

TRUTH OR ELOQUENCE IN THE WORKS OF LATIN CHRISTIAN WRITERS
OF 2ND-3RD CENTURIES*

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Abstract: *To the bloody persecutions applied by the Roman Empire to the Christians were added to the attacks the Christians had to take from the representatives of the contemporary culture and especially from the sophist oratory. This cultural offensive led to a new issue, that is, the way in which the religious truths (acquired by reading, studying and understanding the Bible) were supposed to be revealed. Therefore, the Christian writers tried to state some "theories and paradigms", regarding the way the truths of faith should be revealed to an audience, educated not only according to the standards and the norms of the Greek education, but also in a corrupt way, according to the speeches of profan orators. This is why, we intend to emphasize the attitude of the Latin Fathers of the Church from the 2nd and 3rd centuries towards the rhetorical tradion.*

Rezumat: *Sângeroaselor persecuții suferite de creștini din partea statului roman, se adăugau atacurile pe care aceștia le primeau din partea reprezentanților culturii contemporane și îndeosebi din partea retoricii sofiste. Această ofensivă culturală a dus la apariția unei noi probleme, și anume a modului în care trebuie făcute cunoscute, transmise, expuse adevărurile de credință dobândite prin citirea, studierea și înțelegerea Bibliei. De aceea, scriitorii creștini au încercat să formuleze unele „teorii și paradigme” cu privire la modul în care trebuie exprimate adevărurile de credință unui public educat nu numai după standardele și normele educației grecești, dar și corupt în mod divers prin discursurile oratorilor profani. Prin acest studiu voi încerca să evidențiez atitudinea Părinților latini ai Bisericii din secolele II-III față de tradiția oratorică.*

Carefully examining some literary forms of Late Antiquity period, it was observed that they were based mainly on ideal and on the practice of rhetoric. Therefore, the researchers concerned with the study of rhetoric

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in the period under discussion have approached the problem of the origins of Christian oratory², the relationship between Christian education and pagan instruction, which was reflected in their writings³, the influence of the second kind of sophist thinking⁴, on oratorical style of Greek and Latin Fathers of the Church (for example, Basil of Caesarea⁵, Gregory of Nyssa⁶, John Chrysostom⁷, etc.), the relationship between rhetoric and Christian faith⁸, the acquisition of oratorical art by some of the Greek and Latin Fathers of the Church (for example, Philo of Alexandria⁹, Gregory of Nazianzus¹⁰, Ambrosius of Mediolanum¹¹, Hieronymus¹², Athanasius of Alexandria¹³, John Chrysostom¹⁴ etc.), the

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² VICASTILLO 2004, 19-49.

³ LUGARESI 2004, 779-832; BLÁSQUEZ 2001, 595-629; RUBERSON 2000, 110-139; MILLAR 1946; JAEGER 1961; SADDINGTON 1965, 86-101; KASTER 1988.

⁴ ANDERSON 1993; WHITMARSH 2005.

⁵ CAMPBELL 1922.

⁶ MÉRIDIER 1906.

⁷ AMERINGER 1921.

⁸ KENNEDY 1972, 607-613; KENNEDY 1980, 132-160; KENNEDY 1983, 180-264; KENNEDY 1989, 330-346; KENNEDY 1994, 257-270; QUACQUARELLI 1956; QUACQUARELLI 1960; QUACQUARELLI 1971; QUACQUARELLI 1982; QUACQUARELLI 1988, 127-148; CLARKE 1953, 148-157; MUSURILLO 1957, 357-386; MAGUIRE 1981, 9-21; WILSON 1983, 8-12; AUXENTIOS 1989, 45-58; TREU 1992, 125-139; AUSKI 1995, 144-173; STAMPS 1997, 609-632; KINZIG 1997, 633-670; SATTERTHWAITTE 1997, 671-694; PERVO 1997, 793-805; MOHRMANN 1955, 222-246; FONTAINE 1968; WILDER 1964; KUSTAS 1973; CAMERON 1991, 120-154.

