Vetera novis augere: Notes on the Rhetoric of Response

MARK D. JORDAN*

The contributions to this collection offer astute histories and suggestive analyses. They also illustrate ways of responding to the aggressions of ecclesiastical speech with something other than mere counter-aggression. This is the fundamental rhetorical challenge faced by each of the contributors. In this response, I gather some of the rhetorical lessons to be learned from how they succeed.

The challenge of responding meaningfully to Vatican discourses on sex and gender is more difficult than might appear. It is not easy even to describe it accurately. Many of the church pronouncements studied here share the manipulative techniques of a rhetoric that is at once pervasive and elusive. It is pervasive. A reader can find the techniques in advertising, self-proclaimed journalism, and political campaigns. For all its familiarity, this rhetoric is also elusive. It is designed to elude analysis and to preclude critical response.

A small and obvious example of this sort of speech can be found in a volume that the contributors treat: the *Lexicon* produced by the Pontifical Council for the Family (2003).¹ The opening paragraphs of the text's preface, signed by Cardinal López Trujillo, illustrate features of the rhetoric that I want to describe. They begin by opposing the clear truth of basic categories, rightly understood, to ongoing and deliberate distortions. These 'cultural' distortions mean to trick people out of what would otherwise be an instinctive repugnance towards innovations in regard to sex and gender (5). If the preface begins with such an accusation of bad faith against corrupters of language, it does not actually address them. It speaks instead to those who want to avoid – or *should* want to avoid – the tricks of language played on them. The *Lexicon's* announced audience comprises those who want – or *should* want – to rectify the distorted terms of public debate about marriage, gender, and sex. Unfortunately, some of the addressees lack the 'philosophical, theoretical, legal, and anthropological' education that would enable them to see through tricks of language for themselves. The function of the *Lexicon*, Cardinal Trujillo explains, is to remedy those

¹ I follow the Italian version. I refer parenthetically to the pages of this volume.

*Correspondence: Mellon Professor of Christian Thought (Divinity School), Professor of Studies of Women, Gender, Sexuality (Faculty of Arts and Sciences), Harvard University, Harvard Divinity School, 45 Francis Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA.
E-mail: mjordan@hds.harvard.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution License (3.0)

Religion and Gender | ISSN: 1878-5417 | www.religionandgender.org | Open Journals

defects of education by providing a 'serious and objective' introduction to the secret history of the contested terms (5).

The official handbook will also reprove those who reject natural law or fail to subordinate human law properly. The preface reminds its audience that marriage, according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, is inscribed by God in the nature of women and men. Whatever its historical variations, marriage has certain common and permanent traits. 'There exists nonetheless in all cultures a certain sense of the grandeur of the matrimonial union' (6). Still, Cardinal Trujillo insists, 'it is not the intention of this initiative [the *Lexicon* itself] to combat or go against institutions or persons or, even less, to impose upon them. We wish rather to propose, to persuade with love, pointing towards the truth, with respect, with the hope that a fruitful dialogue might be both established and reinforced' (6).

I stop my paraphrase there, after just eight paragraphs, a page and a half into 867 pages. A complete rhetorical analysis of the eight paragraphs could fill pages of its own. For the moment, I note just three salient features.

First, these paragraphs disorient the reader within language by pulling in contrary directions. If they end with a promise of loving persuasion and respectful dialogue, they have already activated more aggressive rhetorical devices: accusations of bad faith, anxious appeals to instinctive certainty, insinuations of miseducation, authoritarian declamations of a history-spanning truth. Rhetoric like this aims neither at loving persuasion nor at respectful dialogue. It wants instead to stir up fear and resentment towards unnamed deceivers before offering weapons for resisting them. The rest of the preface cultivates this sense of urgent cultural combat: *You are being tricked by elite ideologues who boast of being clever enough to fool you out of what you know in your heart. We are here to arm you with facts. We will also interpret for you what your heart is really trying to say.* (Charamsa describes vividly the frame of cultural warfare and the devices of stigmatization in Vatican offices charged with policing discourse about sex and gender. Garbagnoli shows the same processes at work more broadly.)

