

Saint Paul's "*Conflict of Convictions*": A Discourse of Rhetorical Controversy in the Context of Early Christianity—The Speech on Areopagus

Mirela Saim, *McGill University*

“**H**as anything in fact been left untried, has anyone not attempted to reconcile the *conflict of convictions* which is a sort of sickness of the mind?”¹ So Erasmus asked in one of his soul-searching letters that persistently tried to avoid the schism between his fellow-Christians by going beyond dogmatic controversies. By so asking he, in fact, was defining as pathological the conflict in faith that not only was dominating his days but, as he well knew, was a historical constant in the life of Christianity. For this he had only to remind himself and his audience of the first instance of the discourse of religious debate registered in the narrative of the early church, Paul's Areopagus harangue in the Acts of the Apostles. This mythical confrontation encapsulates in an iconic scene the encounter between the Hellenistic culture of Greco-Latin philosophy and rhetoric and the new faith discourse, structured by Jewish religious concepts. The episode situates the emergence of Christianity as an organized religious movement and reveals its powerful rhetorical discourse of pragmatic articulation with a plural tradition.

In my reading, Paul was a man of his times and of many places: he was a fairly Hellenized Jewish “intellectual” of the public sort, acutely aware of the political life in Roman Palestine and intensely engaged in the building of the new religious institution, the Christian church. By recognizing both his Judaism and his acquaintance with the Greco-Roman culture of the first and second centuries (when both he and Luke are thought to have lived and written) we can resituate him in a cultural environment that was suffering profound changes, coping with enormous pressures. Paul's contribution to the intellectual development of the Western culture, his “invention” of Christianity

1. Emphasis mine.

by a *revisionary blending* of Judaic and Greek religious notions and influences can thus be better understood as a *creative act* in the particular domain of religious thought and, ultimately, envisioned as “political theology.” Within this particular paradigm, there is to be recognized and rearticulated a particular rhetoric, the rhetoric of the controversial discourse in religion. “Prophetic” or “apostolic,” Paul’s rhetorical achievement will be examined here as a discourse of religious innovation, of displacement and re-interpretation of traditions, as an attempt toward a type of communicative action previously untried. Paul’s use of Greek rhetorical and epistemological notions is thus of utmost significance, proving—through discourse apprehension and reconfiguration—the “melting” of sources that effectively lead to the emergence of a new culture, Christianity. In this formative stage, the culture of Christianity provides the converging venue for many previously unconnected conceptual streams: Roman imperial engagement with diversity, Jewish messianic expectations, Greek and Latin discursive icons and symbols.

An apostle before the Athenians

“Do you know Greek?” asks Paul in Acts 21:37, thus reminding us that his own familiarity with Greek had already been displayed in the Areopagus speech. One of the best known, widely read and commented upon pages of the Bible², thought by many to be “the most wonderful page of the Apostolic history”³, Paul’s oration on Areopagus has inspired a great number of studies: it has an iconic status of a deliberate appeal to conversion and association addressed to a Hellenic public and as such it holds a central importance for the apostolic narrative. Quite recently, a renewed attention to the Judaism of Paul has brought to the fore a more lively image of the complex discursive tradition-making that is nowadays perceived as the constitutive frame of Paul’s

2. For general bibliographical overviews and bibliographic syntheses see W. Ward Gasque, *A History of the Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975); Vincenzo Gatti, *Il Discorso di Paolo ad Atene* (Brescia: Paideia Editrice, 1985); Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele, eds., *Contextualizing Acts. Lukan Narrative and Greco-Roman Discourse* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

3. “das wundervollste Stück der Apostelgeschichte,” Adolf von Harnack, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1906, vol.1, p.321).

(and consequently Luke's) words, with its many tensional oppositions and experimental dimensions.