⁹ CONLEY 1997, 695-713.

¹⁰ GUIGNAT 1911; RUETHER 1969; CASTELLI 2002, 371-389; BØRTNES, HÄGG 2006.

¹¹ PIZZOLATO 1991, 57-71; GRAUMANN 1997, 587-600; CORALUPPI 685-730.

¹² CLAUSI 87-126.

¹³ STEAD 1976, 121-137.

¹⁴ QUIROGA PUERTAS 2007; PAPAGEORGIU 1998, 93-104; FRENCH 1998, 468-484; CARTER 1958, 367-371; MAAT 1944; BURNS 1930; WILKEN 1983; RYLAARSDAM 2000; HUBBELL 1924, 261-276; ALISSANDRATOS 1980, 182-198; SKIMINA 1927; SIMONETTI 1953, 159-180; ZITNIK 1947; ASENSIO 1977, 153-171; ASENSIO 1981, 201-221; CIOFFI 1978, 3-45; FAIRWEATHER 1994, 1-38, 213-244; THURÉN 2001, 180-218.

discourse as a means of preaching¹⁵ etc. Less studied has been the attitude of Christian writers towards the pagan oratorical art. Therefore, here we intend to highlight the way in which Latin Christian writers of the second and third centuries expressed the truths of faith to an audience educated not only by Greek standards and regulations, but also variously corrupted by the discourses of pagan speakers.

As it is well known, to those bloody persecutions suffered by Christians because of the Roman rule, one can add the attacks they received from the representatives of contemporary culture and especially from the sophist rhetoricians. The rhetoricians like Aelius Aristides, Fronto, Galenus the physician, Celsus, Porphyry, Julian the Apostate, Libanius, Symmachus and others fiercely attacked the writings of the new faith, through which the Christians defended and supported the superiority of their religion. Those rhetoricians disregarded the Christian writers for the simplicity and lack of artistic elegance present in their expression of the truths of faith, and also for the fact that their works did not meet the rules of what generally was considered to be an elegant style.

This cultural attack led to a new problem, namely how to disclose, spread, and display the truths of faith acquired through reading, studying and understanding the Bible.

This attitude, closely linked to the general attitude towards the classical culture and pagan education¹⁶, was complex and contradictory.

Starting with Paul the Apostle, all means and methods of the classical oratorical tradition have been removed as harmful. Although Christianity arose and developed in the Greco-Roman world, where a thorough knowledge of the rules of classical rhetoric was an evidence of good education, Paul, relying only on the truth of the Christian message, considered that training in oratorical art was pointless¹⁷. However, he admits that the Christian preacher can use the methods and means of

¹⁵ WHITBY 1998; LENSKI, CAIN 2009.

¹⁶ COCHRANE 1957; HAGENDAHL 1958; SEVCENKO 1980, 53-73; LAISTNER 1951; PELLEGRINO 1947; LEMERLE 1986; SIMONETTI 1985, 119-136.

¹⁷ 2 COR., 11, 6; 1 COR., 1, 17; 1 COR. 2, 1-5; 1 COR., 2, 13; 1 COR. 2, 1-5.

classical rhetoric only in cases of public debates with pagan intellectuals¹⁸. So, being a keen observer of the pagan culture, which he appropriated quite well and knowing the danger of a discussion with pagan intellectuals, so versed in philosophy and in the technique of dispute¹⁹, Paul wrote to Colossians: "And your words should always be with grace, as if seasoned with salt, and be aware how it is appropriate for you to answer each man"²⁰ (Col., 4, 6).

