Laurent Pernot

The Rhetoric of Religion

Abstract: The paper explores the intersections between rhetoric and religion in Graeco-Roman antiquity, both pagan and Christian. Rhetorical forms of religious expression include discourse about the gods (narrative, eulogy, preaching, naming) and discourse addressed to the gods, especially prayers and hymns. Rhetoric itself possesses a religious dimension in the power of words, the effectiveness of speech, and the magic of persuasion. Discourse can have supernatural effectiveness, and the orator can be invested with religious powers. Aelius Aristides (2nd c. CE) displays these different aspects; his *Sacred Tales* illustrate the cross-fertilization of rhetoric and religion.

The rhetorical dimension of religious discourse

In a certain sense the parallel between rhetoric and religion is obvious. Religion is intimately linked with words. Everyone knows that the spoken and written word plays an essential role in religion, as language is necessarily used to address the gods or God, to speak about the divine or the sacred, and to express religious feeling or awareness. All these phenomena can be grouped under the term "rhetoric," as it relates to forms of expression, in the broad sense of rhetoric, and to the art of discourse in the strict sense, as it was codified, taught, practiced and discussed

Plenary address delivered at the fifteenth biennial congress of the International Society for the History of Rhetoric in Los Angeles, July 13, 2005. I thank the curators of the Huntington Library for their hospitality and Harvey Yunis for his editing of this text.

Rhetorica, Vol. XXIV, Issue 3, pp. 235–254, ISSN 0734-8584, electronic ISSN 1533-8541.

throughout history. It being impossible to cover the immense subject of rhetoric and religion, or more precisely, the rhetoric of religion, in its totality, I shall limit myself to Graeco-Roman antiquity, both pagan and Christian. Yet a rhetorical approach to the problems of ancient religion allows us to look at the relationship between paganism and Christianity from a new angle, to revise preconceived ideas, and to transcend long-standing, artificial distinctions.

Given recent progress in the history of rhetoric and religious studies, the moment is propitious to explore the intersections between rhetoric and religion. Rhetoric is established in contemporary thought as an essential dimension of human activity, and the study of ancient religion is more intense than ever before. Documentation of ancient religions (literary, epigraphical, archaeological) is increasingly well-known. We can now apply a broader range of scholarly methods in studying ancient religions and situate those religions better with regard to their social context and historical origins.

Additionally, we are today witnessing the return of religion. As the French writer and statesman André Malraux predicted, the twenty-first century would be religious. This is why it is important—and perhaps why it is the duty of us academics and intellectuals—to find new ways of thinking about religion in a world where unthinking and depraved uses of religion can be dangerous. We should not forget, however, that for many linking rhetoric and religion remains new and daring. To say that religious discourse can be examined rhetorically, as persuasive speech following set forms and structures, may arouse suspicion. Scholars who take this approach may be suspected of adopting a rationalist attitude and misunderstanding the very basis of religion, namely, belief in the transcendental. If a rhetorical approach is applied to Christian texts, to the scriptures, or to the church fathers, accusations of subversion may follow on the grounds that an emphasis on rhetoric may undermine faith and theological doctrine. Even today, many academic circles remain reticent and unenthusiastic when it comes to rhetorical readings of ancient religious texts, whether they be pagan or Christian. Things are changing, but slowly. There are brilliant exceptions, but they are rare.

Therefore it is still necessary to emphasize the usefulness of the rhetorical approach in the field of religion. Fortunately, such an approach has worthy predecessors. The title of this paper, "The Rhetoric of Religion," calls to mind Kenneth Burke's book of the same title, published in Boston in 1961. The German philologist Eduard

Norden was a pioneer on the subject.[1] Specialists in biblical studies have opened up important areas.[2] Within the International Society for the History of Rhetoric, former presidents George Kennedy and Carl Joachim Classen made crucial contributions.[3]

Rhetorical forms of religious expression

To explore the points of contact between rhetoric and religion, it may be convenient to start by locating rhetorical forms of religious expression in order to establish a kind of map of religious discourse. After considering the most important and problematic such forms, I shall concentrate on two: prayer and hymn.

What we call religious discourse consists, first of all, in speaking about the gods. Discourse about the gods includes, notably, narration of the god's deeds and eulogy of his powers. Narrative and eulogy are discursive forms that fall within ancient rhetoric, eulogy having been studied from Gorgias and Aristotle onwards and narrative occupying a place of importance in the theory of preliminary exercises in rhetoric (*progymnasmata*) that was taught in all schools of the Graeco-Roman world.

Another form of discourse on the gods is preaching, which belongs to what ancient rhetoric calls the deliberative genus. It consists in exhorting an audience either to embrace a religion they do not yet know or to persevere in the beliefs they already hold. All forms of advice, from the protreptic to parainetic, are in play here. Another rhetorical device is naming and designation. To the ancient mind, the divine name is of value in itself, insofar as naming the gods is a way to know them and to enter into contact with them, and perhaps to influence them. Divine qualifiers, epithets, and invocations, defining the origin of the gods, their functions or roles, and their power, are

---

[1]See E. Norden, *Agnostos Theos: Untersuchungen zur Formengeschichte religiöser Rede* (Leipzig-Berlin: Teubner, 1913).

