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Rhetorical Analysis: *Letter from Birmingham City Jail* Martin Luther King Jr.

Martin Luther King Jr. was a skilled orator who had mastered the art of effectively employing rhetorical strategies in his speech for activist and mobilization appeal. In his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, King makes references to well-known historical and contemporary figures (of his time) such as Reinhold Niebuhr, St. Augustine, T.S. Elliot, Abraham Lincoln, Socrates, Apostle Paul, and John Bunyan, by quoting or alluding to their actions. The name dropping of these individuals was strategic in order to provide an ethos to his messages that empowering his delivery to the audience. In particular, Socrates' allusion in the letter was powerful, effective and very relevant to the agenda of the letter and King's message. King successfully alludes and name drops Socrates and his works as an ethos support of underpinning his message of disruption of social order through non-violent protest to create tension that will force negotiations and reforms from the oppressors.

Support Non-Violent Protest

Ethos is used to project a sense of credibility and authority that lends credence to the speaker's words which King understood and employed in his letter. Since the primary message of Socrates was to defend his advocacy of non-violent protest, alluding to Socrates as a proponent of that school of thought was very effective. King tells his audience that the freedoms of academic expression society enjoys are "...because Socrates practiced civil disobedience". In

this way, King demonstrates that his method of non-violent protest is a time tested approach to confront oppression and not a reckless invention of his own which was just meant to create chaos. In fact, he makes a comparison of ancient Socrates's principles with the contemporary Boston Tea Party in the country as movements of civil disobedience needed to move society forward. This is a powerful use of ethos as these two entities are well known, respected and their principles followed by many people, both conservative and liberal.

Shared Blame Civil Disobedience

King referenced Socrates in demonstrating the illogical way that those opposing his methods used by comparing Socrates killers when there was shared blame in civil disobedience. In his letter, King strived to demonstrate that people needed to look beyond the actions of the protestors but also the root cause of the protests. According to King, the civil disobedience that people saw as uncomfortable should not have been blamed on the civil rights activists as the blame also lay on those who created the racist conditions pushing African Americans and their allies to protests. To support this, King explains that condemning protestors for social disruption was the same as "...condemning Socrates because his unwavering commitment to truth...precipitated the act by the misguided populace in which they made him drink hemlock". This is a successful use of ethos as Socrates is a historical figure respected for his wisdom, sound logic and solid philosophical teachings. By drawing a parallel of his actions and Socrates' commitment to the truth, King is able to successfully appeal to the people of the credibility of his actions.

Necessity of Social Tension

Finally, it was important for Martin Luther King Jr. to convince the church leaders who saw his protest as an unnecessary disruption of peace that tension within reasonable grounds was necessary to effect changes for the oppressed Black community. King aimed at mobilizing people to adopt non-violent direct action that was not chaotic and operating within a structured way of drawing the attention of the authorities and society to the ills of segregation visited upon the Black community. To convince the church leadership that his approach was not chaotic or aimed at malicious upset of social order, King alludes to the origin of the tactic of social tension, Socrates, to provide an authoritative backing to his protest strategies. Creating tension by non-violent means, King argues, provokes people to address the issues raised “Just as Socrates felt it was necessary to create tension in the mind so that the individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths the unfettered realm of...objective appraisal”. This powerful allusion from Socrates helps convince the audience of his letter that a social crisis should be desirable when other means of attracting dialogue and negotiations have failed. Such as was the case in getting authorities to abolish segregation and support implementation of a society free of racist division that especially oppressed the Black people.

Works Cited

African Studies Center - University Of Pennsylvania. "Letter from A Birmingham Jail [King, Jr.]. *Africa.Upenn.Edu*, 2021, https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html. Accessed 22 Apr 2021.