The second rhetorical feature to notice in the preface is that the first bit of evidence adduced is the Vatican's own *Catechism*. Despite its appeals to comprehensive education, the *Lexicon* rests on a network of cross-citations to similar documents that share its official authorship and its rhetorical character. The enterprise is guided principally not by the complexities of Christian scriptures or theological traditions, not by ongoing debates in philosophy and the natural or social sciences, but by the artificial clarity of codified policies – of that *magisterium* which speaks out of a closed bureaucracy.

A third rhetorical feature of the *Lexicon*'s opening is both the most important and most elusive. The accusation of bad faith in enemies is a pre-emptive strike against criticism – perhaps especially the kind of rhetorical criticism I now attempt alongside the other contributors. If I claim, as I do, that the *Lexicon* is animated by rhetorical purposes opposed to those it professes, then I seem to be tangling myself in my own accusation: the *Lexicon* is trying to deceive by making accusations of deceit. Or else I class myself immediately among those deceivers that the *Lexicon* warns against. In sum, even these few paragraphs hope to make it impossible to respond to the *Lexicon* except on its own terms. A project that urges the rectification of names by accusing those who use names otherwise of bad faith – such a project wants so far as possible to steal speech from its critics.

Rhetorical purpose is one thing, rhetorical reception something else. If power tends to project its own objects within an expanding field, it also and inevitably creates resistance at many points. How exactly is it possible to resist the kind of rhetoric one finds in the *Lexicon* and the similar documents to which it links itself? How to resist the torrent of official ecclesiastical speech long enough to think about it critically – to take up the distance that would in fact be needed for a mutually respectful dialogue?

* * *

Over recent decades, many different genres have been employed to talk back to Rome about gender and sexuality. A basic list of them might begin in this way:

Autobiographical testimony. One of the strongest responses to official speeches about gender and sex has been to retell the hurtful effects they continue to have on individual lives. This has been the labor of many ‘personal statements,’ testimonies short and long. The statements record and sustain individual discernment. They also build communities. ‘Liberal’ or ‘dissident’ Catholic groups depend on personal testimonies – on an almost liturgical witness to the real harms of official acts and the labor over years to escape the hierarchs without losing trust in God. Such testimonies draw upon historically influential forms of Christian speech – not least, the lives of martyrs and saints. They also resonate with widely diffused forms of the religious conversion narrative – or the ‘secular’ accounts of self-help movements.

Campaign speech. Other counter-genres have been used to resist public interventions by the Roman Catholic organizations around issues of gender and sex. The particular features of campaign rhetoric vary with local politics and their histories. In the United States, for example, legislative proposals by the Catholic hierarchy have been met with appeals to what are supposed to be more specifically American ideals: fairness, equality, human rights, the separation of church and state. The largest US lobbying organization for LGBTQ concerns is the ‘Human Rights Campaign’. Its symbol is the equal sign.

Scholarly history. One of the most unlikely counter-genres has been the scholarly monograph – or, at least, its popular representation. This kind of writing is obviously part of a broader effort over the last century and a half to contradict negative teaching about sex with historical and scientific facts. Even so, it remains striking that certain erudite histories – like John Boswell’s two last books – have attracted popular audiences and exerted a deep influence on public debates.