[2]Because of the importance of the "word" in Christian theology, academic students of Christianity have been keen to see a discursive dimension (of proclamation and revelation) in the sources. Hence the importance of the method known as "rhetorical analysis" or "rhetorical criticism" in research on the Old and New Testaments. See D.F. Watson and A.J. Hauser, *Rhetorical Criticism of the Bible: A Comprehensive Bibliography with Notes on History and Method* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

[3]George Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Carl Joachim Classen, *Rhetorical Criticism of the New Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

of key importance. Thus naming the gods has not only cultural and philosophical value, but also rhetorical value.

Narrative, eulogy, preaching, and naming are acts of worship. If these acts consist essentially in rhetorical devices, they are nonetheless distinctive in that their subject matter is beyond the human realm. The difficulty of using human language to speak about a subject that is beyond the human was highlighted from the first Greek poets and philosophers onwards. It appears, for example, in an important sentence in Plato's *Timaeus* (28c): "To discover the creator and father of the universe is a difficult task. But once we have found him, to express him to everybody else will be impossible."[4] This is the idea of the ineffable. To remedy the theoretical impossibility of speaking about the divine, many solutions were found. One was metaphor, which allows things to be said without saying them, and to approach that which cannot be reached in plain words. A passage of the neo-Platonic philosopher Plotinus is especially relevant, as it explains that it is impossible to talk about the Supreme Good in proper terms with exact words (*Enneads* 6.8.13): all that can be said about the Good can only be approximate, in the form "like" or "in a certain way" (*hoion*).[5] Religious rhetoric, effectively, is often of the *hoion* type. Yet because of the difficulty of expressing the divine, discourse about the gods sometimes departs from rational argument and becomes a discourse of revelation, disclosure, and paradox, as in Euripides' *Bacchae* regarding Dionysiac religion or in Christian literature regarding the evangelical message.

Rhetorical religious discourse includes not only discourse about the gods, but also discourse addressed to the gods, for example, the different ways of greeting the gods, and prayer, to which we will return. The discourse an individual addresses to himself, to act on himself, to comfort or change himself, may also be religious. Meditations and spiritual exercises obey a kind of rhetoric, both in Christianity, for instance with Cassiodorus' meditation on the psalms,[6] as well as in stoicism, with Marcus Aurelius' concise and dazzling writing technique in the books *To Himself*.

---

[4] Τὸν μὲν οὖν ποιητὴν καὶ πατέρα τοῦδε τοῦ παντὸς εὑρεῖν τε ἔργον καὶ εὑρόντα εἰς πάντας ἀδύνατον λέγειν.

[5] Δεῖ δὲ συγχωρεῖν τοῖς ὀνόμασιν, εἴ τις περὶ ἐκείνου λέγων ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἐνδείξεως ἕνεκα αὐτοῖς χρῆται, ἃ ἀκριβείᾳ οὐκ ἐῶμεν λέγεσθαι· λαμβανέτω δὲ καὶ τὸ οἷον ἐφ' ἑκάστου.

[6] A. W. Astell, "Cassiodorus's *Commentary on the Psalms* as an *Ars rhetorica*," *Rhetorica* 17 (1999): 37–75.

Finally, there is the discourse of the gods. Homer speaks of a language of the gods that is different from the language of men. Unfortunately, Homer only quotes a few words belonging to this language and says nothing about its properties; neither does he say if it included a specific kind of rhetoric.[7] The ancients were unable to describe thoroughly the language of the gods, but they could hear divine words expressed in prophecies and oracles, through the intervention of holy personages such as soothsayers, prophets, and prophetesses.

The mention of prophetesses—in the feminine—is interesting, as recent research has shown that there was a certain type of ancient religious language that was the reserve of women. The speech of prophetesses, and sibyls in particular, was characterized by inarticulate cries, vocal rituals, and *glossolalia*, which involved sounds with no meaning, in a state of prophetic ecstasy.[8] This behavior was considered specific to inspired women. Feminine divination, insofar as it was visionary and vocal, thus distinguished itself from the techniques of masculine divination. Such characterization introduces a distinction in terms of sex within religious rhetoric, and creates an opposition between the wise rhetoric of masculine prophets and the crazed voices of inspired women. Religious rhetoric thus enhances the study of rhetoric from the point of view of gender. Women in antiquity were marginal with regard to the official and public rhetoric that took place in legal and political settings among men. In religious rhetoric, women had a specific place.

---

[7] *Iliad* 14.291, 20.74; *Odyssey* 10.305, 12.61. On this topic, see L. Radermacher, *Artium scriptores (Reste der vorariststotelischen Rhetorik)* (Wien: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philos.-hist. Kl. 227.3, 1951), 1–3; M. Detienne and G. Hamonic, eds., *La déesse Parole: Quatre figures de la langue des dieux* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994); D. Lau, *Wie sprach Gott "Es werde Licht!" Antiken Vorstellungen von der Gottessprache* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2003); L. Spina, "Modi divini di nominare gli uomini," in *Nommer les dieux: Théonymes, épithètes, épiclèses dans l'Antiquité* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005): 579–584.

[8] S. Crippa, "Glossolalia. Il linguaggio di Cassandra," *Studi italiani di linguistica teorica ed applicata* 19 (1990): 487–508; "La voce e la visione. Il linguaggio oracolare femminile," in I. Chirassi Colombo and T. Seppilli, eds., *Sibille e linguaggi oracolari: Mito, storia, tradizione* (Pisa: Istituti editoriali e poligrafici internazionali, 1998), 159–189; "Entre vocalité et écriture: les voix de la Sibylle et les rites vocaux des magiciens," in C. Batsch, U. Egelhaag-Gaiser, and R. Sepper, eds., *Zwischen Krise und Alltag: Antike Religionen im Mittelmeerraum* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1999), 95–110.

