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Link to published version: https://doi.org/10.5465/AMPROC.2025.342bp

BIBLE BACKERS: HOW TAKEN-FOR-GRANTED ASSUMPTIONS CHANGED IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

RUBEN VAN WERVEN
Bayes Business School, City St George's, University of London
106 Bunhill Row, EC1Y 8TZ
London, United Kingdom

AMIT NIGAM
Bayes Business School, City St George's, University of London

SIMON PARKER
Bayes Business School, City St George's, University of London

INTRODUCTION

Communication is constitutive of institutions. A rich history of research has established that diverse forms of communication, including the word combinations that people use (Loewenstein et al., 2012) and the frames or rhetorical arguments that they mobilize (Gray, Purdy & Ansari, 2015), are essential features that constitute institutions, and that can shape whether and how they are maintained or altered over time. Hence, this approach is performative, in that it shows specific institutional actors defining or shaping the institutional environment within which other actors operate (Lok, 2010; Wright et al., 2021). The emphasis in this work is on the effects of a specific text or a specific actor's communicative act; much of the institutional research on communication focuses on how vocabularies, discourse, or frames, articulated by a single institutional actor, can impact the cognition and/or behaviors of others (e.g., Fiss & Zajac, 2004; Werner & Cornelissen, 2014).

Taking a slightly different approach to theorizing the relationship between communication and institutions, a smaller body of work sees communication as a process through which institutions are co-constructed (Cornelissen et al., 2015); communication thus conceived involves diverse parties acting and interacting in ways that alter or preserve institutional arrangements. This approach, therefore, argues that the shared understandings and meanings that emerge within institutions are unlikely to be shaped by an individual actor (Cooren et al., 2011) and examines debates between multiple institutional actors (e.g., Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). Yet, such studies are rare and, because they tend to focus on the substance of the arguments exchanged and the outcome of the debate (i.e., institutional maintenance or change), generally do not consider the mechanisms of rhetorical contestation.

To further explore how institutions are co-constructed through communication between multiple actors, we draw on recent work that, inspired by Toulmin's (1958) ideas about the rhetorical structure of arguments, analyzed how communication can reveal the taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs in an institutional context (cf. DiMaggio and Powell, 2011; Douglas, 1986; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Toulmin calls the underlying, institutional-context-specific assumptions that undergird and structure communication the "backing" of an argument. Emerging work (Green et al., 2009; Harmon et al., 2015; Harmon, 2019) has highlighted that this type of analysis has the potential to help us unpack micro-processes through which institutions might change. While analysis of rhetorical structure thus has great potential, it has, to our knowledge, not been extended to understanding rhetorical contestation between different institutional actors. Subsequently, we ask the question: *How do the taken-for-granted assumptions of an institution change through debate?*

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research drawing on rhetoric and rhetorical structures of argument has been fruitful in exploring communication within institutions (Green, 2004; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). Rhetoric, understood as the "art of persuasion", presents an interesting form of communication within an institution as it is directly linked to the act of convincing others to do something they perhaps otherwise would not have. Actors use rhetoric to construct legitimacy (Alvesson, 1993; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005; Vaara et al., 2006) and institutionalize practices (Green et al., 2009; Heracleous and Barrett, 2001; Sillince and Suddaby, 2008). Scholars have used the Aristotelean ideas of pathos, logos and ethos (see Green, 2004; Erkama and Vaara, 2010) to understand the ways in which individuals draw upon logic and rationality (logos), appeal to emotion (pathos), and make claims of legitimacy or authority (ethos) to convince others. Like the broader literature on communication, the literature on rhetoric often takes on a performative perspective and focuses on one-way communication, largely overlooking debates and contestation between different groups (see Hoefer and Green, 2016). For example, Brown et al. (2012) analyze a single text that argued for the separation of care for young disabled and frail elderly individuals in care facility. Similarly, Goodrick et al. (2020) focus on the editorials of a pharmaceutical journal, noting how emotions are invoked as a means of persuading internal stakeholders.

