

# **SACRED AND PROFANE: A NOT-SO-SOUTHERN CONTROVERSY**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

**KELSEY MORGAN**

Submitted to the Undergraduate Research Scholars program  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as an

**UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLAR**

Approved by  
Research Advisor:

Dr. Nandra Perry

May 2016

Major: English  
Philosophy

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	1
DEDICATION.....	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	3
NOMENCLATURE .....	4
SECTION	
I    INTRODUCTION .....	5
The sacred in modern day.....	7
Symbols and the sacred.....	10
II    BREAKING DOWN .....	13
Empathy as power.....	15
Symbolism in media .....	19
III   RECLAIMING THE OTHER .....	22
IV   CONCLUSION.....	26
REFERENCES .....	28
APPENDIX A .....	30
APPENDIX B .....	32
APPENDIX C .....	34
APPENDIX D .....	35

## **ABSTRACT**

Sacred and Profane: A Not-So-Southern Controversy

Kelsey Morgan  
Department of English  
Department of Philosophy  
Texas A&M University

Research Advisor: Dr. Nandra Perry  
Department of English

This thesis is proposing an alternative way to view the notions of sacred and profane that better facilitates conversation in public discourse. Currently, public conversation tends to not acknowledge that there can be competing notions of what is sacred. Instead, one group's notion of sacred tends to be privileged, while another's is vilified and seen as profane. I will analyze media reports covering the Confederate flag debate and the Charleston shooting to expose the tendency within public discourse to acknowledge one notion of sacred at a time. Exposing this tendency will provide me with the framework for discussing a needed shift in our thought process when it comes to the sacred. I argue that we should bring the notion of sacred back into public discourse not as a religious category but as a rhetorical category of analysis. As a rhetorical device, sacred is best understood through Kenneth Burke's notion of "god-term." He defines "god-term" as the main motivator for a person's actions and understandings. Because the sacred is like a "god-term" there can be multiple notions of the sacred at once since each person is not motivated by the same factor. The rhetorical understanding of sacred allows for clearer conversation within public discourse.

## **DEDICATION**

In memory of Robert Morgan. Thank you Dad for the constant support and inspiration.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

A special thanks to Dr. Nandra Perry for your help and encouragement through out the entire process. Also, thank you to Caroline Sonnier for the hours of company in the library and endless words of encouragement.

## **NOMENCLATURE**

AME—African Methodist Episcopal Church

# SECTION I

## INTRODUCTION

“Every new & successful example therefore of a perfect separation between ecclesiastical and civil matters, is of importance. And I have no doubt that every new example, will succeed, as every past one has done, in shewing that religion & Govt. will both exist in greater purity, the less they are mixed together.”

— James Madison<sup>1</sup>

“[W]hen they have opened a gap in the hedge or wall of Separation between the Garden of the Church and the Wildernes of the world, God hath ever broke down the wall it selfe, removed the Candlestick, &c. and made his Garden a Wildernesse, as at this day.”

— Roger Williams<sup>2</sup>

It is commonly understood, that for the public sphere to function to its highest degree, it must be secular. To have the secular and non-secular spheres intertwined is seen as a hindrance to society because there is no clear authority. This division causes a person’s allegiance to come into question. To prevent this split of power and allegiance, the two are kept separate in America so that they may “both exist in greater purity, the less they are mixed together.”<sup>3</sup> However, despite this legal separation, the two spheres are not entirely free from one another. Our religious understandings of events are carried over into the public sphere. The notion of the sacred, in religious connotations, is anything that is set apart or is seen as holy. It was a concept intended to

---

<sup>1</sup> James Madison, “Letter to Edward Livingston,” in *James Madison: Writings*, (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1999), 788-789.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Williams, *Mr. Cottons letter lately printed, examined and ansvvered*, (London: 1644), 45.

<sup>3</sup> Madison, “Letter to Edward Livingston,” 789.

be kept on the purely religious side of the “wall” that has found its way over to the secular. This means, the notion of the sacred is also able to enter into public discourse because the “wall” that separates the secular and non-secular is full of “holes.”<sup>4</sup> These holes allow for concepts and ideas to slip back and forth between the two discourses. Kenneth Burke argues that “we note one thinker uses ‘God’ as his term for the ultimate ground or scene of human action, another uses ‘nature,’ a third uses ‘environment,’ or ‘history,’ or ‘means of production,’”<sup>5</sup> that drives the person’s understanding of the world. The “god-term” we place on our lives creates for us an idea of the sacred, and therefore causes a creation of “the profane.” In short, Burke is saying that everyone is motivated by a god-term. Each person calls their god-term something different. For some it is God, others it is family, or power. This causes the secular and non secular to be in continual conversation, influencing ideas. Because of this, we cannot ignore the notion of sacred in public discourse and our understanding of it must change. The notion of the sacred becomes a way in which we can discuss the main motivating factor for a person’s actions and what founds their understanding of the world. To ignore the notion of the sacred, is to hinder our ability to effectively converse with one another due to the level of impact that the sacred has on individuals and the public sphere.