Prayer as discourse

Prayer is a form of religious expression that can be considered as discourse and which deserves rhetorical analysis.[9]

Etymology already invites an association between prayer and rhetoric. Indeed, the Latin verb *orare* means both "to speak, to plead" and "to pray." This double meaning is not coincidental: to pray is to speak to the gods in the form of an argued discourse. Therefore prayer should be analyzed as discourse, insofar as prayer is a speech that a person addresses to a divinity, and prayer can be understood in terms of the ancient categories of discourse.

There is a structure for prayer that was codified through usage: (1) address or invocation; (2) arguments in support of the request; and (3) the request. This is the classical structure of prayer which is found in many Greek and Latin texts. Three-part prayer represents the implementation of a rhetorical structure, which is logical and constructed for its purpose, and which is particularly concerned with argumentation and persuasion in support of the request.

The argumentation of prayer includes a series of commonplaces, summarized by the philologists: "give because I have given" (*da quia dedi*), "give so that I give" (*da ut dem*), "give because you have given" (*da quia dedisti*), "give because to give this is in your power" (*da quia hoc dare tuum est*).

The different forms of prayer, of which there is a large diversity, can be classified according to type. The prayer of request, for example, subdivides into several forms: the request for such-and-such material object, prayers asking for advice, prayers containing a curse, etc. Prayers can be grouped typologically with respect to rhetorical criteria (the situation, the aim of the speech, the arguments used). A study of *ethos* and *pathos* in prayer would highlight the mentality of the speaker and the psychological means used to convey his message: for example, an appeal to pity in supplication can be related to the role of the pathetic in oratorical works. A stylistic study would enable us to distinguish different stylistic levels, from the most simple, material requests to the longest and most elaborate prayers. Stylistic study can also be applied to the models and devices used in prayers

[9]On this example and the following ones, see L. Pernot, "Prière et rhétorique," in L. Calboli Montefusco, ed., *Papers on Rhetoric* 3 (Bologna: Clueb, 2000), 213–232; "Les *Discours Sacrés* d'Aelius Aristide entre médecine, religion et rhétorique," *Atti dell'Accademia Pontaniana*, N. S. 51 (2002): 369–383; "Au-delà de Babel: le langage de la louange et de la prière," *Millenium. Jahrbuch zu Kultur und Geschichte des ersten Jahrtausends n. Chr.*, 2 (2005): 63–77.

(alliteration, repetition, colometric rhythm, predefinite phraseology), along the lines of the work of Eduard Norden on the "Du-Stil" and "Er-Stil," the predicate in the relative or participial proposition, the dynamic predicate ("you can") or the essential predicate ("you are").[10]

Finally, there is the *actio* of prayer, that is, the way in which the prayer is spoken, the gestures are used, and the postures are adopted, which are codified through usage. The ever-increasing number of artistic representations available to us in ceramics, sculpture, painting, and the like invite further investigation. We know today that certain ideas, often dogmatically asserted in the past, must be nuanced—notably, the idea that pagans never prayed in silence, or that they did not kneel down to pray. Both were rare in paganism (in contrast to Christianity), but they did exist. It would be interesting to revisit this area in a systematic way, and to classify the different uses of the voice and gestures in prayer. In terms of voice, one could look at the different ways of reciting prayers, either aloud or in a low voice, using singing, litanies, or cries and shouts. In terms of gestures, one could look at the different movements of the hands and the body that accompanied the words of the prayer and reinforced their desired effect, as with prostration, the seated or crouching position, the *circumactio* (walking around a sacred object), or the hands raised or turned downwards towards the ground.

Thus the categories of ancient rhetoric suggest new lines of inquiry for ancient prayer. The purpose is not an attempt to write a modern rhetorical treatise on prayer, following the ancient model (that would be absurd), but simply to create a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of ancient prayer. The epistemological importance of such an approach lies in its historical relevance. To refer to the rhetorical concepts in use in antiquity is to refer to an intellectual, ideological and aesthetic horizon that existed when the prayers were recited and when the texts were written. Certain prayers, in particular literary ones, are attributed to authors who were familiar with rhetoric and who were evidently influenced by it. Other prayers, without being subject to a direct influence from rhetoric, belonged to a world in which rhetoric played an important role, both in general society and in teaching; in consequence, they were not immune to the ambient rhetorical thought.

This research could result in the identification of a kind of rhetoric specific to prayer, which will not be a mere transposition of judicial, deliberative, and epideictic categories, but a form of discourse *sui*

[10]Norden, cited above, n. 1.

generis, characterized by structures, arguments, stylistic forms, and an *actio* of its own. The links between prayer and rhetoric are to be found not only by means of analogy or in the vague idea that all language is rhetorical. Rather, prayer can be analyzed as a specific form of discourse. The links with rhetoric are intrinsic and rhetorical concepts can lead to a better understanding of ancient prayer.

Hymn and the relationship between paganism and Christianity

Hymn—defined, in the ancient sense, as a eulogy to a god, accompanied by an invocation and an address—offers a second example of the connection between rhetoric and religion. I would like to demonstrate the rhetoric of hymns (not unlike the rhetoric of prayer), and to use this as a point of departure for considering the relationship between paganism and Christianity. Are certain elements of religious language common from one religion to another, from one culture to another? The problem will be considered in the early centuries of the Roman Empire, at the beginning of the Christian era.

