

# Joining Religion and Politics: The South African Rhetorical Presidency

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As deliberation in the democratic sphere is enfolded in South Africa, a surreptitious and uncritiqued cohabitation of fractured “rhetorical traditions” (Murphy, 1997) contributes to give it shape. At face value, political rhetoric and religious rhetoric have long been “rhetorics in contact” (as I would call it) in South Africa. There is indeed little doubt that democratic and secular rhetoric spun around nation-building in South Africa, finds its roots in pulpit oratory, specifically Desmond Tutu’s, as this efficacious religious rhetor vigorously voiced the main themes of the Liberation forces during the struggle against racial tyranny. More broadly, religious rhetoric was a major agent for public deliberation and political argumentation under apartheid. It informed both religious sides, the Dutch Reformed Church’s apologetics as well as the Protestant dissenters’ manifestos, that gave, in South Africa a voice and a face and a dignity to democratic values; it supported political argumentation and, with the advent of democracy, as I have shown elsewhere, the pulpit lent credibility and energy to democratic protest (Salazar, 2001a).

This being said, the particular brand of rhetoric emblemized by Tutu began to lose its influence in the mid-1990s, as political deliberation mercifully attained secular autonomy and developed its own modes of appearance and its own systems of rituals (Parliament being an obvious instance, but also the open access to a free practices of assembly. See my correlate study, Salazar 2001c in Detienne and Abélès, 2001). It can be justifiably argued that the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, with its ensuing public debate, was the last instance of religious rhetoric intervening directly and, some contend, disruptively, in the sphere of democratic deliberation (Doxtader in Salazar, 2001b). The very short-lived span of this debate, and the uneasiness many felt about Tutu’s insistence on doctrinal and scriptural commonplaces (forgiveness, cleansing) indicated however, that some of his Habermasian “taken-for-granted” (to use Farrell’s ingenious coinage; Farrell, 1993, 188-197) were no longer op-

erative and no longer functioning as convenient universals for public deliberation.

At present, South Africa stands practically alone among emerging democracies that uphold the rule of law and have espoused secular values directly inherited from the Enlightenment, as having a strong religious substratum – another case is Poland in Europe (as Cezar Ornatowski's work shows eloquently)<sup>2</sup>, whereas the emergence of secular Palestine in the midst of religious-based states in the Levant may provide, sooner or later, a contrasted example of rhetoric in conflict or in contact.

The problem for Rhetoric Studies resides in unraveling what remains as "taken-for-granted" in post-Mandela and post-Tutu South African political argumentation; what acts as a basis for recognition between orators and audiences; what gives persuasion its naturalness and appearance of secularism. As the public deliberative sphere is gaining secular autonomy, it is worth taking stock of it with a view to ascertain, at a later stage of research, the surreptitious presence of its commonplaces, its logical strategies, and its emotional appeal.

A ready entry into the subject is found in what, in rhetoric, pertains today to the "rhetorical presidency" area of studies. As I have outlined it elsewhere (Salazar, 2000a) the signal passage in South Africa from the founder's rhetoric to his successor's lies in the former's awareness of the immediacy of his *ethos* (in rhetoric, *ethos* is one of three systems of providing compelling evidence - proofs that provoke adhesion, alongside *logos*, or logic, conceived as the arrangement of beliefs so as to make them look "truthful", and *pathos*, or the appeal to emotions) and in the latter's awareness that, with no such *ethos* at his disposal, he has to resort to what is called, in rhetoric studies, "prudential" rhetoric, the construction by an orator of the impression that (s)he speaks with integrity and a sense of occasion. It is not necessary here, to elaborate further on these notions which are the stock in trade of Rhetoric Studies. The problem at hand can be summarized as follows : do we find in Mandela's successor's rhetoric – taking it as a handy example of political argumentation – what Murphy calls the "orchestration" of "rhetorical traditions", and more specifically, of a religious tradition, that acts underhand and leads to persuasion? In sum: is Mr Mbeki's will to persuade actually a re-tooling of religious rhetoric?