The notion of the sacred has such a profound effect because it is the concept that founds and orients a person’s world view, so much so that it affects a person’s understanding of events. Looking at the notion of the sacred this way means that everyone has a sacred, or god-term. Because the sacred is like a god-term, there can be multiple notions of the sacred at once since each person is motivated by different factor. Once again, it must be noted that anytime a sacred

---

<sup>4</sup> Williams, *Mr. Cottons letter lately printed, examined and answered*, 45.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*. (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1954, c1945, 1954), xvi-xvii.



is established, a profane is also created—those things that go against your sacred. The profane becomes vilified because they are seen as actively against the sacred, resulting in profanes being considered evil. This creates an interesting situation when one notion of the sacred comes into conflict with another person's notion of the sacred. The conflict is often because the person's notion of the sacred touches on something marked profane by the other person. Since it's seen as profane there's no desire to admit that this thing is sacred to another person. Public discourse fossilizes this problem by privileging some terms as sacred and casting others as profane because it doesn't acknowledge that these notions are already in play with public discourse. It tends not to acknowledging that different people might have different views of the sacred further solidifying the tendency to speak of only one sacred. When the sacredness of those things marked profane can't be appreciated, real conversation and dialogue is impossible. I argue that bringing the notion of sacred back into public discourse, not as a religious category, but as a rhetorical category of analysis will provide for more beneficial, and difficult, conversations to occur.

### **The sacred in modern day**

Our tendency to not acknowledge the possibility of people bringing different notions of the sacred to the same situation is apparent in the articles published accounting the shooting at Emmanuel AME in Charleston, South Carolina. It is especially apparent in the resulting debate over the whether or not South Carolina should remove the Confederate flag from its state house. On June 17<sup>th</sup> in Charleston South Carolina, Dylann Roof opened fire at a prayer meeting and killed nine people, including the senior pastor. After his arrest, Roof was reported of having “told

investigators he wanted to start a race war.”<sup>6</sup> His desire for a race war was quickly linked with white supremacist movements, and later a manifesto believed to be written by Roof himself. Although the manifesto reflects many ideals of white supremacist groups, it is believed that Roof “had self-radicalized, and that he did not belong to a particular hate group.”<sup>7</sup> Roof believed white supremacist ideals were a notion of sacred that he adopted and made his sacred. His sacred, outlined in his manifesto, gave Roof cause for attending the prayer meeting and opening fire, even though he found the churchgoers to be “nice.” While Roof’s actions are indeed unethical, performing an action because it aligns with your sacred is universally done. The churchgoers at Emmanuel AME view God as their sacred, so their actions, such as attending prayer are a result of this belief.

Being motivated by a sacred does not exempt actions from judgment. However, the tendency within public discourse to not discuss competing notions of sacred hinders our ability to fully understand the dynamics of confrontations. We then end up missing important details for how we should converse with one another as well as the opportunity to create a shared dialogue with those who hold a competing notion of sacred because we find best to acknowledge one sacred and refer to the other as evil. In public discourse, the churchgoers’ notion of sacred, God, is maintained as the sacred and Roof’s sacred, white supremacy, is cast as profane. These designations are correct from a legal and ethical standpoint, but from a rhetorical understanding, where morality is suspended, we are not allowing ourselves to view Roof’s notion of the sacred as a sacred. This creates controversy, allowing for a debate to occur instead of a conversation

---

<sup>6</sup> Dallas Franklin, "Dylann Roof Says He Almost Backed out Because Everyone at Church Was 'so Nice,'" *KFOR.com*, June 19, 2015. <http://kfor.com/2015/06/19/dylann-roof-says-he-almost-backed-out-because-everyone-at-church-was-so-nice/>.

<sup>7</sup> Frances Robles, "Dylann Roof Photos and a Manifesto Are Posted on Website," *The New York Times*, June 20, 2015. [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/21/us/dylann-storm-roof-photos-website-charleston-church-shooting.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/21/us/dylann-storm-roof-photos-website-charleston-church-shooting.html?_r=0).

because “the manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world.”<sup>8</sup> This set up, of sacred versus profane, seeks to have winner at the end instead of a clearer understanding of both sides’ views. As rhetorician, Mircea Eliade proposes, this breakdown in communication occurs because the way we speak about events shapes our understanding of them, founding the reality in which the controversy occurs. In not discussing multiple notions of the sacred in public discourse, individuals are not acknowledging the reality that multiple notions of the sacred can coexist. This does not mean that all notions of sacred are equal.

Acknowledging that Roof was motivated by his notion of the sacred does not make white supremacy in any way justified or equivalent to a notion of the sacred that is founded in God. By acknowledging competing notions of the sacred, we understand what founds their reality and realize that any argument against it is an argument against the person’s way of life. As a result, groups who hold opposing notions of the sacred seek “to avoid, to delay the moment when one will have to say something and perhaps acknowledge, surrender, impart a secret,”<sup>9</sup> that would otherwise cause them to reevaluate their beliefs that would result from the type of conversation I am arguing for. The hope to defend one’s notion of the sacred by avoiding other notions of the sacred “amplifies the digressions”<sup>10</sup> causing a greater hindrance for productive conversations to occur. The tendency to lack acknowledgment of other notions of the sacred not only hinders conversation, it also stalls it, causing it to digress further from the initial, and difficult conversation, that should be taking place. The lack of acknowledgment means there is no way

---

<sup>8</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane; the Nature of Religion*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace 1959; 1st American ed., 1959), 21.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," in *Languages of the Unsayable : The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Sanford Budick et al. (New York : Columbia University Press, c1989, 1989) 16.

