

Rhetoric as a Political Tool in Shaping the Byzantine Theocracy

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The transmission of rhetoric from classical Greece to Byzantium provides a salutary study of the way in which the manipulation of language can shape not only the cultural and political ethos of a civilisation but its *Weltanschauung* as well. The unique Byzantine world-view was shaped by two major factors: the classical rhetorical tradition which provided the basis for the education system, and the gradual evolution of theological concepts of government derived from pagan elements, chiefly ruler worship, and promulgated by the deliberate use of rhetorical techniques inherited from antiquity. The principles of classical rhetoric were brilliantly applied by both Church and State to manipulate public sentiment to effect a compromise between pagan and Christian elements in an effort to unite the far-flung polyglot peoples of the Empire. Evidence of their success can be found in the thousand-year duration of the Byzantine civilisation, while at the same time providing one of the many examples of the potential of this classical legacy to transcend time and place.

The breadth of this topic dictates that any attempt to encapsulate it in a short presentation can only aspire to a synoptic overview of the main features of what was a long and tortuous process of semantic and political manipulation.

Byzantium was heir both to the great classical pagan tradition and to the new spiritual dimensions of Christianity. How its best minds reconciled these paradoxical elements is one of the outstanding achievements of this civilisation. In effecting this transformation, the manipulation of the classical rhetorical and philosophical tradition by both Church and State and the gradual evolution of theological concepts of government derived from the pagan cult of ruler worship played major roles.

Of these forces at play, however, it was classical rhetoric in its seminal role as the cornerstone of Byzantine education which was to exert an incalculable influence on the direction taken by the newly established Roman empire in the east. However, it must be emphasised here that although stemming from the classical tradition, rhetoric in its transmission from antiquity to the Byzantine era underwent myriad changes and modulations to encompass the needs of both Church and State.

The hybrid composition of the eastern half of the Roman Empire can be glimpsed by following the spread of Christianity as it swept over the Hellenistic world: from its origins in Syria, then a province of Rome, administered by a Graeco-Roman governing class with a mixed population of Aramaeans, Cappadocians, Armenians and Jews influenced by Hellenistic and Persian ideas, to Asia Minor with its mixture of Semitic, Iranian and Hellenistic elements.

A powerful force working for the empire's first ruler, Constantine, in uniting this population was

the common assumption of a Roman monarchy based on Hellenistic principles. [...] [The Greeks] personified Rome and her might as a goddess [...] since their political life was rooted in the *polis*, or city organization, and it was customary for them to worship their gods as protectors of their cities. [...] Having created the *Thea Roma*, the Greeks found it natural to express their political loyalty in terms of religious worship (Dvornik, 1966:487).

Further exploiting this established tradition, Constantine had only to adopt Christianity as the State religion to complete the consolidation of the empire, and at the same time provide a means for his subjects to be integrated into this great *oecumene* by the simple process of embracing Christianity.

The politically ingenious outcome was that at the fringes of the empire, the central image projected by the physical and metaphysical Constantinople, the liturgy, and the emperor in his role as God's vicar on earth served as an icon to which people could relate, regardless of their own local cults, ensuring a sense of participation and belonging that had the power to gloss over their differences:

As soon as Constantine revealed his sympathies for the Christian religion, the Christians, already schooled in Christian-Hellenistic dialectics, were ready to find not only God in the reflection of an earthly monarchy, but also the emperor in the reflection of the divine monarchy (Dvornik, 1966:611).

This imitative, mimetic aspect of Byzantine thought involving reliance on a model and characterised by excessive admiration for and emulation of divine prototypes, comprises one of the most profound contributions of classical rhetorical theory to the Byzantine world-view and possibly one of its most destructive, in that it encouraged a conservative mind-set that abhorred change.

However, the concept of the divine model worked brilliantly in the context of the empire, with the *deisis* depicting the emperor and his court as a mirror image of the celestial kingdom of God and his saints. The cumulative effect of these influences on the future direction of Byzantine government can be summed up as:

Platonic thought, transmitted by such interpreters as the pagan Plotinus, the Jew Philo, and the Christian heretic Origen, which was combined with the Oriental tradition of Hellenistic monarchy and the pragmatic authority of the Roman Imperator, that formed the foundation on which Eusebius [Constantine's biographer and eulogist] built up his theory of government (Runciman, 1977:162).