Hymns were common in the pagan world. Certain hymns were performed during great religious ceremonies, as during panegyric festivals. Liturgical hymns accompanied acts of worship in the temples. Literary hymns were written or recited as artistic compositions. Important collections of hymns, in verse and prose, survive from pagan antiquity: Homeric hymns, Orphic hymns, oratorical hymns, philosophical hymns, magical hymns. At the same time, the hymn was important in Christian communities. The first Christian community, that formed by Christ and his disciples, sang the psalms. In the *Epistle to the Colossians* (3.16), Paul gives this advice: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord."[11] Christian communities used the psalms and the canticles of the Old Testament, but in the New Testament there appeared new liturgical texts of the early Church celebrating God. Further, the Greek words for hymn were the same for both pagans and Christians: *epainos* and *hymnos*.

[11] Ὁ λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐνοικείτω ἐν ὑμῖν πλουσίως, ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ διδάσκοντες καὶ νουθετοῦντες ἑαυτοὺς ψαλμοῖς, ὕμνοις, ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς ἐν χάριτι ᾄδοντες ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν τῷ θεῷ.

Consequently, pagans were far from surprised by Christian practices involving hymn—either sung or written—which recalled practices that had always existed in the Graeco-Roman world. For instance, a pagan author, Pliny the Younger, bears witness to this lack of surprise. In his famous letter to the Emperor Trajan about the Christians of Bithynia (*Epistles* 10.96.7), he notes that they sing hymns: "They are accustomed . . . to reciting alternately amongst themselves a song in honor of Christ as in honor of a god."[12] This Roman aristocrat, a former consul and imperial legate (who was also an expert in rhetoric), shows no surprise. Without going into the contents of Christian songs, he can well imagine their form and meaning, and he only questions the divinity to whom they are addressed. What he does not understand is the Christian God; he understands their praising their God perfectly well. If Pliny had discovered the contents of Christian hymns, he would have come across many similarities to the hymns he knew. Here I wish to stress not the large difference of religion,[13] but precisely what lies beyond that difference: Pliny could have discerned the elements of a common language in praise of God. Let us consider two famous hymns from the New Testament, and see what can be said from the point of view of pagan rhetoric at the time.

First, in the book of Apocalypse (15.3–4), the canticle of the Lamb is a song of praise invoking the triumph of the Lord and his people. Remarkably, this text, which is independent of the Graeco-Roman tradition and in numerous instances echoes the Old Testament, uses devices employed by Graeco-Roman rhetoric: a eulogy of the "deeds" (*erga*) of the Lord; the notion of the "marvelous" (*thaumasta*); the idea of universal glory and the worship of God by all; and stylistically, rhetorical questions and the anaphora of the causal conjunction "because" (*hoti*). Many examples of the use of these devices can be found, in verse and in prose, in eulogies to Greek and Roman gods.

The second text is the Magnificat, a canticle delivered by Mary at the beginning of the Gospel according to Saint Luke (1.47–55). Here again, numerous parallels can be drawn between this passage of the New Testament and the poetic and rhetorical hymns of paganism. The guiding theme consists in praising the actions of the Lord (he has come to rescue the people of Israel), and these actions demonstrate that God is powerful (*dunatos*) and full of mercy (*eleos*). Another

[12] *quod essent soliti ... carmen Christo quasi deo dicere secum inuicem.*

[13] This difference is brilliantly emphasized and explained in the recent book of G. G. Stroumsa, *La fin du sacrifice: Les mutations religieuses de l'Antiquité tardive* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2005).

guiding theme is giving thanks. Mary exalts the Lord because He has made her the mother of Jesus. Praise is the means of giving thanks: a function defined by Greek rhetoric with the creation of the specific category, "hymn of thanks" (*kharisterios hymnos*). Other examples, marked by an atmosphere of joyous worship, can be found at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, or indeed in the Epistles of St Paul. On this basis, some observations can be made.

In terms of the structure of the texts, Christian eulogies stress divine actions and power. Similarly, in the Graeco-Roman tradition, deeds (*erga*, *acta*) and powers or faculties (*dunameis*, *uis*) are of central importance to the hymn. In terms of the treatment of these actions, the Christian eulogist foregoes a long narrative in order to mention the power or quality he wants to praise; and he briefly describes the deeds by way of proof and illustration: this choice parallels that of the Graeco-Roman hymn, which evolved in the same way from the Hellenistic age onwards.[14] This fundamental structural choice is accompanied by recurring "commonplaces": for example, the power of the god, his good deeds, his mercy, his status as master or lord, and his name. As mentioned with regard to the Magnificat, Christian eulogy is most often an act of thanksgiving. Similarly, in paganism, worship is linked to precise circumstances and situations, which are often personal—as in the aretologies and the ex-voto. Christianity and paganism converge in the notion that worship is part of a context to which it must adapt, the so-called "Sitz im Leben." Finally, there are stylistic parallels between pagan eulogies and Christian eulogies: in terms of the freedom with which prose, poetry, and poetic prose are used and interspersed; in their recourse to alternating songs and responses; and in third person narrative based on relative pronouns, following the model "It is He who."