<sup>10</sup> Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” 16.

for opposing groups to discuss with one another their notions of the sacred. This problem is especially apparent in the debates that occur over symbols.

### *Symbols and the sacred*

The way we discuss symbols is how we wish to discuss competing notions of the sacred. As Mircea Eliade asserts, the “sacred remains active through symbolism...even if it is no longer consciously understood in every part. For a symbol speaks to the whole human being and not only to the intelligence.”<sup>11</sup> Symbols are attributed with a charge that is the result of how it aligns with a person’s notion of sacred. Some may see the symbol as representative of their sacred while others see it as antagonistic toward their views on life. This room for interpretation from person to person points toward Eliade’s belief that the symbol is not fully understood. The modern day argument for or against the confederate flag embodies Eliade’s belief. The pro and anti-confederate flag groups are using the same symbol but attributing opposing meanings to it based on their partial understanding of the symbol. Some believe the obvious response to the shooting is to take down the Confederate flag others believe that it did not play a role in the shooting.

The inability to communicate properly with one another is due to these different understandings of what the Confederate flag symbolizes. This is because, even though it is the same flag, the underlying “god-term” is different for each person so they view the flag through their sacred, thus giving it a sacred or profane charge. In the same sense, the understanding of the confederate flag is driven by the charge we associate with it due to our own sacred. These different opinions

---

<sup>11</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane; the Nature of Religion*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959), 129.

on what should be done with the flag reflect the way we want to talk about our own notions of the sacred. One group views the flag as a symbol of southern pride and values. Some, like Megyn Kelly, who is pro-Confederate flag, say that the flag represents a fight against “tyranny over the freedom of expression, tyranny over the freedom of association, tyranny over the freedom of speech, and tyranny over the freedom of conscience.”<sup>12</sup> Many in the South feel that the flag represents the defense of their constitutional rights and a way of life they deem sacred. Therefore, the flag carries a sacred charge that causes pro-Confederate flag activists to fight for it to not only be allowed in historical contexts such as museums but also to be allowed to remain in the public sphere, flying from buildings and purchasable in major stores. The anti-Confederate flag group sees the flag as profane because they understand it as attacking the fundamental sacredness of life, especially black lives, which have historically been devalued in the American South. The flag is “reflecting a history of hatred, racism, and violence”<sup>13</sup> as according to Gabrielle Canon, due to oppression that initially made the Southern way of life possible.

This debates over a symbol are a reductive way to discuss competing notions of the sacred. More specifically these two different understandings of the confederate flag reflect what is underneath the conversations about the Charleston shooting. These opposing understandings of the same flag present different parts of the flag’s history. The varying opinions of what to do with the flag are due to the charge different individuals believe the flag to be carrying. Each view held about the flag is a partial understanding of the effects it had and still has on human beings in a highly emotional sense, not just intellectual, because of how intertwined the flag is with both racism and

---

<sup>12</sup> Megyn Kelly, “The Confederate Flag Needs To Be Raised, Not Lowered,” *Megyn Kelly* (blog), July 9, 2015, [http://megynkelly.org/179680/the-confederate-flag-needs-to-be-raised-not-lowered/?utm\\_source=dlvr.it&utm\\_medium=facebook](http://megynkelly.org/179680/the-confederate-flag-needs-to-be-raised-not-lowered/?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=facebook).

<sup>13</sup> Gabrielle Canon, “Here’s One Confederate Flag that Shouldn’t Be Taken Down,” *Mother Jones* (blog), June 27, 2015. Accessed June 29, 2015.

a fight for personal beliefs. A person's notion of the sacred affects how they can speak about the flag because how a person discusses the flag coincides with their own understanding of reality. To speak with those of a differing opinion would involve suspending their own reality in order to understand the other which could result in persuasion of belief.

The way each group talks in regards to the flag mimics their beliefs. Their beliefs are the result of their sacred which shape the reality they live in because of the influence the sacred has on actions and understanding. Because of this, we "seek for vocabularies that will be faithful reflections of reality,"<sup>14</sup> but in doing so, we forget to account for differences in reality because to allow for multiple notions of sacred, and therefore realities, would be understood as a betrayal of a person's own reality and sacred.

---

<sup>14</sup> Burke, "Grammar of Motives," 59.

## SECTION II

### BREAKING DOWN

In the moment's following Roof opening fire on the pray group at Emmanuel AME, news reports spread, detailing the event to the entire country. The reports all carried the same information with the title of "breaking news." However, upon closer inspection of the reports we find that the information being circulated did not allow for full engagement with Roof and his motives. As previously noted, Roof's actions were heinous, a sentiment that is well documented, but they were also motivated by his notion of the sacred. Yet when discussing his motives, there seems to be a lapse in understanding that immoral actions could have a rational cause. Additionally, the inability to acknowledge two notions of the sacred is very apparent through the media's portrayal of Roof.