In clarifying this concept further Runciman (1977:22) foreshadows the merging of pagan and Christian imagery when he points out that “The king is not God among men but the Viceroy of God. He is not the *logos* incarnate but is in a special relation with the *logos*”.

To define what is meant by the term “*logos*” in this context is fraught with difficulties as it is a concept that encompasses multiple meanings and interpretations. However we can say that in terms of “Judaeo-Christian rhetoric [...] the analogue of *logos* is the divine truth, as enunciated by God [...] by his sending his Son into the world, the Christian *Logos*. But this truth is not proved, as in classical rhetoric. Its acceptance is dependent on God’s grace in allowing each individual to understand the message” (Kennedy, 1981:25).

In a broader sense, the Stoics believed that the universe was penetrated by a cosmic reason, a *logos*. In a significant association of ideas Armstrong and Markus (1960:144) note that “those who lived and thought in accordance with the disseminated *logos*, even if knowing nothing of Christ, lived and thought in accordance with the truth. This is the first serious attempt in the history of Christian thinking to come to terms with pagan philosophy by representing the best of pagan thought as part of the ‘preparation of the Gospel’”. For Christian apologists it was a short step from linking philosophy and theology to bringing rhetoric into the fold by seizing on one of its more devious aspects — the concept of obscurity — as providing “a mystical means of expressing divine truth”. In seeking justification they were able to draw upon Aristotle’s contention that although clarity is the overall aim of rhetoric, obscurity is permissible under certain circumstances, such as making the listener work harder to understand, or preserving certain knowledge for initiates only. The net result as Kostas so succinctly put it was that “the Christian now said that [...] theology and rhetoric are one. [...] Rhetoric is now a sacred art. [...] It is a sacrament [...] a *μυστήριον* [...] for the act of formal expression in words is a religious act, charged with divinity and embracing at once the *logos* of man in the *Logos* of God” (Kostas, 1973:27).

In view of the role played by the concept of obscurity in Byzantine culture, it is instructive to trace its origins in the practice of rhetoric in antiquity.

Born of the need for citizens to conduct their own defence in the law courts, rhetoric earned a reputation for being immoral in that the practitioner was concerned not with justice but with winning the case. Under these conditions it is not surprising that ways and means to conceal the real intent of the words developed side by side with other more positive aspects of rhetoric.

Though some writings on rhetoric were extant before his time, Aristotle is credited with writing the first systematic treatise on the subject. And it is in his definition of rhetoric as “an offshoot of [...] ethical studies [...]” which in turn “[...] may fairly be called political [...] and for this reason rhetoric masquerades as political science” (13158a23) that one can gain the first inkling of the ingenious way in which this ancient art was to be pressed into the service of Christianity by the Byzantine theocracy in its confrontation with pagan elements.

Inherent in Aristotle's definition is the inference that rhetoric embodies moral values. In fact he explicitly states that the rhetor should be a good man — sentiments that are echoed by the Stoics and Roman rhetors like Quintilian, leaving the way open for the church to eventually rid rhetoric of its "immoral" image and to invest it with Christian ethical values. For the early Apologists this was a step closer to the Platonic ideal which deplored the use of rhetoric to sway a jury regardless of the justice or otherwise of the result in what seemed a wasted opportunity to exploit its great philosophical potential to reveal the truth of whatever topic it had under consideration. This perceived flaw also led one of the Byzantines' most trenchant critics, Romilly Jenkins, to assert that certain exercises "in which pupils alternately attacked and defended the same proposition with equal ardor and persuasiveness" made for instability, leading him to characterise rhetoric as "the most powerful and pernicious influence of Hellenism on the mind of Byzantium" (Maguire, 1981:3).

