes far beyond styles of public speaking, political deliberation, or effective sermonising (Weaver 1970, 201ff; Lanham 1994, 155ff; Zulick 1997, 117ff). From this perspective, rhetoric is not only to be found in political texts or formal speeches; nor is it only learned from the institutionally authorised texts of college debate courses. It also occurs in the everyday and informal discourse through which we construct our daily lives. It is not just something taught from some abstract "top" down. Instead, it is also, and perhaps first, something learned and carried forward in everyday social interaction.

When rhetoric is conceived as "vernacular," it is seen as operating in everyday social discourse. This includes discourse that emerged as the "vernacular Web" in the last decades of the twentieth century (Howard 1997, 295ff; Beckerlegge 2001, 219ff). With new communication technologies, old forms emerged in a changed fashion—but still exhibiting their traditional content. One example of the emergence of a traditional form in a new communication medium is that of the Sinner's Prayer tradition on amateur web pages. In cases where a traditional form of appeal emerges as a performative online document, folklore studies is particularly equipped to locate, describe, and analyse these traditional performative documents.

In 2003, there were at least five and a half thousand websites that explicitly deployed and/or discussed something called "The Sinner's Prayer." On many such pages (about thirty-four per cent overall), the explicit goal of the web page was to "save" individuals by persuading them to perform their own Sinner's Prayer. In the online environment, neither the performance of this prayer or the invitation to it occur in a single shared documentable moment as they might during a church service or other "real world" context. On web pages, the basic invitation is performed in the creation of the page. By being accessed again and

again, an untold number of invitations are performed. Each invitation is a shared performance in which links are made not only between web pages, but also between ideas. In some cases, these ideas evolve into a symbolically charged moment of private religious devotion. Through motivated actions, the online document is not just an inert text. Instead, it is the private location of a traditional religious performance. Through the concept of "vernacular rhetoric," the performative nature of online communication can be effectively highlighted and analysed.

A Theory of Vernacular Rhetoric

In Aristotle's handbook on the art of rhetoric, he defined the term as follows: "Let rhetoric be [defined as] an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion" (Aristotle 1991, 37). Sunk within that definition is the assumption that rhetoric is an "ability" that people possess. It is the ability to see what is persuasive in a particular case. As an ability, rhetoric is observable when people choose to engage in it. Since they *choose* to do it, it is a motivated action. Since they do it in relation to others, it is exhibited as part of an overall social matrix or "discourse community." Rhetoric, then, is strategic communicative behaviour observable in human discourse.

In two articles in 1968, Roger Abrahams introduced the concept of "folk rhetoric." With reference to Kenneth Burke, Abrahams argued that "all language is a process of naming, . . . naming gives comfort by creating a feeling of control, . . . [and] for one to know the name of a thing is to achieve magical control over it" (Abrahams 1968a, 145; 1968b, 168ff). Primarily focusing on this functional aspect of the nexus between belief and action, Abrahams's concept failed to include the essential component that the study of vernacular rhetoric could bring to folklore and that the study of folklore could bring to rhetoric. Vernacular rhetoric is not just the activity of naming; it is the aspect of any communicative action that authorises its claims with strategies that arise from or appeal to "traditional," "native," or local community beliefs and practices.

The word "vernacular" has its origins in the concept of "the local" or "home grown." *Verna*, in Roman Latin, is a noun specifically referring to home-born slaves. In classical Greek, the noun "*verna*" is *oikotrips* and the adjective is *oikogenes* or "home-genetic." For the Greeks and Romans, the marks of this "home genetic" nature were found in the language with which a person spoke. This meaning is clear in Plato's dialogue, *Meno*, when Socrates asks Meno to provide a "retainer" for an experiment in learning. Meno brings a boy forward, and Socrates asks: "He is a Greek and speaks our language?" Meno responds: "Indeed, yes—born and bred in the house" (Plato 1989, 365). The slave was a *verna*. He was "vernacular."

