

Research Article



The Rhetoric of Revelation: Examining Religious Rhetoric on Secularism through an Ethnographic Content Analysis of Mormon Leadership Discourse

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Abstract | This study examines the rhetorical practices of conservative Christian leadership in the United States over time through a case study of Mormonism. Using data drawn from their semi-annual General Conference and other church-produced documents from 1903 to the present, I examine how Mormon leaders have responded, through discourse, to secular forces over the course of more than a century. I accomplish this by employing the techniques of ethnographic content analysis consistent with the inductive logic of a constructionist grounded theory. Combining elements of rhetorical theory with a sociological view of religious movement and marketplace, I identify the major themes and evolving narrative of this American religion in relation to secular historical and cultural conditions. The data suggest the rhetorical strategies revealed in Mormon leaders' discourse on the secular is a part of the way it negotiates relationships within its organization and to the public, and is important to its success in contemporary American society. This case study will be useful to future research in drawing connections between the discursive response of American conservative Christianity broadly, and modern secular forces. I also argue sociologists of religion should investigate more directly religious leaders' rhetoric to better understand the relationship between religious and secular spheres.

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How do conservative Christian leaders in the United States think about and respond to secularism through public discourse? In what ways do they conceptualize the secular and articulate its causes and consequences? What has been the historical role of rhetoric in shaping American conservative religion and the ways it negotiates meaning within secular society? Mormonism provides a useful and convenient case study on these questions because it has for more than a century proffered to the public an unbroken serial source of well-documented leadership discourse through its General Conference. This extensive body

of public talks is organized and made available by the Church, making it ideal for content analysis. Despite the unique aspects of Mormon theology compared to other Christian groups, the basic features of Mormon leaders' talk on secularism is suggestive of the discursive strategies of American conservative Christianity broadly.

Through ethnographic content analysis (ECA), this study identifies the major themes and rhetorical practices of Mormon leaders' discourse on secularism. The central argument that emerges is that rhetoric on the

secular plays an important role in how religious leaders interact with wider social forces and negotiate moral and symbolic meaning. An organization with a highly rationalized hierarchy and comparatively well-controlled message, Mormon leaders engage forms of persuasion in negotiating this meaning to its members and the non-Mormon public. Within a religious adaptation and marketplace perspective, the primary contribution of this study is its novel application of rhetorical theory and the ECA method to an underdeveloped area in the literature: the historical role of rhetoric in the relationship between secular forces and conservative Christianity in the United States.

Background and Literature

Religion and secularism in the United States has had a complicated relationship, and the tension between the two has persisted since the founding of the nation. As Jacoby (2004:4) observes, “Given the intensity of both secularist and religious passions in the founding generation, it was probably inevitable that the response of Americans to secularism...would be fraught with ambivalence.” America has historically prized both the freedom of religious expression, and science and Enlightenment principles, often bringing theistic and faith-based claims about reality in contrast with claims premised on rationality and empirical evidence.

The 1925 Scopes “monkey trial” is illustrative. Against growing acceptance of Darwin’s theory of evolution in the academy, William Jennings Bryan, a prominent orator and politician claimed that this theory, which contradicted the Christian bible, would erode morality and threaten public life. Bryan was counsel for the World Christian Fundamentals Association, and argued against the defense lawyer, critic of religion and self-proclaimed agnostic Clarence Darrow, that American educators, influenced by scientific communism and the atheism it implied, were corrupting and, “mold[ing] the religion of the nation” toward godless ends (Jacoby 2004:227). The passion and skill that both Bryan and Darrow brought to bear in their arguments highlighted the tension between these American commitments as well as the rhetorical character of related debates for decades onward. Part of the ambivalence of Americans toward science and secularism that Jacoby points out is the product of how Christian leaders have helped frame the meaning of the secular through public discourse. The persua-

siveness of their arguments in response to secularizing processes continues to hinge on symbolic and moral boundaries.

Mormonism, one manifestation of American conservative Christianity, was founded by Joseph Smith in New York state in 1830. It emerged as part of the latter-day movement during the Second Great Awakening, and is restorationist. That is, Smith believed Mormonism represented the restoration of Christ’s original Church. The polity of the Latter-Day Saint Church today is led by a prophet, seer, and revelator (Bowman 2012). The current prophet (and president) of the Church is Russel M. Nelson. Nelson, his two counselors, and the quorum of the twelve apostles are each considered living prophets who receive revelation for the Church and its members (Bushman 2007). Below this top hierarchy is another quorum call *the seventy* whose members oversee their respective jurisdictions and help lead the Church. Combined, all of these men are known as *general authorities*.¹ Mormon leadership discourse is best represented in General Conference, a semi-annual event where these authorities address members and the public in a series of talks, testimonies, and publications (Shepherd and Shepherd 2016).

Studies of Mormonism in recent decades include comparative analysis of its history and the evolution of its doctrines (Alexander 1986), the character of its culture (Givens 2007), the role of its founder (Bushman, 2007), and the examination of Mormon missiology (Golding 2015). Mormonism’s history of persecution from both secular culture and mainstream religious organizations (Moore 1986), and its contemporary success has made it the subject of sociological research primarily through the lens of a religious marketplace model and, historically, within an analytical framework of the cultural dynamics of new religious movements. Rodney Stark (2005) views Mormonism as part and product of the competitive religious marketplace characteristic of American culture, arguing that its growth and success can be attributed to its strong proselytizing program, emphasis on personal conversion, the appeal of the demands it makes on its members, and its metaphysical claims. In such a competitive environment, religious groups seek legitimacy through variably highlighting or downplaying certain doctrinal claims and demonstrating how they align with shifting religious commitments and sentiments (Chaves, 1997), while also working to maintain

a unique market appeal that will sustain them. In other words, success is premised on, “the [right] balance between legitimacy and niche appeal” (Cragun 2011).

Mauss’s (1994; 2011) work focuses on the cultural tensions and organizational dynamics of Mormonism and the wider secular society, and is broadly consistent with both religious marketplace assumptions and the adaptive strategies characteristic of NRMs. Mormonism was founded in a charismatic leader, has steadily institutionalized over time, and otherwise represents the, “Innovative religious response to the conditions of modernity” (Rubenstein 2005) that is at the core of successful NRMs. Mauss’s main argument, captured in his *assimilationist-retrenchment* thesis, is that such groups engage practices of assimilation to mainstream secular and religious norms and values (including laws). This is followed by periods of retrenchment, or the reversal of the assimilationist position in an attempt to reassert a distinctive religious identity. The rhetoric of religious leaders, I argue, is an important part of adaptive success in a competitive religious marketplace.

Shepherd and Shepherd’s (2016) quantitative content analysis of conference talks through 2009 identified *utopia*, the *family*, and *authority* as overarching themes. They show a shift away from the rhetoric of utopia in the Church’s early days when eschatological concerns were most salient, toward a rhetoric more focused on family and authority. They outline the Church’s variable (de)emphasis of doctrinal claims in negotiating their relationship with the wider culture showing, for example, that references to the historical veracity of the Book of Mormon and more esoteric teachings have declined, while emphasis on more general themes such as family and morality have increased. Shepherd and Shepherd (2016: 218) suggest Mormonism’s “marketing of [its] religious beliefs” is increasingly characterized “in ways that seem more reasonable to secular consciousness.”

Religion and the Secular

One’s definition of the secular will largely depend on one’s definition of religion (Roberts and Yamane 2011). Substantive sociological definitions focus on what religion *is* by examining its essential features. Its propositional beliefs and ritual practices have primacy for analysts. God or other deities as objects of belief and worship center religion in substantive terms. Functional definitions place greater focus on what

religion *does* (Yinger 1970). From this view, religion meets the human need for meaning, moral community, and ultimate purpose. Form and function, rather than religious content per se is the object of analysis.