In addition to the moral reservations associated with rhetoric, problems of language and style associated with Christian literature had to be solved before rhetoric could reach its full potential as a propaganda instrument of the Church and State. As Kustas notes:

The Apologists of the Second Century, in their attempt to explain and defend Christianity, were necessarily addressing the pagan world and argued in terms which that society could understand; moreover they utilized Attic language and style in order to be taken seriously by an educated audience, though in their communications to each other they held to the humble *koine* (Kustas, 1973:21).

In the opinion of Ševčenko, this symbiotic relationship between Church and State also meant that

the literature of the church absorbed many of the characteristics of late antique rhetoric, with respect to both structure and embellishment. The techniques of oratory were imprinted upon the minds of those who read Christian hymns and sermons or heard them in the liturgy, even if they had received no training in rhetoric; both learned patrons and less well educated artists were exposed to the forms of rhetoric (Ševčenko, 1982:II 55).

As a result, rhetoric was not transmitted to Byzantium in its undiluted form directly from classical Greece, but was shaped by many influences before reaching the schoolrooms of Byzantium via the treatises of great masters like Hermogenes and Aphthonius. The standard method of teaching rhetoric which evolved was through writing exercises called the "progymnasmata" which held up the oratory of the great classical rhetors as models for students to emulate and were used by the Byzantine populace at all academic levels.

The stream of rhetoric favoured by the Christians in trying to effect an interface with pagan thought evolved from Plato's theory of Forms or Categories of style. This was to find its Byzantine expression in the *De Ideis* of Hermogenes, who defined stylistic behaviour in terms of Platonic ideals. There is therefore a continuous line of influence from Plato to the theories of Hermogenes whose "Christianization" gives us

an insight into “the interrelation of Neoplatonic and Christian thought and its application to rhetorical questions” (Clarke, 1953:131).

The gradual transition from pagan philosophical concepts to Christian thought processes was accomplished also by semantic adaptation, such as Psellus’ attempt to achieve such a mutation simply by changing “gods” to “God”. Hunger provides even more flagrant examples:

The weight of words was deliberately and aggressively changed by the Christians. They deprived a number of expressions of their previous usage and usurped them for their own cause. The best known examples of this procedure is the change in meaning of *philosophia*, *philosophos*, *philosophein*. In this case the development had already begun among the Jews, for instance, by Philo of Alexandria, and was furthered by Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesarea and many others. [...] The important innovation was to move *philosophia* from the realm of theory to that of practical ethics so that the word was finally “conquered” to mean “Christian life” in the sense of the “ascetic life of a monk” so that *philosophos* could be equated with “monk”. [...] The purpose was to change consciousness by changing language (Hunger, 1981:40–41).

In fact the whole process was “changing the very way words were looked upon” (Kustas, 1973:55).

Embroiled in this semantic struggle churchmen concerned at the perceived “simplicity” of the Gospels were at pains to distance themselves from the classical forms of the language:

Many churchmen actively championed the use of the lowly speech and rejected “the fine style of the Hellenes” which they compared to the proverbial honey that drips from the mouth of a whore. They argued that to cultivate the epic and iambic metres was not only childish; it was an insult to Christ and the apostles (Mango, 1980:234–35).

This was in contrast to the school of thought which attempted to make the Scriptures more linguistically sophisticated. Bizarre efforts to compensate for the apparent simplicity of these texts strained the ingenuity of Christian rhetors, who had been prohibited from teaching pagan authors and who in order to have a subject to teach attempted to

transpose the Scriptures into an antique form or genre: the Old Testament was rendered in hexameters or iambs; the New Testament transformed into Platonic dialogues. [...] About the middle of the fifth century, the Greek Psalter, the most frequently read part of the Septuagint, was translated into Homeric verse; a life of a saint — St. Cyprian — was rewritten in hexameters by the Christian empress Eudocia; authentic Homeric lines were put together by the same empress and others and made into *centos*, “quilts”, or a continuous narration, in order to render, among other things, Gospel stories and parts of Genesis in epic diction (Ševčenko, 1982:II 60).

In this theocratic milieu the liturgy became a central focus of the linguistic conflict, leading Pelikan (1974:6) to comment that “Byzantine theology included a force virtually unknown in the West until the Renaissance or even later: the theological

speculations of an educated laity”. Geanakoplos (1976:42) goes so far as to claim that “the Orthodox faith served in a very real sense as the basis not only for the emperor’s authority but for the very existence of the empire”.