Following Harmon et al. (2015), Harmon (2019) and Green et al., (2009), we believe that the rhetorical theory of Toulmin (1958) provides a useful framework for analyzing the exchange of arguments between stakeholders and the impact such debates have on taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs in an institutional context. Toulmin explains that arguments have three basic components: "people reason with others by asserting a *claim* (conclusion) and then justifying it with *data* (evidence) and *warrants* (explanations for why the data support the claim)" (Harmon, 2019: 545, emphasis added). An additional component that is of relevance here is the *backing*, i.e., the "collectively understood assumptions" that – often implicitly – render the warrant acceptable" (Toulmin, 1958). The example Toulmin (1958) himself gave to illustrate these components concerns a lawyer arguing that his client, a person born in Bermuda (data), is a British citizen (claim) because people born in Bermuda generally are British subjects (warrant), as specified by law (backing).

Each of the components of an argument may be challenged. When arguers agree on the backing, but dispute each other's data, warrant, or claim, they engage in *intrafield* rhetoric (Harmon et al., 2015). In case an arguer's backing is not accepted, e.g., when the law is not seen as the appropriate basis for deciding on the citizenship of somebody born in Bermuda, Toulmin et al. (1984) speak of *interfield* rhetoric. The notion of 'field' here refers to 'argument fields', not 'institutional fields'. Institutional fields are networks of actors whose relationships are structured around common interests and shared cultural understandings (Zietsma et al., 2017). Argument fields exist within and across institutional fields; actors within an institutional field may draw on multiple argument fields, e.g., surgeons may advise against a procedure on medical as well as financial grounds, and claims made by actors from different institutional fields may be situated within the same argument field – as is the case when both doctors and lawyers reason on religious grounds (Willard, 1992; Zarefsky, 1992).

While argument fields differ from institutional fields, arguments can change institutions. Harmon (2019: 543) argues that "Toulmin's linguistic concept of backing can be mapped directly onto institutional theorists' concept of taken-for-granted assumptions". Harmon et al. (2015: 77) note that "intrafield rhetorical strategies shape and reflect social actors' assumptions about the legitimacy of an action", whereas "interfield rhetorical strategies shape and reflect social actors' assumptions about the legitimacy of the context itself". Hence, interfield rhetoric is most likely to significantly alter an institution, as it

challenges the legitimacy of the context itself. Yet, even intrafield rhetoric can destabilize an institution; the U.S. Federal Reserve, through explicitly reaffirming the "backing" underlying U.S. monetary policy and thereby suggesting that taken-for-granted assumptions were up for discussion, caused market turmoil (Harmon, 2019). We believe that analyzing the rhetorical dynamics of how actors switch from intrafield to interfield rhetoric will allow a deeper insight into how the taken-for-granted assumptions within an institution can change.

So far, we have shown how rhetorical analysis can be helpful to understand how actors deploy rhetorical strategies and how, in some cases, rhetorical analysis can be used to explore the taken-for-granted assumptions of an institution. However, as noted previously, much of the literature on rhetoric has focused on the analysis of singular texts (Brown et al, 2012; Goodrick et al, 2020; Harmon, 2019). When prior work does focus on contestation between different groups (see Green, 2004; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005), it does not explore the dynamics or mechanisms of this contestation. We address this sparsity of research through exploring debates focusing on the mechanisms of contestation between two groups within the Church of England. We focus on significant instances within debates where the backing/taken-for-granted assumptions of the institution are challenged and change. We introduce the case, our data, and our method of analysis in the following section.

METHODS

Research setting

To answer our research question, we analyzed a contentious debate within the Church of England (CofE) about the need to commit more resources to evangelism. The CofE, which embodies the Anglican branch of Christianity, is regarded England's national church (Zygan & Le Grys, 2018). It believes it has the 'cure of all souls' living in the country, i.e., assigned itself the responsibility of looking after every resident of England, irrespective of whether they are a CofE member. In line with that belief, the CofE has a presence throughout the entire country; all of England is divided up into small territorial units called parishes to ensure that nobody is too far removed from church.

