

Three Rhetorical Saints

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I teach rhetoric, an unusual way to make a living, and a very ancient one as well. What is rhetoric? I am often asked. Of course, the term is used today almost exclusively as a means of dismissing someone else's ideas, that is, as an insult. Just last week I heard this comment on the radio, "What we're getting from Congress is not really a trade policy, it's just rhetoric." So, to say that you teach rhetoric is guaranteed to create confusion. Today it's like saying you teach gossiping or lying. The Greek philosopher Plato first gave the term rhetoric its negative meaning when he attacked the teachers of rhetoric, known as Sophists, in Athens 2,500 years ago. Plato lumped all of the politicians, speechmakers, lawyers, snake oil salesmen, and anyone else who made their living by persuasion under the heading "Rhetores." In fact, some classical scholars think he actually coined the term "rhetoric" to disparage what these people did for a living, that is, persuade other people. Plato described this despicable activity in one of his dialogues as "foul and ugly."

But Plato reserved a special scorn for those who actually stooped so low as to teach rhetoric to others. Teaching people to persuade others was, if anything, worse than being a professional, paid persuader. One Athenian critic of Plato's day called teachers of rhetoric "public nuisances." Aristotle, Plato's pupil for a time, and himself a teacher of rhetoric, among other subjects, tried to rescue the reputation of rhetoric by defining it as the morally neutral art of critical thinking and public argument. Nothing wrong with teaching this kind of thing. So, from a very early point in western history, the question of how to think about teachers of rhetoric has been hotly contested. Plato would certainly not have agreed with giving one an endowed chair.

As an aside, I think the term people are looking for when they use "rhetoric" as an insult is the good old term sophistry, which was and is the practice of persuasion without any regard for truth or substance. Sophistry implies verbal trickery, emotional appeals, specious arguments, florid ornaments, that is, winning an argument by hook or by crook, and doing so for a handsome fee. No wonder the Athenians were shocked when their sons flocked to the schools of the Sophists.

So, why would someone choose to teach rhetoric? I hope you will indulge me in a little intellectual autobiography. As long as I can remember I have greatly enjoyed the give and take of argument. This is likely a matter of natural disposition, though I have not heard that a gene for the love of argument has been discovered. It is also likely a matter of upbringing, for I was raised in a family that liked to argue. Not the angry, belittling kind of argument that Archie Bunker and his son-in-law were so famous for, but rather the vigorous give-and-take of statement and rebuttal, of point and counter-point, that marks the difference between a polite conversation and a really interesting one. Janet has told me that she was at first taken aback by this quality of my family, but gradually came to accept and even appreciate it. So, by both nature and nurture I am a lover of argument.

And, as long as I am confessing to things as questionable as teaching rhetoric and loving to argue, I might as well add that there are few things I appreciate more than genuine eloquence,

real mastery of the sounds, the rhythms, the sheer power of the spoken word. As a child I would listen attentively to Eric Severeid deliver his commentaries on the CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite. I seldom understood a word the aged journalist was saying, but I loved to hear him say his words so well. It was this quality of absolute command of the energy of language that later drew me to writers like Joseph Conrad and Mark Twain (both of whom are best appreciated when read aloud), to the speeches of Abraham Lincoln, and to the lyrics of Cole Porter. This gravitation toward the rhetorical in both of its aspects—as vibrant argument and verbal aesthetics—was, though I did not know it until I started graduate school, setting a course for my professional life.

The other great factor in my developing intellectual life was faith. I mark my Christian conversion from the age of about sixteen, and it was for me a dramatic event. Immediately upon entering college in 1972, these two apparently incompatible strands—the rhetorical and the spiritual—began to be woven into a single cord. All it took for me to recognize the strength of my impulse to argue about matters of faith was a philosophy professor telling me that what I believed was, well, irrational. We were, as they say, off to the races. He and I had several stimulating exchanges on this topic, and he tired of the interaction before this eager freshman did.