Both definitions are relevant for examining religious rhetoric, but this study privileges a substantive view by virtue of its explicit focus on discourse and the salience of *propositional religion*, or religion as the set of interrelated, discursive truth claims about reality. From this vantage, I define *secular* as that which stands apart from, but in relation to, substantive religion. Its modern meaning is rooted in the word *saeculum* which in Christian Latin of the medieval era was a way of distinguishing the, “temporal age of the world from the eternal realm of God” (Zuckerman and Shook 2017). The secular is that which is *not* – at least substantively – religious as it proffers claims about reality that do not invoke God or supernatural explanation. Secular, secularism, atheism, and related concepts can have quite distinct meanings. Secular can refer to a nation’s official neutrality on religion, rather than religion’s absence. Secular states can be highly religious. Likewise, secularism can refer to religious indifference, the promotion of secular ideas, or to the exclusion or rejection of religion (Zuckerman and Shook 2017). Despite these distinctions, I include all such terms in this analysis because of the way they are employed in religious leaders’ discourse itself, not because I take these terms as interchangeable.

Debate continues regarding the nature and extent of secularization in the United States and whether religion is resurging (Berger, 1999) stable, or declining (Chaves 1997). But generally, sociologists argue this country is exceptional among other wealthy, democratic societies in the overall strength of its religiosity (Norris and Inglehart 2004). Declining religious authority, rather than declining religiosity, and the “softening” of the institutional power of religion in the lives of ordinary people has changed the character of religious belief and practice (Chaves, 1997). However, the U.S. remains a remarkably religious society because of its vibrant marketplace, where competition between religious groups is high (Stark 2005) and where legitimacy in public life is actively sought by religious leaders (Chaves, 1997; Cragun, 2011) in part, through discursive practices at the pulpit.

Religious organizations, as interactive systems that negotiate moral and symbolic boundaries with other social institutions, vary along a continuum of open

versus closed systems (Roberts and Yamane 2011). Open religious systems have freer flow of influence between the inputs from secular culture (science, education, secular values etc.) and their outputs (religious doctrines, symbols, definitions of morality etc.) such that they enjoy greater equilibrium with society. Closed systems stand in “protest” with secular society and are more likely to challenge cultural norms. They must strike the right balance of these inputs-outputs if they are to endure. Given my focus on discourse, the most important points regarding this continuum, and adaptation in a competitive marketplace is that 1) religious groups are in constant discursive-symbolic negotiation with secular forces and 2) the rhetoric of religious leaders is an important feature of the adaptive process, and of the movement along this continuum. Mormonism has steadily mainstreamed while also protesting in ways that help it retain some of its outsider status (Moore 1986), in part, through its discursive practice.

Rhetoric and Discourse

Rhetoric refers to the persuasive dimension of discourse (Bruner 2005). Rhetorical theory dates back to the ancient Greeks, and Aristotle examined it most systematically in outlining its essential types and functions. He famously defined rhetoric as, “The ability in any given case to see the available means of persuasion” (McKeon 1992). Aristotle’s three genres of rhetoric – forensic, deliberative, and epideictic – laid the foundation for its study and continues to shape modern theories across disciplines (Zaleska and Okulska 2016). Forensic rhetoric refers to persuasive discourse surrounding the law, crime and other legal concerns. Deliberative rhetoric is more political in character and engages techniques aimed at pre- or proscribing future behavior. Epideictic rhetoric is demonstrative and involves ceremonial displays of approval or condemnation. It is sometimes called “praise-and-blame” rhetoric (Bruner 2005). Each type can be found in virtually every discourse. As McKeon (1992) observes, rhetoric is a “verbal art”; it is the form and essence of argumentation itself, and is therefore not limited to any specific subject matter. Yet, the necessity of each type for religious and secular discourse in particular is clear, given that we live in a knowledge society dependent on scientific, religious, and other competing claims about reality (Plantin 2016).

Abstractly, to analyze rhetoric is to focus on the relationships between language, interactants, and reality;

although today, theories of rhetoric tend to emphasize its strategic dimensions as a communicative form in the public sphere (Zaleska and Okulska 2016). The role of rhetoric in constructing the meaning of social events that shape public opinion through media discourse (Altheide 2016); the use of rhetoric in identity politics and as a tool for negotiating public images (Kaylor 2011), and its general role in constructing symbolic boundaries between social groups are all areas of interest. In his review of rhetorical theory and its relation to collective identity construction, Bruner (2005) shows how public narratives and the “discursive construction of publics,” shape the behavior of local, national, and international communities. He argues that examining the strategies of persuasion in public discourse is central to understanding how collective identities function and become compelling to social actors.

Discourse can be conceptualized in a number of ways. For this study, I distinguish two basic senses of the word. First, discourse can mean social practice itself, including its non-linguistic forms, and often refers abstractly to the formation of and relationships between knowledge, power, and ideology and the ways these become internalized and reproduced in society (Fairclough 2001; Foucault 1972). Second, discourse can be understood in a more strictly linguistic sense. Defined as, “text and talk in relation to their context of production” (Zaleska and Okulska 2016), discourse is analyzed as a concrete product of human communication in particular social domains. Both meanings are relevant to examining religious discourse, but the latter is more aligned with the present analysis given its focus on the meaning-making text and talk of religious leaders. Contemporary sociological work on rhetoric tends to examine the role of talk in creating and sustaining collective identity and memory (Fairclough 2001), which is particularly relevant in a religious context where in-group/out-group dynamics are in part realized through the discourse of religious leaders.

In cognitive sociology and sociolinguistics rhetoric is a crucial – although often implicit – component of how text and talk are analyzed. Discourse analysis and related fields may vary in approach, but the underlying goal is to understand the persuasive-strategic dimensions of discourse. For instance, Van Dijk (2014) examines the role of dissent in public life via the relationship of discourse and knowledge construction, and Fairclough (2001) focuses on how social actors as the subjects of structural-historical conditions engage

language in ways that simultaneously reproduce and challenge those conditions. In both cases rhetoric is central to explaining the meaning of social action in response to social change.

Methods

Ethnographic content analysis (ECA), also known as qualitative discourse analysis (QDA) provides the methodological framework for this study. ECA is the recursive, systematic examination of documents – broadly construed – for the purpose of interpreting their meaning in context. David Altheide (1987), in discussing the premise of this method and in codifying its procedures, distinguishes ECA from traditional forms of quantitative content analysis (QCA) by suggesting the former is committed to a more reflexive approach wherein the goal is to draw valid, context-centered inferences from a collection of documents (1987: 65). Both methods involve quantification and both seek to identify patterns and make comparisons within and across data, but where QCA emphasizes reliability and seeks verification of pre-structured categories through statistical analysis, ECA seeks the discovery of categories and insights from concepts that emerge through an inductive process. Documents are viewed by the researcher not as static artifacts waiting to be mined for objective meaning, but as socially constructed, historically motivated artifacts to be interpreted. It is in this sense that ECA can be conceptualized as a kind of unobtrusive fieldwork (Altheide 1987).

The analytically inductive, emergent nature of ECA is consistent with the principles of a constructionist grounded theory (Charmaz 2014), and involves an interpretive practice of informed judgment. This is useful for analyzing discourse generally, and in particular religious leaders' rhetoric over time. From this approach, the meaning of religious beliefs as represented in propositional claims about reality can only be understood with reference to the broader discourse and system of beliefs of which it is a part. This makes ECA and qualitative interpretation a natural and effective method for studying religious discourse.