In classical Roman society, most slaves were seized during wars, during the suppression of colonial insurrections, or even through outright piracy. The vast majority of these slaves spoke little or no Latin, the institutional language of Roman government. Since any person born to a slave woman (without regard to the social position of the father) was automatically a slave, female slaves were encouraged to have children to increase the master's slave stock (Bradley 1987, 42). These *verna* became even more valuable than their mothers because they were

native Latin speakers and could be trained in more valuable skills that relied on literacy in Latin.

On the opposite end of the social spectrum, Marcus Tullius Cicero was considered by the late Roman Republic to be the greatest master of public speaking and the highest example of an orator. A masterful politician, he was regarded as being among the greatest thinkers and practitioners of rhetoric. Struggling against the eminent collapse of the Roman Republic into tyranny, Cicero famously lost his life; his tongue is said to have been cut from his head and held as a trophy.

Emerging from a long line of thinkers about politics and discourse that began with Aristotle's contemporary competitor Isocrates, Cicero held that skill in rhetoric was fostered by formal education and this skill was necessary to the formation and maintenance of a just society (Mendelson 2002, 135ff). Cicero argued that, in order to counter tyranny, educated individuals must learn and engage in *controversia*. Controversia refers to public debates that were enacted as a method for reaching decisions on important public issues. In this way, skilled and educated speakers would keep public controversies from devolving into violent conflict. In the end, Cicero himself fell prey to a collapse of the representative system of government his vision of political rhetoric had fostered. Still, his notion of an educated group of individuals who would enact, through language, the social truths that underpin a just government has been of enduring significance (Habermas 1970, 360; Conley 1990, 34ff; Kennedy 1994, 128ff). Part of his abiding legacy would be the strong association between the study of rhetoric and that of public political speaking. For Cicero, however, political debates and reasoned arguments were not the only modes of rhetorical skill, and formal education was not the only means by which the skills of rhetoric were learned.

By Cicero's day, the meaning of vernacular had begun to expand in interesting ways. Cicero used the word in his dialogue *Brutus* to define a successful orator: "Tinca … was completely worsted by Granius through some indescribable vernacular flavor" (Cicero 1971, 147). This reference emerges in the context of a discussion of how a particular manner of speaking and thinking arises within a certain city. This manner is one that goes far beyond just local colloquialisms or accent. For Cicero, a "vernacular" sense of speaking and thinking could be recognised when exhibited outside of the "home" location. Linked to participation in a particular community, Cicero understood the "vernacular" as set in opposition to what he and other Roman politicians saw as the universalised and institutional elements of persuasive communication codified in textbooks. Unlike the arts of *controversia*, the "vernacular" was "indescribable." It existed and was learned outside of formal Roman education. Because of this association, vernacular came to refer to the non-institutional languages of Europe through the Renaissance. Although it still holds this formal meaning, its association with the non-institutional gave the term new currency as an analytic category in interpretive anthropology (Lantis 1960, 202ff).

As an analytical category, "vernacular" appeared as early as 1960 in an article in *American Anthropologist* entitled, simply, "Vernacular Culture." In this article, Margaret Lantis uses the term to refer to "the commonplace" (Lantis 1960, 202). After Lantis's article, the term "vernacular" began to appear in other scholarly circles. It made its most notable impact in the study of architecture. Seeking to

define forms of architectural design that were neither "primitive" or representative of the highest technological advances or monumental efforts of a culture group, Amos Rapoport used the phrase "vernacular architecture."

> When building tradesmen are used for the construction of most dwellings, we may arbitrarily state that primitive building gives way to *preindustrial vernacular*. Even in this case, however, everyone in the society knows the building types and even how to build them, the expertise of the tradesman being a matter of degree (Rapoport 1969, 4; original emphasis).

Clearly sharing the socially transmitted nature of what Abrahams termed "folk" in rhetoric and the "native" or "home-born" in the Greek and Roman meanings of the word, Rapoport's "vernacular" is a knowledge that is shared by "everyone in society." As such, this sort of vernacular is not imposed from above by institutional design or maintenance. Instead, it emerges across individual behaviours in a given community.

