

Kansas vs. Roeder: Christian Identity, Juridical Discourses and American Exceptionalism

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Abstract. The US Evangelical movement's use of media and the court system since the 1980s to litigate morality issues, such as abortion, has gained global attention with the state of Kansas at the center of this awareness. On May 31, 2009, Scott Roeder, an anti-abortion activist, walked into the Reformation Lutheran Church in Wichita, KS and killed abortion provider, Dr. George Tiller, where he was attending Sunday morning services. I explore Roeder's killing of Tiller, as a public crisis, and the news reporting of the subsequent trial from an anthropological perspective. This research was carried out with members of the Wichita community who were bound by their reading of news sources which reported on the trial of Scott Roeder. I posit the public performance of violence and the ritual process of the trial were communicative and catalysts for change within some Christian communities in Wichita. I argue the legal discourses produced as a result of the conflict and resolutions have brought out moderate Evangelical identities and communities, historically associated with conservative Evangelicalism and strictly anti-abortion positions. I also find the distribution of legal discourses impacts religion which allows voice in the secular sphere

1. Introduction

This project began with an interest in the daily use of media by people and how media impacts communities through the production of knowledge. My project included the use of different forms of communication, including discursive strategies found within forms of media, how decisions about reporting were made by journalists and how this information impacted Christian identification and agency. The focus of my study was on internet journalism and reporting of information pertaining to the abortion conflict in Wichita, the killing of Dr. George Tiller in May 2009 and the trial of Scott Roeder for the killing in January 2010. The project began with questions of Christian identity, the negotiation of such and the potential agency of Christian identity in the abortion conflict. The focus was on concerns within the field of the anthropology of Christianity, including those concerns of Christian communities, such as the ways in which Christian identity is contested and becomes contested [5]. As well, the different types of linguistic strategies that might be used in the community were explored [2, 4].

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

The primary focus of this ethnography is on informants from different interacting communities in Wichita who were qualified through their reading of a news source which reported on the trial of Scott Roeder in January 2011. I conducted fieldwork and interviews with informants, who were 1) formerly members of Evangelical denominations in Wichita, including members from the field of journalism and law who adhere to Christianity but do not identify with any denomination, having left conservative Evangelical congregations in relation to the abortion conflict and 2) a conservative Baptist congregation. These interacting communities help put into context the national abortion debate, as well as account for change over time of cultural groups and the community environment.

I employed a holistic anthropological approach to the killing (public crisis) and the trial as media events with the community as engaged participants in the production and consumption of information and resolution of conflict. Informants were qualified and bound through a selected internet news source, which was systematically collected and analyzed. Fifteen informants were observed and interviewed during the span of the trial which started in January 2010. Interviews were conducted through October 2010 and took place in different formats, including informal interviews, conversations and recorded formal interviews. I asked questions about historical background including education, family, religious affiliations, reading of different news sources and how they accessed and incorporated this knowledge into their daily lives, understanding and identification of themselves as well as their identification of other religious groups. Also included were questions about what it meant to them to be an American, their positions on abortion, the events of Dr. Tiller's killing and the trial of Scott Roeder. During

fieldwork, it became apparent there was an impact of juridical discourses in the community such as “guilty” and “not-guilty” in relation to identification of Christian denominations who were or were not to blame for the performance of violence in Wichita. Blame for the violence in Wichita was predominantly assigned to the “Baptist” denomination, including the killing as related to protestors and use of inciteful language.

Legal proceedings were integral in the formation of public discourses surrounding Evangelical Christianity. The field of law is shaped by religion despite secularism in the US. The practices and formations of religion are impacted by legal discourses appreciated through the reporting of law. The use of legal discourses by religious groups has secularizing affects and these groups incorporate specific linguistic ideologies, making their positions more acceptable within the public secular sphere. The agency of these discourses is distributed through the practices of institutions and individuals. The practice of “legal naming” [3] is important in identity for individuals and groups. The legal discourse of “guilty” in relation to responsibility for the actions of Scott Roeder identifies which religious groups are allowed into the public sphere and have voice as well as produce changes in linguistic ideologies and strategies of religious groups identified as such. For example, the Baptist denomination I worked with were aware through their interaction with other cultural groups that they were identified as “guilty” for the violence and in turn, incorporated legal and national ideologies framing their position as follows: “Choice is a right given to us by God.” For my attorney informants the issue was used to test Judge’s ideology regarding key issues such as traditional marriage, associated with conservative Evangelical identity. Questions about abortion were employed as a means of social action to bind elected Judges to a perceived secular sphere of law, in which they believed the spheres of religion and politics had intruded.

3. Conclusions

I have found there is a distribution of legal discourses in the Wichita community which serve to regulate society by determining which groups are or are not acceptable members of society as determined through the reporting of trials and the folk practice of law, which is a creation and representation of “facts” [6] through the ritual process of the trial. This includes production of assumedly objective information about the identification of Christian groups [3]. The incorporation of legal discourses allows religious groups entry into the secular public sphere as members of civil society, which gives them voice in relation to the abortion conflict [1]. I find this is a recursive system, in which the use of media and the court system by religious groups to litigate morality issues to gain recognition and legitimation of their belief system is changing the practice of law. These uses of the court system and communication techniques have developed attorney’s understanding of Christian identity in the courtroom and recognition of Judge’s political and religious affiliations.

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