As is well known, the general redaction of the Gospels is usually assigned to the second to third centuries, while the writing of the Pauline Epistles is considered of earlier composition; thus Paul's letters to the churches would be the "original" text of the emergent Christianity, better attesting to the intellectual turmoil of its foundation. In this context, the speeches in Acts function as a valid link to *the discursive ideology* that is key to the understanding of formative Christianity: *both* Paul's epistles and his orations in Acts provide a discursive configuration that is heavily indebted to classical rhetoric.

As a preacher, polemist and epistolary writer, Paul belongs to the age of the Second Sophistic, an age that situates the teaching of public rhetorical practices at the core of its elite culture. Quite recently, though, the rhetorical reappraisal of the Pauline corpus provided by George Kennedy, in his *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*⁴, has freshly reopened the discussion by foregrounding some previously neglected links with the rhetorical tradition that used to be the backbone of the classical culture in the Hellenistic age. In his close reading of the Areopagus speech, G. Kennedy emphasizes a number of structural elements properly rhetorical: the persuasive organization of the entire fragment, with—in his opinion—a deliberative bent; the strategic use of ambiguity and semantic *redefinition* (from the "unknown God" to the God of Christian salvation), the masterly transformation from a defensive stance into a criticism of the Athenian religious flaws and, finally, a telling shift from apologetic orientation to missionary preaching.

Rhetorical criticism applied to Acts has thus far convincingly proved the familiarity with classical Greco-Latin rhetoric of the author(s) of the Gospels, particularly for Luke-Acts. But once this familiarity is accepted, we also need to go beyond the simple school tradition of the *progymnasmata*, a tradition that used the *controversiae* as technical exercises of oral declamation in preparation for public life.⁵

4. George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984). Particularly valuable for the issue here discussed are, within the chapter "The Speeches in Acts," the pages dedicated to the Areopagus speech, 129–134.

5. For a recent discussion of the structures of education in the period, see Teresa Morgan, *Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds*, Cambridge University Press, 1998. Also useful in this field are Ian Henderson, "Quintilian and the *Progymnasmata*," *Antike*

It is in this spirit, I suggest, that the superb page of literary excellence that is the Areopagus speech should be understood, especially when coupled with the numerous disclaimers of elocutionary excellence found in Paul's Epistles.⁶ This implies that we have to refine our approach to understanding the unique elements of a rhetoric that is both transitional and dynamically searching its way for improvement, expressed by a type of eloquence that blends dialectic and poetry, associating the appeal to reason with a powerful appeal to feelings and emotions. In this new kind of rhetorical address, the persuasive goal is attained by summoning the support of both rhetorical arguments and signs of revelation. The many sources of inspiration detectable through a close reading of the speech also provide several suggestions for the rhetorical resources of a *new rhetoric* that will impose the Christian discourse of faith as a main cultural stream. In what follows, I will discuss some of these less obvious resources.

The Ciceronian model of religious controversy

The defining textual model of argumentation strategies for debates in religious matters was written by Cicero in his dialogue *On the Nature of the Gods*⁷, a work that dramatizes a somewhat extended debate on religion between the representatives of the three main discourses that constitute the theological landscape of his time: Epicureanism, Stoicism and Platonic Skepticism. Taking its main inspiration from a Platonic text (*Laws*, X⁸), the Ciceronian discussion is inherently prescriptive, while also seeking to outline a complex anti-dogmatic theological stance. More importantly, though, it clearly spells out the main rules to be observed during this type of confrontation, thus defining the procedural standard for the *religious controversy* as a discursive practice. Thus it can be said that it provides the generic norms for this type of polemical discourse.

und Abendland, 37 (1991): 82–99, as well as the new and better editions of Second Sophistic rhetorical handbooks by Apsines, Rufus, Theon, Pseudo-Aelius Aristides, etc.

6. Reiterated time and again by the first critics of Christianity, themselves also rhetoricians and philosophers.

7. *De natura deorum*, hereafter DND, dating from 45–44 B.C. My references here are to the translation provided by P. G. Walsh: Cicero. *The Nature of the Gods* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

8. *Laws*, X, 885: the segment aligns the arguments of a discussion about gods, providing a schematic blueprint of the issues to be re-worked by Cicero in his dialogue.

