RELIGIOUS RHETORIC AND PUBLIC DELIBERATION: PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS

YEHOSHUA GITAY

Abstract

The matter of Religious Rhetoric may be discussed under two main categories: in the first, Religion is merely a means of argumentation and in the second, Religion is the object of the argumentation. The first category may be defined as "agreements of certain special audiences" which is distinguished from the "universal audience." The "universal audience" constitutes a wide range of agreement, which is based as a rule on the general knowledge, experience and common sense of people. This agreement functions rhetorically as the starting point of an argument while the speaker (writer) seeks to begin the argument from a point shared with the audience at large, the "universal audience." However, an argument that aims to reach an agreement on the basis of theology (i.e. a religious system, or sacred texts) cannot capture the "universal audience." The audience's presupposition under such specific cases is limited to a specific group that shares a specific language and specific premises accepted only by them as self-evidence. What is usually called common sense consists of a series of beliefs which are accepted within a particular society, and which the members of that society suppose to be shared by every reasonable being.

Yehoshua Gitay is Professor of Hebrew Language and Literatures and Co-Director of the Centre for Rhetoric Studies, University of Cape Town, email: gitay@beattie.uct.ac.za.

On 11 January 2000, President Mbeki addressed the Centenary Synod of the Ethiopian Episcopal Church in Port Elizabeth (Mbeki 2000).[1] He started his speech by quoting the late President of the African National Congress, Oliver Tambo, who approached the World Consultation of the World Council of Churches in 1980 as follows:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

> *And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth* (Genesis 1, 27-28).

The President of the African National Congress (ANC) – by no means a religious organisation – wrestled with the question of human equality in the context of Apartheid. He sought to demonstrate his argument for human equality through a language which was perceived by his audience as an authority. As the ANC president addressed a religious audience, which regards the Biblical Canon as an absolute authority, he chose to quote the Biblical verse of the creation of humankind.

Nevertheless, when President Mbeki delivered his opening address to the National Conference on Racism (30 August 2000) he condemned racism on the following grounds: "It is both anti-human and constitutes a gross violation of human rights" (Mbeki 2000). Taking for granted the liberal nature of the delegates there was no need – the speaker felt – to argue for racism as a violation of human rights. For this specific audience, gathering together under the conviction that racism was evil, the issue was a matter of self-evidence. That is to say, for this liberal audience, there was neither a need for arguing the case nor a need to arm the claim with an authority which justified the claim. For them Racism is axiomatically anti-human. We observe that the case of human equality can be argued either as a religious matter or as a humanistic principle. In other words, the same issue may be argued on different grounds, depending on the audience's acceptance, each of which is approached via a specific rhetorical strategy.

The issue is well demonstrated through the following open letter of the then the Dean of the Anglican Church, Desmond Tutu to the South African Prime Minister, John Vorster in 1976. The Dean seeks to persuade the Prime Minister that he should not pursue the policy of Apartheid any further. Rhetorically, our question is how the African man, the victim of Apartheid, intends to appeal to the leader of the oppressive regime to accept his call for human rights. He motivates his claim through a chain of arguments which constitutes three cycles. First the Dean approaches the Prime Minister as a member of the human family which shares, as such, fundamental human feelings. The African writes as follows to the Afrikaner:

> *I know you to be a loving and caring father and husband, a doting grandfather who has experienced the joys and anguish of family life, its laughter and gaiety, its sorrows and pangs … you have loved, you have wept, you have watched by the bed of a sick one whom you loved… I am writing to you as one human person to another human person* (Allen 1994, 7-8).

Fatherhood is a basic human feeling, shared by every human being regardless of his religious belief or colour. Fathers and grandfathers may identify with one

another. Kenneth Burke has considered this sort of identification between human beings – on the basis of a common feelings or ideas – as the core of persuasion. He writes as follows: "In being identified with (B), (A) is 'substantially one' with a person other than himself" (Burke 1969, 21).

This situation of being "substantially one" is the goal of persuasion. You might be persuaded while you identify with the position/situation of the one who seeks to persuade you. Tutu, the father, is addressing Vorster, the father. This is a humanistic category of persuasion, which transcends racism and religion.

Tutu's letter does not cease here. He sharpens his humanistic approach through a reference to the "Human person gloriously created in the image of the selfsame God." This refers to the Genesis account of creation (1, 27-28), which specifies not only the equality of human beings but also their creation in the image of God; every person with no exception and with no distinction. Nonetheless, the appeal to the Scriptures is designed for a smaller circle of people rather than everyone. Indeed, it is designed for every father and grandfather, as earlier. The smaller circle is confined to people who accept the Scriptures as their authority. Assessing the argument of authority, Perelman points out that "one resorts to it [authority] when agreement on the question involved is in danger of being debated" (1969, 308). The argument from authority is not debatable.

