

The Homilies and Epistles of Saint Gregory Palamas. Rhetoric and Hermeneutics in Byzantium

Abstract

This study aims to explore the palamite homilies from a rhetorical as well as hermeneutic perspective, by referring to the entire Byzantine Christian Tradition. We deal with the palamite works because they represent a synthesis of the entire byzantine culture, which allowed us to approach a variety of themes and phenomena that we analyzed diachronically, since the texts chosen fully illustrated the Scriptural and Patristic intertextuality.

The work combines the theoretic and practical approach. In the first part, which has rather a historical character, we present the evolution of ancient rhetoric in the Byzantine period, underlining the way in which rhetoric became a byzantine *Weltanschauung*, a device that labeled all the levels of life in the byzantine society, by influencing the political, religious, cultural and social life. In this evolution, we tried to find both the elements of permanence of the ancient rhetorical culture, and the innovations that introduced Christian ideology. The ancient discourse molded according new Christian imperatives, while trying to proclaim Christian faith by appealing to the classical rhetorical means, which they adapted to the Christian message.

We also systematically followed the way in which the three genres *symbouleutikon* (deliberative), *dikanikon* (judicial) and *epideiktikon* (demonstrative) survived in Byzantium, especially after the Edict of Milan, by Constantine the Great, in the framework of the Church Councils and of the Judicial Trails for faith which were held in Byzantium after the decree of Theodosius the Great, and which proliferated during the Justinian period. Most of the researchers and historians consider that starting with the Principality of Augustus and across the entire byzantine period, the

two basic genres of classical Rhetoric, the deliberative (*symbouleutikon*) and the judicial (*dikanikon*) knew a period of decline, due to the fact that the political power was concentrated, more and more, in the hand and the person of the emperor, whose deliberative power, as *ἐμψυχος νόμος*, became almost absolute. This had severe consequences on the political structures of the new born Empire. The Senate, till then the most important deliberative instance, loses its political influence and its importance.

We investigated thoroughly this phenomenon, especially because a lot of researchers seem to agree that the only rhetorical genre which survived in Byzantium was the *epideiktic* genre, with its species, the *enkomia* and *panegyric*. Our study assumed quite a different position, by proving that this generally accepted “truth” was only partly true, and that it could only refer to the period between the Principality of Augustus, passing through the Diocletian Dominate, and Constantine the Great. To assume that this was a general phenomenon in Byzantium is a serious historical error, which betrays superficiality in treating such an important matter, by ignoring a large amount of texts.

After the Edict of Milan and the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Empire by Constantine the Great, the situation changed unexpectedly in favor of the deliberative and judicial rhetoric. George A. Kennedy¹ investigated closely the survivals of deliberative and judicial rhetoric under different byzantine Emperors, imperial codicology mainly, so that we approached a different kind of text source material, belonging to the deliberative rhetoric as well, very productive, but less explored, I mean the texts belonging to the field of the Ecumenical Councils. These Councils became practically the new deliberative power which replaced the ancient Senate, at least as far

¹ George A. Kennedy, *Greek Rhetoric under Christian Emperors*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1983.

as the problems of religion are concerned. Our analysis approaches the new deliberative genres which appeared exclusively in Christian Byzantine society, in the framework of these Councils, and we illustrated with rich examples the entire typology of the texts in the period, the sub-genres and species of this literature, such as the Apology, the Synodal Rules and Prescriptions, the deliberations of the Councils, the professions of faith, the synodal Epistle, the different decrees and edicts, as well as the supreme deliberative document of the Council: The synodal Tomos.

The thorough analysis of these genres and species of deliberative Rhetoric proved not only that this kind of Rhetoric had survived in the Byzantine society, as it was by now superficially suggested, but also knew a real recrudescence after Constantine the Great, after a period of silence during the late antique society of the Second Sophistry, by renewing its forms of expression, especially in the effervescent ecumenical Councils of Nicaea, Constantinople I and II, Ephesus and Chalcedon.