According to Cicero, any debate on religious issues implies the following principles:

- religious diversity ought to be recognized as being of utmost political importance (and consequently to be discussed by those searching for truth);⁹
- debates on the main religious options should proceed in a spirit of friendly confrontation;¹⁰
- polemic debating should bring together, in a common setting, representatives of the main "schools of thought" (although there is no requirement for an exhaustive display of each and all of them);
- discussions have to be reasonable, inscribing the "logical grammar" of rhetorical argumentation.¹¹

The Ciceronian reference, and through it, the traditional Platonic trace, is present through the Areopagus speech as a contextual broad frame; this makes Cicero's rhetorical thought a paradigmatic presence in the harangue. Specifically, this paradigm of allusions and somewhat obscured references includes the definition of the educated audience in terms of philosophers of Stoic and Epicurean persuasion (as in the DND)¹², the well-known citation from Aratus¹³ (at 17:28), as well as the whole paradoxical formulation of the main ethical ideas as *topoi*, strongly reminiscent of the *Paradoxa stoicorum*. And it is also this intensely paradoxical texture of the Areopagus speech that brings to the fore the question of a "new rhetoric," a rhetoric that would have the ability to persuade the Gentiles, addressing them in a spirit that is both entreating and polemical. In as much as this question underlies the whole speech, it also marks the transition from controversy to

9. DND, I, 1–5, 14.

10. DND, I, 15–17.

11. The *reasonability* of debates on religious issues is a constant of Cicero's thought, one that has been associated predominantly with the Stoic influence, particularly with elements of Stoic logic. The specific rhetorical norms proper to religious discourse, like the defining requirements of piety and righteousness are already included in previous rhetorical treatises (*Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* and the *Ad Herennium*); the main topics of argumentation can, however, be found already in Plato's *Laws*, X.

12. Leaving out representatives and discussions of other schools of thought.

13. Translated by Cicero in his youth, as is well known. See Cicéron. *Les Aratea*. Trans. Victor Buescu. Bucarest, 1941 and Jean Martin, *Histoire du Texte des Phénomènes d'Aratos*, Paris: Klincksieck, 1956.

sermon, from disputing to preaching practices, thus inaugurating the very actual question of *interfaith sermon composition*.

In the same time, by developing the Ciceronian model of religious debates and by adjusting it to his missionary goal, Paul also goes beyond its traditionally established structure. While the Ciceronian debate was articulated as a friendly discussion within the enclosed setting of a semi-private space (a small group of friends), the speeches in Acts, in particular the Areopagus address, are essentially represented as *public space discourses*, more akin to the communal semi-public space discourses on Torah-readings taking place in the *bet-hamidrash*, the public readings and interpretations constantly taking place in the synagogue.

A Christian rhetoric for the public space

The publicity of the polemical structure is repeatedly described; indeed, it constitutes a fundamentally meaningful dimension of the whole missionary activity: at 17:2¹⁴ and 17:17, for example, it is reported that this sort of public controversial arguing was habitually taking place in the synagogue, so that Paul's harangues are clearly traced back to the Jewish practice of teaching and discussing the Torah, a tradition of transmission and textual authorization that will also become central for the development of Rabbinic Judaism, anchoring for centuries the communal and congregational life in Diaspora.

