

**Randall Terry's Liberal Prophecy:
National Sin, Activist Redemption, and the Death of Freedom**

Eric C. Miller
Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania

This essay considers the written rhetoric of anti-abortion activist Randall Terry as a prominent example of liberal prophecy – a rhetorical posture that situates the ideographs of liberal democracy within the prophetic style. Though contemporary “culture war” issues are ostensibly concerned with moral standards and religious beliefs, the public discussion surrounding such issues has tended toward a liberal frame, as competing factions vie for control of concepts such as liberty, freedom, and rights. Often effective in other venues, the liberal frame proved unsuccessful for Terry, who allowed his liberal commitments to be subsumed within a prophetic rhetoric maligned for its extremity.

Keywords: Abortion, Randall Terry, Operation Rescue, Liberalism, Prophecy.

On May 2, 1988, a group of approximately 600 anti-abortion protestors amassed before the entrance of a gynecological clinic on East 85th Street in New York City. According to the New York Times, the group was participating in “a weeklong effort called Operation Rescue,” led by a 29-year-old Binghamton resident named Randall A. Terry. Though none of the protestors tried to enter the building, their sprawling presence prevented patients from entering either, essentially creating a human wall. “Our goal is to completely close down abortion facilities for an entire day,” Terry said, “and each day we will target another one.” On that first day of action, more than 500 of the protestors were arrested and charged with disorderly conduct, an outcome that did not bother Terry. “We are simply producing the social tensions that bring about political change,” he said. “Everyone here is committed to being arrested” (Brozan, 1988a). Over the course of that week, protestors appeared at other sites around the city, where they were again met by police. By May 8, Operation Rescue (OR) members had accounted for more than 1600 arrests, drawing media attention from around the country. Calling the campaign “a week of on-the-job training” for his activists, Terry pre-

Randall Terry's Liberal Prophecy

dicted the start of a new and ubiquitous model of protest, advising one reporter, "Look for me everywhere" (Brozan, 1988b).

True to his word, Terry seemed to be everywhere in the years following the New York City campaign. In the summer of 1988, OR took up an extended stay in Atlanta, beginning at the Democratic National Convention in July and continuing through October – clogging the city's courts with over 1200 arrests. The following March, 200 protestors were arrested in Los Angeles. In June, 261 were arrested on the steps of a clinic in Connecticut. In each case, the protestors worked to create a media spectacle, practicing passive resistance techniques and forcing police to drag them into custody. Once in jail, many of the protestors refused to give their names, identifying themselves only as "Baby John Doe" or "Baby Jane Doe." Since inmates cannot be released on bond without proper identification, these anonymous individuals were held indefinitely, straining municipal resources. "The only thing is the cost and we figure that at \$50 a day per prisoner," Atlanta's assistant jail director told the Times. "They have cost the taxpayers about \$66,000 so far" (Smothers, 1988). Terry's tactic – grabbing a city's attention and forcing it to literally pay for its complicity with abortion – reached its climax in Wichita, Kansas in 1991, when the six-week "Summer of Mercy" campaign resulted in 2600 arrests, all for loitering (Wilkerson, 1991).

The confrontational tactics practiced by OR appealed to a segment of religious conservatives who were dissatisfied by failed legislative and judicial attempts to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. According to Barbara Page, then the organization's communications coordinator, each "rescue" was an opportunity to "save mothers from being exploited and babies from being killed." While politicians deliberated and compromised, OR was achieving tangible results, one clinic at a time. "If you park your body in front of a door," Page said, "you can save a child" (Brozan, 1988). But despite support from notable Christian leaders including Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and D. James Kennedy, OR was also the recipient of frequent criticism, sometimes from distinctly pro-life corners. Charles Stanley, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Atlanta, spoke for many of these critics when he insisted that anti-abortion activism must remain "lawful" (Enemy of Abortions, 1988). This charge – that rescues were unbiblical because illegal

Miller

— was particularly offensive to Terry. While his activism pointed a confrontational finger at the “abortion industry” and the complacent public, his written work addressed a Christian readership in covenantal language, calling first for repentance and then for redemption through action — not just for individuals, but for America as a whole. His was a prophetic rhetoric, attributing American freedom to divine benevolence, and forecasting the death of freedom as a consequence of God’s wrath.

Focused on the late 20th century, this essay operates in a rhetorical environment laden with liberalism, when the ruling in *Roe v. Wade* prompted both a national debate over liberal values (Luker, 1984; Condit, 1990; Williams, 2016) and, from Terry’s perspective, a moment of crisis demanding a prophetic response (Steiner, 2006, pg. 76). After surveying the literature on prophetic discourse, I analyze Terry’s rhetoric at the intersection of two important — but ultimately incompatible — performative traditions. Working in the tradition of the American jeremiad, Terry argued that the crisis of abortion reflected profound national sin, making the nation vulnerable to the withdrawal of divine protection. Drawing from the liberal tradition, he predicted the loss of freedom as a consequence of that withdrawal. In closing, I argue that the short-lived notoriety of Operation Rescue indicates a rhetorical overreach, in that the extremity of Terry’s prophecy ultimately negated the appeal of his liberality. This failure, I conclude, suggests that there are limits to the confluence of religious and liberal discourses in public.