In this way, neither Pliny the Younger nor any other pagan would have been totally lost in the face of the hymns of the New Testament. He could have accessed the Christian message by means of the language of hymn.[15]

The example of hymn leads me to suggest that there was, in the first centuries of the Roman Empire, a rhetorical language of religious

[14]See A.-J. Festugière, "A propos des arétalogies d'Isis," *Harvard Theological Review* 42 (1949): 220–228. As Festugière showed, there is a development in paganism from the long mythological narrative that characterized epic hymns (Homeric hymns) to a form that consists in the abstract description of the power of the god, through his actions and his good deeds, and which triumphed after the classical period. It is this form that we find in the texts of the New Testament.

[15]In addition to these elements, one must take into account gesture, music, and dance, since ancient hymns were not only texts, but were intended to be performed.

experience that was common to both pagan and Christian texts. This is not altogether surprising, as Christians and pagans lived in the same world and used the same languages (Greek and Latin), even if they held different traditions and faiths. Luke and Paul were partly Hellenic in culture. What is interesting is to go beyond this general observation and to try to establish more precisely the essential elements that comprise this common rhetorical language. Forms of expression (such as the hymn), argumentation, stylistic devices, and phraseology are some of them.

This observation raises questions: is it not the case that the similarities I have noted occur on a very general level? Can we not find the same language in other places and other times, as, for example, previously in the Old Testament, or later in the age of the church fathers, for whom the fusion of Christianity and pagan culture was an explicit problem (not to mention other civilizations)? Are there universal aspects of religious rhetoric, anthropological and psycholinguistic constants, or at least essential and persistent practices, such as praising a god by eulogizing his acts and divine power and offering hymns of thanksgiving? The rhetoric of religion allows us to go beyond the differences between particular religions and to identify fundamental rhetorical forms. In this way, we can hope that the rhetorical approach may furnish a new perspective on the study of religion.

The magic of persuasion and the orator as "holy man"

After looking at the rhetorical types and patterns that shape religious discourse, the next step is to explore the religious nature of rhetoric itself. This concerns the power of words, the effectiveness of speech, and the magic of persuasion.

Peitho ("persuasion") was regarded as a goddess. From the beginning of Greek thinking on rhetoric, persuasion was recognized to be a prodigious phenomenon. He who is able to persuade others, who is master of the art of persuasion, thus holds supernatural and almost magical power. This theme was developed by the Greek sophists, notably by Gorgias, and revisited throughout the Graeco-Roman tradition, as shown by Jacqueline de Romilly in her book *Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece*.[16] In antiquity, the charm and fascination that discourse provoked were considered magical. The Greek satirist

[16]Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975.

Lucian compares persuasion to an invisible link that holds listeners captive at a distance, chained by their ears to the tongue of the speaker.[17] Certain sophists and orators were accused of belonging to magical associations.[18] Another sophist, Polemo, could predict the future: simply by observing the faces of two brides, he was able to foresee that their marriage ceremonies would not be completed (as he predicted, one was abducted in the middle of the ceremony, and the other fled).[19]

These examples show that the sophists (in the sense of professional speech-makers and specialists in persuasion) were considered to be endowed with special powers. They were considered "leaders" who had inside them a concentration of the sacred. The sophist thus becomes a kind of "holy man," which was a particularly important phenomenon in late antiquity, as Peter Brown has shown.[20] This phenomenon is a sort of cultural and religious model, incarnated by a series of personalities who claimed to have a relationship with the gods and to have magical powers; they traveled, won admirers and followers, and founded sects. Holy men of this kind were found in Judaism as well as in paganism and Christianity. Many of these holy men, whether Jewish, pagan, or Christian, were connected with the sophistic movement and acted through speech. In this way, the religious dimension of the orator is confirmed: not only is religious discourse rhetorical and not only is there a supernatural effectiveness within discourse, but the orator, as a model figure, is invested with religious powers.

The *Sacred Tales* of Aelius Aristides

To complete this study of the orator as a religious figure, it is useful to look at a very strange and very ill man, Aelius Aristides, a Greek orator who lived in the second century CE. He is an incarnation of the

[17] *Heracles* 3, 5; *Zeus Rants* 45; *Icaromenippus* 3; *Scytha* 11.

[18] Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists* 1.22.2 (523), 2.10.6 (590); Apuleius, *Apology* (*De magia*).

[19] G. Anderson, *Philostratus: Biography and Belles Lettres in the Third Century A.D.* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 142.

[20] P. Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80–101; *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (London: Faber, 1982). See also L. Bieler, *Theios aner: Das Bild des "Göttlichen Menschen" in Spätantike und Früchristentum* (Wien: Höfels, 1935–1936); G. Anderson, *Sage, Saint and Sophist: Holy Men and their Associates in the Early Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 1994).

different aspects we have looked at, illustrating the cross-fertilization of rhetoric and religion. Aelius Aristides belongs to the movement termed the "Second Sophistic." He made speeches at political meetings and ceremonies, and he taught rhetoric. A leading citizen in the Roman Empire, he was part of the Greek-speaking elite, whose ideology he helped shape and spread. Of his works, the *Sacred Tales* is of particular interest as an illustration of the relationship between rhetoric and religion.[21] The very title is significant: corresponding to the Greek *hieroi logoi*, it means "sacred discourses," and therefore unites religion and rhetoric. The expression *hieros logos* was used to denote a divine revelation or the account of the appearance of a god or goddess in mortal form. Aristides' *Sacred Tales* recount visions during which the god Asclepius appeared and gave revelations to the author.