In a report released the day after the shooting, Charleston Mayor Joe Riley was quoted as saying that "the only reason someone could walk into a church and shoot people praying is out of hate."<sup>15</sup> Mayor Riley's quote embodies the main understanding of Roof's actions and it is reflected in all the other reports released. In fact, Roof became portrayed less and less as a human and more so as a senseless monster controlled by hatred. In some reports Roof was not even referred to by name. In an article released by USA Today, Roof was referred to as the "white supremacist" that "authorities have [arrested]...with nine counts of murder in connection

---

<sup>15</sup> Editors, "S. Carolina Leaders Speak out after Charleston Shooting," *WRBL*, June 18, 2015, <http://wrbl.com/2015/06/18/s-carolina-leaders-speak-out-after-charleston-shooting>.

with the Wednesday shootings of nine people at a Bible study session.”<sup>16</sup> Portraying Roof this way encourages a denial of his motives—even if morally wrong—as being more than blind hatred. This allows for public discourse to separate itself from Roof and therefore never question how we might identify with him. In this situation, there is no serious conversation about racism and about how people who are not monsters could be influenced by the same ideas as Roof. To demonize Roof is to deny that it is possible for a non-monstrous person to be racist, so we can’t ever deal with it.

It is important to note that Roof does identify with white supremacy ideals yet he never affiliated with white supremacist groups. Labeling him a white supremacist and a loner make him appear as a senseless monster for attacking those at Emmanuel AME. When we allow for multiple notions of the sacred in public discourse, we are able to take a situation what was once said to be a “senseless tragedy at a place of worship...[and] is absolutely despicable and can never be understood”<sup>17</sup> by Senator Tim Scott and turn it into a learning opportunity. The problem with saying that Roof’s actions can never be understood is that public discourse is dismissing a chance for better conversation which would allow them to better argue against similar situations. It’s not that public discourse *cannot* understand Roof, its that those in public discourse *do not want* to understand him. Trying to understand a hate crime, such as Roof’s, means acknowledging that the perpetrator is human like we are. The idea that a sane and rational human being could shoot an unarmed group of church members is uncomfortable for us. We want separation so there can be an “us” and a “them.” In fact, this is a direct result of how the notions

---

<sup>16</sup> David Jackson, "Obama to Deliver Eulogy Friday in Charleston," *USA Today*, June 22, 2015, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/06/22/obama-charleston-shooting-clementa-pinckney/29110791/>.

<sup>17</sup> Melanie Eversley, "9 Dead in Shooting at Black Church in Charleston, S.C." *USA Today*, June 15, 2015, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/06/17/charleston-south-carolina-shooting/28902017/>.



of the sacred and profane relationship are already engrained in our society. Society seeks to have one sacred so that way there is a line that makes for clear decisions about morality and right action. The separation is seen as a way to maintain order. There is a misconception that once you acknowledge that a group whose notion of sacred blurs society's moral line does have a rationale behind their actions that we have to accept those actions within society. Recognizing the rationale a person followed in no way deems the actions as moral. Instead, it gives both sides fuller understanding of one another that way more effective conversations can occur.

### **Empathy as power**

These type of conversations are possible if public discourse allows for empathy when someone has a notion of sacred that is in conflict with another notion of the sacred. Empathy is often seen as a passive approach to conversation that ultimately seeks for peace between two opposing parties. However, within a rhetorical framework empathy creates a personal appeal for persuasion that has powerful affects on both parties that are involved. Empathy is founded upon gaining more knowledge about one's opponent, so therefore it is also about gaining power over the other. This causes it to ultimately seek avenues for better argumentation as well as conversation. Understanding the rhetorical benefits of empathy in this case allows for more persuasive arguments against racist views because each group has a better understand of what is as stake for the other party. By employing empathy, those in public discourse are able to better understand Roof's world view so that they can then use this understanding in their efforts to persuade others against his actions.

In order to appreciate why empathy works in this argument its useful to understand Michael Foucault's theories about how power works. Foucault argues that power isn't a thing that can be possessed, it circulates. As he puts it, "power is exercised rather than possessed."<sup>18</sup> Since power is always used as a form of action, it evolves in order accommodate the new circumstances just as empathy does. Understanding power in this way emphasizes the need to understand Roof's motives. Acknowledging his motives does not make them socially acceptable. It allows us to better understand why he shot the church members, an act currently seen as senseless, and better argue against these kinds of actions in the future. As those in public discourse pursue their desire for more knowledge about Roof's actions, they are using empathy. However, empathy is not a passive approach to a discussion. For Foucault, knowledge is associated with power and empathy is seen as the pursuit of knowledge with regards to another's insight. This means that empathy would function the same as power since they both seek knowledge of the other that they are in relationship with. The desire to know the audience's point of view is a way in which a speaker can gain power over the audience to more effectively persuade them because they can anticipate potential push backs from whomever they are speaking with.