However certain critics, notably Nicol, have perceived this symbiotic union as detrimental to the development of the Orthodox Church:

Some Orthodox theologians of today have deplored this identification of Church and society. Alexander Schmemmann writes: “The tragedy of the Byzantine church consisted precisely in the fact that it became merely the *Byzantine* church, that it merged itself with the Empire, not so much administratively, as, above all, psychologically, in its own self-awareness. The Empire became for it the absolute and supreme value, unquestioned, inviolable, and self-evident” (Nicol, 1979:5).

Yet the celebration of the Eastern Orthodox liturgy in the huge basilica of Hagia Sofia in the capital was one of the great audio-visual spectacles of its age. The combination of chant, the flickering light of hundreds of candles and lamps bringing to life the gold encrusted mosaics around the walls depicting the life of Christ amid clouds of incense reflected not only the heavenly hierarchy but also the full state panoply of the imperial tradition when the Emperor presided over the service. In fact the liturgy has been viewed as one of the greatest creative achievements of Byzantium, in spite of the fact that it was a political compromise:

the liturgy of the “Great Church” was a synthesis of disparate elements, rather than an original creation. This synthetic and “catholic” character reflects faithfully the role of Byzantium in politics and theology. As an empire, Byzantium had to integrate the various cultural traditions which composed it, and as the center of the imperial church, it continually attempted to maintain a balance between the various local theological trends which divided Christendom after the fourth century (Meyendorff, 1974:116).

Beyond the political level, the impact of the liturgy was even more profound in its influence on the literature, art, architecture and iconography of Byzantium:

The central act of the liturgy gathered together all the diverse strands of their complex origins. In its complete and final form the liturgy conveyed, through an infinite sequence of visual and verbal imagery, poetic allegory and scriptural allusion, the Byzantine view of the Christian universe (Mango, 1984:46).

The iconic centre of this universe — the basilica of Hagia Sofia — functioned as a form of external rhetoric:

Christian architecture with its mystic intent to express the invisible by means of the visible, appropriated the ideological concepts already associated with imperial Roman architecture [...] inspired by the ideas and ceremonies associated with the towered gateways, triumphal arches, and sacred palaces of the Roman emperors. [...] These motifs in the figurative imagery and rituals of both Antiquity and the Middle Ages persisting as celestial and cosmic symbols in Christian art and architecture, link together in one tradition the thinking of the mediaeval period with that of Rome and the Hellenic East (Baldwin Smith, 1956:4–5).

The Byzantine liturgy also provided the setting for the “acclamations” to the emperor, drawing on ancient eastern sources in sanctioning the ruler’s right to rule. These, in association with the litanies of the Latin church, were to provide a model for the western acclamatory form — the *laudes regiae* — in the sacring of the ruler, as Kantorowicz (1958) has revealed in his brilliant evocation of the role played by the acclamatory form in the shifting balance of power between church and state in the Middle Ages. A more recent indication of the power latent in this rhetorical form was the reintroduction of the medieval acclamations into the papal election ritual by Pope Pius X.

It can be seen then that far from being the static reactionary civilisation it has often been depicted as, the creative aspects of Byzantine culture have exerted a profound effect upon western developments which have not been sufficiently acknowledged.

Since the demise of the Byzantine Empire, the Aristotelian version of rhetoric has undergone many revivals and challenges as new attitudes and insights into language and meaning have brought in their wake studies in linguistics and semiotics. Nevertheless the art of rhetoric in its broadest sense survives because it is the very fabric of language — an essential part of the framework within which human communication operates with all its potential for misunderstandings and lack of clarity, as the Byzantine experience demonstrates.

No better description of the power exerted by rhetoric in the Byzantine context can be found than that of one of the central protagonists in the modern era in the continuing struggle to define language when he describes the domination of rhetoric as a system of language as “greater and more tenacious than any political empire in its dimensions and its duration” (Barthes, 1988:14).

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