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# Weapons for Witnessing

## American Street Preaching and the Rhythms of War

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■ **ABSTRACT:** Drawing on observations of the performances of street preachers in the United States—as well as the texts that inform them—this article explores the concept of rhythm within and beyond the anthropology of religion. More specifically, it develops an expansive concept of rhythm as multiple and interactive, focusing not on a singular rhythm, but on the rhythmic translations that shape the practice of street preaching. First, I argue that the material rhythms of urban infrastructure constrain the narrative rhythms of the street preacher’s sermon, producing a distinct homiletics. I then suggest that the ideological rhythms of war animate the narrative rhythms of the street preacher’s sermon, linking military strategies with tactics of evangelism. Examining the material, narrative, and ideological rhythms of streets, sermons, and military doctrine, this article advances an analytic framework whereby the intersecting rhythmic tensions that shape performance can be registered.

■ **KEYWORDS:** anthropology of religion, evangelism, infrastructure, masculinity, militarization, performance, rhythm, street preaching

Now this is very profound, what rhythm is, and goes far deeper than words. A sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to fit it ...

— Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*. Vol. 3: 1923–1928

A man walked intently down the sidewalk in Boulder, Colorado, pressing a collapsible plastic step stool and two signs between his right arm and his side. After stopping to survey his surroundings, he unfolded the small stool and placed it on the ground, carefully centering it in front of the glass entryway of the building behind him. Above the entrance, the words “Court House” were carved in stone. He leaned one sign (“JESUS SAVES”) against the side of the stool, and placed the other (“Evolution is a LIE, JESUS is LIFE”) on the opposite side. Behind the portable pulpit, he emptied his backpack: a bottle of water, a Bible, some sunscreen, and several hundred pamphlets wrapped in two rubber bands. After twisting open the bottle and taking a drink of water, he stood still and prayed in silence for several minutes as people walked politely around him. Amid the murmur of the passing crowd, the man caught a single word from a



woman's mouth. He stepped up on his stool, extended his Bible toward her, and punctuated the hum of the sidewalk: "Justice!?"

Justice!? Stay there for one minute. One minute! You know what? I love the word "justice." Cause you know what? You know what it means? Jesus Christ ... Listen ... This is the beauty—this is the beauty of the gospel. Jesus Christ went to the cross and satisfied *justice* so that we could go free. Your sin and my sin, the sin of everybody here, everybody on the planet that has lived since the beginning of time ... Our sins are *crying out* to God for his *justice* to be punished. Here's the question I have for you ...

The woman who had unintentionally inspired the preacher's sermon on justice had since crossed the street and disappeared into The Cheesecake Factory.

... are your sins going to be punished in an ugly body, built to withstand the horrors of hell? Or are your sins going to be cleaned by the blood of Christ? That's how good God is, that he loves *filthy* sinners like me. That he would send his son to *bleed* and *die*, in my place, to satisfy *justice* so that I could go free. Isn't that amazing? That ev—that even our best attempts to get right before God are the equivalent of a filthy rag! Do you understand? We deserve to die! We've lived like animals, consuming everything in our flesh, in our wickedness, in our immorality, in our drink and our drug, in our *filthy* lifestyle! We deserve to die!<sup>1</sup>

The preacher fell to his knees as he sentenced the strangers around him to death. He was surrounded by the most unremarkable routines: droves of casual and content walkers, a family sampling shaved ice from a street vendor, a man with a guitar singing Elton John's "Tiny Dancer," a case full of coins and dollar bills at his feet. I sat cross-legged on the grass nearby, caught up in the awkwardness emerging from the meeting of urgent sincerity and utter indifference. This awkwardness does not spare street preachers, who bring news of a living God to the streets day after day, returning even after they are met with silence, laughter, and anger—a persistence animated by one of the most commonly cited biblical verses among street preachers, Mark 16:15 (KJV), in which the recently resurrected Jesus commands his disciples to go into the world and preach the gospel "to every creature."

Dutifully responding to this imperative, street preachers transform streets, sidewalks, and other forms of urban infrastructure into sites of religious performance.<sup>2</sup> Referencing Filip De Boeck (2012), Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox (2015: 5) describe infrastructures as "built forms around which publics thicken." Because of this association between roads and publics, streets are often implicitly coded and explicitly regulated as secular spaces, designed for the circulation of bodies and capital, not the circulation of grace and sin. However, many religious communities have found ways of repurposing these built forms for their own ends. In the late nineteenth century, for example, the Salvation Army sent women warriors into the streets to preach and sell copies of the *War Cry*, a Salvation Army publication (Winston 2000: 76–85). Two decades later, amid the intellectual ferment of the Harlem Renaissance, Ethiopian Hebrews took to the avenues of Harlem to preach that Black Americans should embrace their lost identity as the original Israelites, a practice they still engage in today (Weisenfeld 2016: 40). As these examples suggest—and there are no doubt many more—the curbside performance of religious difference has often modulated gendered and racialized formations of the public sphere in the United States. Street preachers, the women warriors of the Salvation Army, and Ethiopian Hebrews, whatever else their differences, all share an investment in urban infrastructure reimagined as religious infrastructure.