In the Latin space, the flourishing of rhetoric in Late Antiquity, along with the union between the philosopher and the rhetorician in Cicero's person, who was considered to be "the first Latin philosopher", and with the Latin apologists' training in the art of rhetoric, had as result for the Latin Christian writers from the second and third centuries the fusion between philosophy and rhetoric, and also accusing philosophy with some defects specific to the eloquence of the second kind of sophist thinking, which was able to show some lies as being the truth²¹. Ancient philosophy was always concerned with the search for truth. For the Christian belief, Jesus is the truth itself and He brings the truth to humanity²², so that now there is nothing to search for, and the need for philosophy disappeared. What it remains to be done by the Christian preacher is to explain as much as possible and in a rational way, and especially to defend "the truths of divine revelation" from all those who attack them²³. In this respect, Tertullian (ca. 160-ca. 230) argued that along with Christ's coming in the world, all philosophical praises of the truth have lost their meaning. The truth had come into the world. The language of truth was simple, therefore it did not need any clarification²⁴. Establishing the truth as the goal of Christian oratory²⁵, in his famous work, *Apologeticum*, Tertullian opposed false eloquence, based on illusion

¹⁸ FLORESCU 1973, 93.

¹⁹ FLORESCU 1973, 91.

²⁰ COL., 4, 6.

²¹ BÎCICOV 1984, 129.

²² IN, 14, 6.

²³ BÎCICOV 1984, 82.

²⁴ BÎCICOV 1984, 133.

²⁵ SATTERTHWAIT 1997, 688.

and oratorical skill, to true eloquence, used by Christians, for which the truth is its ground and foundation²⁶. In another book, *Adversus Valentinianos*, Tertullian accused the Gnostics for using an ambiguous language that allowed them *per ambiguitates bilingues communem fidem adfirmant*²⁷. Because of their ability, they managed to convince the Christians even before exposing them the details of their teachings. But, adds Tertullian, *veritas autem docendo persuadet, non suadendo docet*²⁸. Also in *De anima*, he criticized those rhetoricians who possessed that „facility of language which is practised in the building up and pulling down of everything, and which has greater aptitude for persuading men by speaking than by teaching”²⁹. From the examples above, one can say that the Latin philosopher opposed the eloquence based on what is credible, which uses illusion and artifice to convince its audience, to philosophical eloquence, founded on the truth which it must transmit³⁰.

Tertullian argued that the art of Christian oratory, whose objective is to preach the truth, must be complemented by an aesthetic that corresponds to this goal: brevity and clarity. In spite of their brief content, three texts are important in supporting this fact. Thus, in *Adversus Marcionem*, the latin apologist says: „*Sed expedita virtus veritatis paucis amat. Multa mendacio erunt necessaria*”³¹. In *De anima*, opposing belief and learning to enjoyment, Tertullian said that „in the few words there always arises certainty to him; nor is he permitted to give his inquiries a wider range than is compatible with their solution”³², and in *De virginibus velandis: naturaliter compedium sermonis et gratum et necessarium est, quoniam sermo lacinosus et onerosus et vanus est*³³. It should be noted that Tertullian's

²⁶ TERT., *Apol.*, 46: „Who will venture to undertake our refutation; not with skill of words, but, as we have managed our demonstration, on the basis of reality?(CCEL 3, 100; PL 1, col. 501).

²⁷ TERT., *Adv. Val.*, 1, 4 (CCSL 2, 753).

²⁸ TERT., *Adv. Val.*, 1, 4 (CCSL 2, 753).

²⁹ TERT., *Anim.*, 2 (CCEL 3, 380).

³⁰ FREDOUILLE 1972, 31.

³¹ TERT., *Adv. Marc.*, 2, 29 (SC 368, 170-172).

³² TERT., *Anim.*, 2, 7 (CCEL 3, 382).

³³ TERT., *Virg. vel.*, 4, 4 (SC 424, 142).

attitude towards the oratorical style has undoubtedly two convergent sources. On the one hand, we know that Tertullian could not ignore Scripture's many warnings against babble and unnecessary digressions, especially the first verse of the first Epistle to Timothy³⁴, and on the other hand, the fact that, starting with Zenon, *brevitas* was one of the advantages of oratorical speech, highly appreciated by Cicero, Seneca, Tacitus and Marcus Aurelius³⁵.

