# Power & persuasion: constructing identity in religious communications

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## Abstract

*According to Geertz (2002, p. 19), religion is "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long lasting moods and motivations" and provides adherents with a means for understanding the world. The qualities of religion mean that church communications acquire some power in forming the identities of members. In the case of immigrants, the church of the homeland is even more powerful in forming identity, because it not only functions as a repository of tradition, but also as a source of community and aid when acculturating to a 'new' land (Cadge & Ecklund, 2007; Ng, 2002; Peek, 2005; Yang, 1999; Vertovec, 2000). For members of the Greek Orthodox diaspora, the Church is presented as a way to be Greek by being Orthodox, which inevitably limits member expression of the self in relation to religious and ethnic identities. The purpose of this paper was to explore how a diasporic Greek Orthodox Church used its communications to establish and maintain relations of power and construct member identity. Accordingly, we applied Cheney's (1983) rhetorical identification typology to bulletins emailed to the church congregation. At its core Cheney's (1983) rhetorical identification typology is comprised of four strategies; the common ground technique, identification through antithesis, the 'transcendent we' and unifying symbols. In unearthing the presence of some of these strategies, we found that the communications may potentially assist this diaspora group in negotiating their religious and ethnic identities, but they are forced to do so within the confines of the meta-discourses of the church hierarchies they left behind. Therefore, it is not unexpected that the messages of the Greek Orthodox Church advocated participation in the church as a way of preserving members' 'Greek ness', and it may be equally unsurprising that the rhetor disseminated these ideas forcefully and authoritatively despite having no certain knowledge of how the audience would receive and respond to such a strong tone..*

## Introduction

Vertovec (2000) asserts that immigrants use the church of their homeland to settle the feelings of displacement, uncertainty and isolation attendant on relocating to a new country. The church, in this way, not only serves faith, but also provides access to the familiar, thus allowing immigrants to express specific cultural identities (Cadge & Ecklund, 2007; Ng, 2002; Peek, 2005; Yang, 1999). The Greek Orthodox Church is particularly important to understanding diasporic Greek communities because the church presents religious and ethnic identities as both identical and inseparable (Hammond & Warner, 1993) following the practice and beliefs of the homeland, where, as Roudometof (2008, p. 71) puts it, Orthodoxy is considered "an integral indispensable element of Greek identity".

Diasporic churches are repositories of the traditions and rituals of the homeland, but they also assist acculturation into new environments by articulating the expectations and behaviours of the host culture

(Athens, 1996; Cadge & Ecklund, 2007; Peek, 2005; Vertovec, 2000).  For example, a Greek Orthodox parish church in Auckland offers the liturgy in both English and Greek.  In this respect, the church's influence over its immigrant congregation appears overwhelmingly positive, but we contend that in fact the communications emanating from the church are permeated with a meta-discourse of authority (Weber, 1968/1925) which attempts to construct acceptable and sanctioned identities for church members (Eickelman, 1997; Stowlow, 2005; White, 2004).  The rhetor appears to expect members to accept the authority as "natural and wholesome" (Burke, 1984, p. 226) and to find it (almost) unthinkable to reject because to do so would be "painful and bewildering" (ibid).  At the same time, there is an element in the rhetoric of what Weber (1947, 1978) calls 'rational-legal authority', which, he argued, is concerned with rank and office and the preservation of existing social structures (Conger, 1993).  The purpose of our paper, then, is to unpack this argument by exploring how a diasporic Greek Orthodox Church used its communications with members to establish and maintain relations of power and to construct member identity.

## Literature Review

van Dijk (1993) argues that power is the ability to control the actions of other people and influence their cognitions, and this notion of power is deployed in religious organisations through adherents' reliance on church teachings (Irons, 1996).  Congregations look to the church for their moral code (Geertz, 2002; Johnstone, 1975; Irons, 1996) and for a "privileged relationship to supernatural beings and forces" (Reber, 2006, p. 193), and thereby render themselves vulnerable to manipulation by church hierarchies in pursuit of their own agendas.  The power of churches to influence and control leads to asymmetrical power relationships and a concomitant negative impact on the individuality of relatively disempowered individual members (Gramsci, 1971).