Drawing on observations of the public performances of street preachers in Boulder and Denver between 2015 and 2017—as well as the texts that inform these performances—this article

examines the constraints and affordances of urban infrastructure for religious performance, focusing specifically on the concept of rhythm. Elaine Peña (2017: 472) suggests that “consideration of corporeal rhythms as object and method of study holds great potential for scholars of material religion.” The study of rhythm, Peña argues, draws “attention to the often taken for granted and under-studied ways infrastructure informs religious expression and emplacement” (ibid.: 467). Building upon this understanding of rhythm as a link between infrastructure, expression, and emplacement, this article is divided into three sections. I begin with a brief theoretical reflection on the concept of rhythm inspired by the work of Henri Lefebvre, developing a broad understanding of rhythm as a force that tethers places, bodies, objects, and words together. I then describe how street preachers have developed a distinct homiletics—or style of preaching—shaped by the rhythms of urban infrastructure. In this homiletics, the movements of the city bleed into the movements of the sermon, creating a point of translation between material and linguistic rhythms. Finally, I turn to the practice of ‘shock and awe preaching,’ a particularly aggressive style of street preaching developed at the turn of the twenty-first century. Drawing on established links between conservative Christianity and militarized masculinity, shock and awe preachers model their speech on United States military doctrine, creating a second point of translation between ideological and linguistic rhythms. Tracing the material, narrative, and ideological rhythms of streets, sermons, and military doctrine, respectively, this article advances an analytic framework capable of registering the intersecting rhythmic tensions that give form to performance, religious or otherwise.

## A Sense of Rhythm

The concept of rhythm has developed in fits and starts, leading Jacques Derrida (1998: 33) to write that “rhythm has always *haunted* our tradition, without ever reaching the center of its concerns.” However, several years before Derrida published those words, Henri Lefebvre gave this ghostly concept a paradigm of its own. Published one year after his death, Lefebvre’s ([1992] 2004) *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life* attempts to unify space, time, and the expulsion of energy in cultural theory just as the mathematician Hermann Minkowski and his followers unified them in physics in the early twentieth century. The result of this unification would be, Lefebvre writes, “nothing less than . . . a science, a new field of knowledge [*savoir*]: the analysis of rhythms; with practical consequences” (ibid.: 3). Lefebvre named this new science ‘rhythmanalysis,’ a nod to his ambitious hope that it would be the heir to the science of psychoanalysis. According to rhythmanalysis, the study of spatiality and temporality must proceed in tandem through the examination of rhythms, that is, the form of cyclical and linear movements through time and space. Part process philosophy, part Marxist critique, and part embodied methodology, rhythmanalysis describes the world as a composition of nested rhythms unfurling in relation to one another, abandoning any distinction between the organic and the artificial, the internal and the external, the local and the global.

Rhythmanalysis departs from the conventional understanding of rhythm as an aesthetic category in two useful ways. First, for Lefebvre ([1992] 2004), rhythms are produced by a variety of processes that include, but also extend beyond, the human. In any scene, countless rhythms weave in and out of each other. Not just in speech, but also in particles, ecosystems, and cosmologies. Not just in writing, but also in footsteps, streetlights, and factories. Therefore, “the surroundings of the body, the social just as much as the cosmic body, are equally bundles of rhythm” (ibid.: 80). Second, and as a consequence of this proliferation of rhythms, Lefebvre is concerned not with individual rhythms, but with understanding relationships among them.

The rhythm analyst, he writes, “must simultaneously catch a rhythm and perceive it within the whole” (ibid.: 21). This concept of rhythm, multiple and interactive, produces a new set of questions: How do rhythms at multiple scales harmonize with or disrupt each other? What are the emergent features of their interactions? How do certain rhythms become established as dominant? Subordinate? And to what effect? In what ways do people engage with, reproduce, repurpose, redirect, or resist rhythms? What are the rhythmic tactics that compose everyday life?

These are empirical questions that Lefebvre does not adequately address. However, anthropologists of religion have explored the concept of rhythm in relation to particular empirical contexts—sometimes as a technical ethnomusicological category, sometimes as a broad orientation toward the textures of temporality.<sup>3</sup> For example, Martijn Oosterbaan (2009) describes how the sounds of amplified gospel and funk music reverberate through the dense and porous architecture of favelas in Rio de Janeiro, establishing dynamics of belonging and exclusion by marking the distinct daily and weekly rhythms of Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals. Oosterbaan argues that “particular urban sounds have a rhythm of their own, a way of repeating and attaching themselves to specific moments of the day or the week, fusing temporal notions and bodily sensations” (ibid.: 86). Drawing similar connections between rhythm, belonging, and exclusion, Andreas Bandak (2014) explores how rhythms and refrains shape relationships among Christians and Muslims in Damascus. “Pupils walking to school, the sound of church bells on Sundays, the daily prayer calls from mosques, the lighting of minarets and church towers at night,” Bandak writes, “these aspects are all part of the rhythms that constitute Damascus as a place, and the familiarization and even embodiment of this place comes through these recurrent rhythms” (ibid.: S250). Neither Oosterbaan nor Bandak frames his analysis in explicitly rhythm analytic terms, although both share a vague rhythm analytic sensibility, that is, an emphasis on the interactivity of distinct rhythms. Described in these terms, the interlocking infrastructures of cities, as well as the forms of circulation and clotting they encourage, constitute the living, breathing architecture of the street preacher’s church. The practice of street preaching transforms the ‘outsides’ of the city—streets, sidewalks, and intersections—into the ‘insides’ of a church—aisles, pews, and pulpits. Unlike other forms of religious infrastructure, from revival tents to megachurches, this outside-in architecture provides a unique set of constraints and affordances defined not by stability, but by ordered and interwoven mobilities.<sup>4</sup>

