have got it into their heads that they can get beyond their human finitude".

1   Cf *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* by Richard Rorty, Oxford 1980.
2   In his review of Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Colour* in the October 1978 issue of *Philosophy,* p 566.
3   In a footnote to *Vom Wesen des Grundes* (1929) Heidegger writes: "The ontological interpretation of being human as being-in-the-world tells neither for nor against the possible existence of God. One must first gain an *adequate concept* of being human by illuminating transcendence. Then, by considering being human, one can *ask* how the relationship of being human to God is ontologically constituted".
4   Cf *Must We Mean What We Say?* by Stanley Cavell, New York 1969 – the references are to p 84 and p 239.
5   Cf *The Claim of Reason,* Oxford 1979, p 493.
6   Cavell again, *Claim,* p 430: "The crucified human body is our best picture of the unacknowledged human soul".
7   Cf *Christ: The Christian Experience in the Modern World* by Edward Schillebeeckx, London 1980, pp 731 to 743.

Theology and Rhetoric

Ricca Edmondson and Markus Wörner

In this paper we should like to examine some rhetorical aspects of theological language. Before doing so, it is necessary to argue for the view that there is a special mode of discourse appropriate to theology, as opposed to the view that theological language is composed of statements which differ from others only in terms of their subject-matter. There is a distinguished history of opposition to the view we propose; in a very ancient debate it has repeatedly been maintained that theology should be concerned only with discovering and promulgating true statements about God and our knowledge of God, and that any concern with developing sorts and styles of language can only distract and distort. This position is connected with another, which has received support from natural-scientific quarters since the mid-19th century especially: it presents a contrast between academic and non-academic language, founded on the contention that academic discourse occurs in the course of researches where the *truth* of a statement matters, but virtually nothing else about it does. According to this position, as long as a statement is true it should not matter to the researcher whether anyone finds it important or believable, or whether it impinges on anyone's interests or needs. (Hence the expressions, presumably used chiefly in non-academic circles, 'an academic point', or 'of merely academic interest'.) The concept of rhetoric

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can be used to point to misguided features in this type of position, whether it is taken up in relation to theology or in relation to research in general. But theology, more obviously than most subjects, highlights the dubiousness of trying to erect a linguistic ideal without attending to the effects on language of its most communicative aspects.

Attempts to separate theological language, or academic language in general, from other types of utterance stem from a common source which in itself is worthy of the greatest respect: the wish to protect the search for truth from the distorting influences which the impingement of either the speaker's or the hearer's needs and interests certainly can have on it. This desire to protect true statements, or even mistaken attempts at true statements, from distortion is of crucial importance and should be sustained; but it seems doubtful that it can be fulfilled by the method of protecting one particular field of language from any obligation to do anything other than accumulate correct propositions. It is doubtful whether any body of discourse can succeed in communicating anything to anyone — that is, in making 'statements' at all — without both having a relationship to the views and interests of its recipients, and being affected by that relationship. (It is sometimes claimed that the natural sciences form an exception to this generalisation; the positions on which this claim is based seem dubious, but there is not room to discuss them now. In any case, they will not make any difference to what is said here about theology or about the non-natural-scientific branches of academic language.) Moreover, it is doubtful whether any field of discourse would be wise in choosing this method of protecting its truthfulness even were it feasible, for it seems important enough that true discoveries should be made known in a convincing manner. And theology is a particularly clear case in which appealing to the feelings and the interests of its recipients is one of the proper concerns of a subject; these virtues can, moreover, support rather than counteract the equally important virtue of truthfulness.

Rather than argue directly against the claims of those who take a 'purist' view of language — a project which has often been undertaken elsewhere — it seems more interesting to counterpose to this view a sketch of a rhetorical theory of communication which can present a positive counter-model. The notion of rhetoric can be used to give rise to a special view of the way in which language works; the exposition of this position itself gives some indication of the difficulty of communicating effectively while avoiding appeals to one's hearer or reader, in his capacity as a person with dispositions which are affective, moral or mixed in various ways as well as simply cognitive. This view will at the same time yield

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criteria for criticising the type of discourse produced if the hearer is involved in it in this way. Since theology is par excellence a subject whose major categories – such as 'God', 'love', or 'revelation' – can hardly be grasped without some exercise of extra-cognitive faculties, and since it is centrally concerned with matters whose examination is explicitly intended to convince other people, such uses of rhetoric may be considered particularly important to it.