The negative effect of unequal power distribution is particularly marked if members accept the ideologies that permeate the church as a social institution (Foucault, 1980; Mumby & Stohl, 1999) and their subordinate position as an outcome of those ideologies.  In other words, members are likely to accept hegemonic power "because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they view it as natural and unchangeable" (Luke, 1974, p. 24).  Adherents of Greek Orthodoxy who have absorbed the belief that practicing Greek Orthodoxy and being Greek are synonymous (Chrysoloras, 2004; Mavrogordatos, 2003; Pollis, 1992; Roudometof, 2008) may perpetuate the "immutable traditionalism" (Mavrogordatos, 2003, p. 125) of the church and its rigid resistance to change (Oppenheim, 1990; Pollis, 1993).  The church, then, occupies a privileged position in relation to its members and uses that position to disseminate ideologies and to construct its members into a conformist identity that corresponds with certain ideal "prototypical characteristics" (Hogg & Terry, 2000, p. 123).

Of course, not all followers of religious organisations will readily accept identities created on their behalf and may resist efforts at identity construction.  As Chomsky (The myth of liberal media, 1998) argues, subordinates who have choices will not simply accept subordinate positions, but instead will challenge power and despite the efforts of "religious leaders to manufacture consent through the reinforcement of religiously sanctioned norms, challenges to organised Christianity have become increasingly common in

recent history" (Nairn, 2013, p. 32) because of the perceived injustices embedded in the attitudes and practices of religious institutions.  When member resistance is high, organisations may well use persuasive communication to assert their power covertly in order that individuals will forfeit a degree of their autonomy to make decisions that favour the organisation (Scott, Corman & Cheney, 1998; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985).  An organisation is well served if it can encourage members into identification with its culture.  According to Cheney (1983), Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, (1994), and Hogg and Terry (2000), strong identification prompts members to abide by the approved rules and policies of the organisation, which also leads to the goals of members and those of the organisation becoming "integrated and congruent" (Hall, 1971, p. 176).

Individuals usually identify with a number of social categories (Abrahamson & Anderson, 1984; Albert & Whetten, 2004; Brewer & Gardner, 2004; Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994), reducing the likelihood that any one organisation will be able to fully control a person.  The more limited the control by the organisation, however, the greater its efforts will be to alter the normalised attitudes and behaviours of their members by persuasion (Areni & Lutz, 1988; Taillard, 2000).  We are not arguing that identification is necessarily sinister, of course: members acquire psychological benefits by belonging to an organisation that allows them feelings of self-worth (Pfeffer & Fong, 2005; Swann Jr, Milton & Polzer, 2000).  However, identification with an organisation certainly serves the interests of the organisation because members can enact citizenship behaviours (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000), defend the organisation against negative publicity (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991), and act in the best interests of the organisation (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985).

All organisations, therefore, benefit if they can engender identification amongst their members, but perhaps the church needs its members to identify even more than most, competing as it does in an increasingly secular society (Lambert, 1999; Melton, 1998) for discretionary time, money and interest.  We propose, then, that the everyday communications of the church to its members are likely to be full of inducements to identification, and to investigate this proposition, we applied Cheney's (1983) rhetorical identification typology to the Easter bulletins emailed to members of an Auckland-based Greek Orthodox Church.

## Method

Cheney's (1983) rhetorical identification typology provides tools for exploring the identity construction that occurs in persuasive communication.  The typology operationalises Burke's (1969) theories of identification, which are based on the concept of "consubstantiality" (p. 21), and derive from a somewhat idealistic view of the power of communication to bring about cooperation. Burke (1969) believed that rhetors could achieve identification by three main ways: first, by creating common ground with the audience; second, by encouraging the disassociation of groups from one another; and third, by subtly merging the interests of disparate groups and the rhetor under an "assumed we". Cheney's (1983) typology deploys all three of Burke's strategies of identification, and includes a fourth category: unifying symbols.  In this paper, we understand the typology as a tool-in-trade for practitioners of persuasive

communication, but its use, obviously, leaves tracks that reveal the rhetor's intentions towards the audience.  We also, therefore, see the typology simultaneously as a method of analysis for researchers.