Contemporary with Tertullian, also originally from Africa, Minucius Felix (second and third centuries) was a known Roman lawyer, author of the famous writing *Octavius*. After converting to Christianity, he condemned his previous activity as rhetorician, because he realized that its essence, and especially its aesthetic appearance, contradicts the simplicity of Christian doctrine. In his opinion, the power of eloquence is not used to defend the truth, but to support lies and deception. Thus, to minimize the accusations brought by Caecilius' speech against Christians, after the speech Minucius Felix's notes that „for the most part the condition of truth should be changed according to the powers of discussion, and even the faculty of perspicuous eloquence. This is very well known to occur by reason of the facility of the hearers, who, being distracted by the allurements of words from attention to things, assent without distinction to everything that is said, and do not separate falsehood from truth; unaware that even in that which is incredible there is often truth, and in verisimilitude falsehood³⁶. Hence, knowing the power of aesthetic influence of a well-constructed speech, because of gnosiological reasons he adopted a critical attitude towards the eloquence used quite often in that period against Christians and their teachings.

In the same dispute with *Octavius*, Minucius Felix also mentioned that it happened that truth seemed quite confused, while a skillful discourse often assumes the appearance of a valid evidence. Therefore, he believed, it was necessary that everything should be carefully deliberated, „as carefully as possible to weigh each particular, that we may, while

³⁴ I TIM., 1, 3-4.

³⁵ FREDOUILLE 1972, 33.

³⁶ MIN., *Oct.*, 14 (CCEL 4, 416; PL 3, col. 276).

ready to applaud acuteness, yet elect, approve, and adopt those things which are right"³⁷. But to highlight the truth helps particularly the simple speech, for proof it is not hidden in it, under the cover of beautiful speech figures, but is presented in its natural form and derived from the truth itself: „even the more unskilled the discourse, the more evident the reasoning, since it is not coloured by the pomp of eloquence and grace; but as it is, it is sustained by the rule of right"³⁸.

The same position is also followed by Cyprian of Carthage (c. 200-258). In the *Epistle to Donatus*, he stated that his works are not written in a special and refined style, for his skill in the oratorical art is quite modest and cannot touch its heights by its wealth, nor by the beauty of expression: „In courts of justice, in the public assembly, in political debate, a copious eloquence may be the glory of a voluble ambition; but in speaking of the Lord God, a chaste simplicity of expression strives for the conviction of faith rather with the substance, than with the powers, of eloquence. Therefore accept from me things, not clever but weighty, words, not decked up to charm a popular audience with cultivated rhetoric, but simple and fitted by their unvarnished truthfulness for the proclamation of the divine mercy"³⁹.

Arnobius (ca. 235-ca 310), also, being deeply convinced that truth needs no artifice specific to classical oratorical art, tried to defend the Scripture's simple form and developed a whole theory against pagan rhetorical aesthetics⁴⁰. He also used all his oratorical talent to demonstrate the superiority of simple and raw language of Christian texts over the elegant speech of Pagan orators and philosophers⁴¹. In his speech, in which he supported the early Christian religious utilitarianism against the rhetorical aestheticism of late antique culture, Arnobius has made reference to Socrates, who opposed those speakers who used lots of

³⁷ MIN., *Oct.*, 14 (CCEL 4, 416; PL 3, col. 278).

³⁸ MIN., *Oct.*, 16 (CCEL 4, 419; PL 3, col. 283).

³⁹ CYPR., *Donat.*, 2 (CCEL 5, 688; PL 4, col. 197-198)

⁴⁰ MOHRMANN 1965, 149-150.

⁴¹ BÎCICOV 1984, 235-236.

technical means of speech, seeking to impress their audience by playing with ideas and words⁴².