There are several different conceptions of rhetoric which would make these claims surprising. 'Rhetoric' is variously used as a name, not for a theory of communication, but for particular linguistic practices – that of bending one's audience to one's will by demagogic means, for example, or of decorating one's literary prose with elaborate and artificial conceits. The study and practice of rhetoric referred to here, however, is a different branch of a common tradition concerned with speaking and writing effectively; 'effectively' not in the sense in which success need be measured in terms of whether the hearer ends by agreeing with the speaker, but in the sense in which the speaker manages to convey what he wishes to convey and the hearer, whether he agrees with it or not, grasps the point which is being made and is able to respond to it in an appreciative and critical manner. The branch of this tradition which seems most appropriate for use in understanding communication today is one stemming from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. No attempt will be made here to give an accurate summary of or sample from the theories of Aristotle; instead, concepts will be introduced which are based on a reading of Aristotle and which can be used in contemporary theory as well as demonstrating the sort of approach to communication this theory can take. This way of using, rather than expounding, Aristotle can then be extended by a more Christianised understanding of language to outline a type of discourse to which theologians might be expected to aspire.

Rhetoric, according to Aristotle, is 'the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion'.[1] 'Persuasion' is not used here to refer to the use of arbitrary, dubious or insufficient means of getting someone to do or believe something. It can be summarised as the use, conditioned by the opportunities and constraints of the situation in which discourse is going on, of argumentative practices which show the reasonableness or usefulness of a position in a manner which is appropriate to the subject-matter under discussion, to the speaker and his character, and to the affective and other dispositions of the hearer. This summary, though some of its terms will have to be explained, by no means excludes the criteria of honesty and truthfulness. Aristotle repeatedly stresses his aversion to distorting the hearer's judgement in order to induce his assent, and for him the very point of using

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rhetorical means of persuasion is to bring the hearer to a position from which he can respond to a speech in the way appropriate to it – which may be quite compatible with rejecting its conclusions.

Aristotle points out that deliberation, and rendering its conclusions suasive to other people, are as a rule necessary in situations where there is some doubt what has happened, what is going to happen or what should be done or thought;[2] situations of complete certainty allow no place for deliberation and its consequences. More often, though, decisions have to be made between 'alternative possibilities'; this is in the nature of arguing, for no-one takes the trouble to devote deep consideration to a course which he perceives as utterly obvious and inevitable.[3] This is what is meant by saying that rhetoric takes place within the area of the probable; there may well be true answers to questions about which rhetorical debate occurs, but if their truth were wholly apparent from the beginning, no serious dispute about them could take place. It is either true or not that God exists; but if this "fact" (whichever it is) and its implications were quite clear to everyone, the range of theological argument would be considerably curtailed.

The notion of the rhetorical situation in which arguing goes on is a concept which takes immediate account of the persons involved. A speaker or writer who, in a given situation, wants to convince someone of something cannot normally hope to succeed if he acts as if unaware of the limitations and advantages afforded by the situation they share: both experience and theoretical considerations go to show that convincing is a process which must take account, for example, of the number of people present, their ages, backgrounds, beliefs and capacities. (Differences in forms of communication occur, clearly, according to whether debate is written or spoken; but for our purposes here, 'speaker' and 'writer' or 'hearer' and 'reader' can be treated as equivalent.) The notion of 'situation' is, then, closely bound up with that of the people addressed: "it is . . . the hearer, that determines the speech's end and object'.[4] Those who are purist in their attitude to truthful language may deny that this is a matter of fact – in which case the burden is on them to prove that recipient-oriented convincingness is not really effective or necessary to produce conviction – or else they may admit the fact that communication goes on in this way but prefer to alter its normal course on the grounds of higher priorities: dic veritatem, pereat mundus. But it may be possible to indicate here that the facts of persuasiveness need not prima facie be seen as a threat to truthfulness, in theology or elsewhere.

Aristotle may be read as trying to show the plausibility of this view by demonstrating the compatibility, rather than the enmity, of the three 'means of persuasion' which work in concert: ethos,

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pathos and logos. 'Ethos' depends on 'the personal character of the speaker' as it is revealed in what he says.[5] According to Aristotle, a speaker can count as reliable and convincing if he appears to judge honestly and prudently, if he seems intellectually and morally capable of dealing with his subject, and if he is well disposed towards his hearers. (That is, ethos involves the possession of practical wisdom, a moral character whose virtue can command respect, and benevolent relations with those with whom one is talking.) The more uncertain the subject under discussion, the more influential the character of the speaker is liable to be. 'We believe good men more fully and readily than others,' and 'where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided' a speaker's personal qualities may be decisive in influencing a decision.[6] This does not, on consideration, seem irrational. If we have to decide something, and if we cannot decide on the basis of the empirical proof (say) that is at hand, it seems rational to allow the balance to be swung by a competent and well-disposed person rather than by an incompetent and ill-disposed one. It is also realistic; in very many decisions, and not only trivial ones, we are obliged to rely on the experience or expertise of other people, as far as we can judge it to be from what they say to us. From a different point of view, it may also be held that unless a speaker can make a convincing effect on the hearer, the latter may easily make mistakes in understanding what is said to him: he may perceive different emphases from those intended (which is different from noticing what the speaker intends to stress but thinking him mistaken), or be distracted into making inferences which do not properly follow from what is said.