Tutu turns now to his third argumentative cycle in his appeal to the head of the Apartheid regime. The second circle might still be too wide. It constitutes a religious audience, but Christians and Jews alike accept the first five books of Moses as a sacred authority. Hence, Tutu now limits the periscope of his addressees further. He directs his argument specifically to members of the Christian faith, addressing Vorster, the Christian believer as follows:

> *I am writing to you as one human person to another human person, gloriously created in the image of God, redeemed by the selfsame Son of God who for all our sakes died on the Cross … I am writing to you, Sir, as one Christian to another, for through our common baptism we have been made members of and are united in the Body of our dear Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. This Jesus Christ … has broken down all that separates us irrelevantly – such as race, sex, culture, status, etc. In this Jesus Christ we are all for ever bound together as one redeemed humanity, black and white together* (Allen 1994, 8).

One Christian appeals to his fellow Christian. This is an appeal to the authority of the Religious Dogma, restricted to a specific community of believers who accept this Dogma as a premise.

So far we have dealt with matters which seek to convey a message that might be argued on a religious basis while the message itself does not emerge as strictly religious matter. In other words, religion has been a means – a strategy – for delivering the message persuasively. The religious argument here functions as a means of persuasion which might be replaced by another argument such as liberal humanism. The matter depends, therefore, on the addressees' premise of acceptance, e.g. Religion versus Humanism. The audience's acceptance determines the source of the argument. Perelman, who insists that a successful argument must start from the audience's position, makes his point as follows:

> *To make his discourse effective, a speaker must adapt to his audience. What constitutes this adaptation, which is a specific requisite for argumentation?*

It amounts essentially to this: the speaker can choose as his points of departure only the theses accepted by those he addresses (1981, 21).

The following example may further illustrate this notion of religious argumentation. The Anglican Archbishop of South Africa, Njongonkulu Ndungane, published an article which urges South Africa to grow up as a mature country using the talents of her people. Unfortunately, there are many talented people who are sealed in prisons. The Archbishop calls for the release of the useful talents. He writes as follows: I think that we should find a way to harness their skills and talents for the benefit of South African society (Ndungane 2000).

How does he argue his case? The Archbishop motivates his claim as follows: To be a person of faith means to have a faith in a Supreme Being and in the innate goodness of people. … Our belief in redemption is a signal of compromise with evil rather than a potential victory over evil. The rationale of the argument is clear: if we are ready to compromise with evil, and the country needs talent but the talented are enclosed in prisons, then by inference we need to release these talented people. This argument is a fundamental exercise of syllogism – moving from the general (compromise with evil) to the particular (the talented prisoners):

A (compromise) = B (imprisoned talented)
B = C (the country's needs)
A (compromise) = C (the country's needs)

The Archbishop, manifesting his religious Dogma as his argumentative premise has argued the issue of releasing the prisoners as an appeal to reason. That is, having presented the religious premise, the argument is continued as a process of deduction based on the fundamental principle of human reasoning. In other words, the thesis for releasing the talented prisoners is not a strictly religious matter (the Archbishop did not call for the release of all the prisoners). The Archbishop, however, employed the religious premise as his *means* of persuasion, appealing, in fact, to the closed circle of believers who share his premise of faith in a Supreme Being. Thus, the call for releasing the talented prisoners for the sake of rebuilding the country, as a Religious principle, is limited to the specific audience that accepts the arguer's point of departure. Non-believers may reject the present argument, but may however, agree to release the prisoners given an argumentative premise which they accept.

To sum up, the act of Rhetoric is actually a triangle based on the mutual relationship between the three vertices of its angles: the speech, the audience and the speaker. In various instances, specifically in religious rhetoric, we can confine these relationships to two angles: the audience and the text. The reason is that the speaker (e.g. President Mbeki in the above example) might not be religious while the premise of the message is religious, as is the audience's position. The argument must start from a position shared by the audience.