In the New Testament, there are many reports of synagogue controversies and altercations, featuring both Jesus and the apostles, usually shown as stirring up the hostility of the Jewish establishment, and, in most cases, calling for the intervention from the local Roman civic authorities. But it is only in Athens that this already recurrent pattern of challenging debates in synagogue is linked to, resituated and redirected as an appeal to Gentiles, Athenians and foreigners alike, to those individuals who, we are told, spent their time doing nothing else but discussing the news: "all the Athenians and foreigners" (Acts 17:21). Thus the already defined public space of politics is merged and redefined with the Judaic space of public religious teaching. In this respect, we would be quite right to identify in this whole sequence the *very* narrative starting point of an evolving rhetorical standard, with an homiletical missionary function. This is the standard that

14. "And Paul went in / the synagogue / *as was his custom*, and for three weeks he argued with them from the scriptures" (17:2) (emphasis mine).

supports a new "universalized" space of public discussions on religion, the real space of "*political theology*."¹⁵ As represented in Acts 17, this space of "universality" is based on the old definitions of the public space, Jewish *and* Greek: synagogue, agora, Areopagus (i.e. the forensic space) converge and overlap in the "production" of a new generic public space that is specifically dedicated to religious conversation, dialogue and controversy.

The setting and the audience of this polemical activity are distinctive elements of the discursive typology thus engaged. Rhetorically, in the episode of the speech in Athens, the audience is defined sequentially and identified by the location of every speech act: at first, Paul talks to the "Jews and the devout persons" in the synagogue (17:17)¹⁶, then to an enlarged public, "those who happened to be" in the *agora* (17:17)¹⁷, then, finally, challenged by Stoic and Epicurean philosophers and brought before a jury on the Areopagus (17:18), he speaks to an all-inclusive audience: "all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there" (17:21).

"Offering a thumbnail sketch of Paul's Athenian hearers"¹⁸, the phrase articulates the transition from narrative context to direct speech and defines the frame for the eloquent dispensation of Paul's address, thus highlighting the rhetorical condition of the whole episode. In this way, the Areopagus speech is significantly defined by its social frame, by textually explicit public participation in discussions on faith. Certainly reminiscent of Cicero, this reference is, as even Erasmus noted (in his own Cicero-inspired comments) a very convenient and restricted evocation of religious antithetic paradigms prevalent in Antiquity.¹⁹ While in the Ciceronian context, the limitation to the "bipartisan," Stoic and Epicurean, philosophical schools had a quasi

15. Acts 17:21: "all the Athenians and foreigners who lived there spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new."

16. "Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews."

17. "in the market daily with them that met with him"; this of course is highly reminiscent of the Socratic practice of discussing with everybody in the *agora*.

18. Phillip E. Satterthwaite, "Acts against the background of Classical Rhetoric." *The Book of Acts in its Ancient Literary Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) vol.1, 357.

19. "... Epicureans and Stoics, who hold vastly different dogmas. Epicureans, measuring the highest human happiness by the standard of pleasure, believe either that there are no gods or that they have no concern for human affairs. Stoics, besides their other paradoxes, measure human happiness by a single disposition of the mind which they call "virtue" or the "morally honourable." Erasmus, *Paraphrase*, 107.

synecdochic sense, in Acts 17 the same restricted representation of the philosophical challenge seems to be reoriented differently. In Paul's address, the Stoic reference is given a particular weight because the speech is, as a "translation" of its essentially messianic Jewish content into a radically Hellenized language of universal human identity, particularly associated with the Stoic philosophy and its theological elements.

The text of the speech also shows the tension between the established forms of address and the innovative language of the oration. The incipient address, "ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι" (Men of Athens), for example, would be inappropriate in terms of forensic or political practice, because the instance is different, even if it is evocative of a forensic situation; despite this surface impropriety, the address is quite fitting on a symbolic level, since it summons the best oratorical tradition of the Athenian political debates.