The *Sacred Tales* are a kind of autobiography, divided into six speeches (the end of the sixth has been lost). They cover a hundred pages of Greek text and span twenty years of the author's life. Aristides was about fifty-five when he wrote his memoirs, basing them on memories and detailed notes he made in his youth. Aristides talks primarily about his illnesses and the way in which the god Asclepius cared for him, sending dreams and prescribing remedies. (Asclepius is the Greek name for Aesculapius, the god of medicine.) Aristides' motive for writing the *Sacred Tales* lies in his conviction that he had been chosen by Asclepius and blessed with divine protection, which was exceptional in its duration, its multiple forms, and its effectiveness. Sincerely convinced that his experiences were not ordinary, he wanted to recount them, intending to praise Asclepius and give him thanks, but also to testify to his experiences and persuade non-believers. There is an element of vanity or narcissism in his project, yet he did not allow himself to speak about himself or his successes except when this emphasized the power of the god. Vanity, he believed, was a form of piety.[22]

---

[21]Greek text: B. Keil, *Aelii Aristidis Smyrnaei quae supersunt omnia* 2 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1898): 376–467; English translation: C. A. Behr, *P. Aelius Aristides, The Complete Works* 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1981): 278–353.

[22]The *Sacred Tales* were studied with notable results by two great experts on ancient religious mentalities: see E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), chap. 4; Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), chap. 2; A. J. Festugière, *Personal Religion Among the Greeks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), chap. 6.

The *Sacred Tales* are a precious source for the history of religion and the history of medicine in the second century CE. Yet in addition to religion and medicine, rhetoric is also crucial for this text, though it has largely been neglected. The problem of the composition and the delivery of the speeches is omnipresent in the relationship between Aristides and Asclepius, between the sophist-patient and the god-doctor. Aristides was a writer and an orator, and he explains what gave him the will to make speeches, how it was difficult for him (particularly because of his illness), and how he turned to the god Asclepius for help and advice. Aristides is an example of eloquence inspired by divinity, and here too there are parallels with Christianity.

Aristides' illnesses

Aristides was a sick man for a large part of his life. He contracted acute illnesses, such as an ear infection resulting in septicemia, a tumor of the groin (due, it seems, to either a hernia or an abscess), and smallpox during the epidemic that ravaged Asia Minor. He also suffered chronic illnesses, such as respiratory and digestive problems. Aristides was constantly worried by the state of his abdomen. Finally, on several occasions, it appears that Aristides' general health was distressing. He remained bedridden for long periods of time, weak, unable to sleep, and extremely thin, to such an extent that he claimed to have been struck by "consumption" (*phthoe*) (*Sacred Tales* 3.11). Faced with this list of illnesses, moderns doctors who have studied the case have considered the possibility of a psychosomatic component, based on several pieces of evidence: psychological factors are often an underlying cause for the onset of asthma; the subject was hypersensitive to exterior factors, notably the weather; and he presented symptoms often associated with neurological disorders, like sleep problems, the alternation between depression and hyperactivity, voluntary reclusion, and (especially significant according to doctors) aggression towards colleagues. The importance of such psychological factors is clear in the way Aristides endured his illnesses and was cured of them. For Aristides, his physical condition was only one aspect of things; it was continually being interpreted, modified, and overcome by mental activity, both in dreams and when he was awake.

The psychiatrists who have studied *The Sacred Tales* have unfortunately come to contradictory conclusions, but suffice it to say that the most frequent diagnosis is nervous hysteria. A convincing example of this hysteria would be the convulsive fit that Aristides suffered and which he describes impressively (3.17).

Asclepius' remedies

When he fell ill for the first time, Aristides resorted to human medicine. But he quickly became convinced that doctors were powerless in his case. One day, Asclepius appeared to him for the first time in a dream. Aristides resolved to travel to the sanctuary of Asclepius in Pergamum for treatment. From that moment on and for the rest of his life, he confided in the "providence" (*pronoia*) of the god. Aristides believed that his illnesses were exceptionally serious and that they could therefore only be cured through equally exceptional means, those prescribed by Asclepius.

In the sanctuaries of Asclepius (*Asklepieia*), the patient slept, according to the rite of "incubation" (*kataklisis*), in the sanctuary, and the god sent him dreams containing the remedies he should follow. The priests and doctors present in the sanctuary helped the sick man interpret his dreams and deduce from them the appropriate remedies. This is the treatment Aristides followed at the *Asklepieion* of Pergamum, where he spent a year at the beginning of his illness and where he returned on numerous occasions. In fact, Aristides also received remedies in the form of dreams when he was far away from the sanctuaries because the god appeared to him everywhere. Aristides was particularly happy and proud about this repeated and permanent assistance.

Several of Asclepius' remedies were in no way out of the ordinary and corresponded with the standard medicine at the time: dieting, fasting, induced vomiting, enemas, bloodletting, ointments, and potions of complex composition. Other remedies, however, can be categorized as paradoxical remedies, whose unbelievable and prodigious character Aristides likes to emphasize. The god prescribed bloodletting amounting to "one hundred and twenty liters" in total, the equivalent of about twenty liters in today's measures (clearly not all at the same time). He prescribed the wearing of a poultice for thirty days in a row. He forced him to go riding, despite his illness, and to undertake journeys in the summer when it was stifling hot. When Aristides was suffering from a tumor of the groin, Asclepius forbade him from piercing the abscess, which must have seemed like the only reasonable course of action, and forced him to wait for a long period of time until the cure came about by itself. One might have feared that such remedies could only harm the patient, but this was not the case: every time Aristides undertook treatment, he followed it through to its conclusion and ended up, contrary to all expectations, feeling healthier and regenerated.