Data collection and sample

The LDS Church makes public through its website full audio/video files of all general conference proceedings dating back to 1971. Written transcripts from 1971 to the present are also available in the Church's *Ensign* magazine. Transcripts before 1971

have been compiled by the Sunstone Education Foundation. My sampling frame consisted of conference talk transcripts from 1903 to 2012 and select video recorded conferences from 1971 to the present. Written transcripts amounted to over 1,000 pages, which I organized by decade to facilitate more systematic analysis. Every page was searched and coded for relevant words, their context units (paragraphs or other segment forms), and general themes. Of the hundreds of hours of audio and/or video recorded talks available online, I took a purposive sample, selecting talks based on the relevance of their titles and promise for touching upon the topic of secularism. Though I already had the transcripts from many of these talks (before 2012), I viewed video recordings primarily to add the elements of gesture, tone, and other qualitative aspects of rhetoric that are ambiguous or absent in text documents alone.

Data coding and analysis

I began with initial codes close to the data (Charmaz 2014), and developed successive levels of focused and higher order coding until generic but interconnected categories and themes emerged. This process was iterative and elastic rather than neat and linear. In fact, well into the data, I returned to search new terms, reorganize codes, and in some cases reconceptualize their meaning. Given the breadth of data, I used the qualitative analysis program *HyperResearch* to organize and code the contents of documents. This allowed me to search terms, view their frequencies and contexts, make comparisons over time, run data reports and examine their relationships, and otherwise develop more complex analyses than could be done manually.

My overarching coding schema was primarily a product of running searches on relevant terms of inquiry and building a thematic analysis by applying successively abstract codes, from which, I drew inferences, discovered conceptual and thematic relationships, and developed theoretical insights. My focus was on continually building my analysis from the bottom up, ensuring that any higher-order abstraction I made was ultimately grounded in the data (Charmaz 2014). Initial codes were developed by running search queries on the 16 primary, topic-relevant terms outlined in table 1. I took the contiguous complete paragraphs on either side of every primary term and developed 75 initial codes based on the surrounding content. Table 1 includes all primary search terms along with the highest frequency initial codes. Figure 1 depicts the frequency of the five highest search terms across all the data.

Table 1: Search term frequencies and percentages

Primary terms and associated word forms	Frequency counts across all decades	Highest frequency decade(s)	Percentage relative to other search terms
agnosticism	32	1990s	3.1%
atheism	333	1960s	32.0%
communism	194	1960s	18.5%
disbelief	12	1960s	1.1%
doubt	141	1960s	13.5%
evolution	11	1970s	1.1%
heathen	9	1920s; 1960s	0.9%
heretic	9	1940s	0.9%
humanism	21	1970s	2.0%
infidel	36	1920s; 40s; 70s	3.4%
irreligion	10	1970s	1.0%
nonreligious	6	1990s	0.6%
secular	75	1990s	7.2%
skeptic	22	1940s; 1970s	2.1%
socialism	105	1960s	10.0%
unbelief	30	1900-10s; 1970s	2.8%
TOTAL	1046	ALL	~100%

These are the primary terms from which initial codes were developed and used for subsequent focused coding. To simplify the table, each primary term listed includes exhaustive searches for its related word forms (e.g. primary term “secular” included secularism, secularity, and secularization). Terms not obviously related (e.g. communism, evolution) were added later when it became apparent they were often used in the same context. Other originally searched terms, such as “nontheism” and “deism” were dropped for lack of occurrence.¹

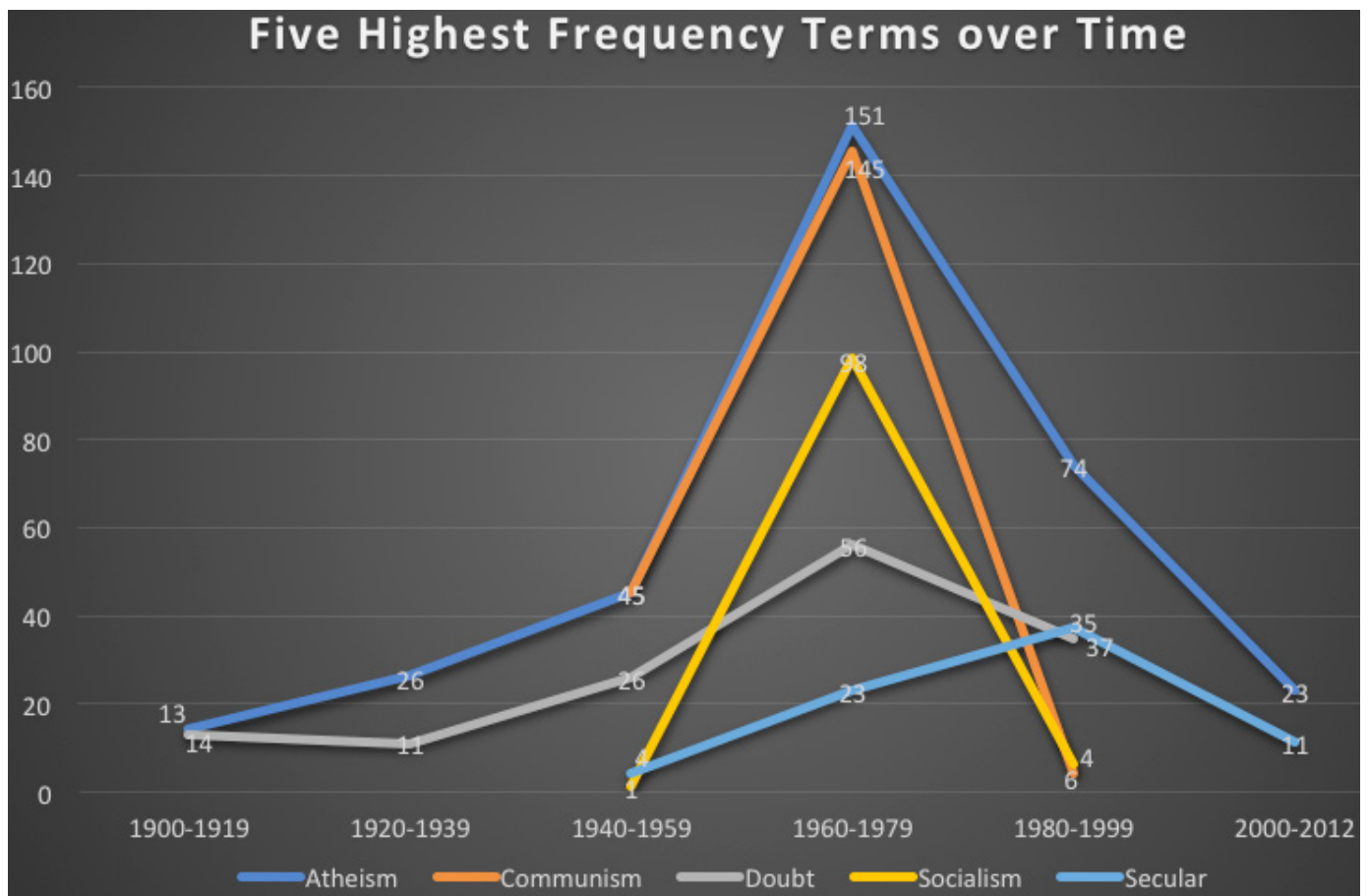


Figure 1: Five highest frequency terms over time

Initial coding provided a sense of the tone and structure of conference talks in addition to the prevalence, meaning, and use of the searched terms across decades. From this, I moved to a more focused analysis by creating a primary data collection sheet based on a full reading of each relevant conference talk. I developed focused codes from the initial coding efficiently because the software allowed me to search every source of data within specified time-frames across the full range of talks. From here I constructed working categories which facilitated the identification of themes and the interpretation of the data as a whole.