In 1974, Don Yoder defined "folk religion" as existing alongside but apart from institutional religion (Yoder 1974). Responding to Yoder in 1995, Leonard Primiano has argued that the concept of "vernacular religion" represents belief both inside and outside of institutions. For Primiano, even institutions themselves can be viewed as vernacular creations (Primiano 1995). Similarly, to look at a given communication through the analytic category of "vernacular rhetoric" is to attempt to locate Cicero's "indescribable flavour" in motivated communications of even the most formal speakers in the most formal contexts. Vernacular rhetoric as an analytic concept is less an object of study as much as it is an approach to studying human behaviour.

In the field of communication, the vernacular approach to rhetoric has not been theorised in ways that adequately address Primiano's notion of a vernacular nature in even the most formal communications. Gerry Hauser has most famously explored the term's meaning among scholars of rhetoric. For Hauser, the concept helps to account for the way in which institutional publics are influenced by everyday discourse. Hauser, however, and those who have expanded on his ideas, continue to think of the "vernacular" as simply one influence on a traditional conception of the "public sphere" of discourse (Habermas 1974, 49). Hauser does not seek to clearly define or explain his sense of the "vernacular" as it comes to be either opposed to or to be part of a political "public." In fact, it remains unclear precisely how Hauser envisions the relationship between public discourse, politics, and what he calls "vernacular voices" (Hauser 1999, 12).

Other scholars of rhetoric, such as John Ono and Kent Sloop, also engage the term "vernacular" in an attempt to direct study towards non-institutional discourse. Their research findings point to the difficulties of making a hard and fast distinction between institutional and vernacular rhetorics. They conclude that "vernacular discourse does not only exist as counter-hegemonic, but also as affirmative, articulating a sense of community that does not function solely as oppositional to dominant ideologies" (Ono and Sloop 1995, 22). While noting the potentially non-"counter-hegemonic" nature of the vernacular, they fail to note the "vernacular" nature of even the most empowered or "hegemonic" communications. Focusing on communities that seemed to them "non-institutional,"

Ono and Sloop failed to consider the very real vernacular characteristics of otherwise "institutional" communities.

Ono and Sloop approach the problem from the limited perspective of rhetorical studies; a perspective that links the "vernacular" with the disempowered. In rhetorical and most critical studies, the "vernacular" is assumed to oppose the institutional. Thomas Boyd, in his 1991 analysis of African-American film, for example, stresses that marginalised elements of a dominant society negate that dominance in unique and specific ways. Vernacular discourse "challenges the dominant white discourse on blacks in American society" (Boyd 1991, 100). In the introduction to his well-known book *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. asserts the existence of a generalised "vernacular theory" of African-American literature. Gates, however, has been rightly shown to have imagined a singular, transhistorical, and romanticised view of the vernacular. In so doing, he failed to recognise the diversity of vernacular discourses even within a single geographic community (Gates 1988, xii; Gibson 1989, 47; Potter 1995, 17).

One bright spot in research on vernacular rhetoric is in the narrow field of proverb studies. Here, rhetoric and ideas about vernacular thinking have usefully informed each other by locating the vernacular element of all kinds of communication when they deploy proverbial speech strategically. In Goodwin and Wenzel's 1979 piece, for example, a vernacular sense of "practical reasoning" is associated with the traditional form of the proverb (Goodwin and Wenzel's 1979, 289). Similarly, in Thomas Green's and William Pepicello's work, the forms of the proverb and riddle are compared with that of Aristotle's rhetorical syllogism, the enthymeme (Bitzer 1959, 399ff; Green and Pepicello 1986, 33ff). Although all of these cases point to the rich connections between persuasive language and folkloric forms, they do not adequately address the underlying architectonic and performative implications of vernacular rhetoric as a broad analytic category.

A more rigorous attempt to offer a theory of "vernacular rhetoric" seeks to correct the failure of rhetorical scholars to adequately address the influence of informal social learning on communication. Even the most studied and formal political debate has, at its core, vernacular rhetorical aspects that the special focus of folklore studies can help to elucidate. At the same time, attempting to theorise vernacular rhetoric builds a bridge between two fields of inquiry that are deeply invested in the study of human communication: folklore and rhetoric.