In the analysis that follows, the data yielded only two of the four strategies, common ground technique and the transcendent we, and for the purposes of this paper, we give space to explaining only the elements that we found in the texts . Among the four strategies, the common ground technique is perhaps the most frequently used.  It consists of explicit attempts to establish unity with the audience by emphasising the perceptions and beliefs that the rhetor and the audience hold in common (Cheney, 1983). The technique is made up of six tactics: expression of concern for individuals, recognition of individual contributions, espousal of shared values, advocacy of benefits and activities, praise by outsiders and testimonials. This data set employs only two of the six tactics: recognition of individual contributions and espousal of shared values.  Recognition of individual contributions is where emphasis is placed on belongingness and being part of an in-group (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Stets & Burke, 2000; Tajfel, 1982), while in an espousal of shared values, organisations foster the idea that their values are similar to those of their constituents.  The use of both these tactics is intended to strengthen direct and indirect associations between organisations and members in order to create the conditions in which identification may occur.

The other identification strategy found in the data set is the transcendent we (Cheney, 1983, p. 154), which occurs when the rhetor uses the first person plural to indicate an assumed collective mind.  According to Cheney (1983, p. 154):

> …the assumed 'we' and the corresponding 'they' are found in statements where a common bond amongst members of an organisation is taken for granted, but the nature of the relationship is not well defined.

To clearly define the relationship might alert the disparate parties to each other's differences, so the use of the transcendent we is beneficial to rhetors because of its power of subtle suggestion.

## Data Analysis

The texts we analysed presented two key messages: first, that members should be preparing themselves for Holy Week and second, that they should practise stewardship . The tone of the bulletins is conversational, and perhaps indicates the priest seeks or feels some intimacy with his parishioners.  The priest tends to shift the mood and emotional tenor of his writing from jovial to authoritarian, which adds to our observation that the priest wrote the emails in the understanding of a personal relationship with his congregation, even though these emails are computer mediated communications sent to a mass audience.

The first bulletin we analysed starts with the priest recounting a story of his childhood, discussing growing up in Illinois before referring specifically to how it was "Abraham Lincoln's first home".  As Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann (1983) and Petty and Cacioppo (1984) argue, narratives are persuasive tools because they encourage recipients to invest in the story, often by engaging with the messages and characters in a form of cognitive processing.  The narrative here emphasises the priest as a central figure

in the story. This in turn cements his role as leader, because the information he conveys originates from his knowledge and perspective (Foucault, 1980).  In other words, he holds power because it is his story and he can convey and alter facts according to his own preferences.  In relating the homily of Lincoln, who is presented as typifying ideal and exemplar qualities, the priest is able to subtly suggest that members should adopt a "Lincoln approach" to their own lives.  The narrative then functions to assert the priest's power and knowledge, and is designed to influence members' identities if the Lincoln story resonates with the own self-meanings.

Nonetheless, the priest's positive intentions do not obviate the ethnocentrism (Oetzel, 2009) permeating his story: the achievements of a former U.S. president are not necessarily going to reverberate meaningfully with a Greek Orthodox community in Aotearoa New Zealand.  The priest has assumed his congregation has sufficient cultural capital to be aware of Lincoln's achievements, and that his teachings will therefore be "heard" by his audience. Of course, if they do not have that cultural capital, Lincoln's story will almost certainly not have the desired effect. Congregants will not be able to adopt Lincoln's example as their own and this could negatively affect their connection to the priest and the church. Further, by recognising the contributions (Cheney, 1983) of a person outside of the ethnic and religious group of himself and his congregants, the priest has perhaps unintentionally constructed the congregation as an out-group and broadened the divide between the priest and his charges.  Thus rather than bind members together, the story-that-is-told could quite easily create divisions and ambivalence and this in turn would adversely impact the priest's ability to control his congregation.