Next, focused codes were further refined by grouping the 75 initial codes into 12 focused code categories based on similarity and proximal meaning. For example, the association of atheism with sin was grouped with the association of atheism and evil. These higher order codes were then applied in new search queries throughout the data, this time to generate statistical reports on the relationships and patterns between primary terms, initial codes, and focused code categories. Consistency was obtained through comparing the results of my manual searches with the *autocode* function of the software. Table 2 represents the frequencies of focused code categories across decades.

Table 2: Focused code categories and frequencies

Focused Code Category (FCC)	Frequency Occurrence (all decades)	Highest Frequency Initial Codes and their frequency occurrence Per FCC (all decades)	FCC Highest Frequency Decade	Percentage Relative to all FCCs	
Arguments Against Atheism	32	Criticism of Prominent Atheists	9	1920s	8.4%
		Arguments Against Atheism	7		
		Atheism and Lie of Evolution	4		
Evil of Atheism	57	Atheism Equated with Sin and Evil	21	1960s	14.8%
		Atheist as Mocker/Denier of Truth	11		
		Atheism and Satan	7		
Conversion	49	Conversion from Atheism	43	1990s	12.7%
		Doubt; Losing/Finding Faith	6		
Atheist Relation to Religion	4	Founding Fathers Believers	2	1970s	1.0%
Recognizing Non-Mormon Beliefs	4	Mormonism and Atheism	2	1990s	1.0%
		Respect for Others Religious Beliefs	2		
		Value Independence of Thought	1		
Mormon Church Force for Good	18	Recognizing Nonreligious Beliefs	1	1960s	4.6%
		Church Fights Against Atheism	5		
		Church Protects Against Unbelief	4		
Positive Remarks about Atheists	5	Gospel for Unbelievers too	3	1990s	1.3%
		Atheists can be Good	3		
		Atheists' right of Conscience	2		
Religion/Belief Superior to Secular/Unbelief	15	Unbelief from "Hardened Heart"	5	1900-1910	3.9%
		Religious Belief Above All	3		
		Religious Hypocrisy Worse than Unbelief	2		
Religious vs. Secular Wellbeing	17	Believers Happier than Unbelievers	10	1990s	4.4%
		Religious Healthier than Nonreligious	7		
Role of Science	20	Science Proves God's Existence	10	1950s	5.2%
		Religion and Science Compatible	3		
		Scientific Atheism	2		
State of (Non)Religious Landscape	81	Atheism in the Academy/Schools	22	1960s	21.1%
		Threat of Secularization/Secularism	18		
		Atheism is on the Rise	8		
Character and Dangers of the Secular	83	Soviet Communistic Atheism	47	1960s	21.5%
		Church/State Separation Issues	16		
		Civil/Secular/Atheism as Religion	11		
TOTAL	385		297*		99.9%

Focused code categories were produced from grouping the 75 initial codes (i.e. coding the codes) and corresponding search terms. *For space, not all 75 initial codes are represented.

Finally, I conducted theoretical testing of the inferences drawn from the coding process with Boolean operators in the *theory builder* application. This reflexive, conceptual scaffolding produced the summative thematic results below. The major themes represent

an additional level of abstraction such that most focused code categories became the subthemes of major themes. In one case, the theme “the role of science” retained its title from a focused code category.

Thematic results

Table 3: Themes and subthemes

Theme (bold) Subtheme (<i>italics</i>)	Occurrences across data*	Percentage across data*
The Problem of the Secular	258	67%
<i>Arguments against atheism</i>		
<i>Evils/sinfulness of atheism</i>		
<i>Character and dangers of secularism</i>		
<i>The state of secularism in society</i>		
Belief and Unbelief	56	14.5%
<i>Religious Belief for Health and Wellbeing</i>		
<i>Religious vs. Secular Morality and Goodness</i>		
<i>Role of the Non-Mormon, Non-believer</i>		
<i>Believer and Nonbeliever Relations</i>		
Conversion to the Gospel	51	13.2%
<i>Journey out of Unbelief</i>		
<i>Faith lost, faith found</i>		
The Role of Science	20	5.2%
<i>Science supports Mormon beliefs</i>		
<i>Science, Religion, and Atheism</i>		
TOTAL	385	99.9%
‡Total Thematic Salience Score:		0.10

* Refers to all conference transcriptions from 1903 to 2012 and select talks from 2012 to 2017. These are the most salient themes representing discourse on secularism, subsuming the 16 primary search terms.

‡ Following Shepard and Shepard (2016: 250), I calculated a “salience score,” a summary measure, presented as a ratio, that indicates the importance of the combined four themes relative to all other (non-secularism related) content in the data. Calculated by tallying the total number of context units (coded paragraphs containing any of the secular themes) divided by the estimated total number of paragraphs in the text data. In other words, an estimated 10% of conference content touches upon these themes.

The first thing to notice across every table is the consistency of connotation regarding the secular. With a few exceptions (e.g. benefits of secular education, positive remarks about atheists) the vast majority of references have a negative quality. That is, leaders associate the secular with worldliness, immorality, and false beliefs that ultimately degrade individuals and society. This is evident throughout the discourse as represented in the four major themes.²

The problem of the secular

The secular is conceptualized as a problem in two senses. First, the secular is dangerous primarily because it *implies* atheism. As its subthemes suggest, atheism is positioned most prominently in the overall discourse on the secular. In fact, no clear distinction

is made between secular, secularism, and atheism. The presence and/or promotion of secular ideas and values by social actors and organizations (secularism) is treated synonymously with disbelief in the existence of a supreme deity (atheism). Selfishness, sinfulness, and blindness to truth are all packaged within the secular-atheist worldview.

Atheistic communism in particular is adduced as the primary example of what follows at the societal level when belief in God is abandoned. Its implications touch every aspect of social and economic life, but most importantly, spiritual wellbeing. Most Christian organizations in the United States shared the national sentiment that communism is a fundamental enemy of freedom and religious expression, but as is evident

in the words of Ezra Taft Benson, one of the most influential Mormon prophets of the second half of the 20th century, the evil of communism lies not in its economic policies, but in its ability to erode religious faith: “We must never forget exactly what communism really is. Communism is far more than an economic system. It is a total philosophy of life – atheistic and completely opposed to all that we hold dear” (1960). But communism need not take hold for atheism to undermine the moral order. Changing cultural norms themselves can be insidious. For example, church leadership considered the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 70s as corrupting to faith and moral purity. As general authority Sterling Sill put it:

Now what of the entertainment that is available to our young people today? Are you being undermined right in your home through your TV, radio, slick magazines, rock records? Much of the rock music is purposely designed to push immorality, narcotics, revolution, atheism, and nihilism, through language that often has a double meaning and with which many parents are not familiar (Sterling W. Sill, 1970)

That atheism, a philosophical position on the existence of God, is casually paired with, for instance, narcotics is illustrative of its rhetorical power. Such associations frequent historical discourse, as this first presidency message suggests:³

Infidelity, atheism, un-chastity, intemperance, civil corruption, greed, avarice, ambition – personal, political, national – are more powerful today than at any other time in the lives of us now living. They are pulling and thrusting us almost at will into new fields of action, new lines of thought. They are shaking the faith, undermining the morals, polluting the lives of the people (CR 1942:13)

Immorality, sin, and evil of all kind share the company of atheism. Plainly, atheism is perceived as much more than a philosophical position: “Let us not be parties in any way to the paganism, the atheism that is abroad in the world...for they will destroy our civilization if they shall come to be the belief of the people and to direct their lives” (CR 1946:122). There is also danger in secular education, as Church authorities have perceived threats to religious faith being housed in the public-school system, led by unbelieving teachers and

professors:

If every party in the state has the right of excluding from public schools whatever he does not believe to be true, then he that believes most must give way to him that believes least, and then he that believes least must give way to him that believes absolutely nothing, no matter how small a minority the atheists...may be. It is self-evident that on this scheme, if it is consistently and persistently carried out in all parts of the country, the United States system of national popular education will be the most efficient and widespread instrument for the propagation of atheism which the world has ever seen (CR 1970)

Pronouncements like this in the form of epideictic rhetoric tend to overshadow leaders’ occasional references to the value of secular education. The second sense of the secular as a problem is evinced by the subtheme *arguments against atheism*. Such deliberations engage rational arguments as to why atheism is indefensible morally and intellectually. Consider for example the words of apostle George Richards:

There is a class who do not believe that there is a God, a Creator of all things, and who do not believe that there is a life beyond the grave. It is an unfortunate condition. If there is a God and a life beyond the grave there will come a time when that fact will be known. Now, if it shall prove that there is a God, and a life beyond the grave, and that faith in Him is necessary to salvation... how much better off will those be who have had that faith than those who have rejected it? And if it were possible that we were mistaken, we would still be as well off as the atheist and better off than we would have been without this faith, for it is helpful to make us better men and women than we otherwise would have been (George F. Richards, 1914)

This Pascal’s wager-like argument suggests faith in itself is inherently good because it improves moral quality and happiness. This deliberative rhetorical move presupposes God’s existence, as the atheistic hypothetical is offered, not as an actual possibility, but as a way of symbolically underscoring the benefit of religious faith. The rhetorical conflation of atheism with immorality reflects a broader one in the discourse. Sin, Satan, and evil in both their literal and symbolic sense

are effectual precisely because of secular unbelief, and leaders regularly assess the state and potential of this danger. Secularism is cast as a threat to be resisted through religious faith and practice. This is consistent with Shepherd and Shepherd's (2016:146) finding that, especially in the context of the countercultural movements of the 1960s, "there was [a] perceptibly renewed concern about the encroaching dangers emanative from the values, lifestyles, and political direction of the secular world."

Belief and unbelief

The importance of belief in specific doctrine is prominent in the discourse. The redemptive power of Christ, the theophany of Joseph Smith, and the veracity of the Book of Mormon, each subsumed within the religious worldview of Mormonism represents a core theme connecting all conference talks (Shepherd and Shepherd 2016). Of course, doctrinal beliefs are important for most religious organizations, but acceptance of claims through active faith is particularly relevant with respect to leaders' view of the secular world. Belief/unbelief and its four subthemes represent the most frequent topics on the secular. In discussing revealed truth through the prophet Joseph Smith and the wager of unbelief, Hyrum Mack Smith plainly stated that:

Men must believe in God; they must believe that He is our Father, that He created us and established us here; and He shall welcome us again in His presence. We must believe that Jesus is the Redeemer of the world, and accept Him as such. We must accept the doctrines...So long as we have infidels, skeptics and unbelievers...men who do not understand the Bible and cannot make proper explanation of its contents, I say... [this situation] is more disastrous than beneficial by far (1907).

Theistic belief is fundamental to keeping the "disaster" of unbelief at bay. As a conference report more than a half century later suggested, it is true belief in God that affords the "priceless advantage" to American society. Paraphrasing the U.S. president, Herbert Hoover, the first presidency of the Church in 1962, led by prophet David O. McKay stated:

We will come through because we have the best form of Government men have ever devised. We have great creative and productive genius because

we have freedom and the courage to protect it, and, above all, we will come through because we believe in God. That is a priceless advantage that our atheistic enemies do not have...Therefore, every American should appreciate this priceless gift and not alone believe in God, but accept his teachings and accept [the] truth (CR 1962:30)

The context here was the Supreme Court's 1962/63 decisions to make mandatory prayer in public schools unlawful.⁴ Church leaders cited president Hoover, a living former-president in 1962, as "a deeply religious man" who was rightly outraged at the court's decision. The religious roots of morality often remain implicit in talks, but it also takes an explicit form, as the seventh president of the Church Heber J. Grant suggested:

To put morality on anything but a religious basis is to build on sand. It is religion that gives vision, strength, inspiration, and without it we are nothing. I have children of my own, and I want them to grow up into men and women who believe that religion has a genuine message for them, as it has for me. I don't want them to develop into atheists and materialists (Heber J. Grant, 1928)

Atheism and materialism are overcome by drawing strength from the message of religion. Prayer is a primary source of this strength and inspiration, as observed by general authority Reed Smoot who in a 1908 conference stated, "Prayer has bridled the vicious passions of men. It has routed and destroyed armies of proud, daring atheists. Prayer has brought one man from the bottom of the ocean, and carried another, in a chariot of fire, to heaven." Figurative statements like this get much of their persuasive power from the way they dramatize principles of faith through imagery (Kaylor 2011). The effect is to inspire and arouse emotion, but such demonstrative rhetoric is not viewed as sufficient by itself. This is apparent because rational arguments employing deliberative styles of persuasion are equally prevalent and help balance emotional appeals. Hyrum Smith's explanation for *why* there are unbelievers in the first place is illustrative:

People are in this condition of unbelief...[not] because they prefer to be in that condition, but because for centuries they have been led by men who had not themselves a knowledge of the truth. Their eyes have been blinded to the truth...

I can see no remedy for this condition, only in the unequivocal acceptance of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Here, unbelief is a product of honest conditions of ignorance rather than a desire for sin or worldliness. More than 70 years later, general authority W. Grant Bangertter ratiocinated more elaborately on the nature of unbelief while maintaining Smith's core idea about ignorance:

We know some of you say that you do not believe in God. Some of you have even been so unwise as to say there is no God. That kind of statement raises some interesting questions. Do you think your unbelief makes any difference? He won't go away just because you don't believe in him. Reportedly, when Galileo was forced to say, contrary to his knowledge, that the earth did not turn, he then added, "And yet it turns" ... How can you know that there is no God? Did he reveal it to you? Have you been there to make sure? All you can really know is that you don't know there is a God, and that is an admission of ignorance (*Ensign* 1979:9).

Galileo's words, usually used to argue *against* religious dogma, are turned on their head by Bangertter to demonstrate how religious truth will inevitably supersede the doubts of unbelievers. This rhetorical technique demonstrates how leaders make the case for religious belief with the help of logical argument.

Conversion to the Gospel

Conversion is a major theme of conference talks. Of course, it is not surprising that leaders devote significant time to this topic in promoting the faith. What is less obvious, but equally important, is that this theme is a consequence of the way general authorities conceptualize the secular as a problem. A premium is placed on transformations of secular unbelief into religious faith. Stories of conversion from one faith position to the Mormon faith are also present, but those focusing on secular unbelief dominate. The following excerpts are illustrative and represent the rhetorical character of talk on conversion. First, Robert E. Wells explains the experience of a Mormon missionary who was bearing his testimony to an unbeliever:

A new senior companion faced a sophisticated woman lawyer who was polite, but very in-

tellectual. When the missionary asked her who the boy prophet saw in the column of light, she answered, "I am an atheist." The elder [male missionary] didn't really understand the implication so he repeated the question. She answered again, 'I am an atheist. You want me to say that Joseph Smith saw the Father and the Son, but I do not believe in God.' The elder had never encountered an atheist before, and his first impulse was to give up and leave, but the Spirit said, 'No, she will listen. Just answer the questions for her.' So the elder proceeded and said, 'You are right. He saw the Father and the Son.' He continued...[and] at the end of the presentation he taught her how we pray, and then courageously asked her to kneel with them. She did kneel and did pray to her Heavenly Father. Never again did she say that she was an atheist. She and her family subsequently were baptized (Robert E. Wells, 1985).