Responding to Crisis: Terry’s Liberal Prophecy

In 1988, the year of the New York City rescue, Terry published his first book, titled *Operation Rescue*. Essentially a statement of his protest philosophy, the book was addressed to a Christian audience, attempting to explain the rescue model and to justify it in response to the predictable objections. In subsequent years, as those objections arose and became more pronounced, three other books would follow (Terry, 1990; 1993; 1995). Unlike his street protest, which was purely confrontational, Terry’s written work is thorough and coarsely diplomatic, imploring Christians to join his cause and exhibiting marked frustration at their hesitancy to do so. For Terry, this reluctance was especially unforgivable when viewed in light of the crisis inaugurated by *Roe*.

Randall Terry's Liberal Prophecy

The element of crisis in Terry's exigency is important because it situates him within the tradition of the American jeremiad. Dating back to the first Puritan settlers of the 17th century, this rhetorical construction has served countless speakers in the generations since, providing a link between collective action and divine sanction. Under the jeremiad, a group of people enters into a covenant with God, agreeing to a sort of contractual arrangement in which obedience is met with favor, while disobedience is punishable on a mass scale. This arrangement provides the incentives and deterrents necessary for maintaining group commitment to a common cause. Classifying the jeremiad as a "political sermon" and a "state-of-the-covenant address," Sacvan Bercovitch describes the Puritan version as a laundry list of collective sins and failures, including but not limited to "false dealing with God, betrayal of covenant promises, the degeneracy of the young, [and] the lure of profits and pleasures," always accompanied by "the prospect of God's just, swift, and total revenge" (Bercovitch, 1978, pg. 4). Perry Miller notes that such revenge could come in a variety of forms, including "crop failures, epidemics, grasshoppers, caterpillars, torrid summers, arctic winters, Indian wars, hurricanes, shipwrecks, accidents, and (most grievous of all) unsatisfactory children" (Miller, 1964, pg. 6). Though Miller emphasizes the sermon form's fierce castigation, Berkovitch stresses its "unshakeable optimism," noting that the doctrine of vengeance is balanced and offset by "a promise of ultimate success" (Bercovitch, 1978, pg. 7). The two poles of this construction provide boundary markers by which adherents can orient themselves en route to a holy lifestyle. For the Puritans, the stress of this orientation was heightened by the presumed presence of interested and diverse audiences. John Winthrop famously advised:

Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us: soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our god in his worke wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall shame the faces of many of gods worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into Cursses upon us till wee be consumed out of the good land whither we are going. (Winthrop Papers, 1931, pp. 294-295)

Miller

Since the Puritans understood their “errand” as a public testament to the viability of true religion, any violation of the covenant was doubly destructive – it *offended* God on the one hand, and *embarrassed* him on the other. Thus the American jeremiad began as a solemn catalog of errors in need of correction, an identity it has retained over time. In Terry’s usage – as in Winthrop’s – the jeremiad seeks to reorient a godly people by enumerating their failings and demanding their repentance.

Having derived its name from one of the Old Testament’s most prominent and accusatory prophets, the jeremiad has provided the conceptual basis for modern prophecy of all stripes. In his definitive work on the prophetic tradition, James Darsey associates American prophecy with a persistent strain of radicalism, noting that it is “defined by its concern with the political roots of a society, its fundamental laws, its foundational principles, its most sacred covenants.” Radical American prophets commonly “claim to be the true keepers of the faith,” opposing their society using “its own most noble expressions and aspirations” (Darsey, 1997, pg. 9). Generally reformers, American prophets share a variety of qualities with their Old Testament counterparts. “Both have in common a sense of mission,” Darsey writes, “a desire to bring the practice of the people into accord with a sacred principle, and an uncompromising, often excoriating stance toward a reluctant audience” (Darsey, 1997, pg. 16). Andrew R. Murphy notes that proponents of modern jeremiads seek to “use political power to intervene on one side of a divisive cultural or political issue.” “And yet,” Murphy writes, “given the long-term vision of the jeremiad, reform is never simply about a mundane set of policy proposals, but a vindication of the American past and the virtues of previous generations” (Murphy, 2009, pg. 10). In Terry’s work, the vast and transcendent scope of God’s will throughout history was brought to bear on a particular set of policy choices, situated in a very particular place and time. Since that place was America, and that time was the late 20th century, his rhetoric offered liberal appeals in prophetic style.