## Shotgun Semiotics

The Regional Transportation District’s Free MallRide loops continuously around the 16th Street Mall in Denver, shuttling shoppers along the mile-long strip from 5:00 in the morning until 2:00 in the morning. Because of its short route, the bus schedule is informal, arriving at each stop every few minutes. One afternoon, a street preacher, megaphone slung around his shoulder, stood in front of the bus stop at the corner of 16th and Broadway, rebuking the public for their use of pharmaceuticals and their worship of nature. The Rocky Mountains are so enchanting, the preacher explained to no one in particular, that the residents of Colorado had forgotten that the creation had a creator—an unfortunate side effect of God’s craftsmanship. His son stood next to him, holding a bright yellow sign with “GOD HATES SIN” in black text and a few dozen copies of a pamphlet titled “Are You Bad Enough to Be a Christian?” The tract states that “the Christian gospel is for bad people,” but “some men think they are so good they have no need of Jesus Christ.” The sign, designed for an adult, barely allowed the boy’s eyes to peek over the top as he politely offered a pamphlet to each person waiting for the bus.

A bus arrived and a dozen or so people shuffled around, forming three impromptu lines. Three sets of double doors simultaneously opened, like curtains parting to signify the beginning of a play. The preacher approached the bus and stopped in front of the exposed travelers, addressing them through the crackle of the megaphone: “God commands today, this *very* day, God commands *all* men to repent and believe. Stop *rejecting* the Lord Jesus Christ and receive his love and forgiveness today. Stop rejecting Christ . . . You’ll stand before him one day.” The preacher pointed at one woman in particular, avowing: “You’ll stand before him one day.” Some stared directly at him with blank expressions, others took refuge in their phones, while others looked just past the preacher at nothing in particular, desperately trying to pretend that he was not there. The doors collectively shut, allowing the preacher’s final few words to slip into the now sealed container. The curtains closed; the scene was over. As the bus pulled away, the preacher turned around and continued to address those shuffling nervously past him. In a few minutes, another Free MallRide would arrive, opening its doors for a second showing, and a third, and so on.

This hurried sermon is marked by a kind of conceptual claustrophobia, crowding a theology (“God commands *all* men to repent and believe”), a soteriology (“receive his love and forgiveness today”), and an eschatology (“You’ll stand before him one day”) into a handful of simple sentences constrained by the rhythms of mass transit. Here, technologies for producing and regulating mobility inadvertently become technologies for producing and regulating audiences. In an attempt to reach these ephemeral audiences, street preachers replace the established narrative devices of Christian homiletics with an improvised and non-linear collection of interchangeable assertions, imperatives, quotations, and questions. This shift should not be surprising. After all, the term ‘homiletics’ is derived from the Greek *homilos*, a word used to describe an assembled crowd. In contrast, street preaching might be described as the art of preaching to an unassembled crowd, or the art of preaching in order to assemble a crowd. Without overemphasizing the significance of etymological analysis, this distinction suggests that the difference between congregational preaching and street preaching lies not only in the location of the sermon, but also in what Erving Goffman (1981: 137) would call its “participation framework,” that is, the wide variety of ways that people participate in the sermon as different kinds of speakers and hearers. Within the participation framework of street preaching, uninterested passersby take the place of sympathetic congregants, placing practical constraints on the narrative rhythm of the preacher’s message through the collective act of constantly walking out of earshot.

This style of preaching also produces a particular kind of public, one characterized not by communicative rationality or shared discourse, but by the establishment of an epistemological hierarchy between the preacher and the public. As Joshua Edelman (2013: 118) argues, street preaching is not necessarily *intolerant*, although it is necessarily *intolerable*, that is, it always involves “hailing its public as ignorant and its speaker as wise in a way that is both infuriating and unsustainable.” However, this intolerability always risks lapsing into parodic spectacle. For example, since 1997, performance artist Bill Talen has preached on the streets of New York City as Reverend Billy of the Church of Stop Shopping, an anti-capitalist street preacher who exorcises demons from ATMs, teaches that Mickey Mouse is the Antichrist, and warns the public of the impending Shopocalypse (Lane 2002). In general, passersby are more likely to take photographs of street preachers than argue with them. And, in general, street preachers are more than willing to raise their Bible into the air, look sternly into the camera, and grimace performatively *as* street preachers.