There is an important rhetorical element to the way conversion stories are framed. The young missionary, unable to fully comprehend the response of the sophisticated, atheist "woman lawyer" speaks to the persuasiveness of simple faith and devotion (Alexander 1986; Bowman 2012; Givens 2007). The woman represents secular worldliness; the missionary, a humble messenger of truth. This is analogous to how Joseph Smith is characterized in Mormon history: that he was an unsophisticated boy with little formal education, yet God chose him to restore the true gospel because of the purity of his faith (Bushman 2007); a rhetorical move that lends credibility to Smith's story.

A quote from a talk titled, "My Bus Was Late" signals another important aspect of the conversion theme – the testimonies of the converted themselves. Here, Thierry Damoiseau, shared his own story of conversion and the life-changing benefits that resulted. A university student in France during the 1990s, his bus happened to arrive late one morning while on his way to class. The delay allowed him to strike up a conversation with two missionaries passing by:

"Do you believe in God?" he [the missionary] asked. I was surprised and hesitated to reply. I had asked myself that very question many times and finally decided I was an atheist. There was no reason to talk with these young men, but something about their demeanor was so remarkable I found myself wanting to proceed... They radiat-

ed a feeling of peace and...an outpouring of love and intelligence. During our discussions, [they] introduced me to the Book of Mormon, and they taught me about the restored gospel. Little by little, I learned the principles of the gospel and came to believe they are true. My entire life began to change... Communication with my family improved, and my relationships with everyone became happier. I made friends more easily than ever before (*Ensign*, 2000).

Thierry's experience points to a rhetoric of simplicity and of plain religious truth. The missionaries, full of the spirit of God and armed with knowledge of the restored gospel, "radiated" feelings Thierry could not ignore. Rhetorically, personal testimonies of conversion are particularly compelling in that they cultivate the faith of members while simultaneously appealing to another audience, nonbelievers.

A significant portion of this theme relates to missionary work, but not only because missionaries are tasked with bringing new converts. A deeper point is that the rhetoric of conversion has roots in religious collective identity and in the doctrinal concerns of early Mormonism. As Golding (2015: 217) explains in his study of missiology, "Mission concerns pervaded the Mormon experience from the beginning, ensuring that even in the process of adapting their orientation to new realities, Mormons would draw from a common vocabulary of ideas." In the early days, Mormon leaders, along with many Protestant leaders, were particularly focused on eschatology. The second coming of Christ was imminent, and so the efforts of missionaries to convert non-believers held a special urgency. Today end-times prophecies are comparatively downplayed (Shepherd and Shepherd 2016), but conversion continues to be a priority for leaders (Wrigley 2012) and it retains its rhetorical value.

The role of science

Having emerged in the modern scientific era, science has played an important role in Mormon theology and cosmology (Paul 1992), and this is evident in leaders' rhetoric. In the first half of the 20th century, science was viewed as an important source of validating Mormon doctrine. Along with many other religious leaders, early Mormon leaders taught that all knowledge and truth flow from a single source, God. Science then, is a tool God has granted humanity to aid discovery of this truth. As general authority Rulon

S. Wells explained:

True science is knowledge classified and must be true, hence it is a part of true religion which embraces and accepts all truth. How I rejoice in the wonderful development of science and invention, and I hope I may ever have an open mind ready to receive all knowledge let it come from whence it will, for it has but one source; it comes from God who is the fountain of all truth (1929).

The idea that both true secular and religious forms of knowledge derive from the same source reflected the position of Mormon leaders on science for much of the 20th century. Eventually connecting secular knowledge with atheism, Wells continued:

Revelation is truth made known whether that truth be religious or secular. Every invention or discovery, in fact all our understanding comes from God... God sends us his prophets to teach us in the way of life; he also sends us scientists, inventors and discoverers. They too are servants of God and have a part in the great work of educating mankind. I am not an atheist and deny that knowledge leads to atheism, nor am I an agnostic who holds that nothing can be known beyond material phenomena, who regards faith as a positive weakness, mistaking it for credulity, thus pulling down the blinds and shutting out from his soul the light of faith while he gropes around in darkness and despair. No, I am neither one nor the other. God forbid!

The transition in the same paragraph from a broad message about the symbiotic relationship between religion and science to specific commentary about atheism reflects a tension in leaders' conceptualization of the secular. Aware of interpretations of science that might support a nontheistic perspective, Wells rhetorically frames his argument about the nonbeliever's interpretation to help quell doubt or confusion on the subject. Any implication that science might be consistent with nontheism tended to be handled with phrases like, "[The] more thoroughly science is studied, the further does it take us away from anything comparable to atheism. If you think strongly enough, you will be forced by science to a belief in God" (CR 1952:105). Sixty years later, the essence of this rhetoric remains. Apostle Quentin L. Cook, in a 2012 conference quoted an eminent Rabbi to make his point

that, “We recognize that many individuals are not in tune with sacred things...Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks [in noting] how secular some parts of the world have become, stated that one culprit is ‘an aggressive scientific atheism tone deaf to the music of faith.’”

Rational-empirical explanations for the origins of the cosmos and humanity’s place in it frequent mid-century talks, as Apostle Mark E. Petersen’s statement illustrates: “So many essential conditions are necessary for life to exist on our earth, that it is mathematically impossible that all of them could exist in proper relationship by chance, on any one earth at any one time. Therefore, there must be in nature some form of intelligent direction. If this be true, then there must be a purpose” (Mark E. Petersen 1955). This argument from design appeals to evidence-based reasoning, again showing the interplay between emotive and rational forms of rhetoric. Petersen’s claim is framed as a simple logical conclusion. His stepwise move from complex life, to an intelligent designer with a plan for humanity – with other explanations being “mathematically impossible” – is significant as it contrasts markedly with the thematic emphasis on faith. Leaders also tackled issues of scientific concern directly, as this first-presidency statement issued for a 1944 conference titled, “Man Inherits Attributes of God His Father” demonstrates:

Since in the world of life, like besets like, it must follow that in bodily form we are like our Father in heaven. Hence, it cannot be true that we are brutes or descendants of beasts; we are of the race of the Gods. It therefore follows that man did not, as the atheist asserts, create God in his own image (CR, April 1944:149).

The LDS Church today takes no official position on the theory of organic evolution (lds.org 2016), helping to explain why unambiguous statements on human evolution, like this mid-century quote, are absent in more recent conferences. But this does not mean leaders have been silent on the issue. For example, a 1970 conference report references a book by Joseph Fielding Smith, an influential prophet and tenth president of the Church. It states, “If your children are taught untruths on evolution in the public schools... provide them with a copy of President Joseph Fielding Smith’s excellent rebuttal in his book, *Man, His Origin and Destiny*” (CR, October 1970:49). This, and the idea that “true science” cannot contradict “true re-

ligion” demonstrates how both doctrinal and scientific concerns are managed through rhetoric.

Dominant Narratives and Thematic Shifts over Time

The historical context of rhetoric is by definition central to the study of any discourse (Zaleska and Okulska 2016), and religious rhetoric evolves in response to changing cultural circumstance. As a consequence, there is no single way to characterize Mormon discourse on the secular. What is more useful is analyzing the ways that themes, as the representations of the prevalence of specified content in discourse, relate to narrative shifts over time. Narratives are the coherent, story-like arguments embedded in themes, but are distinct from them, as they explicitly draw upon shared norms, values, and identity in making assessments of that past, present, and future (Van Dijk 2014). Narratives employ tools of persuasion; they thread through abstract themes within a body of discourse. The four major themes outlined are permeable; each is present to some extent in every time period. Whereas the preceding section highlighted themes in the data at large, below is a summary of the character of rhetoric and narrative shifts that occurred over time, grouped within periods that reflect the general parameters of these shifts. Each time period lists the order of salience of the four themes (indicated with “>”), followed by discussion of the most significant changes over time.