Since all communication is also action, it is motivated. In the sense that all acts have implicit motives, those motives can be inferred from the rigorous analysis of documents. If the study of rhetoric is the inference and critical assessment of these motives, the study of vernacular rhetoric is the analysis of them as they are expressed in "home-born" communication practices. In this sense, all the genres of folklore studies could be considered from the perspective of vernacular rhetoric. In what sense is a memorate persuasive? When does a quilt become an argument? What motivates people to tell dirty jokes? At the same time, all rhetorical studies can, and often do, incorporate a consideration of the vernacular aspects of communicative action. Why does a political leader sometimes seem "down home" during an official public address? Does he/she use this quality to an advantage?

As will become clear in the following analysis, a more rigorously theorised vernacular rhetoric can also help to reveal the performative nature of seemingly inert World-Wide-Web-based documents.

The Sinner's Prayer as an Invitation to Performance

While it has made its way into more evangelical Catholic discourse as well, the emically named Sinner's Prayer has roots deep in Christian Protestantism. In American theological discourse, it goes back at least as far as Peter Clark's 1734 Boston lecture, "A Sinners Prayer for Converting Grace." In that lecture, Clark discusses how prayer can function, "chiefly for the direction and encouragement of the unconverted to pray for converting grace" (Clark 1735, 1). Also found in both evangelical and African-American folk music traditions, the beginnings of the prayer emerge in American revival movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There, it is most obviously documented in lyrics generally categorised in popular pan-denominational hymnals as "invitation" hymns (Marini 2002, 281). Growing in popularity with the evangelical movements in Protestant Christianity, the invitation to the prayer has become a feature of revival sermons, alter calls, and televangelistic broadcasts.

Theologically, the prayer emphasises personal morality and individual access to the divine. The prayer itself is an explicit admission of human sinfulness by the individual, and then a request for the divine to begin to act in that individual's life. Because this request is personal, it cannot be a codified ritual text. In fact, in its most powerful and functional form, the prayer should not be seen as any "text" at all. Instead, it is conceived as a deeply personal and emotional appeal to God. The enactment of the prayer should follow a general format while also reflecting the earnest desire on the part of the sinner performing the prayer.

In the wide variety of evangelistic contexts from which the prayer emerges, individuals are typically first taught what the prayer means and how it should be performed. Then, the individual "sinner" is invited to perform the prayer privately. Once invited, the sinner is expected to earnestly communicate with the divine through his/her own words. In this way, the "prayer" itself exists in its most powerful form in an untold myriad of individual, personal, and private performances.

On the World Wide Web, recognising this emergent quality of the prayer complicates what might seem to be a simple contextual analysis of prayer texts. The location of an example of the prayer on the World Wide Web points to the far more elusive architectonic and performative moments to which the document gives rise in the everyday lives of people who encounter the Sinner's Prayer online. While traditional forms of textual analysis might be able to locate and categorise prayer texts, a theory of vernacular rhetoric offers a deeper understanding of the prayer as an act that occurs in the private experience of computer users.

Like any traditional form, however, the prayer must first be located and defined by comparing examples found in their own contexts. Online, thousands of Christian websites seek to teach web users what the prayer means and then invite them to enact it. One such site defines the prayer in a typical way by noting its radically personal and performative ethos: "the sinner's prayer … isn't any

'official prayer' but rather a sample prayer to follow when asking Jesus into your heart. You can pray to God in your own words" (Salvation Prayer 2001).

On the Salvation Prayer Net website, a simple four-step form of prayer is explicitly stated as follows:

Salvation Prayer—The Simple Steps

1. Acknowledge in your heart that Jesus is Lord.
2. Confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord.
3. Believe that Jesus died for your sins and was raised three days later.
4. Repent of your sins and get baptized in the name of Jesus (Salvation Prayer 2001).

The website then gives the following example:

> Jesus, I acknowledge that you are the Son of God. I confess that you are Lord. I believe that You died on the cross for my sins and were raised up on the third day. Come into my heart and be Lord of my life. All that I am, I now give to You. All that you are, I now receive as mine. Thank you, Jesus, for eternal life (Salvation Prayer 2001).