It may still be asked how we can distinguish between these components of ethos and more demagogic methods of persuasion, such as appearance, intonation or the exploitation of political allegiance. Why should we accept that phenomena connected with ethos, granted that they occur, really are legitimate influences on our reactions to other people's arguments? Such questions seem answerable in connection with the foundations of those selected characteristics which Aristotle believes justifiably to influence judgements. There are reasons for which practical wisdom is attributed to someone: to possess it *is* to have a fair idea of what aims a group of people can sensibly pursue, and how to achieve them. To have a moral character worthy of respect *is* to be in a condition to proffer grounds on which evaluative decisions can be made. If someone is well disposed towards his hearers, it can reasonably be assumed that he will exercise his capacities in a manner which at least does not counteract their interests. The speaker's character, then, can be judged in terms of three aspects which seem basic to

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reasonable discourse: firstly, his grasp of and capacity to deal with the facts of a matter as far as they can be perceived; secondly, his personal suitability for offering advice; thirdly, his relations with his audience. Other criteria for judging what the speaker maintains should be based on these, which appear to be fundamental to communicative relationships.

'Pathos', for Aristotle, is 'putting the audience into a certain frame of mind',[7] and appears to include at least two sides. Aristotle holds that anyone who wishes to communicate efficiently must not only be able to argue logically but also 'to understand human character and goodness in their various forms' and 'to understand the emotions'.[8] That is, he must take note of the fact that arguing takes place in a context which is social and psychological as well as intellectual, and be able to function in a mode fitting this context. (This requirement is, no doubt, one of the factors which makes arguing difficult.) The second aspect of pathos appears to be partially epistemological. Aristotle remarks that a particular frame of mind may be necessary for the proper consideration of a given argument. 'Our judgements when we are pleased and friendly are not the same as when we are pained and hostile.'[9] (Note that he does not assert that the former attitude is always apposite.) Depending on the way in which he perceives a subject and feels about it, it will be possible for the hearer to infer in particular directions from what is said, or to judge it in a particular way. If he is in a certain mood or has a certain prejudice, there will be points of view which cannot seem acceptable or even intelligible to him. Putting the audience in to a given frame of mind, then, may function to remove the barriers to perception which psychological factors can impose, and – since emotional neutrality is a precarious and unhelpful state, whereas impartiality is an affective attitude – to engage his sympathies in favour of a constructive comprehension of the argument.

'Logos' refers to the argument itself; here Aristotle speaks of 'the use of rational speech'[10] in connection with rhetorical 'reasoning'.[11] In connection with this means of persuasion which may, though it need not, be the most important among the three, a fourth Aristotelian notion may be mentioned, that of the 'topos'. The topos is not a means of persuasion, but is a source of reasoned argumentation in situations which offer an insufficient supply of more stringent components of argument, such as logical laws, analytical propositions and meticulously supported claims of empirical fact. (There is, of course, no reason why all of these should not be incorporated into rhetorical reasoning as well, when they are relevant to it.) Special topoi take the form of generalisations based on experience, observation and a certain understanding of

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human conduct; major sub-classes deal with ethos and with the emotions. Such general assertions are intended to hold, not in every single case, but other things being equal they can be used as presuppositions which themselves exert an influence over the arguments they initiate. Other topoi are general, insofar as they are applicable to any range of phenomena at all. An example of a general topos might be, 'If something does not happen where it is more likely to do so, there is no need to expect it where it is less likely;'[12] a special topos might run, 'A friend is one who feels love and excites this feeling in return.'[13]

Many such generalisations appear banal at first glance, but they are nonetheless influential determinants of the characteristic thought of a culture, summarising the types of inference considered legitimate and plausible within it. (The experience of moving from one culture to another can demonstrate which of these apparent banalities are less universally obvious than their holders may suppose.) Partly because they are so familiar to their users, topoi are not usually explicitly expressed; instead, arguments are built up using topoi for their frameworks, and a speaker will select and present arguments whose appropriateness to his subject-matter he can judge in the light of topoi. Thus people arguing about loving behaviour do not necessarily generalise about what they take love to be, but their contentions are governed by pre-understandings of what is meant; these pre-understandings must to some extent be shared by their hearers if they are to accept the conclusions of arguments put forward on their basis. Topoi, then, are especially useful and influential where no claim to exhaustive logical and empirical rigour can be made but where a basis for reasonable expectations is needed, and where people need to extend and explore common notions about beliefs and behaviour. Theology, it may well seem, is a paradigm case of a subject in need of such devices.