Unconventional already, diverging from the classical (Aristotelian) model, this address marks the beginning of a new rhetorical praxis that employs the tradition for a new usage, a praxis that is broader because it communicates on a broader specter. Addressing for the first time in the New Testament²⁰ an audience that is both educated philosophically and non-Jewish, the Areopagus speech had to modify its whole rhetorical register. It thus raises for the first time the question of a rhetorical performance that is fundamentally defined as an *interfaith (trans-cultural) activity*²¹. In this context, one can also see the narrative core of Acts as a sequence of controversy/debate for the progressive inclusion of the Other—Jew, Greek, Hellenized Jew, "generic" Gentile—into a new and ever-broadening circle of believers, thus creating a new public discourse for a new religious audience, a basic faith community that is defined as all-inclusive and universal.²²

20. In a way, it can be argued that the only precedent similar confrontation in the NT between a "Jewish individual" and a representative of the Hellenistic culture is the failed "encounter" between Jesus and Pontius Pilate.

21. This diversification and adjusting of rhetorical standards to diverse and differentiated audiences will be a constant preoccupation for the fathers of the church, receiving a comprehensive solution in the work of Saint Augustine, a solution minutely treated in *De doctrina christiana* and *De catechizandi rudibus*.

22. In his critical notes, Dibelius insists on the centrality of 17:22–23, seeing in the universality of the *anthropological* topos the main meaning of the speech. As we shall see further, this observation agrees with the newer analysis of Alain Badiou, who also stresses the universalistic message of the Paulinian discourse.

Alterity, homogeneity, heterogeneity

But while the rhetorical strategy of the Areopagus speech is thus articulated by a powerful *anthropologic message*, linking the messianic announcement of salvation ("Jesus and the Resurrection") with the universalistic appeal to humankind in its common condition, this message has to be understood as framed by its *heterogeneous cultural environment*, provided and illustrated by the already long history of the controversial *corpus*. In developing the anthropological argument of the speech, Paul touches on the central topic of *homogeneity and heterogeneity*, a topic that is fundamental to his universal mission: he discusses the uniqueness of God's creation in its diversity and follows by stressing the fact that all humankind, currently separated into several ethnic groups (Athenians and foreigners, in this context), is basically one, all being alike and equal before the Creator, forming one single family, a *γένος*. As the description of the audience extends from Jews to non-Jews and then to Athenians and foreigners alike, the Areopagus speech itself progresses from addressing the Athenian men to addressing the entire human race. This theme will reappear in a more explicit formulation towards the end of the speech, at 17:26–27 ("And he made from one every nation of men") where the human condition is defined by its common search for religious truth: men were created so "that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him." Yet this general definition is—as I have already mentioned—framed within a widely acknowledged awareness of diversity. Further, in the following pages of the Acts the diversification of the Jewish/Gentile audience and the need for an appropriate style of address are again represented through the story of Apollos from Alexandria, "an eloquent man well versed in the scriptures" (18:24)²³, whose "divergent discourse" is seen as incorrect. We are told that Apollos was naively imparting well-intended but "*hetero-didaskalic*" (i.e. incomplete and erroneous) teachings, being otherwise quite successful in his activity in Ephesus.

23. Here "eloquent" translates the more general *λόγιος*, but the following development supports this translation, common in English since Tyndale.

Redefining Piety, rewriting the *Euthyphro*

Implicit in the entire Areopagus narrative is a symbolic engagement, even an overt symbolic encounter across ages with Socrates: his character, his fate, particularly his trial and apology are intimated. In a broader perspective, there is also a persistent recurrence of Platonic religious notions and epistemic elements structures. Indirectly expressed, but powerfully suggested, it is this presence, I believe, that is meant to establish a sympathetic channel of communication with the Athenian audience: Paul's address is indeed a *dialogical answer* of the new religious discourse (Christian Judaism) to the Platonic discourse of religion. *Euthyphro*, the dialogue that "precedes" the trial of Socrates and, as such, has a preliminary place in the Socratic tragedy,²⁴ tries to sift through the conceptual maze of religious concepts of piety, "therapeutic" liturgy and norms of public justice that affect the whole; in the Athenian context, the dialogue has the political, the social and the religious overlapping. In this sense, it can be said that it fulfills a progymnastic function for Socrates, a function that is also mirrored by Paul's speech, because this speech can be seen as a reconceptualization of the prevalent themes of the *Euthyphro* (rather of its last part, 12e–16a).²⁵