The causes of this hostile attitude towards the pagan oratorical art are clear. Some representatives of pagan culture, especially the sophists, accused the Church Fathers that their works were written in an illiterate style, in a rough and primitive language and the lack of truth in their writings⁴³. Thus Lactantius (c. 240-320) described the situation of the first Christian centuries in his writing *Divinae institutiones*: the prophets wrote in a popular and simple style, hence the hostility of intellectuals and scholars towards their texts. Everything written in a simple style was considered inferior and insignificant. It was recognized as truth only what one liked to hear. They were not interested in truth itself, but in its embellishments. They did not accept the divine mysteries, as they were considered to be deprived of such embellishments⁴⁴.

Therefore, Lactantius thought to be possible and appropriate to give up the theory of his predecessors, namely the aesthetic asceticism, and he tried not only to put the eloquence in the service of Christian gnosiology, but he even emphasized the importance of the oratorical art in spreading the Gospel message. Giving up the formal-logical thinking, Lactantius sought to replace it with images and figures of speech that could act directly on the affective side of consciousness, but not on

⁴² POPESCU 1944, 11.

⁴³ BÎCICOV 1984, 150.

⁴⁴ LACT., *Inst.*, 5, 1: „For this is especially the cause why, with the wise and the learned, and the princes of this world, the sacred Scriptures are without credit, because the prophets spoke in common and simple language, as though they spoke to the people. And therefore they are despised by those who are willing to hear or read nothing except that which is polished and eloquent; nor is anything able to remain fixed in their minds, except that which charms their ears by a more soothing sound. But those things which appear humble are considered anile, foolish, and common. So entirely do they regard nothing as true, except that which is pleasant to the ear; nothing as credible, except that which can excite pleasure: no one estimates a subject by its truth, but by its embellishment. Therefore they do not believe the sacred writings, because they are without any pretence; but they do not even believe those who explain them, because they also are either altogether ignorant, or at any rate possessed of little learning. For it very rarely happens that they are wholly eloquent; and the cause of this is evident” (CCEL 7, 299-300; PL 6, col. 549-551).

rationality⁴⁵.

In the first lines of his work *Divinae Institutiones*, Lactantius stated that the ultimate truth is not accessible to sensorial or rational knowledge, therefore all efforts of philosophers were in vain⁴⁶ and that „the truth still lies hidden in obscurity“⁴⁷. Although philosophers have distinguished themselves through their teaching, Lactantius argued that they did not know the truth, because „no one can attain to by reflection or disputation“⁴⁸. Further, showing the objectives and methodology of his work, Lactantius expressed his intention to use for his goals the achievements of the pagan scholars, both philosophers and rhetoricians. He valued more the first ones, because those who teach you to live well are to be praised more than those who teach you to speak well. Therefore, for Greeks the philosophers had greater glory than the rhetoricians, because the art of speaking well concerns only some people, while to live well is important for all of us⁴⁹. Although this art of the chosen ones, which Lactantius, like all other rhetoricians, often used before to support a lie, he now considered necessary to use it only in defense of truth⁵⁰.

Although the truth may be defended without eloquence, it is known that splendor and elegance of speech decorate and in some way contribute to its presentation, because apparently rich and beautiful speech engrave easier on the human mind⁵¹. Truth can be more

⁴⁵ BĀCICOV 1984, 237.

⁴⁶ LACT., *Inst.*, 1, 1 (CCEL 7, 14; PL 6, col. 117)

⁴⁷ LACT., *Inst.*, 3, 1 (CCEL 7, 145; PL 6, col. 347).

⁴⁸ LACT., *Inst.*, 3, 1 (CCEL 7, 146; PL 6, col. 349).

⁴⁹ LACT., *Inst.*, 1, 1: „on which account the philosophers were in greater glory among the Greeks than the orators. For they, the philosophers, were considered teachers of right living, which is far more excellent, since to speak well belongs only to a few, but to live well belongs to all“ (CCEL 7, 15; PL 6, col. 117-119).

⁵⁰ LACT., *Inst.*, 1, 1 (CCEL 7, 15; PL 6, col. 117-119).