At first glance, Mr Mbeki's rhetorical presidency offers an excellent case for studying the interplay of religious "taken-for-granted" and secular political rhetoric, inasmuch as state rhetoric, is, in South Africa, singularly concentrated in the presidency. This concentration of agency is a matter for concern. Interventions of parliamentary orators in the public arena are rare, because such orators are few and far between. As for the third arm of government, the judiciary, one would have to look at pronouncements by Justices of the Constitutional Court, however scarce they are, to see evidence of a judicial rhetoric at work in the governance of South Africa. Rhetoric, constitution and agency,

now that the constitutional founding phase has met its foreclosure, is focused on the President. This rhetorical set-up is exceptional in a democracy that is founded on values that are both similar to those which regulate First World democracies as well as the result of a strong popular belief and identification stemming from the collapse of apartheid. In those democracies where public deliberation is working well and producing vigorous argumentation, the Legislative power and its satellites (from party conventions to media interventions) enjoy a voice of their own. The Executive (the presidency or its equivalent) is one rhetorical agency among others, who enter a contest of words. Not so in South Africa.

Significantly, the entrenchment of the presidential address on general policy at the opening of Parliament as a "state of the nation" address is highly relevant to my case: the successor has adopted a mode of intervention by the Executive within the Legislative arena that Mandela had naturally used, trustful as he was in the separation of powers, as well as fulfilling popular expectation that the Nation's founder had to address, "naturally", her first democratic parliament. However what was "natural" for the founder is not "natural" for the successor. The Constitution (Act 108 of 1996) does not provide for such an address. Presidential rhetoric does. When the Government Communication & Information System calls it a "State of the Nation" (their capitals) address it clearly shows that it falls prey to an illusion of a powerful rhetorical commonplace (GICS, 1999a). The commonplace is borrowed popular belief relayed by the media regarding the American practice on *how* and *when* a president should address the nation – although it does not reflect the reality of the American Constitution. (Firstly the American president is the "national" element of a "federal" mixed régime; secondly, in the *Federalist Papers* the address is dealt with summarily as a secondary Executive's power, which the Constitution in turn defines as: "He shall *from time to time* give to the Congress information of the state of the Union", [Article Two, Section 3]. My emphases indicate the semantic issues. (*The Federalist*, 77). Furthermore, the belief, held as a "truth", that a President must deliver such an address, is a restricted commonplace as it does not reflect the practice of other near-presidential régimes in Western democracies. Putting this belief to the test, French President Francois Mitterrand, when he delivered his own address to the South African Parliament, "marvelled" that any president could at all "enter" the Legislature's hall, let alone speak therein. In his view, Republican values (that is democratic values inherited from the Enlightenment) assert that the nation's representatives alone may express the true "state of the nation" *in the very act of parliamentary debating*, and not a president, even directly elected like himself, or *a fortiori* a president elected by the nation's deputies, like the South African president. Mitterrand pointedly directed his address firstly to "Madam President" (meaning, Madam Speaker of the Assembly). He implied that when rhetorical roles are usurped, constitutional roles may be as well. The South African rhetorical presidency is a

neat case of such “natural” and “taken-for-granted” “usurpation” - which is not the case, one must stress, of the American rhetorical presidency. This detour was necessary to firm up my argument regarding the centrality of presidential rhetoric and its attempt at assuming the mantle of religious, single orator-centered rhetoric.

My hypothesis runs, therefore, as follows: current presidential rhetoric is an “orchestration” or, as I called it in my seminars at the Collège International de Philosophie, a “retooling” of rhetorical traditions that bear strong “sermonic” marks (Salazar, 2001d). I will use the adjective “sermonic” rather than “religious” to stress the oratorical nature of this sort of religious intervention.

These sermonic retoolings are three, in ascending order of complexity : firstly, a hortative tradition, largely derived from the pulpit; secondly, the need to maintain a prudential tradition adapted from the Mandela presidency; thirdly, the presence of Liberation pulpit oratory. All three levels intersect, but for the convenience of this argument I will keep them separate. I will only take one example of speech, the so-called “State of the Nation” address of 25 June 1999.

This first presidential speech in Parliament by Mr Mbeki is the best example so far of presidential rhetoric as an orchestration or retooling of religious rhetoric (GICS, 1999b). The epithet “so-called” is justified by the GICS’s own usage of it in a propaganda leaflet (GICS, 1999a) that bowdlerizes the speech into a series of questions and answers. Although the intended audience and achieved effect of the leaflet are rhetorically unclear (who speaks, for whom, why this sort of language and so on?), except perhaps self-reflective epideictic, the questions do open on this remarkable exchange: “What is so special about the speech? This is our new President’s first State of the Nation address. It is the first opportunity he had to spell out in detail what the new government plans for our country” (GICS, 1999a, 1). The fact is that a general policy speech is being combined with a state of the nation speech, a rhetorical turn that concentrates in one singular orator functions that ought to remain dual in a democracy, either by splitting them between two orators or by having the same orator deliver them at different times.