In *Operation Rescue* one may observe liberal ideography adopted and deployed within the sort of radical, jeremiadic, prophetic style described by Bercovitch, Miller, Darsey, and Murphy. This is fitting. If prophets are defined by their ability to draw upon the fundamental principles of society, then late-20th century Ameri-

Randall Terry's Liberal Prophecy

can prophets would naturally identify liberal language as the most available means of persuasion. Since the abortion debate had by then evolved into a struggle over liberal ideographs – especially the right to life and the freedom to choose – Terry engaged this debate on and through its most prominent terms. This engagement is interesting because it reveals a sort of rhetorical discordancy between content and style, or between a pair of incompatible performative traditions (Jasinski, 1997). For most American speakers, liberal language is attractive precisely because it situates one's message within the mainstream of American discourse, at times allowing intemperate voices to sound more moderate than they actually are (Djupe et al, 2014; Miller, 2014; 2015). But since Terry relied upon a prophetic style, his radicalism ultimately negated whatever mainstream credibility his liberality had earned. Despite his many warnings about the loss of freedom – the ideograph most successfully deployed by his opposition – Terry failed to win lasting support even from sympathetic Christian audiences. To make this case, I devote the following three sections to surveying *Operation Rescue* to document Terry's confrontation of complacent Christians, his ultimatum of repentance or wrath, and his promise of liberal restoration.

Confronting the Christian Church

In *Operation Rescue*, Terry's prophecy begins with a formal confrontation of his Christian allies. Having spent considerable time in the streets challenging the complacent public, he turns his pen toward readers in the church, demanding that they hold themselves to a higher standard. From the beginning of the book, Terry places Christians in a position of unique importance, observing that they “are being watched at all times.” Much like John Winthrop, Terry envisions a sort of hilltop exposure, from which the Christian faith will either be vindicated or shamed. Everything Christians do, whether active or passive, is constantly being observed and noted by a variety of audiences. First among these is Christ, who watches from a “judgment seat” in the “courts of heaven,” where evidence of good and faithless works is always being compiled. Second, there are contemporaries, including “the press and people in business, politics, and education” – believers and non-believers alike. They are judges as well, their opinions determining the broader perception of Christianity in their own place and time. Finally, ever aware of the historical moment, Ter-

Miller

ry notes that members of the “next generation” are watching, or will be, through the pages of their history books and the assessments they will make of the nation they will inherit (Terry, 1988, pp. 36-37). The simple fact that abortion had remained legal for fifteen years by the time of his writing demonstrated to Terry that the judgment of all audiences was bound to be harsh.

But if the legality of abortion was abhorrent, even more offensive was the pitiful opposition Christians had raised against it. This was a collective failure constituting a collective sin. The average Christian was doing nothing to fight abortion, and the average minister was doing nothing to encourage action among members of his congregation. “In making mention of some of our country’s more glaring sins such as abortion, pornography, or homosexuality,” Terry writes, “pastors usually do not give Christians a clear agenda and example of action, but simply denounce these sins from a theological standpoint.” By failing to inspire action, ministers essentially presented a “passive Christ” who was “willing to leave unchallenged the cruelty and wickedness permeating our society.” Most Christians were comfortable with this presentation, Terry suggests, because “practical action is costly, calling for confrontation, persecution, sacrifice, and suffering” (Terry, 1988, pg. 37). By 1988, in other words, the Christian community had met abortion with nothing more than talk, and talk was cheap. American Christians were unwilling to risk their prosperity, even though the only action that stood a chance of saving it.

The link between pro-life activism and American prosperity forms a direct and causal relationship in this construction, but not, perhaps, in an obvious way. Terry was not suggesting that abortion would deprive the nation of entire generations of citizens, or even that the resultant moral pollution would poison the citizenry into something unbecoming of American ideals – at least not in so many words. Rather, Terry’s understanding of American freedom was intertwined with his belief in an *American covenant*, with the idea that freedom and prosperity are ensured only so long as God chooses to extend His approving protection (Bellah, 1975). Since God’s protection was offered as part of a contractual exchange – protection for representation – the success of the nation was intimately linked to the national endorsement of Christian morality. Terry, again like Winthrop, was

Randall Terry's Liberal Prophecy

concerned with audience and appearance precisely because, as Christ's representatives on earth, American Christians were obligated to maintain a country worthy of their divine sponsor. Any failure to do so was not merely to disappoint God – it was to shame Him in front of those who did not believe, a sin that was potentially fatal to the covenant. Fierce opposition to abortion was vital, not simply because the practice was morally repugnant, but because its continued existence testified to the weakness of American Christians. *Roe v. Wade* was hard evidence of soft Christianity, written directly into federal law. For Terry, it was unthinkable that God would continue to ensure freedom in a nation where such a thing was possible. Consequently, he warns, the next generation is likely to “look back in disgrace,” asking:

Dear God, what were the Christians in America thinking? What were they doing? While they rushed to hear the message of peace and prosperity, unborn babies were killed by the millions, handicapped newborns and the elderly were starved to death, and children were being exploited by pornography. How could they have stood by and done so little? Didn't they care? Why didn't they protect the innocent and join in the battle for truth and righteousness? Why did they stand by as our freedoms were being stripped away? (Terry, 1988, pp. 36-37)

Here the connections between Christian complacency and the loss of freedom are made explicit. Still, these are generally tenuous, and some claims – such as the pervasiveness of euthanasia and infanticide – are suspect in themselves. The freedoms that will have been “stripped away” go unspecified, as does the agent who will have done the stripping. Terry shows little interest in precision. But he was committed to mobilizing Christian activists, so he worked to craft a clear and present threat to the Christian way of life – a threat that bound social sins to the loss of freedom. Later in the text, he asks similar questions:

Two and a half decades ago when the Supreme Court banished prayer and Bible reading from public schools, did the church offer much resistance? What about pornography? Where have Christian leaders been while America's women and children have been sexually exploited by pornographic magazines and films? What have

Miller

Christians been doing while our religious freedoms and civil rights have been slowly crushed before our eyes?
(Terry, 1988, pg. 171)

Drawing on the urgency of the appeal, he continues, “The church has *no chance* of defeating abortion, no chance of restoring our quickly disappearing liberties, no chance of bringing America back to moral sanity unless we repent of our idolatry and compromise” (Terry, 1988, pg. 174). Having done so, he writes, “We will defeat the abortion holocaust, restore religious and civil liberties to individuals, bring justice to our judicial system, see common decency return, and the godless, hedonistic, sexually perverted mindset of today pushed back into the closet – and hopefully back to hell where it came from.” The ultimate goal of Christian activism, in this view, is to “struggle for a nation where once again the Judeo-Christian ethic is the foundation for our politics, our judicial system, and our public morality; a nation not floating in the uncertain sea of humanism, but a country whose unmoving bedrock is Higher Laws” (Terry, 1988, pg. 178).

In making these claims, Terry insists that he is not interested in establishing a theocracy, or even a Christian nation. The Church, he declares, is the “only Christian nation.” Instead, he is interested in *repentance*, and in the ability of repentant Christians to sway the course of public sentiment. Only through repentance, he writes, can “America be turned,” and if America is turned, “Righteousness could once again be honored and dominate the consensus” (Terry, 1988, pg. 178). He envisions a de facto Christian polity steered by agreement rather than law, in which religious freedom is permitted insofar as competing beliefs do not offset Christianity’s dominance. As long as Christianity – or the “Judeo-Christian ethic” – maintains control, righteousness will thrive, appropriate policies will be enacted, and America will remain safely in God’s good graces. “If we do not obey,” Terry warns, “I fear God will let America collapse on herself” (Terry, 1988, pg. 59). It is here that he leaves the realm of political theory and proceeds into that of prophecy. Not content to cite Christian influence as a sort of glue holding society together, Terry assigns God an active role in America’s preservation or destruction.

Randall Terry's Liberal Prophecy

Repentance or Wrath

Having registered his disgust at the complacency of the church, Terry argues that, despite their failings, American Christians may yet retrieve God's approval and restore their freedoms. Much like the oft-repeated culture war motto pledging to bring America "back" to a previous, idealized condition, Terry imagines a nation that had maintained a higher moral standing in the past, and had only recently fallen from favor. Randall Lake has identified this "downward movement" as characteristic of anti-abortion rhetoric more broadly, and suggested that it seeks to assign blame for "sexual guilt" (Lake, 1984, pg. 425). For Terry, the fall corresponded to – and was evidenced by – the legality of abortion. If they wanted to halt the American decline, Christians needed to repent. Otherwise, the nation would become subject to God's already descending wrath.

Terry's prescription for repentance is both unequivocal and unequivocally political. Drawing specifically on the Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, he maps a plan of action bent on identifying "specific evils that specific rulers" condone – abortion first and foremost. Here as elsewhere in the text, he relies on a parallel sentence structure, emphasizing the action that "must" be taken:

We must follow the prophet's example and take the Word and precepts of our God into America's political spectrum. We must confront legislators and judges with their injustice. We must also challenge others in positions of power – such as the media elite, hospital boards, and school boards – when their laws, policies, and biases permit or endorse that which is against God's law.