From the beginning of the scene in Acts 17, with Paul facing the accusation of preaching foreign gods²⁶, the text is certainly reminiscent of the Socratic trial, accused and convicted of impiety, for his alleged attempt to introduce new gods to the city. This line of thematic development is central to Paul's speech, in agreement with his known general appreciation in 1 Cor 5:22: "Greeks seek wisdom"—a verdict already built on a paradoxical and antagonistic view of the audience, split up between Jews and Greeks.²⁷ The discourse of the Christians, we are told, is different, focusing on "Jesus and the Resurrection" and being supported uniquely by faith.

In their appreciation of people, both Socrates and Paul share an opinion of the Athenian public that is sarcastic and quite critical: Socrates tells us in the beginning of the dialogue that "the Athenians do not mind anyone they think clever, as long as he does not teach

24. *Euthyphro* precedes the "anachrisis" (ἀνάχρησις), the preliminary judicial inquiry.

25. The version used here is Plato's *Euthyphro*, Introduction and Notes by Ian Walker (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1984).

26. *xenon daimonion* (17:18), just as Socrates was obeying his own *daimon*.

27. "Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom."

his own values" (3d), while Euthyphro, the priest, reports that his attempts at discussing religious issues is usually met with laughter and derision²⁸. Paul, on the other hand, already noticed that "all the Athenians and foreigners who lived there spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new" (17:21), and then, according to Luke, in fact proceeds by doing just what Socrates said not to do: to teach the Athenians his own values and thus, in the end, exposing himself to suffer their anger and their derision (17:31). Thus Socratic irony, that in Plato is used to debunk the certainty of the dialogue partner in order to arrive to a more refined type of knowledge, is recovered in Acts 17 as a *narrative trope* and further used in framing the audience's reaction to the new *kerygmatic* order of discourse.

It can be said that the "ignorance register" of Paul's speech that both opens and closes the harangue (*agnostos theos* at 17:23, and *agnoia* at 17:30) can also be compared with the Socratic pretended ignorance, repeatedly mentioned in the *Euthyphro*²⁹. Socrates presents himself as ignorant and eager to learn from Euthyphro "what piety is" by asking: "Tell me then, what is the pious and what the impious?" (5d). Likewise, Acts 17:22 could be seen as an answer to, if not a rewriting of, *Euthyphro* 12e, that aims at a "geometrically" precise analysis of the relation between the pious, the holy, the just and the "inspirational" sign (or, in Plato's terminology: δσιον, εὐσέβεια, δικαιοσύνη, τεκμήριον, σημεῖον). This conceptual connexion reappears in Paul's oration before the Athenians, although his series of notions is considerably displaced, realigned and ultimately *resemantized*: εὐσέβεια, πίστις, δικαιοσύνη. But there is also a profound change in discursive use: while a commanding reference, the Platonic source is used as a distant model and "transferred" into a new conceptual vocabulary, the new "Christian idiolect" of religious discourse.

There are also important differences, differences that underscore discursively the core of the displacements marked by Lukan-Paulinian Christianity when compared with the religion of the Greeks: Socrates defines the relationship between man and divinity as one between master and servant, while Paul defines it as one of kinship (and supports

28. Euthyphro, a priest, also complains that "Whenever I speak of divine matters in the assembly, / . . . / they laugh me down as if I were crazy" (3c).

29. And a well known characteristic of the Socratic discourse; in the Aeschines of Sphettos' representative words, "I have no learning to teach anyone" (Dittmar, *Die Alkibiades Dichtung*).

his opinion by citing Aratus, the Stoic poet). Similarly, while the Platonic text develops the idea of justice (δικαιοσύνη) as closely related to piety (εὐσέβεια)³⁰ (*Euthyphro*, 11e–16a), the text of Acts 17:31 reformulates this relationship by its stress on the coming time of universal justice, an *epochal* turn already prepared by the sacrifice of one chosen man. Furthermore, Paul highlights the strength of this message, accentuating and “directing” the ambiguity of “*pistis*”³¹ by the alliterative wording: πίστιν παρασχών πάσιν, which will remain imprinted in the listener’s memory.