In order to locate and define the Sinner's Prayer form in the online environment, in October 2004 I documented one hundred websites that engage in discourse referring to the Sinner's Prayer. In order to arrive at this set, I used a search engine that ranks each website by the number of external links that have been made to it. Then, I searched for the keyword phrase "sinner's prayer." From that list, I located the first forty websites that contained explicitly demarcated text that was referred to as the Sinner's Prayer. I compared the prayer variants and located four definitive characteristics.

Across all its variants and as it emerges out of a wide diversity of contexts, the prayer is recognisable as a unique form based on the following four traits: (1) it begins with an emotive and personal statement addressed directly to the Christian deity; (2) the sinner confesses that he/she is imperfect; (3) the sinner professes specific belief in the miracle of Christ's resurrection from the dead; and (4) the sinner performatively gives his/her life, soul, or heart to Jesus. Although the prayer may sometimes appear in somewhat different orders or vary from these specifics (as do all vernacular expressions of belief), its primary definitive trait is the direct confession of personal sin to a deity in an effort to attain Grace.

In October 2004, the prayer could be found on a wide variety of Christian websites. It occurred on the sites of many national and international missionary organisations, sites for a wide variety of mainstream Protestant Churches, as well as amateur missionary and Bible study websites. It could be found in a variety of online contexts including websites offering forums for Christian prayer, personal home pages, and even an occasional non-Christian web-based bulletin board. In all the cases I located, it took its normative form as a confession of sin and personal invitation directed individually at Jesus. In some cases, it was only discussed in the abstract as an issue of theological debate on the topic. Most often, however, it appeared as part of the teaching/invitation pattern typical of an evangelical deployment of a prayer. On most occasions, the prayer emerged as an example or description of what an individual should say followed by an invitation to the reader to compose and perform his/her own variant.

Because it is a personal invitation, the vernacular form of the prayer cannot be a codified ritual text. Instead, it is conceived as a deeply personal and emotional appeal to God that should follow a general format while also reflecting the earnest desire on the part of the sinner performing the prayer. By necessity, the prayer emerges as it is personalised on the spot. In this sense, the prayer exists only in the performances of specific individuals in particular contexts.

At the same time, however, it exhibits continuities and consistencies across many variants. It is a recognisable form, but it is not a codified text. The prayer act is a moment that can only be rightly understood as symbolic action. When that symbolic action occurs in private at the interface between an individual web user and his/her computer, the most powerful and potentially evangelically persuasive forms of the prayer emerge in a vernacular moment difficult to document.

But the webs of significance that render that moment meaningful are easily documentable, and, as a theory of vernacular rhetoric implies, specific Web-based manifestations of the prayer can be analysed to locate the motives behind its presentation to an audience by a web-page builder. While in no way the only aspect of the online prayer experience that might be considered, a vernacular rhetorical approach to the Sinner's Prayer online helps to reveal the way in which natively learned behaviours lead to a recognisable motive in the online environment. In the following section, a rigorous rhetorical analysis of one example of the Sinner's Prayer on the World Wide Web reveals that evangelism may not be the only motive for the presentation of the vernacular prayer form in the online environment. This second motive is properly termed *epideictic*, and epideictic communication rests on the active performance of shared values for its persuasive force.

Alaskrafts Fur Shack: The Sinner's Prayer as Testimony

On a mail order website for a small store in Alaska, a variant of the prayer appears at the bottom, on a long sidebar with a small graphic of the Christian symbol, the fish, and a full-blown invitation to take the prayer. On this site, Alaskrafts's customers can purchase a wide variety of fur clothing as well as various treated animal pelts. Additionally, customers can invite Jesus to be their personal Saviour.

On the Alaskrafts site, the variant of the prayer itself appears as follows:

Dear Jesus:
Thank You for the sacrifice You made for me.
Please forgive me for all of my past sins.
I repent of these actions, and with Your help, I will change and not repeat them again.
I know I am not worthy; but, I willingly accept You as my Lord and my Savior, and I thank You
for Your blessings over my family and me. [1]

This example exhibits the four key definitive traits of the Sinner's Prayer. It begins with an emotive and personal communication with Jesus through its use of the direct salutation, "Dear Jesus." The sinner overtly confesses his/her sins, which fulfils the second trait of the prayer. The third trait is clear in the statement of belief in the Grace offered by the resurrection: "Thank You for the sacrifice You made for me." The final

definitive trait repeats and affirms the personal invocation of the first element when the speaker makes a performative speech act that gives himself/herself to Jesus: "I willingly accept you as my Lord and Savior."