The same happened in the domain of Judicial Rhetoric. After the decree of Theodosius the Great (the edict issued on the 27th of February 380, which was included in the Theodosian Codex), any deviation from the orthodox faith was condemned and each heresy became subject of incriminating inquiry. As a consequence, the judicial trials of faith, often organized publicly, and which, later on, took great importance, especially during the Justinian reign, developed as well a judicial genre of their own, with a well-structured rhetorical discourse, which still conserved the features of the Antique Rhetoric, in spite of its obvious metamorphosis in the Christian field.

Moreover, during the Justinian reign as well, we assist to such a trial concerning problems of faith and dogma, organized by the Emperor against a heresiarch, a posthumous trial. Such was the famous trial organized by Justinian against Origen (IIIrd century, p. Chr.) followed by the drastic formulation of the 15th anathematisms

against him and against his followers, the real ones or the suspected ones, as was the case of St. Maximus' Trial, accused by origenism². We studied two such trials, one, against Vekkos, incriminated by the Patriarch Gregory of Cyprus, during the Latinokrateia after the IVth Crusade, that of 1204 against Constantinople, and the other, during the hesychast controversy against Varlaam, held in 1341.

The second part analyzes the Theory of Rhetoric. We take here into consideration some of the theoretic aspects of Rhetoric, in the way they were formulated in Byzantium. We dealt, in short presentations, with the most important byzantine rhetoricians and orators who were famous in their time both by their pedagogical methods and dialectic and their original rhetorical productions. Most of these rhetoricians were influential people at the imperial court, most of them being implied also in the political life of the empire, such was the case of Michail Psellos, for example, or, later on, of Theodor Metochites, The Great Logothete, some others occupying cathedra of rhetoric at the Imperial Universities, or at the theological schools of the Patriarchate.

We dealt also with the educational byzantine system (enkyklopaideia) where rhetoric played a privileged role. In order to better illustrate this educational system, we observed the most important Rhetorical Enheiridia (Handbooks of Rhetoric) which became influential throughout the entire byzantine period. Such handbooks belonged to Hermogene of Tarsus, Aphthonios, but also Menander, or Teona of Alexandria or Nicholas of Myra. These handbooks, in their major part, had a practical content, they did not expose rhetorical theories, but mostly practical exercises, with elementary explanations, the so called progymnasmata, which we briefly presented in separated

² Sfântul Maxim Mărturisitorul (580-662) și tovarășii săi întru martiriu, papa Martin, Anastasie Monahul, Anastasie Apocrisiarul, „Vieți” – actele procesului – documentele exilului, trad. diac. Ioan Ică jr., Ed. Deisis, Sibiu, 2004.

chapter in order to better understand the structure and composition of byzantine discourse. In the end of this part we presented another specific genre of byzantine rhetoric: the hymnography with its lyrical species which we illustrated by two little works the *Troparion of the sinful woman* of Saint Cassiani, the famous byzantine poet and the *Canon to the Holy Virgin* of Saint Thecla.

In the third part, *Applied Rhetoric* we tried to encompass the most important aspects of byzantine rhetoric as they are reflected in the *Marial Homelies* of St. Gregory Palamas. These *Homelies* are genuinely mariological treatises, true rhetorical jewels, combining the two rhetorical styles of late antique: the atticism (use of classic ideal of literary beauty and of the excellence of the language, use of rare and archaic words) and the assianism (use of pathos and lyricism).

In the presentation of Homily 42 dedicated to the Birth of the Virgin, we analyzed the relationship between the hymnographic text and the homiletic one, the way in which they are intertwined in this homily, the role of the parainesis in the final part of the homily, the implication of the audience into the discourse, the use of the apostrophe, interpellations, direct address, and other rhetorical and stylistical means.