Regardless of whether this dynamic between ignorance and wisdom is infuriating, unsustainable, or humorous, it is certainly not incoherent. Street preaching is a methodical practice characterized by specialized knowledge, disciplined training, and an extensive and elastic community represented by a network of regional and national associations. For example, Street and

Open Air Preachers of America (SOAPA) describes itself as “a diverse association of Spirit led, born again Christians who have experienced a Divine unction constraining and compelling them to carry out the uncommon and unusual task of Open Air Preaching.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the National Street Preachers Conference describes itself as “Raising Up an Army to Call America to Repentance” by providing a space for “street preachers from all over the nation to come together to be encouraged and equipped.”<sup>6</sup> Both SOAPA and the National Street Preachers Conference host annual conferences, giving attendees an opportunity to reconnect with friends, attend and give presentations related to annual themes such as the “Re-emergence of Sodom and Gomorrah” and “God’s Gonna Cut Down the Wicked Like Grass,” and collectively preach in the streets of the host city. In many ways, these conferences mirror academic conferences. Therefore, while some street preachers may be doomsayers, the popular trope of the doomsayer—disheveled and rambling, holding a sign that reads “The End Is Nigh!”—fails to acknowledge street preaching as a form of religious specialization and contributes to the widespread perception that, as I have been told many times, “those people are crazy.”

Today, there are various styles of street preaching. Some preachers attempt to secure verbal conversions, while others are content simply to plant seeds in the hearts of passing strangers. Some focus exclusively on the redemptive power of Jesus’s sacrifice, while others preach about a wide variety of religious and political topics. Because, as Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 9:37 (KJV), “the harvest is truly plenteous, but the laborers are few,” experienced street preachers often self-publish guides, manuals, and other training tools in an attempt to recruit and equip new laborers. Despite their diversity, these texts all emphasize the distinct rhythms of street preaching. For example, in “Street Preachers’ Manual,” Gerald Sutek encourages preachers to have “several short verses memorized on the subject you intend to preach ... Three points and a poem just won’t do on the street. Most of the time, you have less than one minute to preach to any person as they pass from store to store or office to office.” Stores and offices, however, are only two of the possible sites:

Find a place where people gather. Bus stops, parks, flea markets, unemployment lines, college registration lines, box offices for sports, fairs, carnivals, parades, fireworks displays, lunch hour traffic, beaches (careful), public schools (before and after school), miniature golf courses, and college campuses to name a few good examples. If possible, get a float in the parade and preach. Do it with some class, though. Decorate and adjust your message to the theme of the parade.<sup>7</sup>

Each of these locations comes with its own rhythmic constraints and affordances, as well as its own risks and rewards. Be careful at beaches, preachers are warned, as Satan will use anything to stop you, including sexual temptation. Therefore, Perry Demopoulos, in “A Handbook for Street Preaching and Public Ministry,” writes, “where you are preaching will determine either to lengthen the sermon a bit or shorten it.” A stop light, for example, “allows you to preach for about 30-60 seconds; that’s all but that is enough for your ‘audience’ to ‘get the message.’” Demopoulos also instructs inexperienced street preachers to practice at locations where people are unable to leave. As he writes, many preachers “have ‘cut there [*sic*] teeth’ where people have had to wait in line outside along the street to get into a food and bar ‘joint.’ Sometimes many of those people have had to hear three to four preachers in a row before they got into the building. They ‘got the message’ clear and straight!”<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, in “Guidelines to Open Air Preaching,” Kevin Williams explains why traditional sermons are ineffective in the street: “I’ve often observed people preaching 20 or 30 minute sermons in the open air like they would in a church building. Yet most of their audience is hearing between

30 seconds and two minutes, and so getting very little, or nothing at all, out of their message.” Instead, Williams recommends “repeating the Gospel every two or three minutes and keep circulating your message.” However, even a two- or three-minute message may need to be cut short:

A group of us used to preach opposite a tram stop in the streets of Manchester City Centre where we had a ready-made crowd of 30-50 people for between three and seven minutes. The tram times were unpredictable and once we saw the tram coming around the corner, no matter what point we were up to in our message, it meant we had about 30 seconds to go to and explain the cross, and let them know of the offer of eternal life.<sup>9</sup>

Sermons are typically guided by narrative and conceptual movements. The genre of the jeremiad, for example, is characterized by the invocation of a pure past and the rejection of a fallen present, eventually resolving in a passionate call for repentance—narrative movements inspired by the biblical themes of creation, fall, and resurrection. In contrast, the street preacher’s sermon is guided less by the unfolding of internal movements and more by the pressure of external movements, less by the arc of a story or the logic of an argument and more by the pace of a passing stranger or the unpredictable arrival of a tram. As Sutek, Demopolous, and Williams each argue, the success of the performance hinges on the preacher’s ability to recognize this shift and allow the dynamic rhythms of the environment to curve and contour the rhythms of the sermon.