The first implication is that it is a clear case of retooling of one South African “rhetorical tradition”, a tradition embodied by the old régime’s near entire reliance on the State President (or Prime Minister) to articulate policy and express the (white) nation’s (assumed) common understanding. Their speeches were admonitory and hortative, delivered pulpit style, with not infrequent references to the Scriptures and “God”. They were a by-product of Reformed oratory not only in their elocutive and ethic elements but also in the expectation of an audience who wanted to hear words of guidance, of comfort and also of mild chastisement, together with the assignment of faults to (political) sinners. The impact of such a tradition must not be underestimated in terms of its continuing presence within the democratic sphere, nor should one

believe that only white “old timers” are still affected by it. A large sector of the South African population is regularly placed in the presence of, and taking part in, such rhetorical acts - whether in rural areas or through religious activities - that jointly or separately perpetuate the notion that a president ought to address his folks in a certain manner, a sermonic manner. Members of a given audience may not be persuaded by what he says, but for them to engage in the process of persuasion, whether it achieves its aim or not, common rhetorical ground is foremost. The 25 June 1999 speech bears many markers of such sermonic tradition that places squarely onto the presidential ethos the burden of representation. By *ethos*, I mean the rhetorical fact that the burden of providing evidence for the nation’s case is entrusted to the president. The opening two sentences form an appeal to a sermonic common ground from the first rhetorical tradition just mentioned: “Steadily, the dark clouds of despair are lifting, giving way to our season of hope. Our country which, for centuries, has bled from a thousand wounds is progressing towards its healing” (GICS, 1999b, 1). They affirm the president’s privileged site of speaking - watching from above and from outside a situation upon which, on the audience’s behalf, he passes judgement. The wording indicates that he exerts control over natural and historical elements. As naïve as it is, and clumsy (one wonders how the speech-writer could contrive to open the speech with an abstract, flat-sounding adverb), the opening sentence announces the bulk of the speech, a programme of economic and social actions.

In the sermonic tradition, it is expected that a metaphor or an image or an example leads you into “hard facts” by a process of rhetorical induction (in contrast to dialectical induction that necessitates large numbers). In rhetorical terminology, a fiction induces a “*historia*” (event, reality, that which takes place). The linkage between fiction and “*historia*” functions here also as a hidden argument, running so: if I can empathise with the image, then I am better disposed to hear the *realpolitik* lesson. I may be affected fleetingly by the image (the sentence takes only a few seconds), but that is enough to anchor persuasion. (Incidentally, when studying a speech one must always guard against treating it as a “text”: a metaphor may be considered idiotic in a cold speech or text. However, in a warm speech, when orator and audience engage in a common rhetorical act, the same elocutive feature has an entirely different effect - one must guard oneself against literary judgement as literarity is not “rhetoricity”- as indeed *this* opening allegory is, in literary terms, banal and tedious and bombastic).<sup>3</sup>

The rhetorical presidency in the democratic sphere of deliberation has adopted and adapted a tradition to which the time and the place and the format of delivery - encapsulated in the “state of the nation” idiom - give renewed credence, as it comforts even further the presidency as a sermonic power. This “taken-for-granted” is the less elaborated (in terms of speech-writ-

ing) but not necessarily the less effective on a South African audience.

The second tradition retooled or orchestrated in the 25 June 1999 speech, although heavily impacted upon by sermonic features, is the "prudential" tradition embodied by Nelson Mandela. Prudence, I would like to remark, is a founding tenet of rhetoric. In Eugene Garver's analysis of the Aristotelian theory of prudence, "the problem of good practical conduct ... is to see how constancy of character can be consistent with the adaptability to circumstances it sometimes seems to require" (Garver, 1987, 7). "Character" may be interpreted as "integrity" in modern English. A political orator's problem is therefore to conjoin integrity with flexibility. But, in addition, since rhetorical acts always take place with a given audience, what is really at stake is not the absolute integrity of the orator nor his/her adaptability and the actual ethical contradiction between them (that plays itself out in specific dialectical problems), but how that tension appears to a chosen audience and what rhetorical choices are made (or eschewed) in order to make that tension take shape for the audience's judgement. The problem Mr Mbeki is faced with, as noted earlier, is that he succeeds not only a president but a *founding* president. He has to contend with the *absolute* precedent of a particular prudential rhetoric (in contrast to what may have been a *relative* precedent if, for any reason, there would have been an interim). The question is: how does he achieve prudence and what sort of prudence? As I have analysed it in *An African Athens* (Salazar, 2001a), the "African Renaissance" commonplace is Mr Mbeki's choice for defining the area of prudence for his rhetorical presidency. The question at hand, in the 25 June 1999 speech, is how the tension between integrity and adaptability is staged within that definition of prudential values.