In Homily 53 dedicated to The Entrance in the Temple of the Virgin we analyzed in comparison with other byzantine texts, the exordium developed in rich imagery and the way in which this Homily becomes little by little a true treatise of hesychasm, a plea for the contemplative hesychastic life as it was experienced in the Holy Mountain in the XIVth century. This homily is a synthesis of Byzantine Rhetoric, an exemplary illustration of the use of the most important rhetorical figures, such as: typology, allegory, symbol, comparison, interrogation and exclamation, and a special kind of metaphor which we called *hermeneutical metaphor*, a product of biblical and patristic exegesis which was used and consecrated by hymnographic poetry as well.

The *Homily to the Dormition of Theotokos*, presents an important aspect of byzantine society, the way in which a cult or feast could be imposed and transmit the dogmatic content of the Councils of Ephesus 431 and later, Chalcedon 451, the way in which developed the sense of the feast throughout the Christian centuries. This diachronic study revealed some aspects concerning the structure of the homilies dedicated to the Dormition of Theotokos, but also offered a good pretext to treat about the rhetorical byzantine models and the way of functioning of byzantine intertextuality, dealing with the concept of μίμησις.

In the Homily 49 dedicated to St. Dimitrios we focus on another type of byzantine discourse, which represents also a Christian innovation, with a lot of subgenres, that is to say, the hagiographic discourse, its origin, its evolution, the great hagiographic collections such as the Synaxaries and Menologia. We had also in view a social aspect of pragmatic rhetoric: the social phenomenon called the translation of the relics and the processions with the relics, that is to say the „visual Rhetoric” or „rhetoric in action” as it is called by Margaret Mullet in an article, which we illustrated by investigating two byzantine texts: The palamite homily to St. Dimitrios, and the Encomion to St. Phocas of St. John Chrysostom.

The third part is consecrated to palamite hermeneutics and is structured in three chapters: 1) Palamite hermeneutics on the Scriptures or kerygmatic hermeneutics. 2) Patristic hermeneutics in Palamas Epistles, 3) Palamite dogmatic Epistles during the period 1341-1358. These three chapters are preceded by a historical excursus concerning the evolution of the Christian hermeneutics which developed initially from an „apologetic reflex”, which supposed the use by Christian apologists of an entire rhetorical panoply of argumentative kind in their persuasive approach.

In the first chapter, we deal with the analysis of two dogmatic Homelies, 34-35, written on the main topic of the hesychast controversy disputed in the Council of 1341, that is, the uncreated light on Mount Tabor, and the subsequent themes. In the second chapter, we analyze the argumentative and apologetic type of the discourse which is close to the antique judicial discourse, as well as antique philosophical and logical discourse.

As a conclusion, we think that our approach, though it has not any pretense of exhaustivity, presents however a clear and comprehensive image of the main genres, species and rhetorical means from the Byzantine period, with rich illustrations of texts.

As a result of our research, we realized that the byzantine discourse is extremely varied and it does not reduce itself to the epideictic genre as it was suggested by the majority of scholars, who deliberately ignore the value of some of the important source material in the field of deliberative or judicial Rhetoric, such as synodal documents or those of court trials of faith. We could observe the developing of new genres, new species, and new forms of expression, such as, the apology and the apologetic discourse or on the contrary, the anathematisms, professions of faith, the synodal canon, the synodal tomos. Some of them were, of course, inherited from the antique world, but they acquired now new values due to the new content and message of the Christian faith. We could follow also and illustrating with examples taken from a lot of byzantine texts the process of „literaturization“ of Rhetoric, the way it became less a persuasive art and more a literary technique, preoccupied less of convincing and more of touching the soul and the heart and the imagination, hunting beauty instead of truth.

In the final part, in *Addenda*, the study is illustrated by three dogmatic Epistles of St. Gregory Palamas, in my own translation from Greek, *The Epistle to the monk Arsenios*, *Epistle to Gavras*, and the *Epistle to Damian the philosopher*. The Annexes inserted in the

text body of the study has the role to illustrate the phenomena presented and to facilitate the immediate access of the reader to all kinds of Byzantine discourse, allowing the reader to follow himself all the problems under discussion.