This advice is by no means new. In the nineteenth century, the English preacher Charles Spurgeon (1876: 486) made a similar argument, suggesting that the street preacher’s “discourse must not be labored or involved, neither must the second head depend upon the first, for the audience is a changing one, and each point must be complete in itself. The chain of thought must be taken to pieces, and each link melted down and turned into bullets.” Spurgeon describes an even more austere narrative approach, arguing not for sermons measured in minutes, but for sermons composed of a series of individual bullets, each sufficient to communicate a message in and of itself. “Come to the point at once,” he writes, “and come there with all your might” (*ibid.*). Like Sutek, Demopolous, and Williams, Spurgeon emphasizes the rhythmic differences between preaching in a church and preaching on the street. When preaching to a captive audience, Spurgeon suggests, “there is much force in an eloquent silence, now and then interjected; it gives people time to breathe, and also to reflect.” However, when preaching “to a passing company who are not inclined for anything like worship, quick, short, sharp address is most adapted” (*ibid.*). Spurgeon’s writing circulates widely among street preachers today, and this emphasis on quick, short, and sharp address has remained, despite the shifting urban and legal contexts of street preaching between the nineteenth century and the present.<sup>10</sup>

Spurgeon also set a precedent by describing the language of street preaching in explicitly militaristic terms. Bullets and other forms of ammunition serve as key metapragmatic metaphors through which street preachers talk about the effects of their own speech—a parable of the sower for more militarized times. Melting chains of thought into bullets, street preachers disassemble the form of the sermon in an attempt to salvage brief verses, phrases, and arguments that can be endlessly combined, recombined, and shot toward a public that is always already positioned as an enemy combatant. Performance studies scholars might describe this collection of memorized verses, phrases, and arguments as the repertoire of street preaching, although perhaps stockpile would be a more appropriate term. Drawing on this stockpile for hours on end, street preachers abandon exposition and resolution for a state of suspended climax. Each day, the bloody death and miraculous resurrection of Jesus are relived hundreds of times in quick succession.

Street preachers are not alone in drawing connections between the language of evangelism and the trajectory of ammunition; scholars have also turned to similar analogies. For example,

Susan Harding (1987: 169) argues that witnessing is “the plainest, most concentrated method for revealing and transmitting the Word of God, one in which language is intensified, focused, and virtually shot at the unwashed listener.” Likewise, John Fletcher (2003: 117) describes street preaching as “the live-evangelism equivalent of mass mailing, a high-investment, minimal-return shotgun strategy.” While Harding uses the metaphor of shooting to describe the pointed force of the language of witnessing, Fletcher uses the metaphor of the shotgun to describe the indiscriminate spread of the street preacher’s message. The language of aggressive evangelism, condensed and projected, easily lends itself to these kinds of comparisons. Shaping and shooting these words in response to the regulated rhythms of urban infrastructure, street preachers engage in a form of rhythmic translation, transforming the material rhythms of the city into the linguistic rhythms of a sermon. Although, as the comparison between the language of evangelism and the trajectory of ammunition suggests, street preaching is simultaneously shaped by another set of rhythms—one that is drawn from practices of war.

### Shock and Awe

In their book *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance*, which was funded by the United States National Defense University’s Center for Advanced Concepts and Technology, Harlan Ullman and James Wade (1996) argue that a series of geopolitical, economic, and technological shifts since the Cold War warrant a new theory of effective warfare. Responding to these shifts, Ullman and Wade develop the concept of ‘rapid dominance’ as an alternative to the then taken-for-granted US military doctrine of overwhelming force. “The key objective of Rapid Dominance,” they write, “is to impose this overwhelming level of Shock and Awe against an adversary on an immediate or sufficiently timely basis to paralyze its will to carry on” (ibid.: xxv). They continue, “In crude terms, Rapid Dominance would seize control of the environment and paralyze or so overload an adversary’s perceptions and understanding of events that the enemy would be incapable of resistance at tactical and strategic levels” (ibid.). According to the report, this new style of warfare is characterized by a spatial dimension—precision—and a temporal dimension—rapidity. Ullman and Wade draw inspiration from “the comatose and glazed expressions of survivors of the great bombardments of World War I and the attendant horrors and death of trench warfare” (ibid.: 20). These horrors, they write with an air of reverence, “transcend race, culture, and history” (ibid.). Shock and awe is a form of demoralization designed to render the target unable to comprehend—much less respond to—the assault. It is a distinctly rhythmic form of violence, drawing its force not from the material impact of any individual strike, but from the cumulative psychological impact of the rapid rhythm of a series of staccato strikes.