The debate we focused on was sparked by a downward trend in church membership and attendance. In response to the decline, some CofE members proposed evangelistic initiatives aimed at attracting new members (Zygan & Le Grys, 2018). Due to the impact the proposals would therefore have on institutional beliefs and assumptions, they were contested and debated (see Van Werven, 2024). As these debates are well documented, choosing them as the focus of our study provided us insight into the way advocates and opponents of change engage with each other and thereby helped us develop a more interactional linguistic perspective of institutions (Cornelissen et al., 2015; Hoefer & Green, 2016).

Data collection

Discussions around the need to address declining CofE membership, and the best way of doing so, started around the year 1980 and are ongoing (Van Werven, 2024). This provided us with the opportunity to collect longitudinal data and – like prior work on language and institutions (e.g., Gurses & Ozcan 2015; Kellogg, 2011) – study the development of institutional communication over time. Specifically, we analyzed debates held in the General Synod (GS). GS is the CofE's main national decision-making body. It functions as a parliament; its members are elected and it "considers and approves legislation affecting the whole of the Church of England (…) and approves the annual budget for the work of the Church" (Church of England, 2022). The CofE archives were our main data source. In its archives, the CofE stores the reports discussed during General Synod (GS) meetings as well as the minutes of those meetings. One of the authors visited the archives on

several occasions. During those visits, he photographed or downloaded relevant excerpts from those sources. The full dataset consisted of 48 reports and the minutes of 29 meetings (just under 1,900 pages in total).

Data analysis

As we aim to shed light on the debates between advocates and opponents of a new initiative, we followed prior studies of institutional rhetoric (Green et al., 2009; Harmon et al., 2015; Harmon, 2019; Van Werven et al., 2015) and used Toulmin's model to guide our analysis. Unlike previous work, we did not limit our analysis to the arguments advanced by a single speaker; instead, we studied the rhetoric of advocates as well as opponents of evangelism-related change. Taking this more interactional approach (see Hoefer & Green, 2016) enabled us to examine how counterarguments influenced the ongoing debate and how the debate in turn shaped the institution. Specifically, like Green et al. (2009), we first selected all data fragments that explicitly covered our topic of interest (evangelism). For each of those fragments, we then determined which components of an argument were identifiable. As certain components, particularly warrants and backings, are often left implicit (Green et al., 2009; Toulmin et al., 1984), we combined excerpts to piece together the entire argument.

Once we created a comprehensive overview of all evangelism-related arguments exchanged during debates in General Synod, we ordered them chronologically and by standpoint, i.e., based on whether the speaker was in favor of or against taking more action to facilitate evangelism. We then compared the components of these arguments. We paid special attention to the backing because, according to Harmon et al. (2015), backing changes indicate a shift in institutional assumptions. We found that the backing for evangelism-related arguments changed in two ways during our period of study: 1) the most salient basis for arguments in the 1980s had become much less explicit by the end of the 2010s, and 2) a new backing emerged in the mid-1990s and rose to prominence in the 2000s.

To shed light on the process through which a new backing is introduced to an institution and thus improve our understanding of the role of rhetoric in changing institutionalized assumptions, we took two additional steps. First, we used a periodization strategy (Hannigan and Casasnovas, 2020) by closely comparing the content of arguments made over time to identify 'moments' that served as turning points in the debate on evangelism. We identified two key moments that divided our data into three periods, which differed from each other in terms of the nature of the backing upon which arguments were based. Second, we distinguished between conflicting arguments and arguments that established a consensus (cf. Sorsa & Vaara, 2020). We found that consensus was usually claimed just before a key moment, and thereby coincided with a transition between the phases, which suggests that it was an important rhetorical feature of the process of backing change.

FINDINGS

Our analysis of the reports and meeting minutes we retrieved from the Church of England's archives suggests that evangelism was a contentious, heavily debated topic. On one side of the debate were General Synod members who wanted the CofE to commit to evangelism, i.e., "the making known of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ (…) to those who do not know it" (GS780A, 1987: 38). We refer to this group as 'evangelists'. On the other side were Synod members who saw worshipping God and social action, i.e., supporting poor or otherwise disadvantaged people, as the CofE's historical mission. Evangelism for them was not necessarily part of that mission and could, in fact, end up compromising it. In advocating for what they saw as historically appropriate action, these people "emphasized the

significance of the continuity between the Church of England and the Church of the Early and Medieval periods" (Church of England, 2025). We therefore refer to the evangelism-skeptical group as 'traditionalists'.