Beyond that, members of our church should run for political office and seek to hold jobs and positions where policies are made and public opinion is formed. (Terry, 1988, pg. 54)

Terry maintains this assertive rhetorical posture throughout the text, persistently identifying and critiquing the evasion he saw in so much of his audience. Maligning those Christians who don't "feel called" to this sort of work, he repeatedly insists that activ-

Miller

ism is *required* of serious Christians. “Social responsibilities are not an option for God’s people,” he writes. “They are a mandate. Our religious lives and ceremonies may be flowing nicely, but if we neglect our fellow man, God is not pleased with our spiritual gymnastics” (Terry, 1988, pg. 56). God has made his will clear, Terry argues, and now it is time for Christians to act on it. Anything less is “not enough”:

Detesting the social problems that are destroying our nation is not enough. Discussing the evils of abortion, infanticide, euthanasia, pornography, and the elimination of Christian witness in the public schools is not enough. To sympathetically listen to pastors thunder their abhorrence of these atrocities from their pulpits is not enough.

We must *do* something about these evils. (Terry, 1988, pg. 58)

Understood as collective sins, the deficiencies of American Christianity thus invited God’s judgment. Since abortion was legal in the United States, and since it was *murder* in Terry’s view, Christians would be called to account for their failure to demand civil justice. Citing Bible verses that demand death sentences for murderers, he notes that humans are called to see them enforced:

The apostle Paul, writing about the role civil officials play in judgment, said that governmental rule is a “minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil” (Romans 13:4). God ordained that the first wave of His judgment, or punishment, should come upon killers and wicked men *through human agency* (Terry, 1988, pg. 152).

Because the human administration of God’s wrath upon killers and wicked men is part of the covenantal agreement, God expects civil institutions to be the proxies of His justice – an expectation that had gone woefully unmet where abortion was concerned. “The promise God made was this,” Terry writes. “‘Either *you* deal with the child killer, or *I* will deal with him, *and* with those who let him commit this atrocity unpunished’” (Terry, 1988, pg. 153). Though it would be easy to read these lines as an incite-

Randall Terry's Liberal Prophecy

ment to personal violence – such as the assassination of abortion practitioners or the bombing of their clinics – Terry makes clear that he is interested in specifically political solutions. While he would happily see certain doctors executed, he insists that the state take that initiative, acting legally and with support from the people. In his understanding, this is the mission of the state as dictated by God Himself.

If Christians could begin to assuage God's anger by repenting and embracing their civil responsibilities, it was by then too late to undo the damage that fifteen years of apathy had already done. Indeed, Terry suggests, judgment was already underway, an observation that helps explain the culture war condition in the 1980s:

Before God judges America, He is going to judge us, for “it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God” (1 Peter 4:17). Because the church has allowed this slaughter of children to continue, we must face those blazing eyes from which nothing can be hidden. Because we have failed to protect the innocent, God is lifting his protection from us. We have bowed the knee to a godless system that protects murderers, so God is handing us over to that system. (Terry, 1988, pg. 156)

Recall that, at several points in the text, Terry declares that American Christians in the 80s were losing their freedoms and civil liberties. By noting that God “is handing us over” to the system, Terry attributes these losses to God’s personal agency:

The recent outbreak of judicial and legislative persecution against the church is not the work of the devil; *it is God's judgment*. Home schoolers are being hassled by school districts; ministries are facing tax exempt status battles; church-related schools are feeling the pinch of restrictive legislation; common citizens are embroiled in freedom of religion and freedom of speech battles; pastors are taken to court for practicing church discipline; and homes for children are being closed.

These conflicts are directly related to our failure to protect innocent babies. We share in the guilt of this hol-

Miller

caust, and we will be the first to share in this judgment.
(Terry, 1988, pg. 160)

For Terry, these were specific, *current* developments acting as the harbingers of God's judgment – first of the church, and then of the country. The loss of freedom was not simply a consequence of secularism or culture warfare in this view – it was the product of God's avenging hand. This discussion demands quotation at some length:

While the cases of persecution I have mentioned are bad enough, where will it stop? A Supreme Court that can "legalize" child killing can legalize anything. The reasoning used to remove prayer and the Bible from *public* schools could be used to remove any religious expression, such as evangelism, from the *public* sidewalk and the *public* parks.

The notion of "the separation of church and state" will be used to silence political dissent from the pulpit. The Supreme Court (or some lower courts) could rule that devotedly Christian parents are unfit to raise their children in a "pluralistic" society. Or those who discipline their children according to loving, biblical standards could be found guilty of "child abuse."

Churches and/or church schools could be required to hire their quota of homosexual employees or face discrimination charges. In light of how far our nation has deteriorated already, these nightmares are right around the corner.