1900–1920s: *Science > Belief > Problem of Secularism > Conversion*

This period was characterized by rational argumentation, often touching on science. The rhetoric is polemical, formal, and expresses a high-toned critique of secular unbelief, including criticism of prominent nonbelievers. This period foreshadows the *problem of secularism* to come. Leaders are keenly aware of the influence of science and modernity on faith. Drawing an interesting comparison while making a point about the limits of human understanding, Apostle John Widtsoe claimed in 1924, “There is no great difference between the modernist of today and the idol worshiper of the past. It is dangerous to limit in our thinking the powers of God, to allow ourselves to say that God, the Maker of the heavens and the earth, the Founder of truth, is limited simply because we are limited in our understanding. It leads men to unbelief

and atheism.” Science helped shape the modernists’ thinking, opening a path to unbelief through its misunderstanding. But this was not yet a great threat to society. As Hyrum Smith suggested in 1907, “I believe that true religion has never suffered very materially on account of the warfare made upon it by open and avowed enemies who call themselves atheists and infidels; neither has true faith been much disturbed by such attacks...” This statement presages the rhetoric on atheism to come as the threat of communism profoundly shaped the meaning of secular unbelief for the decades that followed. Specific references to literary figures and prominent nonbelievers appear in these decades. For example, Widtsoe said to his audience in 1924:

Yesterday morning, before I left my home, I picked up a paper which is circulated in this country by the hundreds of thousands of copies. I turned to the editorial page, and to my surprise saw a statement by the editor to the effect that what this great country needs today, these great United States of America, is a dose of Voltaire. I suppose he meant by that a dose of atheism.

Refutations of Thomas Huxley, Bertrand Russell, and other prominent critics of religion appeared in conference talks during these decades.

1930–1950s: *Problem of Secularism > Science > Belief > Conversion*

This era was marked by a narrative of a growing threat of secularism. The perceived rise of atheism comes to the fore, and a shift from emphasizing the importance of faith per se, to the spiritual perils of secularism unfolds. The importance of science continues, but takes a different tack. Church leaders begin to argue that science validates specific theological claims. Science is explicitly linked to atheism, but in an unexpected way: it is scientific progress itself that undermines the atheistic worldview. Titled, “More Godliness or More Godlessness?” Reed Smoot’s talk signals the start of the rise-of-atheism narrative, linking it to crime:

[A] feature to which our present attention may be called is that of the prevailing atheistic instruction which permeates our universities, and our schools, and our social and other clubs. [This] is the chief direct and potent cause of the great crime wave of which we hear and see so much

[about] in public discussions today (1931).

The narrative shift on science is represented by apostle Mark Peterson, when he stated that:

Few scientific men today defend the atheistic attitude. Never yet has there been adequate refutation of the argument that design in the universe presumes an intelligence. Evidence points to the existence of a Beginner, a Creator of the universe. A physicist’s studies lead him to believe this Creator to be an intelligent Being (1952).

The first-presidency’s 1944 address which claimed that, “It cannot be true that we are brutes or descendants of beasts” is the most direct reference to evolution, but other addresses during this time elaborate the idea. In a 1955 statement, the presidency summarized the work of scientist Cressy Morrison, a past president of the New York Academy of Sciences, stating that his book *Man Does Not Stand Alone*, “prove[s] from the standpoint of an up-to-date scientist” that the earth had a Creator and that Darwin’s theory of evolution is false:

Then [Morrison] reviewed the intricacy of creation, the intricacy of our own lives, of our bodies, the bodies of other living things... He talked about evolution and said that Darwin’s theory was concocted before science had learned about the genes. ‘The genes,’ he says, ‘keep all forms of life within their own spheres.’

The rhetorical framing during these years indicates a growing sensitivity to the possibility science may undermine religious doctrine; the response is the preemptive counter-claim that science positively supports such doctrines.

1960–1970s: *Problem of Secularism > Belief > Science > Conversion*

Anxiety about the threat of unbelief culminates in leaders’ rhetorical connection between atheism and communism during these decades. The dangers of secularism dominate the discourse and the threat of unbelief – especially to youth – in public schools and the academy along with the Church’s moral fight against godlessness come to the fore. One address just weeks before 1960 illustrates the coming crisis:

Thank heaven there are hundreds and thousands

who believe that testimony [of Christ] and repudiate the claims of the atheists who boast that man is his own god, and have already poisoned the minds of a generation of young men and women. They started this...forty years ago, and during that forty years they have poisoned those young boys and girls with the thought that there is no God (CR, October 1959:123).

The hopeful note in the first sentence belies an anxiety about the forces of secularism in the world. “Forty years ago,” a reference to the Russian Revolution which led to the Soviet Union alludes to what Ezra Taft Benson stated directly, “We must never forget exactly what communism really is. Communism is far more than an economic system. It is a total philosophy of life – atheistic and completely opposed to all that we hold dear” (1960). It is disbelief in God, not the economic order that is the greatest threat to society. The specter of communism heightened anxiety about secular unbelief in other forms:

Many college students, as well as high school students, become confused when some of their professors, in their important positions of influence, try to indoctrinate them with philosophies of men with atheistic ideas... They are very forceful in their distorted view and in their criticisms of those who possess faith in God. I would remind young people to remember that God is the author of all truth and to disregard any teaching that conflicts with the word of God (1965:49).

“Atheistic indoctrination” paints a dramatic picture about the dangers youth face in obtaining a secular education. Part of the symbolic power of this rhetoric relates to how the faithful should respond. Through the technique of association, this address lists the natural products of atheistic communism and instructs righteous men to fight against it:

The fight against godless communism is a very real part of every man’s duty who holds the [Mormon] priesthood. It is the fight against slavery, immorality, atheism, terrorism, cruelty, barbarism, deceit, and the destruction of human life through a kind of tyranny unsurpassed by anything in human history. Here is a struggle against the evil, satanical priest-craft of Lucifer. (CR 1961:70-71).

Wider appeals to American values and the Christian community at large were also made:

When we sing ‘God Bless America,’ what kind of an America should we have in mind? Certainly not a drunken America, nor a criminal America, nor an irresponsible America. We must not build an atheistic America, nor a disloyal America, nor a weak America, nor an immoral America. And to effectively serve God and our country, every good church member and every good citizen should be constantly waging war... for freedom and for truth and for righteousness and for success (CR 1970:70).

1980-2010s: *Conversion > Belief > Science > Problem of Secularism*

The discourse undergoes a dramatic change during this time. The imminent threat of secularism and the atheism-communism connection declines precipitously. Leaders turn to more positive, faith promoting stories of conversion. Atheism remains a topic, but is now framed within an inspirational narrative, where the nonbeliever finds the gospel. The rhetoric on science shifts again. Explicit talk of science validating belief in God is replaced by subtler, more modest discussion of the empirical health benefits of religion. Secular unbelief is still a threat, but is now set within a generic framework of a new “civil/secular” religion where issues of religious freedom become central. Conversion stories, especially unlikely ones, become salient. For example, LaRene Grant, an editor for the church’s *Ensign* magazine, recounts this story:

The day two missionaries knocked on Jacques Faudin’s door, Jacques, then an eighteen-year-old student, seemed an unlikely candidate for membership in any church—he was an active atheist. ‘I only invited the missionaries in so I could fight with them and try to convert them to atheism,’ says Brother Faudin. ‘However, after two discussions, I was shaken. These missionaries had a strength I couldn’t define. I stopped fighting and began to doubt my atheism.’ This was the turning point for Jacques. He decided to find out if there was a God. Still skeptical when the missionaries gave him a copy of the Book of Mormon, he decided to prove it wrong. After a constant two-week study, he had found no errors (*Ensign*, Mar 1995:41).