This example of a web-based prayer can be considered folkloric because it exhibits continuities and consistencies that mark it as participating in the Sinner's Prayer form as it emerged from the sample of forty variants. It is obviously rhetorical because it contains the explicit motive of inviting or compelling readers of the web page to "Know Jesus Now!" by "taking" the prayer. Folklore studies has long been in the business of locating such "traditional" forms, just as rhetorical studies has pursued persuasive language such as this. Combing the two fields reveals something more, however. It locates the multiplicity of audiences envisioned by the builder of the website, and this in turn implies a multiplicity of motives at play in the construction of the web-based documents.

On the front page of the web store's sidebar, bracketed by two golden Christian fish symbols, a clickable web link lights up in yellow when the pointer passes over it. It says: "Take The Sinner's Prayer Right Now, Or Accept Jesus As Your Savior Once Again!" Clearly directed to the multiple audiences of current Christian believers as well as non-Christian potential converts, the invitation is followed by a full-blown example of the prayer. If a visitor to the website follows the link through the prayer, they will find a single web page devoted to the topic.

On this page, the golden fish symbols appear again, much larger. Exhibiting the typical tendency to teach potential invitees about the prayer, the first lines of the page quote the Gospel of John and thus link the prayer to the text of the Bible. Following the quote, the page invites its audience to take the prayer saying: "Know Jesus now! Experience Jesus!" A second authorising passage from the Bible follows: "The premise of the Sinner's Prayer is found in Romans 10:9-10." The biblical passage is quoted in full, and the example of the prayer from the side bar on the front page of the web store is repeated. Then, as is typical of many variants, the store owners invite anyone who takes the prayer to let them know, saying: "Let Us Know If You Have Accepted Jesus With The Above Prayer By Sending Us Your First Name And Where You Live." After that, the web page has a submission script so that people who take the prayer can let the website builders know that they have had a successful conversion.

When I emailed the website builders to ask if they had had a lot of conversions, they responded that they felt they had had some, and that they had heard from many Christians who had reaffirmed their faith. The website builders thought that, generally, it encouraged Christians to shop with them. Other respondents who had similar pages on their websites assumed that they had made new converts through their web pages. However, none could offer concrete examples. As one web-page builder put it:

> I really can't give you an answer on the number of people that have responded to this prayer . . . I was led by the Holy Spirit to do this web site and to include the sinner's prayer in an effort to bring people into God's family . . . My goal was to help bring to salvation, even just "1" soul . . . and if this web site has accomplished that, then I am happy. [2]

This respondent remains convinced that someone has been converted by her web page. Her belief in this claim is anchored to her perceived access to the divine; by

"being led by the Holy Spirit." Almost all respondents expressed similar attitudes. Primarily, they assumed that people were being saved.

Because it is present on a site that is unrelated to any Christian discourse or community, it is clear that the prayer on Alaskrafts's site is intended, at least in part, for a broad audience of individuals, and not Christians specifically. This implies that the motive of the web-page builder had for placing the prayer on the site is at least partially evangelistic. That is to say, the site appears to be seeking to locate non-Christians whom it can teach and potentially convert to Christianity.

However, the page explicitly addresses multiple audiences. On the sidebar, it confronts both current Christians and non-Christians with the message: "Take the Sinner's Prayer right now! Or accept Jesus as your Savior once again!" This prayer exemplifies a basic problem that the Sinner's Prayer discourse is confronted with as a web-based evangelical device (Howard 1997, 285ff; 2000, 225ff; 2005). Because individuals who are not already at least somewhat interested in the prayer are unlikely to follow the link, perform the prayer, and then notify the website builders, few people generally looking to purchase fur products from Alaska will significantly engage with the prayer as it is presented on a commercial website.