The following example demonstrates the case. *Hamachaneh Hacharedi*, an ultra-orthodox religious newspaper published in Israel, calls on the government of Israel to protect Jewish people who come to worship at the Cave of Rachel, located in an Arab area. The Cave is a sacred Jewish site considered as the place of the burial of the Biblical Matriarch, Rachel. Traditionally, Jewish people offer prayers for cures and help at Rachel's Cave. However, during the period of bloodshed which

took place between Israel and the Palestinians towards the end of 2000, the government sought to prevent worship at the site, given the danger. The *Hamachaneh Hacharedi* article, *Rachel Weeping for Her Children*, written by Z. Hirchler, sees the act of offering prayers at the site as a necessity because neither tanks nor military troops can guarantee security: 'God's word' is the true and only real protection. This religious argument is acceptable mainly to a religious audience (while the speaker's belief is marginal). The issue refers to the concept of the audience's identification: a specific group of the audience will take as its thesis the Jewish tradition, another group may adopt the Christian belief. Religious rhetoric may regard the notion of Identification (using Burke's terminology) as identification with a belief or a text rather than identification with the speaker. Having established the addressees' point of acceptance then, the modes of argumentation, the act of reasoning is the same for all audiences, and is not changed from one category to another. The point is that the act of reasoning itself, is based on human logic (deductive or even inductive reasoning): the belief in God is ultimate, consequently human, military, protection is meaningless.

The matter of reasoning involving religious issues may differ when the rhetorical aim is to appeal to an audience to adopt a religious position, which they do not accept as axiomatic. These religious matters might be issues such as the religious notion of God's retribution or even religious faith. The following Biblical examples are demonstrative. The concept of God's retribution, that is, the righteous are rewarded while the wicked are punished, is the subject matter of the poem that opens the lyrical liturgy in the book of Psalms. The poem's thesis is as follows: "For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish" (v. 6).

Who are the righteous? "The one who desires God's Torah and who studies God's Torah day and night" (v. 2). Furthermore, the psalm claims that the righteous are not abandoned; rather those who study God's Torah are flourishing. God rewards the righteous. The relationship between the reward and God's desire is the crux of the psalm, as the gray reality may doubt its validity. The psalm's aim is to establish the unshaken relationship between a theological principle (the righteous who meditate on God's Law, the Torah and consequently their reward, as a matter of cause and effect) and the physical reality. The rhetorical strategy here is the employment of the analogy as the means of persuasion. The analogy or metaphor identifies the rewarded righteous with a blossoming tree:

> *He shall be like a tree which is planted near the running waters, which shall bring forth its fruits, in due season. And his leaf shall not fall off; and whatsoever he shall do shall prosper.*
> *Not so the wicked … but like the dust, which the wind driveth from the face of the earth* (verses 3-4).

In other words, as the tree rooted in the water blossoms, so the righteous will flourish. The metaphor (analogy) is a useful rhetorical tool of persuasion regarding religious matters (consult Gitay 1996, 32-240). "Very often," Perelman writes, "especially in Philosophy and the expression of religious thought, analogy is at the centre of an original vision either of the universe or of the relationship between man and divine" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1981, 114). Religion is conceived as a system of beliefs which transcends the common reason. Therefore, the ques-

tion of the relationship between prosperity and righteousness or, cause and effect, in terms of God's retribution, is not a matter of economic calculation, but rather a question of creed. Nevertheless, the analogy transfers the transcendental notion into a reality, nature itself, which is not a matter of Dogma anymore but rather is demonstrative, based on human experience and shared by every human being.

Another characteristic device employed in religious rhetoric is *the ridicule*. Ridicule is a powerful weapon at the disposal of a speaker against those who might undermine his argument by refusing, without cause, to accept some premise of his discourse. It is the penalty for blindness and is apparent only to those for whom this blindness is obvious (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 206).

The opponent's refusal to accept the speaker's premise motivates the later to employ a rhetorical weapon which depicts the opponent as someone who does not deserve serious treatment, but a laugh. The following instance illustrates the use of the ridicule:

> *To whom, then, can you liken God,*
> *What form compared to Him?*
> *The idol? A woodworker shaped it,*
> *And a smith overlaid it with gold …*
> *As a gift, he chooses the mulberry —*
> *A wood that does not rot —*
> *Then seeks a skillful woodworker*
> *To make a firm idol*
> *That will not topple* (Isaiah 40:18-20).

The prophet is engaged in a debate regarding the uniqueness of God versus the emptiness of the idols. Nevertheless, the prophet does not engage a theological argument. Rather, the prophet prefers to employ the device of *ridicule* as his tool for avoiding a serious theological debate with opponents who do not share his premise. Instead he makes his followers laugh at the opponents, indicating, as well, the superficiality of the opponents' belief: they worship to a piece of wood, shaped into an idol by a fellow human being! *Ridicule* is therefore a common rhetorical technique for debates between religious believers and non-believers where one side does not seem to accept the other's premise. Thus, the religious arguers do not risk a theological debate that they might not win. Instead, the device of *ridicule* may ensure an easy victory by avoiding a true debate.