Several years after the publication of *Shock and Awe*, the United States executed its first military operation to be guided explicitly by the new doctrine—the bombardment and invasion of Baghdad in March 2003. According to declassified United States Air Force documents, the initial period of bombing involved over 1,700 aircraft sorties, or deployments.<sup>11</sup> Shortly after, the phrase ‘shock and awe’ circulated widely through public channels in the US as journalists and commentators debated the strategy’s effectiveness, as well as its affinity with the psychological goals of terrorism. The phrase continued to gain traction, appearing on hot sauce bottles, Independence Day firework tents, and even academic publications (see, e.g., Eekelen et al. 2004). González et al. (2019: 2) refer to this process as ‘merchandizing’ war, that is, “the subtle means by which militaristic values can be designed, manufactured, packaged, and marketed.” The merchandizing of shock and awe is itself part of a broader process of US militarization that began



in the mid-twentieth century—a process that, as Catherine Lutz (2002: 725) notes, has “fed and molded social institutions seemingly little connected to battle.”

Street preachers, too, began developing a new style of evangelism known as ‘shock and awe preaching’. Throughout the 1990s, it was common for street preachers to gather an audience using trivia, magic tricks, and other gimmicks before offering a prepared sermon to the crowd—a technique popularized by evangelist Ray Comfort. However, others criticized this method, arguing that it was misleading, ineffective, and, most importantly, unbiblical. In search of a biblical foundation for street preaching, these critics turned to 2 Timothy 4:2 (KJV): “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.” Reprove, rebuke, exhort. These imperatives became the guiding principles of a new style of street preaching articulated in the militarized language of shock and awe. In a popular training video titled “How to Draw a Crowd Open Air Preaching without Money: Trivia, Magic Tricks, and Other Bait and Switch Tactics—Shock and Awe Preaching,” Jesse Morrell introduces viewers to the concept: “Now, the term shock and awe preaching might sound controversial. It sounds militant. It sounds confrontational and aggressive ... and that’s because it is. It is a confrontational thing to preach the Bible without compromise. It’s controversial and we ought to be militant and even aggressive in our evangelism.” Later he continues: “That’s the superior wisdom of shock and awe preaching—of these very sharp and personal and shocking one-liners that you see in the Bible is that they’re easy to memorize, they’re ... they’re not easy to ignore. They’re not easy to forget. They have a way of penetrating the mind.”<sup>12</sup>

Morrell and other shock and awe preachers champion a distinct style of street preaching shaped by US military doctrine, mapping the movements of the state onto the movements of the body, transforming missiles and bombs into words and gestures in an attempt to bring sinners under conviction. Notably, Ullman and Wade’s description of the psychological effects of shock and awe align neatly with Harding’s (1987: 170) description of the experience of being convicted by the Holy Spirit, that is, entering “a liminal state, a state of confusion and speechlessness.” This state—call it shock and awe or call it conviction—serves as a point of translation in which strategies of war inform tactics of evangelism. Each time I witnessed a flash of righteous intensity in the movements and speech of a street preacher—what I learned to identify as the military principles of precision and rapidity—I reflected on the words of Ullman and Wade (1996: xiv): “What utility, if any, does Rapid Dominance and its application of Shock and Awe imply for Operations Other Than War?”

Are you walking away from the love of Jesus Christ? Are you walking away from his kindness? From his goodness? From his love? From his grace? From his mercy? From eternal life? Are you walking away from that? Well ... I’ve got good news for you, sir. There’s grace and mercy—you can be forgiven your sins and have eternal life today. And it doesn’t matter what you’ve done—it doesn’t matter how filthy the life you used to live was. It doesn’t matter the wicked thoughts or the perversions of your mind. Jesus says, “Come to me.” He says, “Come to me all who are weary and I will give you rest, for your sins.” He says, “I am the good shepherd.” The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. He says, “I am the door and whoever enters in by me will be saved.” He says, “Come, come—just come unto me, it doesn’t matter what you’ve done.”

As the preacher spoke, waving his Bible through the air like a conductor’s wand, another man, his shirt tucked in the back loop of baggy camouflage pants, his ribs and spine visible under tanned skin, stopped in front of the preacher. The preacher turned to address his new audience of one.

It’s too late! It’s too late to clean yourself up, sir. You can’t get in the shower and scrub your skin off enough to make yourself clean before God—but by the blood of Jesus Christ! And

the Word became flesh ... and you think it's funny—I thought it was funny for 39 years and you know why? Because you love your sin. I don't know what it is—your porn, your sexual filth, your wickedness, your lying, or your stealing, or your blasphemy ... You don't like Jesus Christ? Name one thing wrong with him, sir. One thing. Name one wrong thing with the Lord Jesus Christ. All he is is love. All he's done is love. All he is is love. He created you, ma'am, Jesus Christ gave you life—he gave you life. Jesus Christ is the light of the world! The light shines in the darkness.

The man, growing impatient, raised a clear plastic bag of bagels he was carrying and shook it in the preacher's face, declaring, "God loves love! God loves love! Just because you're gay doesn't mean you're going to go to hell. As long as you show love to another person, and treat somebody else right, God loves you! God loves love. It's just about love, it's not about ... any lifestyle, its not about—I want you to hear the truth ... It's all about love!" The preacher, energized by his new critic, interjected, "You're a liar young man!" They began talking simultaneously, each sentence louder than the last, Bible and bagels flying through the air. "This man is judging me, calling me a liar!—Young man, you are a rebel against God, you hate God!—A Christian does not have the right to judge other people!—You're filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, malice, you're full of envy, slander, you're a boaster, hater of God." Repeatedly interrupted by the preacher's indictments, the man struggled to articulate his theology of love. Growing frustrated, he swung the bag of bagels in front of the preacher's face one final time, grunting, and walked away.