The priest then shifts the focus of the bulletin to Holy Week. Here, he espouses shared values (Cheney, 1983), which he presents as universal Christian aspirations:

> …the virtues that Paul reminds us of, that we so often invoke and never tire of: whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report…. (emphasis in the original)

If they internalise these virtues congregants might experience depersonalisation, because in accepting universal norms, they could lose some of their own uniqueness (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Brewer & Gardner, 2004; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Stets & Burke, 2000).  The reference to Paul, achieves two things: first, the priest demonstrates his own learning and justifies his role as leader of the church and second, he has borrowed Paul's credibility to imbue his message with authority. Admittedly, using the credibility of others to strengthen a message will only temporarily persuade members to amend their attitudes and behaviours (Petty et al., 1983). This is because the presence of a credible source can mean that people from do not make the cognitive effort to understand the communication.

By instructing his congregation to make the 'right' choices and espouse shared values (Cheney, 1983) the priest encourages them to see their religious identity as salient in all aspects of their lives.  This aligns with the 'orthodox' teachings of the church that posit "orthodoxy is a way of life" (Chrysoloras, 2004, p. 43).  The Church, then, continues to hold power and sway over the congregation, particularly if they choose to adopt the shared values promoted by the priest and elevate their religious identities to the top

of their hierarchy of identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hecht, 1993; Peek, 2005).  Members who perceive their religious identity as salient could then come to make decisions that favour the organisation (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985), thereby assisting the church to maintain its power and presence in society.

The priest discusses how best to lead a religious life:
> And finally, let us embrace the fullness of the faith.  That especially means the Sacraments…We should, we must, prepare for these gifts with humble repentance

Here, the priest uses the transcendent we strategy (Cheney, 1983) to make the sacraments appear equally important to all members of the church.  He works to subtly control how members interpret the message because he has presented it as unanimously agreed among the congregation that they "should" and "must" prepare for the "gifts".  Consequently, the priest has created what Hogg and Terry (2000, p. 123) refer to as prototypical characteristics, to which all members are expected to conform in order to belong to the church.  To hold divergent attitudes would be to oppose the church in-group and could be viewed as resistance and, potentially, ostracism if members choose not to enact the Christian values of humility and repentance. This strongly suggests that conforming members hold power and influence over those who might choose to dissent.

In elevating the sacraments to the focal position of "fullness of the faith" the priest also demonstrates that congregation is part of an in group.  All Orthodox members should understand the place of the sacraments; this, in turn, may prompt members to view their form of worship as not only an expression of their personal faith, but also as a means to maintain their in-group.  Embracing the "fullness of the faith", therefore, is an opportunity for members to manifest an ethnic identity and cultural heritage that places the church and its congregation as a diaspora church, and 'being Greek' in the matter of religion becomes a value that is promulgated in the bulletin.

The bulletins call the congregation to the practice of material religion, and although this is under the aegis of the priest, members are also offered the opportunity to connect with their Greek identity. Religion-as-ethnicity is a recurring theme in the bulletins and its importance can be best seen in the priest's discussion of how the congregation should prepare for Easter by engaging in two forms of labour. First, the priest wants his congregation to support the church with their money and / or their time. Second, he wants them to labour ethnically by acting as Greek Christians.  Should they perform these forms of labour, the congregation will match their attitudes and behaviours to those promoted by the priest, which would mean they would assimilate to organisationally approved prototypes (Hogg & Terry, 2000).  In the Greek context, we argue this is particularly pertinent: the Greek Orthodox Church has remained bound to the Greek state and has enjoyed privileges such as the state financially supporting its clergy (Mavrogordatos, 2003; Pollis, 1992) under the proviso that that the church preserves "the superior spiritual ethos of Greekness" (Pollis, 1992, p. 179).