The special role of writing, rhetoric, and poetry in the relationship between Aristides and Asclepius

The protection offered to Aristides by Asclepius was not only physical, but also covered the spirit and the soul. Aristides being an orator and a teacher, all the physical ailments were obstacles to his speech-making. Illness prevented him from speaking in public, either because of his generally weak condition, his breathing difficulties, his stomach complaints or his various other pains and incapacities. It prevented him from traveling, which was a further difficulty because sophists in the Roman Empire were itinerant, and it was necessary for them to travel from town to town to give conferences, to speak at ceremonies, and to teach students. As a rhetorical expert, Aristides himself explains these problems in very concrete terms, and he wants to show that Asclepius also understood this aspect of the problem.

The god-doctor believed that it was not enough to restore Aristides' physical health, but that he should also encourage and assist him in his career as an orator. It was not enough to get him back on his feet physically, but he must also give him specific remedies that would allow him to express and develop his rhetorical talent. This assistance given to Aristides is described principally in the fourth and fifth speeches of the *Sacred Tales*. Like the physical remedies, the rhetorical remedies took the form of prescriptions sent in dreams, which can be divided into three groups. (1) Certain dreams urged Aristides, more or less explicitly, to make speeches. (2) Other dreams contained oratorical models. Aristides saw himself, or the god, in the middle of giving a speech. When he woke up, he would try to write down the words he had heard in his dream, which were of an extraordinary quality, yet most often he found it impossible to recall the exact words and remembered only the point of departure or the gist of the speech. Aristides' works include speeches termed "oracular discourse" (*manteutoi*) which, as their exordia indicate, were dreamt before they were written down. They are an important testimony to real-life divine inspiration in the field of rhetoric. (3) The last category consists of more general dreams that had the effect of strengthening Aristides' resolve in his oratorical vocation, praising his talent and placing it on the same level as the great ancients.

These prescriptions, as much as those that were administered to his body, were singular and paradoxical, not only because of where they came from and the way in which they were communicated, but because they forced Aristides to undertake efforts that seemed inappropriate and even dangerous in his condition, and yet showed themselves to be of miraculous benefit. For instance, at the height

of an asthma attack, Asclepius prescribed Aristides to give a conference. Not daring to disobey, he gave it, wondering how on earth he managed. Indeed, at the beginning he could hardly speak. But bit by bit he got his breath back and by the end he was speaking with great ease (4.15–18). On another occasion, a speech was prescribed for a dental infection (4.30). Thanks to Asclepius, Aristides succeeded in being professionally active to such an extent that, given his condition, it was beyond all understanding. The help given by Asclepius was not limited to rhetoric, but included all of Aristides' literary activity, that is to say his poetry as well. The poems were an extension of his discourses, insofar as they were songs celebrating the gods, which continued the rhetorical hymns that Aristides had made his speciality. Unlike the rhetorical hymns, the poems have not been preserved.

Aristides thus benefited from miracles from the point of view of his health and from the point of view of his literary production. But what is intriguing in his case is the fact that literature itself had a healing effect on him. It was not only the purpose, but also the means of his cure. When he did not feel well, Aristides found comfort in the composition of discourse and poems. On his deathbed, between a wild lettuce unction and a clyster, he found peace writing a song about Coronis' wedding and the birth of Asclepius (1.73). Writing was for him a kind of salvation, which allowed him to transcend the limitations imposed by his illness.

Man forms a whole, body and soul. Several passages show that Aristides and certain members of his entourage intuited the convergence and concurrence between the somatic and the psychological. An acquaintance of Aristides, L. Claudius Pardalas, a politician and orator, noticed the link between illness and discourse, and commented with perspicacity on the subject, observing that Aristides' physical illness was, paradoxically, valuable to his oratorical endeavor: "And once that famous Pardalas, who, I would say, was the greatest expert of the Greeks of our time in the science of oratory, dared to say and affirm to me that he believed that I had become ill through some divine good fortune, so that by my association with the god, I might make this improvement" [i.e. an improvement in oratory] (4.27).[23]

[23]Καὶ δὴ Παρδαλᾶς ποτε ἐκεῖνος, ὃν ἐγὼ φαίην ἂν ἄκρον τῶν ἐφ' ἡμῶν Ἑλλήνων γενέσθαι γνῶναι λόγους, ἐτόλμησεν εἰπεῖν πρὸς ἐμὲ καὶ διισχυρίσασθαι, ἦ μὴν νομίζειν τύχῃ τινὶ θείᾳ συμβῆναί μοι τὴν νόσον, ὅπως τῷ θεῷ συγγενόμενος ἐπιδοίην ταύτην τὴν ἐπίδοσιν.