⁵¹ LACT., *Inst.*, 1, 1: „for although the truth may be defended without eloquence, as it often has been defended by many, yet it needs to be explained, and in a measure discussed, with distinctness and elegance of speech, in order that it may flow with greater power into the minds of men, being both provided with its own force, and adorned with the brilliancy of speech“ (CCEL 7, 15; PL 6, col. 117-119).

appreciated when decorated with beautiful figures of speech⁵². Lactantius has shown how the principles of classical oratorical art can be used to support the new faith and the need of their use. He has said it clearly, thus recognizing the profane merit of oratory: „Yet that practice in fictitious suits has been of great advantage to us, so that we are now able to plead the cause of truth with greater copiousness and ability of speaking”⁵³. Developing the ideas presented above about eloquence, Lactantius wrote that he wished to have the gift of eloquence like Cicero’s. His wish had two reasons: first of all, people enjoy the truth faster if it uses the artifices of oratorical art, with which lie is seducing them, and then „the philosophers themselves might be overpowered by us, most of all by their own arms”⁵⁴. Yet, he remembers the ideas of his Latin predecessors, being fully convinced that „God has willed this to be the nature of the case, that simple and undisguised truth should be more clear, because it has sufficient ornament of itself, and on this account it is corrupted when embellished with adornings from without, but that falsehood should please by means of a splendour not its own, because being corrupt of itself it vanishes and melts away, unless it is set off and polished with decoration sought from another source”⁵⁵. Therefore, Lactantius is calming himself, saying that he will limit himself to his modest gift, better trusting the truth itself rather than his own eloquence⁵⁶.

⁵² LACT., *Inst.*, 5, 1, 14: „Only let the cup be anointed with the heavenly honey of wisdom, that the bitter remedies may be drunk by them unawares, without any annoyance, whilst the first sweetness of taste by its allurements conceals, under the cover of pleasantness, the bitterness of the harsh flavour” (CCEL 7, 299; PL 6, col. 549).

⁵³ LACT., *Inst.*, 1, 1 (CCEL 7, 15; PL 6, col. 117-119).

⁵⁴ LACT., *Inst.*, 3, 1, 2: „And I could wish that this were so, for two reasons: either that men might more readily believe the truth when adorned with embellishments, since they even believe falsehood, being captivated by the adornment of speech and the enticement of words; or, at all events, that the philosophers themselves might be overpowered by us, most of all by their own arms, in which they are accustomed to pride themselves and to place confidence” (CCEL 7, 145; PL 6, col. 347).

⁵⁵ Lact., *Inst.*, 3, 1 (CCEL 7, 145; PL 6, col. 347).

⁵⁶ Lact., *Inst.*, 3, 1: „I bear it with equanimity that a moderate degree of talent has been granted to me. But it is not in reliance upon eloquence, but upon the truth, that I have undertaken this work,—a work, perhaps, too great to be sustained by my strength; which,

In conclusion we can say that Latin Christian writers before Lactantius have been hostile to any attention towards language and style, as they have realized that, on the one hand, expressions and style of profane oratory were in contradiction with the simplicity of Christian truth and that, on the other hand, the power of eloquence did not manifest to defend the truth, but to justify lies and deception. Admiring the style of the writings of the Old and New Testament, they argued exposing the truth of faith in a stylish and simple way. Also, not being impressed with the magniloquent style and preferring fewer but more expressive words, they strongly indicated that the Christian message must follow *veritas*, not *eloquentia*. For them, to respect this truth in all its simplicity may give the Christian message the force of persuasion. Only later, Lactantius proclaimed the benefit of oratorical art for the Christian orator, which by this time had a new content: the preaching of Christian truth. Lactantius' new interpretation on profane oratorical art should be naturally preceded by a period of denial, as an important component of Latin and Greek classical tradition.

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however, even if I should fail, the truth itself will complete, with the assistance of God, whose office this is" (CCEL 7, 145; PL 6, col. 347).

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