In the bulletin the priest remarks:
> Saturday and Palm Sunday morning are the last fully joyous moments before Easter, and they are bright indeed, as we celebrate Lazarus' rebirth and Jesus' joyous entry into Jerusalem

Here is a positive portrayal of the period leading up to Easter.  On one hand it seems straightforwardly descriptive. On the other, however, it is prescriptive, because the priest is using a narrative to specify how members should be feeling and thinking about Easter.  In other words, the priest attempts to persuade members to view the events of Easter according to his perspective. This makes sense, because, given his knowledge and position of power, he would expect members to choose to act in ways he advocates.  Additionally, by using Cheney's (1983) transcendent we, the priest has subtly dismissed any alternative narratives on how people should prepare for Easter, instead, emphasising that the joy felt by church members should lead to a sense of belonging to the organisation (Albert, Ashforth & Dutton, 2000; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Bullis & Bach, 1989; Parekh, 2009; Scott, Corman & Cheney, 1998). Here the stress is on display rules being more important than, which, according to Hochschild (1983), can lead to emotional dissonance when the changed emotions are not genuinely felt.  Should emotional dissonance prevail, members may disidentify with the organisation (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Costas & Fleming, 2009; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2002; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004).  Enforcing display rules would only have truly adverse effects on members, however, if they were continually enforced and individual members had a strong religious identity (Tittle & Welch, 1983).

Another example that emphasises the Greek Orthodox way of preparing for Easter is when the priest uses the recognition of individual contribution tactic (Cheney, 1983) to applaud the twelve ladies of the parish who baked more than 300 koulourakia  and were preparing to dye eggs red .  Not only does the priest publically thank the ladies, he also invokes a collective memory of 'doing religion the Greek way'.  In recognising the contributions of the baking ladies, and by drawing on their Greek heritage, the priest casts them as ideal members that others should seek to emulate: to get involved, and to maintain their Greek Orthodox identities.  Despite his positive intensions in singling out these women of the church for praise, the priest nevertheless maintains and supports gender stereotypes by referring to them as "baking ladies".  In a context where advertising and popular culture still stress that the kitchen is the realm of women (Courtney & Whipple, 1974; Dominick & Rauch, 1972; Kang, 1977) his identification here is perhaps understandable.  Nonetheless, this stereotype also reinforces the hierarchical Christian teaching that women serve and men command, that women are constituted as servants to the needs of others, and particularly, that women occupy a subordinate place within the church (Børresen, 1995; Daly, 1973; Fiorenza, 1975; Ruethers, 1985; White, 1995).

## Conclusion

Overall, the emailed bulletins of the Greek Orthodox Church construct members as subordinate to (a) the priest and (b) to the needs of the church.  The communications emphasise the priest's position as leader: he is therefore afforded power to influence and guide the congregation in their engagement with the Greek Orthodox religion.  Despite the presence of the rhetorical strategies of Cheney's typology, the promulgated messages seem to be church centric rather than audience-centric, with the priest regularly drawing on his privileged knowledge and authority to make his point.  In other words, the priest has a tendency to enforce rather than to persuade. While it is correct to argue that this may lead to member identification, it could also just as easily produce resistant readings and disidentification among church members.  Admittedly, the church is very traditional and resistant to change, particularly in its practice of

material religion (Mavrogordatos, 2003; Pollis, 1992), which perhaps accounts for the highly authoritative nature of the bulletins.

Several key messages are present in the bulletins, but all point to the need for members to (a) participate in their church and (b) to hold salient religious identities.  Taken together, these mean members are encouraged to relive and prepare for the events of Easter, and to adopt values and virtues to live by. Further, Greek Orthodoxy is framed as the focal part of the attitudes and behaviours of members and their identities constructed in religious and, to an extent, ethnic terms to serve the interests of the church.  The texts place the church's survival as inextricably linked to its members' essential 'Greek ness', which, in turn, is transmuted into a form of religiosity that creates strong in groups based on the idea that "not just anyone" can be Greek Orthodox. The forceful way the priest urges people to participate and engage with their religion suggests the on going survival of the church may be jeopardy in a crowded religious marketplace (Gruber & Hungerman, 2008; Land, Deane, & Blau, 1991; Zaleski & Zech, 1995), but, of course, it may simply be a result of the priest's personality.  Nevertheless, the bulletins stress centrality of the members to the church. Critically analysing them also stresses the different rhetorical strategies and tactics (Cheney, 1983) that can be deployed to promote identities for the members to produce feelings of belonging, self-enhancement and self-esteem. Of course, what is clear upon analysis but not featured in the texts is how advantageous those feelings are for the church-as-organisation (Abrahamson & Anderson, 1984; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994; Pfeffer & Fong, 2005).

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