As Cass Sunstein discussed in terms of political speech, the ability to "personalize" the consumption of media allows web users to "filter what they see" (Sunstein 2001, 8). Individuals tend to locate and read websites based on their previously held interests. Whether placing the prayer on a fur store website is an effective evangelical strategy or not, a second motive seems to have also guided the placement of the Sinner's Prayer on the Alaskrafts website. Because the motive to evangelise seems likely to produce little reward for the website builder, this second motive may be even more important in the choice to produce the web-based invitation to a Sinner's Prayer.

The vernacular rhetorical perspective suggests that this second motive should also be implied in the contents of the document itself. If the more obvious inducement of the prayer is to encourage a particular kind of private symbolic action as a powerfully experienced moment in a non-Christian individual, then what is the intended impact of performing the prayer by an already-converted individual?

It would seem that Alaskrafts's direct appeal to an audience of already-converted Christians to "accept Jesus as your Savior once again!" implies a wholly different goal than that of the evangelical conversion most obviously associated with the Sinner's Prayer. If Alaskrafts's motive in relation to one audience is to convert, for another it is the experience, enactment, and performance of community itself through "testimony." In rhetorical studies, this mode of discourse is epideictic.

Folklorists have long documented the activity of giving "testimony" as part of specific "folk churches" (Lawless 1988, 85–90). Noting the close association between the "sinner's prayer" and "testimony" or "witnessing," Jeff Todd Titon describes how the confession of sin often precedes public prayer-based conversions. For those individuals already converted, testimony can include short affirmations or recollections of the conversion the Sinner's Prayer invitation explicitly seeks to elicit (Titon 1988, 382–4). In both cases, testimony functions as a public affirmation of participation in the church community.

Web documents, unlike public church services, are not real-time events that can be witnessed as synchronously performed rituals. Still, the performative content of the online Sinner's Prayer provides clear evidence that the Alaskrafts web page is a location of performance. Although there is clearly folkloric and performative content on this web page, the tools of face-to-face ethnography cannot easily access that performance because it is, typically, radically private as a result of the characteristics of web-based media.

The evangelical motive of the text is clearly embedded in its online form. A closer look at that text indicates that there is also a second one. Both on the side-bar as well as on the Sinner's Prayer page itself, the specific invitation performed is: "Take The Sinner's Prayer This Minute, Or You Can Accept Jesus As Your Savior Once Again!" There are actually two invitations to two different kinds of performances: either to "take" the prayer or to "accept Jesus again." These two invitations are directed at two different audiences, and the web-page builder has two different motives for putting the Sinner's Prayer on his/her website depending on which audience his/her invitation happens to locate. One kind of audience-member is the non-Christian. For him/her, the invitation is clearly meant to be evangelical. The second audience, however, is that of already-believing Christians.

I asked the Alaskrafts website builder directly what his purpose was for putting up the prayer and if he felt it had been successful. He responded saying, "Since putting this [web page] up last year, we have had well over a hundred people respond ([Some] saved, ([Some] come back to the Lord, (and [Some] positive comments)."[3] For the website builder, these "positive" comments are a successful and expected category of response to his online invitation to perform the Sinner's Prayer. They served as evidence that fulfilled the expectations he had. "Positive" response from already-believing Christians was his second motive for posting the prayer.

Like testimony during a church service, the presentation of this prayer on a business website is a public display of this individual's personal identity as a Christian. To evangelise non-Christians online is clearly one motive of the prayer text, even though there is very little evidence that any such converting prayer enactments or performances actually took place. But in performing the evangelistic attempt itself, a second audience is imagined and invoked: those already sharing the values of evangelical Christianity. For those individuals, the public invitation to take the Sinner's Prayer is a performance of the values that define the web-page builder as a Christian. In rhetorical terms, this is called "epideictic," the performance of previously shared values within a community to persuasively identify the individual as valid member of that community.