The parallel between Socrates and Christ has been a commonplace of the ancient literature, being evoked by the early Christian controversialists and church fathers: Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Augustine, etc. My reading of the Areopagus speech would imply that the author of Acts was already sharing in a common cultural trend that sees in Socrates a proto-Christian figure; in turn, this would imply that both the Biblical speech of Paul *and* the corpus of the early Christian apologists belong to a *continuum*, the great heterogenous yet homogenizing *discourse of Hellenization*, with strong surviving Platonic traces.

Plato’s *Euthyphro* is centered by an attempt to grasp the full theoretical and practical (liturgical) extent of religious concepts, τὰ θεία, thought to be associated with piety, εὐσέβεια. It is a “*peirastic* dialogue”³², a dialogue that, by inquiry into the definitional status of the concepts, gradually shows that there are few and incomplete bits of sure knowledge; by relentless probing, we—like Euthyphro, relentlessly probed by Socrates—will have to acknowledge our own ignorance and, presumably, strive for a better apprehension of the notion. There is no end to this process of probing and examining because there is no acceptable end to one’s desire for truth and certainty. Reason has no sure limits in its search for truth; its only assurance is in itself. In matters theological or religious, however, the certainty that we might reach by reason alone is usually limited; at best it is personal and individual and thus has little general value.³³ Anti-dogmatic, the Socratic dialogue,

30. Plato uses both εὐσέβεια and δαίον in his texts, but in *Euthyphro*, the term δαίον is prevalent.

31. Both “faith” and sign/proof or sure proof.

32. A *peirastic* dialogue is a dialogue of inquiry constituting a species of the dialogue of training (*gymnic*) and said to have as its aim the probing of thoughts. Cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, III.

33. Socrates is given signs by his personal “daimon”—but this has no general dogmatic or even doxastic value.

as reported by Plato, constructs a "labyrinth"-like rhetoric that aims at confusing the established "knowledge" of the "pious": his tools are those of the seeker after truth, valuing dynamic inquiry. Paul, on the other hand, aims at surpassing the uncertainties of reason through the "apocalyptic" discourse of revelation.

In the *Laws*, his last attempt at a redefinition of many core concepts³⁴, Plato discusses the myth of the *epochal change*: according to this myth, told by the Athenian Stranger, the world is forever caught in a cyclical succession of ages, one in which perfect government by the gods is followed by an imperfect age of government by human rulers. Submitted to cosmological laws, these epochs succeed each other with necessity. It is at this point that the later Plato can be said to meet the New Testament discourse in one of its most important topics, the messianic expectation (fulfilled in Jesus according to Christians, unfulfilled and still to come according to Jews). Thus the *kerygmatic* message at the centre of the Areopagus speech is uttered in converging terms with both Jewish and Platonic formulations, although it is quite different and new, because it is also presented as a message of faith and revealed truth.

Paul's effort is geared towards imposing his own certain truth; his speech advances from ignorance to a positive and quasi-dogmatic awareness, forcefully announcing "*the end of the age of ignorance*" (17: 30). His vocabulary is polarized by the use of *eusebeia* and *pistis*³⁵—integrated towards the end of the speech in the memorable alliterative phrase *πίστιν παρασχών πάσιν*, thus moving from ambiguity to reassurance and certainty. Finally, another observation would link these two elements in also showing a radical difference between Plato and the Lukan author: while Socrates insists on his own ignorance as a way of teaching by dialogical "presence" alone ("I have no learning to teach anyone and help him in that way, but I thought that through just being with him my love for him might make him better"³⁶), Paul strives to express his knowledge in a discourse that has to be memorable, thus perpetuating the message of the "good news" even in his absence.