Through analyzing evangelism-related debates in the Church of England, we have been able to document shifts in the core assumptions upon which arguments were based. Specifically, we found that the debate between evangelists and traditionalists moved through two main fields of argument: the field of religion and the field of evidence. Figure 1 shows that the emergence of evidence as a legitimate backing for arguments was the outcome of a gradual process; the process unfolded through a series of smaller transitions between connected argument sub-fields. Initially, evangelists and traditionalists debated how evangelism fits within God's mission (Debate 1, based on *pure theology*). These arguments served as input for a later discussion on the extent to which God allowed people to actively evangelize (Debate 2, based on *ecclesiology*). The second debate paved the way for reports that shared research evidence about grassroots evangelism within the CofE. During the second phase, traditionalists directly challenged the legitimacy of using such evidence (Debate 3, situated in two argument fields) or came up with ecclesiological counterarguments (Debate 4, also interfield). In response to these critiques, evangelists embedded their evidence-based arguments in the field of religion. Following these debates, the CofE started gathering policy evidence to assess the impact of its investments. The intrafield debates that characterized the third phase focused on these initiatives and were strongly rooted within the field of evidence (Debate 5).

Figure 1 about here

DISCUSSION

Contributions

Our analysis of the way evangelists and traditionalists drew on argument (sub-)fields revealed a backing change; the field of religion, which was the sole basis for argumentation in the late 20th century, was less prominent than the field of evidence by the end of our period of study. Within the Church of England, this process of backing change was *gradual* and facilitated by the *ambiguity* of the field of religion.

Based on these findings, we theorize the impact of communication and language on institutions. We show that backing change, i.e., a change in assumptions that are taken for granted within an institution, is gradual; a new backing only emerges through a series of debates that leverage both intrafield rhetoric and interfield rhetoric. Through outlining this process, we generate new insight into how communication changes the taken-for-granted assumptions behind an institution. Specifically, we show that argument fields can include distinctive sub-fields. Shifts between different argument sub-fields, which took place the transition from intrafield to interfield rhetoric, can introduce new argument fields within an institution without delegitimizing pre-existing institutional arrangements. Hence, we add to prior work (e.g., Harmon et al., 2015) by pointing out that intrafield rhetoric contributes as much to institutional change as interfield rhetoric.
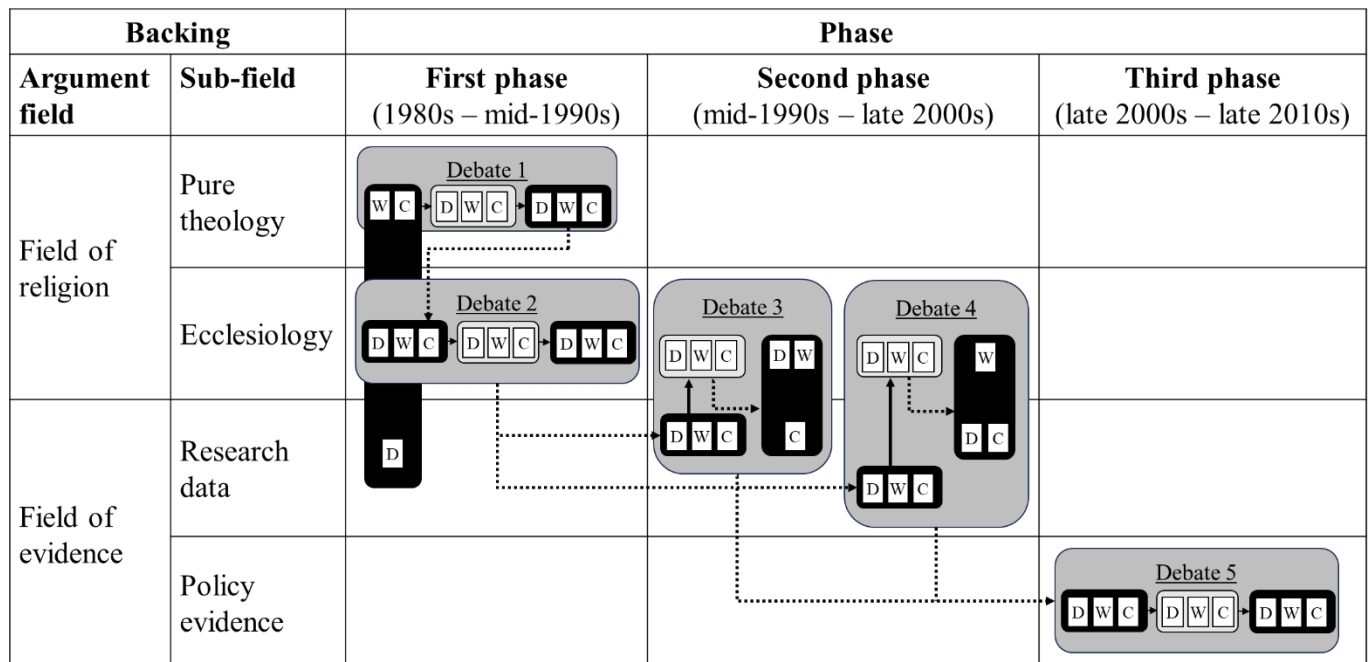
The second contribution of our study relates to the ambiguity of the field of religion. In communication, ambiguity can be used strategically, e.g., created deliberately to accommodate conflicting interpretations of an institution (Gümüsay et al., 2020; Jarzabkowski et al., 2010). Yet, it also makes communication within institutions nonlinear and complex because it gives rise to varying understandings (Cornelissen et al., 2015). Our