When we fully invest in knowing someone's sacred, and continue to argue against the person, you are calling for them to change their life. So to fully oppose Roof's actions, we must oppose his worldview, which we can only understand through empathy and attempting to understand the rational behind his actions. The rhetorical persuasion that comes about in this confrontation is most noted by Burke. He believes that "a social relation is established between the individual and external things or other people, since the individual learns to anticipate their attitudes toward

---

<sup>18</sup> Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 26.

him.”<sup>19</sup> This relationship necessitates the speaker to seek out more knowledge about their audience in order to better anticipate their reactions. In order to do so, a rhetor must know where he and his audience lies on what he calls “the terministic pentad”. The pentad is made up of five points with each representing a potential world view. These points are labeled “act” (what took place in thought or deed), “scene” (the background of the act or the situation in which it occurred), “agent” (what person or kind of person preformed the acts), “agency” (what means or instruments they used), and “purpose” (why they acted in the manner they did). Each point is often associated with different fields of study such as act is often the sciences, scene is history, agent is psychology, agency is anthropology and purpose is philosophy. A person is never at one specific point. Instead they are constantly moving along the pentad based on new information they receive as well as the given situation just as power moves from person to person within a situation.

It should be noted that what I am classifying as empathy is comparable Burke’s notion of identification. In order to argue more effectively “we should place ourselves *within* [controversies], by an understanding of their essential grammar”<sup>20</sup> because unless we do so, we will never be able to fully comprehend why the person we are in discussion with holds so tightly to their opinion. Understanding their grammar, is Burke’s assertion that before we can challenge someone’s position, we must first take care to decipher why and where an individual lies on the pentad. This same approach is highly effective in public discourse. When reporting the Charleston shooting, attempting to identify with Roof and understand his notion of sacred instead of immediately labeling him as a loner and his actions as senseless and and never able to be understood, we can better argue against his motives. This then allows the discourse to condemn

---

<sup>19</sup> Burke, “Grammar of Motives,” 37.

<sup>20</sup> Burke, “Grammar of Motives,” 268.

not only Roof's actions at Emmanuel AME but also his way of life. Doing this is then a pointed attempt to persuade others who would sympathize and identify with Roof from replicating his actions instead of condemning a specific event and the main person involved. It is because of this that empathy is a form of power. It allows the speaker to use any and all knowledge they have about the other person in order to be more persuasive and provides the speaker with an argument that is filled with pathos, not just fact. If those in public discourse effectively use empathy it becomes quite clear that "knowledge extends and reinforces this power"<sup>21</sup> developed by empathy that results in a more persuasive argument.

However, for this to effectively work in public discourse we must take cues from the audience, which is constantly changing, as they prepare and present arguments, giving them input on the progression of the argument because "new listeners...always imply new demands; thus a teacher himself is changed by what he teaches his students; or, at least he must be prepared to have his words changed, if not himself."<sup>22</sup> So as public discourse addresses new controversies, they must cater to these changes to properly identify with whatever notions of the sacred are involved.

Empathy takes away the initial critical understanding a speaker may have of a certain notion of the sacred and forces them to view the notion of sacred in its entirety. This allows the speaker to better empathize and brings them into what we might think of as an "I-Thou relationship" with the notion of sacred.

This kind of relationship stresses seeing the other, whether a person or idea, in its entirety. Instead of trying to break down and rationalize their existence; you simply let them exist as they are. The opposite of this kind of relationship is called "I-It." In an I-It relationship, the object or

---

<sup>21</sup> Foucault, "Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison," 29.

<sup>22</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *On Jewish Learning*, (New York: Schocken, 1955), 73-74.

person in the relationship “can never be spoken [about] with one’s whole being”<sup>23</sup> in mind. It focuses on different parts eliminating the ability to empathize. The I-Thou relationship prevents this because you must view the other in its entirety and “one can hate only part of a being.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, a true I-Thou relationship eliminates all possibilities of hating or being frustrated with the other. When we seek to change another person’s mind out of a hatred we are focusing on that one aspect of their full existence. In the the I-Thou relationship, there is a common understanding due to the establishment of an equal ground for discussion. During this exchange, both parties find that “their participation in a common ground makes for transformability”<sup>25</sup> in their placement on the pentad. The time of explanation by each side is also a time of persuasion that the rhetor encourages in an effort to appear more empathetic toward them. Empathy is now seen as a tool for more intentional persuasion instead of a passive attempt for understanding. This time of transformability is when persuasion is most effective and is only brought about through empathy and identification. So using empathy to attempt to understand Roof’s actions and acknowledge that he was motivated by a notion of the sacred is not deeming his actions okay. It is a more knowledgeable attempt to argue against him and his actions in order to persuade him and other of the wrongfulness of the actions.

### **Symbolism in media**

Using empathy and attempting to identify with the other notions of sacred provides a more direct route for conversation. Without it, conversations gradually move away from the issue at hand to a topic that seems to be easier to discuss as a replacement for the conversation that should be

---

<sup>23</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, New York: Touchstone, 1996, 54.

<sup>24</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 68.

<sup>25</sup> Burke, “Grammar of Motives,” xix.

had. The Charleston shooting is no exception and symbolism plays an important role. The photos used in reports strongly suggest the emotional response that should be had. Releasing photos becomes a way to reinforce the idea of Roof as a senseless monster. Instead of addressing Roof and his actions, the conversation zoned in on the confederate flag and since then it has become one of the primary topics surrounding the shooting.

