

Preface

Religion and Rhetoric

We are witnessing a growing universal interest in religion and, in fact, an increasing commitment to the practice of religion, which is affecting innumerable people and entire communities all over the world. The issue is acute, as thousands and thousands of people of varying congregations gather together and worship in a state of near ecstasy, while listening with passion to their preachers. Moreover, various channels of communication - written material, radio and television - are used for the purpose of capturing the audiences' emotions. The preachers' sermons and other like material are extremely effective, and the public, government, the media, and the community of researchers cannot ignore the growing impact of religious rhetoric.

In this regard, it is illuminating to look at Hegel's criticism of the established religious tradition. Hegel took Abraham meandering his way to the land which God had directed him, (Genesis 12), as his point of departure:

With his herds Abraham wandered hither and thither over a boundless territory without bringing parts of it nearer to him by cultivating and improving them ... he was a stranger to soil and men alike ... The whole world Abraham regarded as his opposite; if he did not take it to be a nullity he looked upon it as sustained by a God who was alien to it. Nothing in nature was supposed to have any part in God; everything was simply under God's mastery. (cited in R Plant, *Hegel*, London: Phoenix, 1997, p. 13)

Hegel is concerned about the separation between religion and the ways of life. However, this separation exists only partially today. Many believers do not separate real life from religion. Religion is an integral part of the community. The issue is that religious discourses are not confined to a strict religious context and effect, but, in fact, also to other crucial aspects of the public arena such as politics or even science and health. Hence, it is necessary to study the religious phenomenon as a rhetorical discourse.

Turning our attention to the ubiquitous religious phenomenon, researchers of religion know that the phenomenon is meta-natural, not based on scientific demonstration or logical deduction. Furthermore, religion also revolves around spiritualism, where the non-rational expressions of religious behaviour prevail. The treatment of religion as an academic subject of research is a matter of methodology, as the subject matter lacks a discipline, that is, criteria that are demonstrated as the foundation of an academic research. The methodological question for the researcher is how to approach the subject in academic terms, rather than from the point of view of the community of believers. This is actually the methodological difficulty of religious rhetoric. Rhetoric is the “ability, in each case, to see the available means of persuasion” (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1355b). The question for the rhetorician is “how”: how this enormous communicative endeavour is designed to appeal. The practitioners of religion employ various modes of argumentation, which are designed to appeal to a broad variety of audiences. Religious texts, sermons, prayers, hymns, spirituals and homilies employ the strategic principles of rhetoric, which are based on a close knowledge of what might affect the human heart. Hence, a study of the rhetorical means of the religious public address is necessary.

Not unexpectedly, researchers of rhetoric are more familiar with the modes of argumentation which are demonstrative, engaging scientific presentations or political public delivery rather than the meta-natural discourse of religion. The issue is that Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* regarding the genre of public appeal deals with the three categories of public discourse: political, ceremonial and juridical, that is, civic discourse. Are these categories effective regarding the religious discourse, or are we perhaps dealing here with another sort of a rhetorical discourse? For instance, Aristotle stresses the importance of the appeal to reason, employing specifically the syllogism (*enthymeme*) as the most effective means of persuasion. Is this the rhetorical prevailing method of public religious discourse? This is a major concern of the study of religious rhetoric which occupies the attention of the present essays. The guidelines are that, in fact, Rhetoric is applicable to any discourse - religious or non-religious - that seeks to communicate effectively. This principle guides the essays on Religion and Rhetoric, which constitutes the present issue. Thus, the aim of the essays of the present issue of the *Journal for the Study of Religion*—as well as volume 14/1 of the same Journal, which also constitutes essays of the same symposium on religion and rhetoric—is to shed light on the means and circumstances of the religious mode of argumentation. Nevertheless, the above guideline is too broad, and the real question is whether there are specific means of appeal regarding the realm of the religious genre? Here, attention must be given to the various modes of Religious appeal, specifically to the non-rational dimensions, which employ, as well, an appeal to authority and the authority of sacred scriptures. Researchers of rhetoric as public discourse are engaged in investigating the phenomenon, seek-

ing to define the subject and outline the strategy and the technique of public appeal of the religious discourse. Indeed, that was the aim of the symposium on Religion and Rhetoric (September 2000), sponsored by the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa, and organised by the author of this preface under the auspices of the Centre for Rhetoric Studies of the University of Cape Town, which also supported the endeavour.

In order to shed light on the phenomenon of religious rhetoric at large, the essays of this issue present studies of ancient Religious Rhetoric, Renaissance and Modern Rhetoric. It is illuminating to study the rhetoric of the Hebrew Bible as a source of inspiration for modern preachers and religious speakers. Interestingly enough, the rhetoric of the Hebrew Bible, specifically that of the Prophets, does not merely rely on God's authority. The prophetic books presuppose that people must be persuaded by a human means of appeal. The metaphor, the story and the parable are among the characteristic modes of Biblical religious appeal. Can we extrapolate from the Biblical art of argumentation in the current status of religious rhetoric? Can we study Shakespeare's approach to religion as a rhetorical discourse? The speeches of the Pope as well as the rhetoric of contemporary religious groups, are the subject of discussion of the present issue.

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