These four Aristotelian components can offer the basic elements of a theory or model of communication which — whether or not it can be taken as universal — is highly appropriate for analysing and prescribing procedures in (non-natural-scientific) discourse where attitudes are to be taken up, decisions reached and people persuaded. It is true that they require expansion, and some modification — notably in allowing for the *active* manner of the hearer's reception of what he hears, and for his influence upon the speaker, which can contribute to a chain of mutual effects lasting throughout a dialogue. Unlike many other models of communication, though, an Aristotelian theory both includes more components than those which can be classed as strictly linguistic and takes account of the effects of dispositions which are not strictly

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cognitive, without debasing these to the status of irrationality. In order to make even such an amended version into a theory which allows for a specifically Christian notion of communication, though, certain alterations need to be made.

If we can regard an accentuation of the hearer's participation in discourse as an intensification of the notion of pathos, the concept of ethos needs deepening too in order to yield a view of communication compatible with conveying Christian attitudes and ideas. Here we can use the Augustinian point that the ultimate end of speech, as of every other human activity, is to come nearer to the love of God; if we are to use discussion to help other people towards this end, it will not be enough to adapt our forms of expression to what is most helpful to them, and to use our best argumentative efforts in their interests. Nothing less than Christian love will be enough to convince other people of theological truths. We need this conception of love, too, to control the notion of an 'appropriate' reaction to other people and one's circumstances, and to control the impingement of its form of expression on a proposition so that its truth remains unscathed. It may not be easy to work out criteria for truthfulness which involve ethical and emotional as well as cognitive components, but given that language itself has ethical and emotional as well as cognitive aspects there seems to be no alternative to attempting to evolve a notion of truthfulness which takes the circumstances of communication into account. Here, those specific topoi whose acceptance defines the Christian community can act as a guide. Lastly, the notion of logos can also be treated in a Christian manner — not just as the content of any argument one might choose to convey, but as the active word of God.

It is possible to claim that the goal of rhetoric, that which finally demonstrates its significance and use, consists in guiding the hearer into a position where he is able to make his own judgements. Here it is not just a question of whether the hearer can, after hearing a particular piece of discourse, take something to be true about which he had been unable to decide before — as if rhetoric were only of use in influencing intellectual processes. Rhetoric is just as much concerned with whether the hearer is able to develop adequate moral and emotional attitudes to a subject which is under discussion, so that it can become possible to say that he is 'completely' convinced, convinced 'as a person', 'in his heart'. The use of rhetoric therefore aims at a particular sort of assent which characterises the hearer as a whole person; this is also precisely the case for the language of faith, and for theological argument too insofar as its aim is to convince. Here Aristotle's means of persuasion, then, can be subjected to a specification for translation into

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Christian terms which interprets them in a materially different way. If the Aristotelian orator must possess practical wisdom, well-disposedness and virtue in order to convince, this is also true of the Christian speaker – but under a special leading aspect, which determines the structure of ethos, pathos and logos: the aspect of agape or love. More precisely, he must speak in imitation of that love with which Christ himself spoke to men.

(All references are to the translation of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* by Rhys Roberts, Oxford, O.U.P. 1924; this edition 1971.)

1   Ar. *Rhet.* 1355b 25–6.
2   1359a 31–34.
3   1357a 5–7.
4   1358b 1f.
5   1356a 2.
6   1356a 6–8.
7   1356a 3.
8   1356a 20–27.
9   1356a 15f.
10 1355a 38–55b 2.
11 1357a 1–5.
12 Cf. 1397b 12–29.
13 1381a 1f.

Bonhoeffer's Footnote and the

Moral Absolute

Jordan Bishop

In much contemporary discussion of ethics, the Roman Catholic tradition – particularly in questions of sexual morality – has been characterized as the last refuge of the absolute. On questions such as the morality of contraception, the Church has been remarkably out of phase with other churches and other ethical traditions, insisting on a particular approach to natural law theory which has, by now, become identified with the Roman Catholic tradition.

It is interesting then, to find the following footnote in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, as edited from Bonhoeffer's papers by Eberhard Bethge:

Marriage is not founded upon the purpose of reproduction but on the union of man and woman. Woman is given to man as 'an help meet for him' (Gen.2:18). The two shall be 'one flesh' (Gen.2:23). But the fruitfulness of this union is not something that is commanded. For biblical thought this would have been

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