

Timothy H. Sherwood. *The Rhetorical Leadership of Fulton J. Sheen, Norman Vincent Peale, and Billy Graham in the Age of Extremes*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013. 170 pages. \$80.00.

Timothy H. Sherwood's *The Rhetorical Leadership of Fulton J. Sheen, Norman Vincent Peale and Billy Graham in the Age of Extremes* sees mid-twentieth century American history through the lens of three preaching witnesses, while grasping the wide range of religious and cultural ideologies of these personalities. The book appears to be an outgrowth of Sherwood's earlier study, *The Preaching of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen: The Gospel Meets the Cold War* (2010), which investigated the ways in which the pioneer Catholic radio and television personality helped to define post-World War II American (anti-Communist) identity through a masterful rhetorical media strategy. The subject has broadened considerably in Sherwood's current work, drawing from what *Life Magazine* called its most influential preachers of 1953, including Sheen, Peale, and Graham. Taken together, the three celebrated preachers crystalize around a particular *Zeitgeist*: to Sheen belongs the Age of Ideology, to Peale the Age of Anxiety, and to Graham the Age of Heroes.

What becomes quite lucid throughout Sherwood's investigation of America at mid-century is the vital role of rhetoric in shaping middle class sensibility. In this regard, we find Sheen as uniquely suited to bridge religion and patriotism during the Cold War. It was Sheen, after all, who artfully navigated a fear-struck nation in the depths of the Great Depression by famously popularizing a kind of common sense religion with the advent of the "Catholic Hour" in 1930. By the time of the Cold War, Sheen's credibility was so high that he drew multiple denominations in the millions; his audience was ripe for the defining distinctions of American freedom and democracy over and against Soviet "chicanery," "enslavement," and (best of all) "the kiss of Judas."

No less important was Norman Vincent Peale in softening the Age of Anxiety for a troubled American society. Sherwood does an admirable job in summarizing an enormous amount of material concerning the rise of American anxiousness from about 1940 to 1970, including the rise of psychiatry, paranoia over the Bomb and the Red Scare, and the rise of self-help books; but I missed Peale's obvious antecedent in the pulpit: Harry Emerson Fosdick. One wonders if Peale's triumph of the (evangelical) therapeutic would have been as effective without the legacy of Fosdick, whose rejection of a stern Calvinism and fundamentalism seem to carry the "Power of Positive Thinking" even before Peale made those words a household phrase. Also, not unlike Fosdick, Peale was often criticized for psychologizing the Gospel, even as *Guideposts* magazine empathically drew a readership of the "psychologically homeless" into its pages. Indeed, Peale seems to have understood quite well that the rhetoric of religion finds a natural companion with the "Problem Solver." The Gospel is a handbook for the "Tough Minded Optimist." Christ and his teaching become instrumental in integration and wholeness, salient advice for a society riddled with guilt and fear, haunted by the specter of psychologically wounded veterans, and raising children within the looming shadow of an atomic apocalypse. Peale's "therapeutic" Gospel helped countless people to unlock another kind of American Dream, one not based on material wealth (although Peale was also accused of preaching a "Prosperity Gospel"), but based on peace of mind.

Billy Graham also makes his way into Sherwood's study, but for slightly different reasons than Sheen and Peale. While Sheen and Peale's rhetoric negotiated the cultural contours present in ideology and hyper-anxiety in America during the Cold War, Graham transformed

himself into an American religious icon in the Age of Heroes. It might have been more useful for Sherwood to have called this particular time in America the “Age of Celebrities,” since it would seem that Graham’s rhetorical style effectively gathered into his “Crusade” those who were searching for a person with an aura which only the rhetoric of the camera can bestow. Along with his convincing, impassioned voice, it was the visual impact of Graham’s rhetoric that further persuaded tens of thousands at rallies and on television of the preacher’s power, credibility, and, most of all, as Sherwood points out, “authority.”

Sherwood’s book goes a long way in demonstrating the powerful rhetoric of three outstanding lives. They illustrate just how words may make us.

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