What is at stake for the church? Everything we hold sacred: our freedoms, our rights, our values, our Bibles, our families, and the very future we hope to deliver to our children. (Terry, 1988, pp. 160-161)

Having identified the culture war specifically as evidence of God's wrath on the church, Terry entertains a variety of possibilities for the rest of the nation. These include the spread of AIDS, economic collapse, drought, famine, or even nuclear apocalypse instigated by "Russian or Chinese missiles." Though the vehicle of God's wrath was uncertain, its arrival was *assured*. The surviv-

Randall Terry's Liberal Prophecy

al of the nation, like the survival of the faith, depended entirely on how Christians responded to these warnings. “If we dare hold back those who are staggering to the slaughter,” Terry writes, “God may spare our nation. If we succumb to fear and apathy, our nation is doomed to destruction” (Terry, 1988, pp. 160-161).

Much like his forbearers in the Old Testament and on the Mayflower, Terry prophesies without moderation, promising absolute destruction to anyone who fails to heed the call to repentance. He identifies and draws upon the fundamental values of the culture, warning his readers that their freedoms and rights hang in the balance. He cites a variety of sympathetic examples, tracing a direct correlation between the withdrawal of God’s protection and the loss of political liberties. In keeping with the prophetic tradition, however, his warnings about penalties and punishments for the apathetic are accompanied by a promise of success and reward for the obedient.

Promise of Liberal Restoration

By articulating the church’s collective sin, Terry points an accusatory finger at his brethren in the pews just as he had been doing toward his enemies on the street. By identifying the catastrophic consequences of that sin, he presents his peers with a pair of simple and eternal options. In his view, confrontation is a necessary step toward repentance, which is in turn a step toward restoration – the re-establishment of the sort of “Christian consensus” that may yet save American freedom. Only by acknowledging their shared failures and seeking forgiveness could American Christians demonstrate their commitment to the faith, reclaim God’s favor, and inspire a national uprising to stem the crisis of their time. As Terry put it, “Children’s lives are at stake. The survival of America may be at stake. But if we stand together, time still exists to restore justice and to lead America out of moral chaos, turning her back to godlessness and common decency” (Terry, 1988, pg. 42).

In bringing his argument to a close, Terry assures his readers that “God is looking for a reason not to judge America into oblivion, but rather to chasten her and restore her.” By repenting of their collective sin and becoming active in the rescue cause, American Christians could still “give Him a reason to show mercy.” As

Miller

long as they were willing to “prepare the way,” Terry was confident that, “when God does visit America it can result in revival and reformation, not judgment and annihilation” (Terry, 1988, pg. 190). This restoration would take a decidedly liberal form. The triumphant church would “restore religious and civil liberties to individuals, bring justice to our judicial system, [and] see common decency return,” evidence of “a nation where once again the Judeo-Christian ethic is the foundation for our politics, our judicial system, and our public morality” (Terry, 1988, pg. 178).

In the end, then, Terry’s prophecy advances a religious prescription for American liberal democracy. Christian belief and morality were necessary for the restoration of freedom and justice, but not for merely pragmatic reasons. Terry was not simply arguing that Christian belief was generative of good citizenship. He was insisting, instead, that Christian social action is requisite for God’s covenantal protection. If Christian – and some secular – audiences could find a utilitarian theory compelling, Terry’s revision made stronger demands on faith.

Liberality, Prophecy, and Incompatibility

From the outset, critics dismissed Operation Rescue as a “radical fringe group” and an “embarrassment,” demonstrating an inability to “change anyone’s mind” (Brozan, 1988b). Such criticism emphasized the extremism of OR activism, insisting that rescues were unable to influence mainstream public opinion. In response, Terry compared OR to the Civil Rights movement, claiming a sort of positivity – and liberality – by association. “If we are extremists,” he said, “then so was the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., for we are using the same nonviolent tactics” (Brozan, 1988b). If Terry’s prophetic speaking position was effective at attracting media attention and creating spectacle, the concerted charges of radicalism leveled against him revealed an ancillary weakness.

Perhaps ironically, the federal judiciary dealt OR a harsh blow in 1989, citing “civil rights” concerns while banning the organization from clinic entrances. Finding that the First Amendment cannot be understood to protect speech “at any time, in any manner, and in any place,” a Federal appeals court panel declared that “blocking access to public or private buildings has never been upheld as a proper method of communication in an orderly socie-

Randall Terry's Liberal Prophecy

ty.” The ruling, which leveled a \$50,000 judgment against OR, was heralded by plaintiffs’ attorney David Cole. “Operation Rescue’s actions against women trying to exercise their right to abortions,” he stated, “are analogous to the Ku Klux Klan actions trying to deny blacks their civil rights” (Hays, 1989). Apparently, King’s mantle was not to be surrendered without a fight.