The next category of religious rhetoric to be mentioned in this schematic presentation is the question of God's existence. The issue revolves around the question of the composition of the Torah, which may be argued, given the conclusions of Biblical scholarship, is a human composition which does not necessarily reflect a recordrd historical event. The rhetorical challenge for the ultra-orthodox is to prove for the questioning audience that God inspired the Torah given to Moses on Mount Sinai. This argument appeared in the religious newspaper (in Hebrew) of ultra-orthodox Jews, *Hamodia* (24 Adar 2, 5 760). The rhetorical strategy is as follows: Exodus 19 points out that over half a million people witnessed God's appearance on Mount Sinai addressing the people of Israel. Furthermore, Jewish people over the years have given their lives for keeping the Laws of Sinai, and now Biblical scholarship claims that the Sinai's revelation is a fiction; a product of human imagination? Does that make sense for the victims, the people who gave their lives

for their beliefs, and who are now informed that the events at Sinai are nothing but an invention of the human mind? *Harmodia* argues that the secular argument is based on the notion of the *absurd.* The accusation of *absurd,* is used therefore by the religious arguer as a rhetorical means for arguing a case which otherwise might not be easily demonstrated.

Mysticism: the notion of Mysticism, accepted as beyond the human sense of reason, is designed to appeal to the non-believer as an existence, a "fact", which is demonstrable with no scientific explanation but rather that of a Superior power. The claim for the authenticity of the Torah, as a sacred book that could be inspired only by God, is argued further in *Hamodia* (ibid.) as a mysterious occurence. The rhetorical technique is the principle of *numerology.* The claim is that a sophisticated linguistic code dominates the Torah, revealing a system which is beyond any human achievement and understanding specifically in the pre-computer era. The examples are many, and the following instance demonstrates: if one counts 49 letters from the first instance of the Hebrew letter *tav* in the Torah, which is the last letter of the first word, that is, *bereshit* ("at the beginning"), the 50th letter will be found to be a *vav.* If you continue in this way, 50 letters later after *vav* there will be *resh,* and the same pattern applies to the following 50 letters, ending with *heh,* which together constitute the word *Torah (tav+vav+tesh+heh).* The same phenomenon repeats itself at the end of the book of Genesis, starting with chapter 49 verse 28 (the *tav* of the word *vezot*). *Hamodia's* argument of *numerology* intends to prove that this distinct patterning, which characterises the Torah, cannot be a result of a human pen.

In conclusion, the above examples illustrate that the matter of Religious Rhetoric in relation to public deliberationmay be discussed under two main categories: in the first, Religion is merely a means of argumentation and in the second, Religion is the object of the argumentation. The first category may be defined as "agreements of certain special audiences" which is distinguished from the "universal audience". The "universal audience" constitutes a wide range of agreement, which is based as a rule on the general knowledge, experience and common sense of people. This agreement functions rhetorically as the starting point of an argument while the speaker (writer) seeks to begin the argument from a point shared with the audience at large, the "universal audience". However, an argument which aims to reach an agreement on the basis of theology (i.e. a religious system, or sacred texts) cannot capture the "universal audience". The audience's presupposition under such specific cases is limited to a specific group that shares a specific language and specific premises accepted only by them as self-evidence. What is usually called common sense consists of a series of beliefs which are accepted within a particular society, and which the members of that society suppose to be shared by every reasonable being. But, besides beliefs of this kind, there are agreements that are peculiar to the members of a particular discipline. They may be the result of certain conventions or of adherence to certain texts, and they characterise certain audiences. What is essential regarding religious rhetoric is that texts form the starting point of new reasoning (compare Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 99).

Nevertheless, as the objects of the appeal are human beings, reasoning is the mode of persuasion applied on the basis of the accepted premise. However, while reason is the mode of argumentation, religious rhetoric may aim to show in argu-

ments for religious principles to a general audience, that these principles are not understood in accordance with human reasoning, but rather are meta-reasoning, an indication of the Supreme power. Given the meta-realism of religious/theological Dogma, metaphors (analogies) are useful rhetorical devices for transferring a concept into a concrete object. In short, religious writing and preaching is not self-evident, but seeks to reach an audience, and when the audience is involved, rhetoric is the means of building bridges between ideas and people, religious concepts and human acceptance.

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