34. A detailed utopian discourse on government situated in Crete.

35. "*Pistis*" is terminologically resemantized by Paul, who uses it as both proof and trustful allegiance, almost in a "covenantal" approximation of the notion. In this way, he replaces and "rearranges" the usage of both "*semelion*" (sign) and "*tekmerion*" (proof) in the Socratic discourse.

36. A phrase attributed to Socrates by his contemporary Aeschines of Sphettus (see Dittmar, *Aeschines von Sphettos*, Alkibiades).

Intensely rhetorized, but by a more pervasive figure of speech, the *polyptoton*, is the central *reconceptualization* of the relationship with the divinity: *theos* (θεός) is integrated in a string of grammatically inflected utterances—dative, nominative, accusative, genitive (17:23; 17:24; 17:27; 17:29)³⁷. The polyptoton as an *isolexism*, a semantic counterpart of the *isophononic* (alliterative) sequence, transposes and stresses—by variation and repetition—the urgency and importance of the revealed *kerygmatic* message, making it unforgettable. The repetitive structures, reinforced by isolexism and by the alliterative formation, do show a tendency to produce a stylistic cluster of reiterative figures that goes beyond simple ornamentation. This structure, in fact, foregrounds the conceptual core of the oration and constitutes a mark of elaborated stylistic expression, situating it without any doubt in the sphere of the Second Sophistic rhetorical ideology.³⁸

Conclusion

In exploring the classical resources of the Areopagus speech I tried to show how the message of epochal expectation and messianic hope, elaborated *within* the basic prophetic language of Judaism, is recast and reformulated within the Greco-Roman frame of reference. This reading is in agreement with the new critical discourse on Paul, a discourse that seeks to reexamine his position in the history of the Abrahamic monotheisms: recently, many important European philosophers (Marcel Gauchet, Jean-Luc Nancy, Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben, etc.) have brought their contribution to a reappraisal of the function of religion in the cultural history of the West. Among these new attempts, the book published in 1997 by Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul. La fondation de l'universalisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France), is quite interesting in its contribution to a new interpretation of the emergent discourse of Christianity, repositioning it in the context of Roman Hellenistic diversity, including the Jewish and Greco-Roman legacies. He considers Paul an “anti-philosopher”, an “unconventional” radical thinker whose discourse

37. Cf. Mikeal C. Parsons, “Luke and the Progymnasmata: A Preliminary Investigation into the Preliminary Exercises,” *Contextualizing Acts*, 58; Parsons also finds the same figure in Paul’s speech before Agrippa.

38. Known as the Second Sophistic, the period between 50–250 A.D. coincides with the age of the Synoptic Gospels’ composition. The last decade has revealed a strong convergence of the rhetoric of this age and the writing of the New Testament.

is essentially one of *pragma*, oriented by action. While Alain Badiou's analysis is mainly concerned with the Epistles, his observations justify—in my opinion—an extension to other elements of the "Pauline corpus" of discourse, mainly to his speeches, textually constituted in the Acts.

Limited by space, this paper tried to look briefly at the topic of religious diversity as an issue of rhetorical practice, to see how this issue was expressed in the Areopagus speech and to examine its models from the point of view of the structural unity construed as an authorial voice; my examination also identified in the controversial paradigm one of the main frames of reference for the composition of the harangue. Like Alain Badiou, I think that in the emergent Christian discourse of religion, a discourse that "accommodates and names differences", it is possible to see how two different cultural discourses contribute differently to the creation of a third, both in terms of conceptualizations and rhetorical procedures. But it is only a careful and detailed recontextualization of the Pauline cluster of letters and speeches within the Second Sophistic mass of Hermogenian and meta-Hermogenian rhetorical treatises that will really show us the hidden springs of this new discourse.

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