Once more, the orator resorts to a sermonic tradition while it builds upon the prudential tradition inherited from Nelson Mandela. One rhetorical device favoured in this instance is a constant recourse to "we". The president feigns to speak from within "the people". This metonymic trope is different to the regalian "we" used by the founding president. In rhetoric (see Perelman, 1969), a metonymy acts as a syllogism (what affects the part, affects the whole). Integrity is therefore said to lie in the successor's identification with "the people". This proof (as a trope which carries syllogistic properties acts as a proof or evidence) is re-inforced by the immediate recourse to irony: the president calls for "those ... who occupy positions of authority and power to join in this new way of doing things" (GICS, 1999b, 3). Irony indeed, as he seems to place himself outside a "position of power", referring to those who possess it as "they" and not "we" as should be the case logically (for he has a position of power). Following Burke's *Grammar of Motives* (Burke, 1969), Moore (Moore, 1996) has underlined, in his incisive essay on American presidential campaigns, the rhetorical power of irony as a strategy for identification between a politically weary audience and orator. In the present case, Mr Mbeki resorts to irony by placing himself

outside “those of authority or power” whom he invites “to serve the people”. By implication (this is a second syllogistic move) he inserts himself in the people. Prudentially he projects the image of an accommodator who, so he implies, knows how to serve, and possesses “integrity” while being “adaptable”- two characteristics that “those who occupy positions of authority and power” are implicitly said not to possess.

The traditional element of sermonic rhetoric that is retooled here is obviously that of the pastoral function whereby the orator is “servant of the servants of God”. The speech-writer did try, in this instance, to create a new commonplace in order to assert this prudential turn – the word “Faranani !” (glossed over in GICS 1999b as “supporting each other”) – appropriately the motto of the African Renaissance prudential rhetoric. It failed to impress. Too many tropes tend to jam an audience’s perceptions unless the orator is dealing with a “composite audience”, in which case particular speech segments are carefully crafted to impact upon particular segments of the audience. Incidentally this failure is a neat example of how a speech may at times fulfil the end of the art (to use all relevant means: here, a zealous attempt to tie up two distant tropes - “we” and irony – in one sound-bite) but fail to achieve the aim of the speech (to persuade). (For a clear explanation of the “ends” of rhetoric, see Garver, 1994). *That* sermonic turn recurs in the speech, together with the same iterative attempt to tag (intended to be) sound-catching labels onto arguments. (Another one is “Batho pele!”, GICS 1999b, 20). (The abuse of exclamation marks is an added indicator.)

Yet the inherent peril of infusing irony in prudence is its reversibility, as integrity may be seen to suffer from this recourse to distanciation. The founding president’s rhetorical prudence did not have to contend with such indictment as it carefully, and naturally, steered away from irony. The successor’s speech-writer ought to weigh this particular device before abusing it.

The third sermonic tradition at work in the South African current presidential rhetoric represents, by comparison with the first two retoolings, a far richer orchestration. It plugs directly into Liberation pulpit oratory.

I need, for the purpose of this analysis, to revert to 1982, when Desmond Tutu was deposed by the Eloff Commission which was set up by the government of the day to investigate the funding of the South African Council of Churches, a *de facto* legal opposition to the régime. Tutu took the opportunity arising from his compulsory testimony to deliver a masterful lesson in rhetoric (Salazar, 2001a).

The interest, at present, lies in the fact that Desmond Tutu, while deposing, enfolds an (unwanted) argument that reaches beyond the confines of the commission, towards the nation in the process of being built. In rhetorical terminology, he turns an *apologia* into a *kategoria* – a defense into an accusation (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1368b). And, having turned the tables of oratory around

and redefined his own voice and place of address which he aptly names "the divine imperative", he now affirms the imperative need to tell the truth. Why? Because the nation being built needs models. And the SACC embodies *shalom* (peace) and *koinonia* (unity): a model for a nation still torn by civil war and fragmentation. In Aristotelian terms, *shalom* and *koinonia* are the "topics" of Tutu's oratorical inventiveness. They utter the need for a Pauline ministry of reconciliation (Tutu refers to 2 Corinthians 5: 19, "God was in Christ reconciling the world with himself") (Tutu, 1994, 63) and to reverse the fragmentation of the nation.