The ruling would have serious repercussions for OR in subsequent years. In 1990, Terry announced the closing of OR’s national headquarters, citing the judgment as cause of a \$70,000 debt and a serious drop in fundraising (Anti-Abortion Group, 1990). This accompanied a \$450,000 penalty leveled by a federal judge in Manhattan after Terry ignored an injunction prohibiting rescues in New York City. Calling the judges “tyrants,” he told reporters that the rulings did not apply to him because he was “following the dictates of a higher authority, God” (Rebuffed by Courts, 1990). Shortly afterward, in a newsletter to supporters, Terry noted that OR was “in a lull,” since rescuers were “tired and battle-weary” (Lewin, 1990). In 1991, the media spectacle of the “Summer of Mercy” campaign found Terry in jail once again, where he had been placed by Judge Patrick Kelly after flooding Wichita, Kansas with protestors. Perhaps chastened and battle-weary himself, Terry buckled under the pressure, agreeing to leave Wichita in exchange for his release (Judge Threatens Wichita Abortion Protestors, 1991). Shortly thereafter, he resigned his leadership position with OR.

If Terry’s decline may be attributed to a failure of will, it must be further traceable to a failure of persuasion. Operation Rescue’s ability to secure high-profile endorsements did not reflect a steady stream of willing participants. The early 90s saw fewer rescues, with fewer rescuers. From a social movement perspective, this is not surprising, as the inherent risks of public confrontation have been well documented. Darsey notes that the rejection of communal speech norms may be interpreted as “a portent of incipient chaos and the abandonment of the rule of order generally” – both developments that may discourage participation (Darsey, 1997, pg. 5). And in their treatment of the “rhetorical failures of anti-war protest,” J. Justin Gustainis and Dan F. Hahn argue that the radical nature of the Vietnam-era peace movement was more liability than asset, failing “to reduce mass public support” for the war, and perhaps even increasing support by casting

Miller

the protestors “as a negative reference group” (Gustainis and Hahn, 1988). That Terry’s activism may have proven unsustainable is, all things considered, understandable.

But it should also be noted that Terry made no effort to downplay or dismiss the rhetorical problems raised by his prophetic style. To the contrary, he reveled in them. His frequent comparisons to civil rights heroes and Holocaust survivors, ubiquitous references to biblical prophets and saintly servants, and numerous invocations of jail time and sacrifice were specifically fashioned to emphasize the radicalism of OR protest. Seeming to embrace Barry Goldwater’s maxim that extremism in defense of liberty is no vice, Terry offered his readers the chance to live their faith and their citizenship in radical ways – ways that would save innocent lives and American freedom while fulfilling a covenant with their doting but angry God. Far from minimizing the stakes of Christian social action, Terry maximized them, hoping that his fellow believers would embrace the opportunity to suffer for the cause of Christ. That so many did not was continually vexing to him.

It is certainly possible that mainstream Christians were resistant to Terry’s brand of activism for all the reasons he repeatedly claimed. Perhaps they were accommodating, compromising, and cowardly. But it is also possible that Terry’s prophecy failed the test of civic narrative fidelity – that his diagnosis of the situation disrupted the way Christian citizens thought about their obligation to their communities. If that is true, then Terry’s covenantal arguments may have proven incompatible with the liberal ideals they claimed to protect.

In his analysis of *Operation Rescue*, Mark Allen Steiner writes that Randall Terry’s historical vision “encouraged its recipients to make essential and exclusive connections between Operation Rescue activism and the authentic expression of evangelical Christian faith” (Steiner, 2006, pg. 92). This is undoubtedly true. But the point could be pushed further. While most of the critical attention paid to Terry has focused on his confrontational demonstrations and prophetic declarations, it is important to acknowledge the covenantal political theory underwriting the entire project. Terry did not oppose abortion simply on the grounds that it was murderous, or that it was the appropriate thing for a Christian to do. He opposed abortion because its exist-

Randall Terry's Liberal Prophecy

ence threatened the age-old relationship between American political freedom and the discretionary protection of God. Freedom was not a given in this view, and it did not spring naturally from America's national temperament or political institutions. Freedom was a gift, and it came with conditions.

Conclusion

On the surface, the abortion debate since *Roe v. Wade* remains intimately concerned with questions of liberty and rights. Pro-choice advocates continue to embrace the "Freedom to Choose," and pro-life forces still defend the "Right to Life" (Haydan, 2009). But as the pathos-driven arguments hover over the moral status of individual persons – particularly mother and fetus – their deeper rhetorical foundations often go unexamined. Terry's framework was important because it represented a worldview – a way of understanding American life that drove culture war activism on a whole range of social issues, from women's rights to gay rights to public school curricula. For Terry, Christians – whether politically invested or not – necessarily subscribed to this worldview, and so had a religious obligation to social action.