The photos released of Roof are typically grainy and captured at moments that make him appear to lack normal social skills. This, plus the cold colors of the picture elicit a cold response to Roof as can be seen in the photos in Appendix A. However, when you look at Appendix B, the churchgoers are photographed by seemingly better cameras and the colors are much brighter causing a warmer response. The released photos are also filled with emotion so the pathos appeal to them is much greater than to those of Roof. The symbolism in the choice of photos aids in creating a divide between Roof and the churchgoers and distracts us from understanding what would motivate Roof to act as he did. There is clearly empathy with Emmanuel AME, as there should be, as they still recover from their loss. There is no visible empathy, or attempt to identify with Roof. To better public discourse, it is necessary to remember that “people are not essays, where you can go back to a previous paragraph and undermine the priors through careful, unperturbed dissection.”<sup>26</sup> They have emotions and reasons that are deeply intertwined with their view point of a situation. Once we truly empathize are finally able to understand that when we confront someone and attempt to persuade them, “we're asking [them] to abandon a part of themselves.”<sup>27</sup> But instead of using empathy in this way to better argue against the Roof’s

---

<sup>26</sup> Adam Mongrain, "I thought all anti-vaxxers were idiots. Then I married one," *Vox*, September 4, 2015, <http://www.vox.com/2015/9/4/9252489/anti-vaxx-wife>.

<sup>27</sup> Mongrain, “I Thought all anti-vaxxers were idiots.”

actions, the central conversation is avoided and public discourse looks for other related issues to address instead.

In the context I have established, the debate cannot be anything but a distraction from Roof and his actions because the necessary work has not been put in to understand both groups of people on either side of the debate. The focus on the flag reignites decades of debate and pain but does nothing to help solve it. When we have a debate that insists on demonizing one position or the other, what is lost is the full human context of the people who are holding the options. You are unable to have an I-Thou relationship. A real debate about the flag is one that could make space for the painful conversation about racism as well as the conversation about southern identity and the ways in which the fact that it's bound up in racism is painful to those who hold the flag as meaningful. An I-Thou conversation about the flag that refuses to look seriously at the notions of sacred in competition: on one side, antiracism and the other, southern culture at large, without acknowledging what is to be gained and lost is impossible. Then, we are unable to reach an agreement about what should be done with what is only a symbol of both notions of sacred. Instead we need to address the debate head on. However, this doesn't always have to be done verbally.

## **SECTION III**

### **RECLAIMING THE OTHER**

Reclaiming an “other” is directly confronting an idea that is profane and choosing to enter into an I-Thou relationship with it. Sonya Clark, an artist, has found a way to make use of the I-Thou relationship and subsequently rewrite the meaning of the confederate flag. For her, rewriting the flag’s meaning is an undoing of the hatred it represents and seeing the flag in its entirety. Her use of the flag in her artwork can be extended into a visual representation of how empathy works in order to better understand Roof and his motives.

Sonya Clark is the chair of the Department of Craft and Material Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her artwork has been featured in over 250 museums world wide. And through her artwork, attempts to unite modern day culture with her African heritage by producing provoking pieces of art in a variety of mediums. Two notable pieces are “Unraveling,” seen in Appendix C, and “Unraveled,” seen in Appendix D. The two pieces of artwork are physical representations of how to confront the Confederate flag in its entirety. In doing so, Clark is entering into an I-Thou relationship with it and choosing to rewrite and reclaim the symbol as one of empowerment instead of racism. She does this by taking the flag apart thread by thread. When she placed each thread into a pile based on it’s color, to create “Unraveled,” Clark was acknowledging the flag for what it was—dyed pieces of thread woven together onto which we have projected our notions of sacred and profane.

Clark’s ability to approach the flag is possible because of her ability to empathize with it. This was the result of her upbringing. Clark recalled that “many of my family members taught me the



value of a well-told story and so it is that I value the stories held in objects.”<sup>28</sup> By recognizing that the flag has more stories to it than racism, Clark was able to confront it and work with it. The result was a piece of art that spoke much louder than any debate over the flag could have. When interviewed by Mother Jones, Clark notes how “we live in the United States of America and we are used to a kind of injustice because it is part of the fabric of our nation. There’s a way in which unraveling a cloth—using that metaphor, using that sense of a material that we are so familiar with, but we don’t actually understand how it was constructed. Undoing it helps us understand that.”<sup>29</sup> By undoing the cloth, we are able to undo the hate, the racism, and the pain. It is not a fast process or an easy process but it is a way to approach the difficult conflicts that arise in our lives.