The threat of secularism is cast in new symbolic terms. In place of atheistic communism as an external existential threat, the problem becomes domestic and political. The associations of atheism with a wide-range of negative labels is now absent. Instead, nonbelief is framed as a new political, “religious” movement, as Boyd K. Packer, then president of the twelve suggested, “Atheists and agnostics make nonbelief their religion and today organize in unprecedented ways to attack faith and belief. They are now organized, and they pursue political power. You will be hearing much about them and from them...” (2007). A similar sentiment is echoed a year later by apostle Quentin Cook, “This is a time when those who feel accountable to God for their conduct feel under siege by a secular world. You understand the moral principles that are under attack and the need to defend morality... We must work together to both protect religious freedom and restore morality” (2011). The idea of a novel, organized political secularism in America reflects a particular political moment. Both of these comments were delivered at the height of the “new atheist” movement in 2008/2009, where best-selling authors like Richard Dawkins and other prominent atheists became more publicly critical of religion. The atheist billboard campaign which took place in the U.K. and U.S. during these years received specific mention by Cook:

Recent bus ads...demonstrate the polarization that exists concerning religion in general. Some atheists, agnostics, and nonbelievers paid to display large posters on red double-decker buses in London that said, “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” Opposing ads by Christians asserted, “There definitely is a God,” followed by uplifting messages.

During this time the activities of nonbelievers simply reveal a political polarization, not an evil or imminent threat to the souls of mankind. In the past, leaders may have referred to figures like Richard Dawkins (who spearheaded the bus campaign), by name. But there is no contemporary equivalent to leaders’ challenging Julian Huxley or Bertrand Russel, as they have done in the past. This evolving rhetoric is evident in an emerging vocabulary of a “new secular religion.” In the 1990s, as the threat of communism faded, the problem of secularism was recast into less strident terms, and appeals to religious freedom became the focus. James E. Faust’s talk is illustrative:

There seems to be developing a new civil religion. The civil religion I refer to is a secular religion. It has no moral absolutes...It is nontheistic. It is politically focused... If this trend continues, nonbelief will be more honored than belief...Nonbelief is becoming more sponsored in the body politic than belief...The long history and tradition of America, which had its roots in petitions for divine guidance, is being challenged. (*Ensign*, Oct 1992: 69)

To be sure, religious truth, moral integrity, and other issues that cast secularism as a problem continue, but as the 20th century turned to 21st, a rhetorical repositioning took effect. Unequivocal words such as “evil” were replaced with phrases like “no moral absolutes.” Divine guidance and moral authority are being “challenged” by unbelievers, but secularists are no longer godless degenerates that need to be defeated before they destroy society. Atheists continue to mock the faithful, but atheism is no longer accompanied by words like sin, evil, greed, un-chastity, or many of the other concepts it was once virtually guaranteed to be associated with. Instead, it is framed as attempting to compete with religion, as a religion. Both the decline of references to the secular in the 21st century, and the associated softening of the language when such references do occur, is consistent with Shepherd and Shepherd’s (2016) more general findings about the evolving rhetoric of Church leaders in contemporary society.

Conclusion

Through a case study of Mormonism, I argue that rhetoric on the secular plays an important role in religious leaders’ discourse. This study supports and adds to a marketplace perspective, showing that rhetoric is part of the discursive response to secular forces, helping religious groups negotiate boundaries and adapt to a complex religious marketplace and secular environment. This discourse plays a role in the self-understanding of religion in the modern secular world. Like all religious organizations, the cultural inputs from the wider society help shape the religious outputs of the Mormon Church. From this, I argue that religious rhetoric itself can be viewed as a kind of discursive intermediary between these inputs and outputs, revealing how moral boundaries are managed through discourse.

Religious rhetoric on secularism has evolved along with and in relation to cultural and historical changes in society. Every type and function of rhetoric can be identified at every point in Mormon history, but this analysis suggests on balance a *demonstrative-deliberative* rhetoric has steadily replaced the *rational-intellectual*, doctrine-based rhetoric that characterized the early church. The coupling of appeals to faith and feeling through conversion narratives with religion as the primary source of authority, truth, and morality has become the dominant discursive practice. The problem of secularism, though always there, crested during the Vietnam War. But in more recent decades, this problem has been reframed in terms of a new “secular religion” where the threat of secular unbelief per se was replaced with a focus on faith promoting stories of conversion.

As with the discursive practices that solidify other collective identities (Bruner 2005), the rhetoric of religious leaders helps cohere a belief system, making it compelling to members. But religious rhetoric is also unique in that its claims are not restricted to this-world concerns. Kaylor’s (2011:1) study of the Democratic party’s discourse during the 2004 and 2008 elections showed how party leaders used religious rhetoric to repair their public image as the “godless” party. In doing so, they appealed to a supernatural source of authority in negotiating their public image. Religious organizations, like political ones, consciously hone their message as they engage in public relations and promote their beliefs (Bruner 2005).

This study supports a religious marketplace/adaptation framework in part through the way it reveals discourse as a source of accommodating changing cultural norms and seeking broader legitimacy (Chaves 1997; Cragun et al. 2011). Shepherd and Shepherd’s (2016:194) observation that overall there has been, “a linear decrease in the salience of supernatural rhetoric in every generation of general conference since 1860,” is supported in the present analysis which suggests leaders’ have sought legitimacy through shifting from a supernaturalist rhetoric to one more aligned with contemporary secular-political discourse. This is consistent with Mauss’s (1994) idea of *optimal tension*. Outsider religious groups seek acceptance and respectability by appealing to the mainstream (Mauss 2011), while simultaneously asserting themselves in ways that retain some of their outsider status (Moore 1986).

My analysis also challenges one significant aspect of this thesis. Despite the claim that Mormonism increasingly markets its beliefs, “In ways that seem more reasonable to secular consciousness” (Shepherd and Shepherd 2016:218), like other conservative religious groups, it continues to frame secular unbelievers as an essential other (Edgell et al. 2006), where the sharpest moral boundary is drawn between religious believers and secular nonbelievers. The respectability it seeks is largely from other religious people and groups, not secular unbelievers or their organizations. This is in line with research that shows growing tolerance toward minority religious groups does not extend in equal part to the nonreligious (Edgell et al. 2006). Rhetoric on atheism in particular has been a symbolic foil for drawing moral boundaries. Likewise, science may be integral to Mormon cosmology (Paul 1992), but my analysis suggests leaders’ engagement with science is a rhetorical resource for negotiating religious claims.

Finally, this study highlights the need for sociologists of religion to examine the rhetoric of religious leaders as they seek to understand the role discourse plays in the relationship between religious and secular spheres. Rhetoric has played an important role in the evolution of religious movements. Religious organizations negotiate secular forces through discursive practices in ways that demonstrate the use of available means of persuasion. Appeals to both emotion and the intellect; metaphysical promises and existential crises; these are powerful rhetorical tools that offer religious meaning and solidarity amidst an essential secular other.

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End Notes

[1] In recent years, quorum structures have actually

become more complicated than this. For more details see lds.org

[2] Space does not allow full treatment of all 12 sub-themes. Only the most prominent are discussed.

[3] Conference Reports (CR) is a publication of collective statements by general authorities to accompany conference talks, so quotes of these kind are not attributable to a single author. All other references are from conference talks.

[4] See Engel vs. Vitale at: <http://www.uscourts.gov>. See Abington School District vs. Schempp at: <http://www.firstamendmentschools.org>