findings suggest that the intrinsic ambiguity of theological texts – "we can prove just about anything we please from the Bible's passages" (Toulmin et al., 1984: 171) – facilitated a backing change. During the period of interfield rhetoric, those in favor of facilitating evangelism were challenged by their opponents for failing to provide religious backing for their arguments. In response, evangelists legitimated their evidence-backed reasoning by finding support for such arguments in the field of religion. We therefore argue that ambiguous institutions like the Church of England might experience unintended institutional change; without the interfield critique expressed by opponents of evangelism, proponents may not have elaborated the new backings, i.e., taken-for-granted assumptions, that shifted the focus of the institution over time.

Limitations

This paper has a few limitations that future research can address. First, we analyzed reports that were written for and debated during meetings of the Church of England's General Synod, which is a highly idiosyncratic setting. Hence, more research is needed to establish whether the process of backing change we observed and the mechanisms that drove the transitions between intrafield and interfield rhetoric are unique to a religious context, or whether our findings more generally apply to institutional settings characterized by ambiguity. Second, the lack of debate about the 'correct' interpretation of biblical evidence surprised us; the CofE data seem to suggest that finding some theological backing was more important than the quality of the argument derived from that backing. It is conceivable that objections were expressed outside of GS meetings. Adopting ethnographic or interview methods could shed light on this issue.

FIGURE 1: THE PROCESS OF BACKING CHANGE[1]

Backing		Phase		
Argument field	Sub-field	First phase (1980s – mid-1990s)	Second phase (mid-1990s – late 2000s)	Third phase (late 2000s – late 2010s)
Field of religion	Pure theology	Debate 1		
	Ecclesiology	Debate 2	Debate 3 Debate 4	
Field of evidence	Research data			
	Policy evidence			Debate 5

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHOR(S)

[1] In Figure 1, the letters D, W, and C refer to Toulmin's (1958) concepts of Data, Warrant, and Claim, respectively. Each combination of D, W, and C represents an argument (black shading for evangelist arguments, light grey for traditionalist arguments). Arguments are exchanged in debates (dark grey areas). Solid arrows connect arguments within a debate. Dashed arrows indicate how debates spurred new lines of reasoning.