Translated from speech to writing, the frantic rhythm of the preacher's sermon is somewhat deadened. Nonetheless, each dimension of shock and awe is present, transformed from a strategy of war into a tactic of evangelism. First, the preaching is precise. When the preacher pronounces, "I don't know what it is—your porn, your sexual filth, your wickedness, your lying, or your stealing, or your blasphemy," the "your" is singular rather than plural. He looks directly into an individual's eyes during each accusation. It is *your* porn, *your* sexual filth, and *your* wickedness. It is not simply that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God; it is *you*, ma'am, who have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Modeled after the precise strikes of shock and awe warfare, shock and awe preachers indiscriminately accuse specific people of specific sins—one after the other.

Second, the preaching is rapid. Each sentence rolls effortlessly from the last, connected by a thread of loose associations—from kindness, goodness, love, grace, and mercy to porn, filth, wickedness, lying, stealing, and blasphemy. The unbroken cadence and repetition—"he says," "he says," "he says," or "all he is," "all he's done," "all he is"—gives the monologue an unrelenting quality. At the same time, however, nearly every sentence is semantically self-sufficient, capable of functioning independently of the sentences surrounding it. Every few words, the preacher shifts his body and gaze, sometimes directly addressing several different passing strangers within a single sentence. These shifts are accompanied by linguistic markers, a desperate and exasperated "sir" or "ma'am" that punctuates the unfurling speech, an unfurling that even the preacher seems unable to slow or stop. Through this rapid series of strikes, shock and awe preachers establish a rhythmic frame that defines the tempo of engagement or, in the language of Ullman and Wade (1996: xxvii), has the "ability to 'own' the dimension of time." Unlike, for example, members of Westboro Baptist Church, who understand their capacity to shock in terms of the content of their speech alone, shock and awe preachers understand their capacity to shock as an emergent effect of both content and form—of the gospel wrapped in the rhythms of war.

The rhythms of shock and awe are difficult to grasp, especially in contrast to the intransigent material rhythms of urban infrastructure. After all, what would a sermon do other than strike? However, even in the homiletic tradition of fire and brimstone, this emphasis on the militarized haptics of speech is a relatively recent innovation. For example, Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners

in the Hands of an Angry God” is filled with vivid images of the hopelessness and helplessness of humanity. The wretchedness of the sermon is not a product of its content alone, but also the rhythm of its prose. As Edward Gallagher (2000: 204) argues, the sermon’s “pace, its pulse, or what we might call more precisely its pulsation” mirrors its content. The sermon opens as a “model of serene, logical order, and it proceeds at a measured, steady gait” (ibid.). Soon, however, the “rhetorical surface starts to buckle from the steady, incremental, pulsating pressure of horrifying content” until the syntax begins to fall apart (ibid.: 205). While the beginning of Edwards’s sermon proceeds in balanced groupings of four, sentences begin to grow increasingly awkward and inefficient. For example, just as God allows the sinner to slip from his hands, Edwards ([1995] 2003: 90) writes, so “he that stands in such slippery declining ground on the edge of a pit that he can’t stand alone, when he is let go he immediately falls and is lost.” As the congregation is dangled over the pit of hell, the rhythm of the sermon—the last thing left to hold on to—crumbles. Edwards’s rhythmic sensibility provides a useful point of comparison to the rhythmic sensibility of shock and awe preachers. Both emphasizes the depravity of humanity and the desperate need for salvation. However, while Edwards attempts to cultivate these themes through a disorienting shift in rhythm that moves from order to disorder and back again, shock and awe preachers attempt to establish them through an unrelenting rhythm that assaults and overwhelms.

The militarization of Christianity is not unique to shock and awe preachers. In the United States, the links between conservative Christianity and militarized masculinity have a long history (see, e.g., Dowland 2011). More recently, these links have shaped practices of spiritual warfare, which Elizabeth McAlister (2016: 115) describes as the “latest iteration in a long partnership between Christian missions and military expeditions, tropes, values, and logics” (see also Johnson 2010; Marshall 2016). In other words, shock and awe preaching is not all that shocking. At the same time, however, shock and awe preachers extend this partnership to include not only expeditions, tropes, values, and logics, but also rhythms. How do the rhythms of war produce novel forms of Christian performance in contexts other than literal war? And how do these performances relate to the process of militarization more broadly? For shock and awe preachers, the analogy between speaking and shooting is more than descriptive flourish; it provides an opportunity to link imaginaries of war with gendered forms of Christian performance. Assembled from the nationalist products of a merchandised ‘war on terror’, shock and awe preachers translate the rhythms of military conflict into rhythms of linguistic conflict. As a result of this weaponization of rhythm, the tactile dimensions of speech become more pronounced and words are understood not only in terms of their ability to signify, but also their ability to strike.