Not surprisingly, my Christian conversion led me immediately into the study of the Bible. And I knew that some Christians believed that faith and argument had little to do with one another. My exchange with the philosophy prof seemed like a legitimate intellectual as well as spiritual endeavor. But, did the Bible actually support this activity of arguing with others about one's faith, of seeking to persuade others toward belief? One day while reading Peter's first epistle I was riveted by a verse that helped me to resolve this tension between faith and rhetoric. There it was, I Peter chapter 3 and verse 15. "Always be prepared to offer a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is within you, but do it with gentleness and reverence." This quickly became my eleventh commandment, and, I preached it as widely and often as I could. Why, Christians who weren't doing this were just dropping the ball, maybe even living in sin. Hadn't they read first Peter? So, on the strength of this single exhortation, Peter became for me the rhetorical apostle, the one who said it was all right to be a Christian and a rhetorician.

And there would be other such influences in the coming years. I don't recall now how or when it happened, but someone at some point during my undergraduate days at Fresno State—the Harvard of the San Joaquin Valley—handed me a paperback copy of C. S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*. To paraphrase the poet John Keats, I felt as if a new planet had swum into my ken. Behold, here was someone doing exactly what Peter exhorted all believers to do, and doing it with a breathtaking command of both argument and style. It was love at first paragraph. I read all of Lewis I could get my hands on—*The Problem of Pain, Miracles, The Screwtape Letters, Letters to Malcolm, A Grief Observed, Surprised by Joy, God in the Dock*. Little did I know then that C. S. Lewis was the favorite author of at least a hundred million people. As an untutored undergraduate, I thought I had discovered him. Here was a true Christian apologist, a defender of the faith, a writer who lived and breathed I Peter 3: 15, that is, here was a Christian rhetorician. With literally sophomoric naiveté I thought, "If only I could be like C. S. Lewis." I knew even then that I had neither Lewis' natural gifts nor his educational opportunities. But, ah, to dream.

And then I stumbled onto this line from Lewis' essay entitled "Christian Apologetics." It struck me like a second encounter with I Peter 3:15. "What we want," Lewis wrote, "is not more little books about Christianity, but more little books by Christians on other subjects—with their Christianity latent." And then he added, "Our business is to present that which is timeless (the same yesterday, today and tomorrow) in the particular language of our own age." Lewis seemed to be saying that books could be inherently persuasive, *and* that Christians should exploit this possibility. Some time later I read Lewis' novel, *Out of the Silent Planet*. There it was—the perfect example of a little book with its Christianity latent. This is a science fiction story about a humanities professor (not unlike Lewis himself) who is kidnapped and taken by another professor—a physicist—to Mars. I won't try to summarize the book, but Lewis weaves a great deal of Christian theology into the story in a manner both appealing and persuasive.

Could Lewis really have meant to persuade his readers to accept some or perhaps all of Christian theology by reading this little book? Indeed he did! In a letter responding to a fan in 1939, immediately after the publication of *Out of the Silent Planet*, Lewis wrote these words. "Of the sixty or so reviews of the book, only two have shown any inkling that the Bent One [a Satan character in the book] was anything other than my own invention. In more capable hands this might be used to the evangelization of England. Any amount of theology can now be smuggled into the reader's mind under the cover of a good romance without their knowing it." C. S. Lewis, Christian apologist and theology smuggler, became, after Peter, the second of my rhetorical saints.

Around 1994 I set out to write a history of the discipline of rhetoric, a little book on a subject other than Christianity. I wanted this book to both tell the history of rhetoric in an accessible and friendly way, but also to emphasize the potential for argument and persuasion to be used for good purposes such as building communities and doing justice. That is, I wanted Christianity to be latent in my little book. One of the most gratifying compliments I have ever received came a few years later when a young graduate student e-mailed me. He wanted some help with a research question having to do with the history of rhetoric, so I called him up and we talked. After a short conversation, he said, "I knew you were a Christian believer after reading your book on the history of rhetoric." I said, "How did you know that?" He replied, "it was pretty clear to me from the things you emphasized and the way you wrote." I still have this sneaking suspicion that someone put him up to saying that, but it sure made me feel good.

From Peter's "always be prepared" and Lewis' "more little books," I want to move to a third rhetorical saint, another writer who helped me to realize that it was alright to be a Christian who both taught and practiced rhetoric. This writer grew up in North Africa during the late Roman period, 400 years after Peter and 1500 years before Lewis. Like so many young men of his day, he was drawn to the sophists and rhetoricians who provided public entertainment, legal defense, and education in oratory and argument. St. Augustine, as we now know him, became a master of rhetoric, and for some time made his living as a teacher of the art in Milan and other Mediterranean cities. Before his own conversion, Augustine believed, as did all true rhetoricians, that rhetoric revealed two very human facts. First, for every argument, the human mind is capable of creating a counter-argument. Second, that the truth emerges from the clash of arguments.