The second lesson of Tutu's oratory, for our purpose, resides in the fact that Tutu's oratory of nation-building was ritualistic. Anthropological studies of ritual have shown how ritual practices function as a social "education" in the broadest sense of the term, by inciting to imitation and emulation, and by arousing in individuals the consciousness of belonging to a community. Mary Collins calls this "the implicit cognitive, emotional model or idea every culture has for itself" (Carter, 1991). Taken as series of ritualistic events, or performances, Tutu's speeches weave together a sense of community. One good example of such ritualism is the funeral oration delivered in praise of Chris Hani (19 April 1993) as it rhetorically brought to its conclusion the ritual of nation-building. Tutu bases his speech on a quotation from Paul: "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8: 31). Many in his audience would know that this phrase is the rhetorical prelude to Paul's hymn on divine love, which, in Pauline theology, is closely related to "upbuilding" the community of believers. For those who do not recall the New Testament text, the meaning is contextually persuasive as the crowd in the stadium behaved as a community of (secular) believers.

The third characteristic of such tradition is to be found in the prayer read by Tutu at the Swearing-in Ceremony, on 10 May 1994, at the Union Buildings in Pretoria, in which he sums up, as it were, the two rhetorical gestures articulated above by proffering a communal spectacle or social communion by which the audience internalizes the orator's rhetoric, making a poetic vision a locale for public deliberation: "Thank you [O God] for the miraculous way in which you transformed the election into a corporate act of nation-building (Tutu, 1994, 162). In the Pauline tradition this odd expression, "corporate", which seems to be borrowed from the "corporate world", is actually a throwback to *oikodome*, the "upbuilding" of the Christian community, here translated into "nation-building". The oratorical link created by Desmond Tutu helps give shape to a unique situation – that of a postmodern democracy shaping its public deliberative world-view in close alliance with a religious set of arguments regarding the nation.

However, such a situation has a more direct implication for presidential rhetoric, as Tutu may also be considered as a "founding" father with whose



rhetoric any successor has to contend or compromise. The three traits of Tutu's oratory (visionary centrality of the orator, rituals and communality) I have briefly sketched impose on the president the imperative of a retooling. Public deliberation expects these elements to be part of one of its main agents' argumentative stature. If the president does not orchestrate them, he runs the real risk of seeing another agent emerge who will retool them for his/her own purposes, such as the PAC could well attempt. Public deliberation, like nature, abhors a vacuum. All three markers are present in Mr Mbeki's rhetoric, each time with its specific turn. Vision is orchestrated around metaphors, ritual is firmly shaped by the president's less frequent participation in Parliamentary debates and fewer public statements (ritual is based on a careful repetition of chosen acts), while the "world statesman" image he cultivates argues for the insertion of the South African *oikodome* into the wider world, nation-building now being translated into Africa-building, in which South Africa is presented as its leading "incorporation" agency.

By way of conclusion, I would like to stress how "religion and rhetoric" ought not to be approached, as they often are, from the standpoint of "religion", understood as the specific oratorical forms developed by strong doctrinal and dogmatic traditions themselves rooted in the unnerving belief in a transcendental agent which vouchsafes and directs human eloquence, but from the standpoint of "rhetoric", understood as it should be – as the practice of public argumentation and democratic deliberation. A good case is made by the unfolding of a "rhetorical democracy" in South Africa, for observing and monitoring and putting into practice the interplay of "religious rhetoric", as a "tradition" alongside others, and public forms of deliberation that ensure democracy. The attempt by the presidency to express itself in sermonical fashion is both an indication of the permanence of religious values as channels of persuasion and an indication of just how fragile such orchestration is, as secular leaders, in the belief system of their audiences (highly "composite" in the South African case), are not immediately vested with transcendence. The search for "prudence" is its driving force. For all these reasons, the South African rhetorical presidency casts a sharp light on how "prudence" may be *willed*, by setting it at the juncture of religious and political rhetoric, and how that will can mercifully set a trap for itself, and miss its end.

## Notes

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tion in Southern Africa.

<sup>2</sup> Ornatowski's study on Poland appears in this issue of the Journal.

<sup>3</sup> A good counter-example of the danger of literarity is provided by Churchill's Fulton Address (5 March 1946), known as the "Iron Curtain Speech". In fact he had carefully crafted another image he thought would be achieving the empathic effect desired to shake America into "reality", the metaphor of "the sinews of peace". It is an incidental image that achieved an effect different from that Churchill had assigned himself (to lay the ground for a "fraternal association" of Britain and the USA). In short, Churchill had forgotten that a speech is an act, not a text – a common action (Hostetler 1997).

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