There is a directness in confronting something that is personally seen as a profane that Clark appears to embrace. This directness, allows for honest understanding of a profane as well as those who view the profane as part of their notion of the sacred. For Clark, using the flag and entering into the I-Thou relationship with it, gives needed insight to how to confront the issue of racism. She claims that what “cloth patterns and textures evoke help to identify who we are individually and culturally.”<sup>30</sup> Once we understand this, we are able to be honest and view the conflict in it’s entirety. This allows the profane to speak for itself and empathy to be used in argumentation. Clark is allowing the flag to wholly represent Southern culture and racism as she approaches it. She does this while maintaining the knowledge that we are the ones who weaved the flag’s meaning. Therefore, we are also able to dismantle it. In her argument against what the flag symbolizes, the tearing of the flag apart piece by piece, she is arguing against the hatred and

---

<sup>28</sup> Sonya Clark, "Sonya Clark," Sonya Clark Home Comments, <http://sonyaclark.com/>.

<sup>29</sup> Canon, “Here’s One Confederate Flag that Shouldn’t Be Taken Down.”

<sup>30</sup> Clark, "Sonya Clark."

oppression. However, note that what Clark is doing to the profane is not conquering it, nor is it a reinterpretation of the flag's meaning. Clark is giving what she sees as a profane a new life by seeking the "death" of what it currently symbolizes for her.

She does this by allowing the flag to fully disclose itself to her and deepen the I-Thou relationship she has with the flag. Buber argues art to be a key example in understand a true I-Thou relationship because the artist "beholds what confronts him" and the artwork "discloses itself to the artist."<sup>31</sup> The artist must take their subject and present it to the audience in an honest representation. In other words, there is potential for the artist to adapt or change the subject in their artwork, when this occurs the artist must use empathy in order maintain the I-Thou relationship. Without a holistic representation of the subject, the artist would take their I-Thou relationship and turn it into an I-It relationship. There is a level of empathy that between the artist and their artwork that allows for profanes to be rewritten. The artist also seeks to let their art stand alone. They can mold the medium and affect the outcome of the artwork, but in the end, they let the art speak for itself. In an interview I conducted with Clark, she noted that "there will be multiple readings of my work...there is conversation or dialogue."<sup>32</sup> This dialogue is after the piece is finished and is between the audience and the artwork. She wants the audience to leave with a question, not an answer after viewing a piece of artwork. This question is what sparks the conversation with others and drives social change.

Clark's portrayal of the flag, and in light of the Charleston shooting, evokes the question: how is Roof any different from the rest of us. He was a human being made of the same types of threads, just arranged in a different order. To empathize with Roof is our way of understanding him.

---

<sup>31</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 91.

<sup>32</sup> Sonya Clark (Artist), interviewed by Kelsey Morgan at College Station, 2016.

Empathy places us in his experiences and allows for us to hold him accountable for his actions. It also allows for honest comparison of ourselves to him. Asking this question, of how Roof is like us, pushes public discourse to acknowledge that Roof is not a “monster.” The question makes us blur the of separation, and causes our notions of profane and sacred to interact in the same sphere. Blurring this line, provides a framework in which we can empathize and reject Roof’s actions without demonizing him. In the same interview, Clark noted that we “use experience as a point of departure for empathy...It’s the same way you read literature, you find places where you are like the character and where you are not like the character.”<sup>33</sup> In public discourse, we are meant to seek change and understanding of one another. But we also have to acknowledge that our understanding can be skewed due to our own notion of the sacred.

It is better to confront our notion of profane in the same manner as Clark—in complete openness in order to understand the flag in its entirety, not in parts. This openness is how the sacred and profane are meant to interact. It allows for the two to combine so we can see the object wholly, instead of focusing on parts. In doing so, we can see how a “monster” like Roof is not a monster. We can see that he is a human being and could hold some of the same ideals as us. There is a self-awareness that comes about when we allow ourselves to empathize and therefore identify with things and people we may consider profane. Being self-aware helps us to maintain the I-thou relationship and forces us, again and again, to empathize with Roof because we begin to see how we similar to him, as well as how we are different.

---

<sup>33</sup> Sonya Clark (Artist), interviewed by Kelsey Morgan at College Station, 2016.

## SECTION IV

### CONCLUSION

There is a belief that there is a hard line between notions of the sacred and profane and, that this line of separation is what separates the worlds of sacred and profane. The subsequent belief is that this line is what keeps chaos from occurring by preventing the two worlds from interacting. In other words, it gives our society order and provides a clear understanding what is right and what is wrong. I believe, like Eliade, that this boundary is “the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible.”<sup>34</sup>

The division that has been created between the sacred and the profane is not meant to drive the two worlds apart. It is better used as a way for communication because the line is where the two worlds meet. The profane is created by the idea of a sacred, and the sacred is maintained as sacred due to the existence of profanes. The relationship between them is paralleled by Clark’s approach to the flag. Her notion of sacred is upheld by her viewing the flag’s current meaning of racism and oppression as profane. In rewriting the flag’s meaning by crafting “Unraveled” and “Unraveling,” Clark is reclaiming the interaction that naturally occurs between the sacred and profane. She allowed her ideals to better understand what was once profane, and use what would often be seen as a reason to avoid conversation, as a way to enter into a valuable discourse.