To make this point, he relied on a covenantal vision of American history, linking liberal values to God's grace. Given a sympathetic (if hesitant) Christian readership, and coupled with generous and approving scriptural citation, Terry made a compelling case for his brand of activism, suited to his particular moment of crisis. Though not known for his attentiveness to nuanced arguments on behalf of the freedom to choose, Terry did open himself up to the criticisms of his like-minded peers, often going to great lengths to refute them in a shared idiom. A single-minded hard-liner on the street, Terry proved a capable debater in print.

In a nation known for its sharp political division, fierce disagreements are bound to arise. As Marsha L. Vanderford has noted, abortion has for decades served as ground zero for much of that ferocity (Vanderford, 1989). But if civility is to be maintained and differences overcome, it is important to closely examine the foundations of public arguments, accounting for their birth and development over time. If Americans have spent too much time vilifying and abusing one another over their beliefs, they may still refresh their stale debates by going back to the foundational

basics. In Terry's case, we find a strange union of fundamentalist prophecy and liberal idealism, a union that seems to have produced more heat than light, and burned itself out in consequence.

References

Anti-Abortion Group to Close Headquarters. (1990, February 1). *The New York Times*, pg. B9.

Bellah, R. N. (1975). *The Broken Covenant*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bercovitch, S. (1978). *The American Jeremiad*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Brozan, N. (1988a, May 3). 503 Held in Abortion Protest on E. 85th St. *The New York Times*, pp. B1, B2.

Brozan, N. (1988b, May 8). Effectiveness of Abortion Protests is Debated. *The New York Times*, pg. 28.

Condit, C. M. (1990). *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Darsey, J. (1997). *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America*. New York: New York University Press.

Djupe, P. A. et al. (2014). Rights Talk: The Opinion Dynamics of Rights Framing. *Social Science Quarterly*, 95, 652-668.

Enemy of Abortions Is Also Taking Issue With Protest Tactics. (1988, August 31). *The New York Times*, pg. A14.

Gustainis, J. J. and Hahn, D. F. (1988). While the Whole World Watched: Rhetorical Failures of Anti-War Protest. *Communication Quarterly*, 36, 203-216.

Haydan, S. (2009). Revitalizing the Debate Between <Life> and <Choice>: The 2004 March for Women's Lives. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 6, 111-131.

Hays, C. L. (1989, September 21). Abortion Foes Lose Appeal on Protests. *The New York Times*, pg. B1.

Jasinski, J. (1997). Instrumentalism, Contextualism, and Interpretation in Rhetorical Criticism. In A. G. Gross and W. M. Keith (Eds.), *Rhetorical Hermeneutics: Invention and Interpretation in the Age of Science*, ed. Gross, Alan G., and William M. Keith. (195-224). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Judge Threatens Wichita Abortion Protestors. (1991, August 6). *The New York Times*, pg. A14.

Lake, R. A. (1984). Order and Disorder in Anti-Abortion Rhetoric: A Logological View. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70,

Randall Terry's Liberal Prophecy

1425-443.

Lewin, T. (1990, June 11). With Thin Staff and Thick Debt, Anti-Abortion Group Faces Struggle. *The New York Times*, pg. A16.

Luker, K. (1984). *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Miller, E. C. (2014). Fighting for Freedom: Liberal Argumentation in Culture War Rhetoric. *Journal of Communication and Religion*, 37, 102-125.

Miller, E. C. (2015). Phyllis Schlafly's 'Positive' Freedom: Liberty, Liberation, and the Equal Rights Amendment. *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 18, 277-300.

Miller, P. (1964). *Errand into the Wilderness*. New York: Harper Torchbooks.

Murphy, A. R. (2009). *Prodigal Nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Rebuffed by Courts, Anti-Abortion Chief Regroups. (1990, March 5). *The New York Times*, pg. B2.

Smothers, R. (1988, August 13). Atlanta Protests Prove Magnet for Abortion Foes. *The New York Times*, pg. 6.

Steiner, M. A. (2006). *The Rhetoric of Operation Rescue: Projecting the Christian Pro-Life Message*. New York: T&T Clark.

Terry, R. (1988). *Operation Rescue*. W. House: Springdale, PA.

Terry, R. (1990). *Accessory to Murder*. Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt.

Terry, R. (1993). *Why Does a Nice Guy Like Me Keep Getting Thrown in Jail?* Lafayette, LA: Huntington House.

Terry, R. (1995). *The Sword: The Blessing of Righteous Government and the Overthrow of Tyrants*. Windsor, NY: The Reformer Library.

Vanderford, M. L. (1989). Vilification and Social Movements: A Case Study of Pro-Life and Pro-Choice Rhetoric. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 75, 166-182.

Wilkerson, I. (1991, August 4). Drive Against Abortion Finds a Symbol: Wichita. *The New York Times*, pg. 20.

Williams, D. K. (2016). *Defenders of the Unborn: The Pro-Life Movement Before Roe v. Wade*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Winthrop Papers, Vol. II. (1931). The Massachusetts Historical Society.