## Conclusion

Derrida’s (1998: 33) suggestion that “rhythm has always *haunted* our tradition, without ever reaching the center of its concerns” speaks specifically to the concept’s peripheral status in the tradition of French philosophy, although this is not to say that its presence has been particularly palpable elsewhere. For example, reflecting on this same quotation, Lexi Eikelboom (2018: 3) writes: “Rhythm haunts another tradition as well: that of Christian theology. Rhythm is the form of Christianity’s religious expression, its liturgies, rituals, calendars, music, and other artistic expressions. The pervasive rhythmic form of Christian worship and religious expression implies that it is a significant part of the human’s relationship to God.” For Derrida, rhythm is central to the constitution of the subject. For Eikelboom, rhythm is central to the relationship between God and creation. In each tradition—French philosophy and Christian theology—it sits just

out of view. However, Eikelboom points out that Derrida may also be making a broader point. “Like a ghost,” she writes, “rhythm is barely visible and therefore rarely noticed, but it is also ever-present” (ibid.: 1). It is important, though, not to overstate this point. In the anthropology of religion, descriptions of the barely visible yet ever-present force of rhythm are not uncommon—to say nothing of the adjacent concepts of repetition and refrain (see, e.g., Bandak and Coleman 2019). So, then, what does rhythmanalysis offer?

Rhythmanalysis is neither a systematic theory nor a sober method; it is an invitation to register and write the world differently. Yi Chen (2017: 1–2), for example, writes that Lefebvre’s writing on rhythm is “laden with rich ideas and at times the style of writing served well to incite curiosities and receptiveness about social phenomena.” Lefebvre’s most productive incitement to curiosity, to borrow Chen’s phrase, is his insistence that rhythm is multiple and interactive. As Lefebvre ([1992] 2004: 43) writes: “There is neither separation nor an abyss between so-called material bodies, living bodies, social bodies and representations, ideologies, traditions, projects and utopias. They are all composed of (reciprocally influential) rhythms in interaction.” Like any worthwhile incitement to curiosity, it is far from clear what this is supposed to mean. What is clear, however, is that Lefebvre understands rhythm as a kind of form that slips between substance and scale. Foregrounding these slips or rhythmic translations, I argue, is one way that an anthropology of rhythm can contribute to the anthropology of religion.

Preaching the gospel between the rhythms of urban infrastructure and the rhythms of war, street preachers are constrained and animated from elsewhere (to say nothing of the rhythmic ebb and flow of revivalism, or the apocalyptic rhythms of premillennial dispensationalism). Rhythm can do much more than constrain and animate, though; its force gives children’s prayers their sense of comfort, hymns their sense of harmony, and the weekly service its sense of significance. However, it is not only that sermons, rituals, and other forms of religious performance are constituted by the unfolding of a singular rhythm—each sentence or movement stretching out of the last and into the next—but that this process is itself woven into a broader set of polyrhythmic tensions, whether in a church or on a street corner.

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**NOTES**

1. Much of the ethnographic research for this article was completed during a period of preparatory fieldwork. As a result, I focus exclusively on the public facing elements of street preaching. Examples of street preaching quoted at length are transcribed from audio recordings made by the author. Italics indicate emphasis.
2. For a historical survey of the depth and breadth of the tradition of open-air preaching, see Stuart Blythe's (2018) "Open-Air Preaching: A Long and Diverse Tradition."
3. Here I focus on the anthropology of Christianity. However, anthropologists of Islam have also drawn upon and developed the concept of rhythm (see, e.g., Guindi 2008).
4. This article explores the relationship between evangelism and infrastructure at the scale of the performance. For a broader overview of the relationship between Christianity and practices of circulation, see Courtney Handman's (2018) "The Language of Evangelism: Christian Cultures of Circulation Beyond the Missionary Prologue."
5. <https://www.soapasn.com/> (accessed August 2019).
6. See <https://thenationalstreetpreachersconference.wordpress.com/about/>.
7. See <https://www.chick.com/information/article?id=mechanics-of-street-preaching>.
8. See <http://www.kingjamesbiblestudyoftulsa.com/the-king-james-bible-issue-blog/pastor-and-missionary-perry-demopoulos/handbook-street-preaching-public-ministry-perry-demopoulos/>.
9. See <https://endtimesinformation.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/guidelines-to-open-air-preaching-kevin-williams.pdf>.
10. While these shifting contexts are beyond the scope of this article, Richard Sandler's (1999) documentary *The Gods of Times Square* provides one striking example of how the regulation and commodification of Times Square in the 1990s impacted New York City's street corner preachers and prophets.
11. See [https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2003/uscentaf\\_oif\\_report\\_30apr2003.pdf](https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2003/uscentaf_oif_report_30apr2003.pdf).
12. "How to Draw a Crowd Open Air Preaching without Money: Trivia, Magic Tricks, and Other Bait and Switch Tactics—Shock and Awe Preaching!" YouTube video, posted 12 March 2013, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTkhKDu\\_XKg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTkhKDu_XKg) (accessed August 2019).

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