Whereas Christians might have no difficulty affirming the first of these foundation stones of rhetoric, the second is more problematic. It does not, after all, reflect a very Christian position regarding truth. No believer in a divine, absolute and revealed truth would ever accept the notion that truth emerges from the clash of arguments, whether in a courtroom or anywhere else. Rather, the Christian conviction is that truth is absolute, unchanging and unaffected by human reasoning or argument. So, how can a Christian also be a rhetorician?

Augustine, the notorious sinner, the member of the secret sect of the Manichaees, gave his heart to Christ after much prayer by his mother St. Monica and along series of discussions with the great Christian sage, St. Ambrose. What would become of his love of rhetoric now? Does the truth still emerge from the clash of arguments for a man who once said he was converted from rhetoric to Christianity? Augustine was eventually made Bishop of the city of Hippo in North Africa. Here he found himself charged with educating his parishioners and their children, many of whom were deeply suspicious of rhetoric, and for good reason. After all, had not these skills of debate, persuasion and oratory been developed by notorious pagans such as Gorgias, Protagoras and Cicero? These men were not followers of Christ. On the contrary, most were worldly skeptics who worshipped no god at all. They placed their confidence, not in Christ, but in their rhetorical skills. How could the great Christian Bishop in good conscience prepare his pupils to practice the persuasive principles of the pagans? How suspect to instruct his students in the speaking skills of the skeptical sophists? How questionable to inculcate in his catechans a concern for the vacuous contraptions of the connivers of classical times? How odious to orient the innocents to the empty ornaments of the impish orators, ornaments such as, well, alliteration, which I just used badly at least four times in a row?

And, certainly these pious parents in Augustine's parish had a point. OK, five times in a row. Spiritual truth does not emerge from the clash of arguments. St. Paul, the greatest Christian spokesperson of them all, had spoken against the Sophists and their rhetoric when he wrote to the Corinthians, "Where is the sage, where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" Nowhere were worldly wisdom, human sagacity, the skills of debate more concentrated and more elevated than in the rhetoric of the Greeks and Romans.

However, Augustine was an astute enough rhetorician himself to recognize that Paul also was a rhetorician of some note. In the very passage cited he is employing rhetorical devices, even as he speaks out against the orators, debaters and sages. Who can miss the parallelism and striking rhythm of, "Where is the sage? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?" That's just beautiful from a rhetorical point of view. Yes, Paul knew his rhetoric, and he employed it against his opponents.

Augustine also knew that, despite the objections of Christian parents, their children might one day have to answer opponents of the faith as he so often did himself, that is, might have to offer a defense for the hope that was within. And, in the absence of rhetorical training, this could be difficult, perhaps impossible, to do. And so, Augustine resolved the dilemma with these immortal words, "Why should falsehood have an advocate, and the truth not?" In this way did Augustine, the teacher of rhetoric who converted to Christianity, set a rhetorical direction for

Christianity in the Western world. Christianity would be a faith that both knew and practiced rhetoric.

It is true that Christianity asserts a single, absolute and universally valid truth that does not emerge from the clash of arguments. Peter knew this, as did Lewis, Augustine, and Paul. However, that universal truth is often contested, and thus must often be defended. Here rhetoric, well practiced, can play a crucial role. At the same time, the church itself often sharpens its understanding of the truth it proclaims through argument and counter-argument.

Christianity is, to my way of thinking, a radically public faith, a faith always asserting itself, always intruding, always making its case. Is it too strong to say, then, that Christianity is an arguing faith, a debating faith, a rhetorical faith. I have tried to keep this idea in front of me in my teaching, as well as in my research into religious controversy. "All other things being equal," Aristotle wrote in his book *Rhetoric*, "the truth is more persuasive than is error. But," he adds, "many audiences are not capable of discerning what is true, and if the truth is vanquished, it is the fault of the advocates." If the truth is vanquished, it is the fault of the advocates. I have sought to be one of those advocates, to write my little books with their Christianity latent, to be prepared to offer a defense of the hope that is within me, to ensure through my teaching and example that the truth would have its advocates. And, I have appreciated the opportunity to teach in a college which has supported my efforts to be both a Christian scholar, and a teacher of rhetoric.

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