The discourse between Clark and the flag occurs on the line that divides the notion of sacred and profane. At this line, she is able to blur the boundary and allow for the profane flag to be seen as

---

<sup>34</sup> Eliade, “The Sacred and the Profane,” 25.

more than profane. The blurring of the boundary is when empathy occurs because there is a disregard of the boundary between spheres

Clark's project exemplifies how the Charleston shooting and Confederate flag debate are central moments when we can and should be empathizing with more than just the victim. We lay blame then remove ourselves from the situation by calling Roof a monster but we do nothing to prevent another person who has similar values from committing the same heinous crimes. By empathizing, we are able to enter into the mind set of that type of person and use this understanding for more fruitful discussion about racial violence and gun control. Empathy allows us to directly engage with Roof and the flag in order find a real solution that can result in the prevention of more violence. Empathy makes us bring Roof, a profane, into secular discourse and acknowledge that he is motivated by a notion of the sacred that others might also have. The Charleston shooting is no longer thought of as an isolated event but a by-product of some rational. Then instead of arguing against each event as it occurs, we are able to argue against the rational as a whole.

The only way to deal with profane notions in public discourse is by bringing the notion of the sacred in as well. Otherwise, we are continually pushing the profane to the other side of the line we have created because we don't think we can interact with it. Rhetorically speaking, the notion of the sacred is the foundation for arguing against a person because it is what makes the person who they are. To argue against a god-term, we must be well acquainted with it and the types of actions that can result from it.

## REFERENCES

- Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. New York: Touchstone, 1996.
- Burke, Kenneth. *A Grammar of Motives*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1954, c1945, 1954.
- Canon, Gabrielle. "Here's One Confederate Flag that Shouldn't Be Taken Down." *Mother Jones* (blog), June 27, 2015. Accessed June 29, 2015.  
<http://www.motherjones.com/media/2015/06/sonya-clark-unraveling-confederate-flag>.
- Clark, Sonya. Interview by Kelsey Morgan. Personal Interview. College Station, Texas, 2016.
- Clark, Sonya. "Sonya Clark." Sonya Clark Home Comments. Accessed February 19, 2016.  
<http://sonyaclark.com/>.
- Derrida, Jaques. "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials." In *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, edited by Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser. New York: Columbia University Press, c1989, 1989, 3-70.
- Dutton, Sarah, Jennifer De Pinto, Anthony Salvanto, and Fred Backus. "Poll: Views on Charleston Shooting, Confederate Flag." CBSNews. July 23, 2015,  
<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/cbs-news-poll-charleston-shooting-and-the-confederate-flag/>.
- Editors. "S. Carolina Leaders Speak out after Charleston Shooting." *WRBL*. June 18, 2015.  
<http://wrbl.com/2015/06/18/s-carolina-leaders-speak-out-after-charleston-shooting>.
- Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane; the Nature of Religion*. New York: Harcourt, Brace 1959; 1st American ed., 1959.
- Eversley, Melanie. "9 Dead in Shooting at Black Church in Charleston, S.C." USA Today, June 15, 2015. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/06/17/charleston-south-carolina-shooting/28902017/>.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon, 1977.
- Franklin, Dallas. "Dylann Roof Says He Almost Backed out Because Everyone at Church Was 'so Nice.'" *KFOR.com*, June 19, 2015. <http://kfor.com/2015/06/19/dylann-roof-says-he-almost-backed-out-because-everyone-at-church-was-so-nice/>.

Hyde, Bruce and Jeffery L. Bineham. *Argument and Dialogue: A Pedagogical Exploration into the Possibility of Public Discourse*, 1995.

Jackson, David. "Obama to Deliver Eulogy Friday in Charleston." USA Today. June 22, 2015, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/06/22/obama-charleston-shooting-clementa-pinckney/29110791/>.

Kelly, Megyn. "The Confederate Flag Needs To Be Raised, Not Lowered," *Megyn Kelly* (blog), July 9, 2015, [http://megynkelly.org/179680/the-confederate-flag-needs-to-be-raised-not-lowered/?utm\\_source=dlvr.it&utm\\_medium=facebook](http://megynkelly.org/179680/the-confederate-flag-needs-to-be-raised-not-lowered/?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=facebook).

Madison, James. "Letter to Edward Livingston." In *James Madison: Writings*. (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1999), 786-789.

Mongrain, Adam. "I thought all anti-vaxxers were idiots. Then I married one." *Vox*. Vox, September 4, 2015. <http://www.vox.com/2015/9/4/9252489/anti-vaxx-wife>.

Robles, Frances. "Dylann Roof Photos and a Manifesto Are Posted on Website." *The New York Times*, June 20, 2015. [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/21/us/dylann-storm-roof-photos-website-charleston-church-shooting.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/21/us/dylann-storm-roof-photos-website-charleston-church-shooting.html?_r=0).

Rosenzweig, Franz. *On Jewish Learning*. New York: Schocken, 1955.

Williams, Roger. *Mr. Cottons letter lately printed, examined and answered*. London: 1644.

## APPENDIX A

Photo A1. Roof being taken into custody





Photo A2. Roof in prison.



## APPENDIX B

Photo B1. Mourners gathering to honor the victims of the shooting.



Photo B2. Mourners outside of Emmanuel AME paying respects to the victims.



## APPENDIX C

Photo C1. “Unraveling” by Sonya Clark.



## APPENDIX D

Photo D1. “Unraveled” by Sonya Clark.