In relation to this, the doctor who was treating Aristides at Pergamum had invented a new remedy. It consisted in a kind of music therapy, based on Aristides' own works: "Whenever I happened to choke, if my throat were suddenly constricted, or my stomach became disordered, or whenever I had some other troublesome attack, the doctor Theodotus, being in attendance and remembering my dreams, used to order the boys [i.e. a chorus] to sing some of my lyric verse. And while they were singing, there arose unnoticed a feeling of comfort, and sometimes everything which pained me went completely away" (4.38).[24] Or in another passage: "We spent the whole period [namely, several years, affected by many severe illnesses] paradoxically in writing and speaking and correcting that which had been written. And mostly we worked on until at least midnight. Next on each following day, having performed our usual routine, we took some little food. And when fasting followed upon vomiting, this work and study was my consolation. So that . . . I think that I should owe no less thanks to the god [Asclepius] for such endurance and strength" (1.60).[25]

In these texts, the interweaving of illness and intellectual activity is shown in the context of religion. Aristides' speech-making, rhetoric, and writing both made him ill, by provoking desire and anxiety, and led him towards recovery and a cure. We might wonder to what extent Aristides was actually seeking a cure. Perhaps it was not a full recovery he wanted, but just to be looked after. Illness, along with the consequent treatment, was for him in some sense the guarantee of the power to continue to write and deliver discourse. The very composition of the *Sacred Tales* was part of this process, because for Aristides it was another means of treating himself through writing. Thus the *Sacred Tales* is a remarkable document, not only in terms of religious medicine and the paradoxical cures linked to the cult of Asclepius, but also in terms of the history of psychology and a particular form of autosuggestion, one that used discourse and poetry to intrude rhetoric into the medical-religious sphere.

---

[24]καὶ ὁπότε ἢ πνίγεσθαι συμβαίνοι, τοῦ τραχήλου ταθέντος ἐξαίφνης ἢ τοῦ στομάχου καταστάντος εἰς ἀπορίας, ἤ τις ἄλλη γένοιτο ἄπορος προσβολή, παρὼν ἂν Θεόδοτος ὁ ἰατρὸς καὶ μεμνημένος τῶν ἐνυπνίων ἐκέλευε τοὺς παῖδας ἄδειν τῶν μελῶν, καὶ μεταξὺ ᾀδόντων λάθρᾳ τις ἐγίγνετο ῥαστώνη, ἔστιν δ' ὅτε καὶ παντελῶς ἀπῄει πᾶν τὸ λυποῦν.

[25]σχεδὸν διημερεύσαμεν παραλόγως γράφοντές τε καὶ λέγοντες καὶ τὰ γεγραμμένα ἐξετάζοντες· καὶ παρατείναντες οὐκ ἔλαττον ἢ εἰς μέσας νύκτας τὰ πλείω, ἔπειτα ἐφ' ἑκάστῃ τῇ ἐπιούσῃ πράξαντες αὖ πάλιν τὰ εἰωθότα οὕτω τροφὴν ἠρούμεθα ὅσην δή· καὶ ὅτε γε ἡ ἐπὶ τῷ ἐμέτῳ ἀσιτία ἐγκατέλαβεν, τοῦτο ἦν τὸ παραμυθησάμενον, ἡ περὶ ταῦτα ἀσχολία τε καὶ διατριβή. Ὥσθ' . . . μηδὲν ἐλάττω μοι προσήκειν οἴεσθαι τῆς περὶ ταῦτα καρτερίας τε καὶ δυνάμεως χάριν εἰδέναι τῷ θεῷ.

As for the relationship between the *Sacred Tales* and other ancient documents on the same subject, suffice it to say that Aristides was probably less unusual than scholars previously believed. He bears witness to a certain type of spiritual adventure that existed during the Roman Empire and that was characterized by a direct relationship between the worshipper and the god, by a form of mystical religiousness, by the desire to withdraw, to flee, and to invent personal solutions in search of the meaning of life. The particular interest of the *Sacred Tales*, in comparison to contemporary parallels, both pagan and Christian, lies in the role played by writing and rhetoric. Because he was an orator and a sophist, Aristides drew on his rhetorical culture in his relationship with Asclepius, which led him to link rhetoric with every stage of his medical-religious adventure, through devices of great literary and psychological complexity, whose importance is crucial to our understanding of the mentalities of antiquity. The *Sacred Tales* offer precise description of repeated instances of inspired rhetoric. Beyond the example of Aristides, they allow us to better understand the phenomena of the authoritative word and rhetoric in general as it existed in Graeco-Roman antiquity.

Conclusion

Religious messages can be analyzed in rhetorical terms and rhetoric itself sometimes shows a religious dimension. Dialogue between these two realities, religion and rhetoric, can be explained by the affinities that exist between persuasion and belief and between art and the sacred. Religious discourse takes rhetorical forms. Conversely, persuasion is in itself somehow superhuman and the orator is somehow sacred. There are other themes where rhetoric and religion cross paths and that could be addressed if space permitted. For example, there is anti-religious discourse, insofar as rhetoric is used in a polemical way in order to refute adversary religions, deny their gods, and offend the opponents. This is the rhetoric of blasphemy. And in the face of blasphemy, there is euphemism: euphemism in the proper sense of religious silence, of respect and fear in the face of taboos, of concern to utter only compliant or authorized words.[26] There is also the feeling of belonging to a community, which is im-

[26] F. De Martino and A. H. Sommerstein, eds., *Studi sull'eufemismo* (Bari: Levante, 1999); S. Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

portant in religious communities and in the rhetorical community formed by the audience listening to a speaker. We have by no means exhausted the links that unite rhetoric and religion, because the links are numerous and complex. The relationship between rhetoric and religion opens many paths of research.