It is just this function that church-service-based testimonies serve in face-to-face contexts. Professing to have been converted during an evangelical church service is to perform the shared identity of that group. In the wider web of ideas on the World Wide Web, there are multiple possible audiences of such performances. In this context, the Sinner's Prayer presents an opportunity to do two things at once. For this website builder, to evangelise is also to "do one's part" as a member of the Christian community. As he stated in reference to his web page:

> It probably confuses people, but with all the positive comments [that I receive,] I do not think it hinders sales … The Lord uses various mediums to enhance his kingdom (Christians need to do their part to help) … We are just doing our part. [4]

Epideictic Discourse and Web-based Performance

An understanding of the dual-motive of this online religious performance begins to reveal the complexity of online communication—and the perspective of "vernacular rhetoric" has allowed that dual-motive to come to light. Even though the performative aspects of online discourse are difficult to locate, they do exist. In the case of the Sinner's Prayer, the performance of the prayer itself must be a radically private moment between the "sinner" and his/her god. In the case of the Sinner's Prayer online, that prayer performance would be inspired in a context where the sinner is mostly likely to be alone and in front of a computer screen.

That particular performance, between the sinner and his/her god, is obviously implied by an invitation to a "Sinner's Prayer"—and even if such enactments never occur, the overt motive of placing the prayer on a web page is evangelism. But my deployment of vernacular rhetoric has revealed something subtler: this invitation to take the prayer is, itself, a particular sort of rhetorical performance.

The perspective of vernacular rhetoric suggests that individuals express their motives implicitly in their communications based on socially learned rhetorical strategies—of which the Sinner's Prayer seems clearly to be one. While one motive is obviously an attempt to convert non-Christians, a second motive emerges with a closer analysis of the web document. The website itself is evidence of a performance. The prayer is performed by the website builder in an effort to set a model for the proper performance of the prayer, and, in so doing, he enacts his own belief in the Christian doctrine of sin and redemption through Christ.

This performance of already-held beliefs is what Aristotle first dubbed "epideictic" (Conley 1990, 13ff, 317; Aristotle 1991, 47–51; Kennedy 1994, 4). Contemporary scholars such as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson have demonstrated how epideictic elements emerge in presidential speeches. As they describe it, the epideictic mode of presidential rhetoric dramatically, and often in a highly formalised fashion, "rehearses admitted facts" (Kohrs Campbell and Hall Jamieson 1990, 14).

But why would individuals "rehearse" a belief that is already thought to be a "fact?" Why would individuals expend effort to persuade an audience about something that it already believes?

Epideictic rhetoric is unique in rhetorical theory because it refers to the expression of ideas already held in shared belief. Epideictic rhetoric does not seek to "persuade" in a simple sense. Instead, it displays or performs something to an audience imagined as sharing the thing performed or shared (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 47–51; Beale 1978, 221ff; Carter 1991, 209ff; Sullivan 1992, 317). As Edwin Black has argued, the epideictic display *performs* the shared values of a group and hence reveals, demystifies, and disempowers outsiders to that group (Black 1988, 133). In order to "persuade" individuals that one is properly

an evangelical Christian, the Alaskrafts website builder performs an invitation to the "Sinner's Prayer." That is to say, he displays that he is an evangelical Christian by attempting to publicly evangelise. And this is the second motive: to elicit the performance of the shared beliefs of evangelical Christianity in the form of "positive comments" emailed to him.

In the case of the Sinner's Prayer as it appears on the Alaskrafts Fur Shack website, the existence of epideictic discourse on the World Wide Web reveals the performative nature of at least some online documents. Even though the performances, the links made in this "web of ideas," are typically enacted either as an individual builds a web page or as another individual accesses that page, these performances still function in important ways. Through the application of a vernacular rhetorical perspective to online documents, the performative nature of the World Wide Web medium is brought to light.

Through this case study, a more rigorous and careful integration of rhetoric and folklore studies has yielded a more carefully theorised concept of vernacular rhetoric. The vernacular rhetorical perspective in studies of both rhetoric and folklore can, therefore, through future applications, continue to better inform our understanding of human symbolic action in everyday contexts, both virtual- and real-world.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1]   "Know Jesus Now!" Alaskafrafts. 1 April 2001. [http://www.alaskrafts.com/sp.htm] (accessed 14 February 2003).

[2]   Bridges, Janet. "Re: Sinner's Prayer." Email to Robert Howard. 19 April 2003.

[3]   Fields, Steve. "Re: Alaskrafts—Information Request from Rob Howard." Email to Robert Howard. 16 April 2003.

[4]   Idem.

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