The list of counter-genres should continue, of course. I stop for now because I want to consider how the rhetorical strategies of the contributions before us might compare to these three influential counter-genres. The interview with Charamsa might be classed as autobiographical testimony, though it also analyzes the sociology of Catholic doctrinal agencies and provides details for historical reconstruction. The other papers seem at first glance closer to scholarly history, though the events they record are often quite recent and the frame is as much sociological as historical. Still, I would suggest that all the contributions show the complexity of intellectual motives that can be discovered in Boswell’s famous histories. Quite explicitly, Boswell claims for himself the role of the objective or impartial social historian. At the same time, he wagers that the presentation of facts will help change Roman Catholic teaching (Jordan 2005). I

have come to regard this hope as mostly a fantasy. (I confess immediately how attractive the fantasy remains to me.) The course of Vatican teaching about gender and sexuality over the last 60 or 70 years gives no evidence of the kind of change Boswell wanted. Quite the contrary: the official condemnations have become both more articulate and better defended against contrary facts or the conclusions drawn from them. Naïve trust in the demonstrative force of 'objective' arguments about gender and sex risks underestimating official rhetoric and so further empowering it.

There are other risks in an 'objective' scholarship. It can seem to confer a scientific or philosophical legitimacy on documents that do not deserve it. Cardinal López Trujillo's preface to the *Lexicon*, for example, ought not to be treated as if it were a sober, carefully reasoned treatment of conceptual ambiguities in current language. It is not. It is a polemical introduction to a series of regularly polemical essays by authors with overtly authoritarian commitments to powerful institutions. What is more important, this political rhetoric is exercised through specifically religious means. It is backed by the potent formations of early education, adolescent discipline, and life-long ritual that we tend to classify as religious. This speech regularly confuses the political and the religious – or reveals the religious origins of the political. It befuddles ideals both of church/state separation and a comfortably 'secular' reason. (Here I recall Fassin's acute observations on the changeable entanglements of religion and sex.)

The contributions before us are unlikely to persuade the Vatican offices to change their teaching. I would say the same of my earlier writing: I doubt that it persuaded anyone convinced by the *Lexicon* or its predecessors. Of course, that was never my intention (however much it was my fantasy). I intended to demarcate an alternative discourse – a different linguistic sphere – in which some old Christian languages could be heard again without being subsumed into the present programs of the current ecclesiastical authorities. There is much more in Christian traditions than the *Lexicon* allows, much more Christianity than the Vatican claims to superintend. One way to show this is to re-read some older texts so that they can sound again as uncoded voices, as fruitful teaching. The old neo-Thomist slogan was *Vetera novis augere et perficere*, to increase and complete old knowledge with new.² The reversed injunction is just as important: *nova veteribus augere*, to increase new knowledge with the old.

There is at least one point on which I would agree with the *Lexicon*: there are indeed conceptual troubles in the basic categories currently used to describe and debate both gender and sexuality. (I note that the same point is made in the first sentences of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* – a book that church officials condemn without having understood.) I differ from the *Lexicon* in judging the extent of these troubles. While the *Lexicon* finds them chiefly in cultural distortions and dissident theologies, I discover them as well in Vatican documents – and, indeed, in Christian discourse more widely.

For the last century and a half, at least, most Christian groups have reacted belatedly to developments in scientific and legal discourses about sex. (Here I generalize Case's point about recent decades of Catholic teaching.) Sometimes the reaction has consisted in an uncritical appropriation of new terms,

² The phrase comes, of course, from Leo XIII, *Æterni patris* [August 4, 1879], *Acta Sanctae Sedis* 12:97–115, at 111.

explanatory models, and epistemological assumptions. At other times, reaction has meant an equally uncritical rejection of what it (mis)understands as the new – a rejection unwittingly performed within the epistemic frame set by its opponents. To my mind, a binary opposition of acceptance and rejection – or progressive and reactionary, liberal and traditional – often obscures deeper shifts in language around gender and sexuality. Let me name a few of them.

One linguistic shift occurs when an old term is retained but given a new meaning, especially by being inserted into a new epistemic frame. A clear example is the Vatican's current reliance on what it counts a Thomistic doctrine of natural law. The meaning of Thomas's brief remarks in his *Summa of Theology* has been disputed for seven centuries. (One can use variations in the interpretation of law as an index to larger shifts in Thomism, of which there are dozens of varieties.) Most versions of natural law currently advocated by the Vatican assume a propositional positivism that is quite different from Thomas's own understanding of law as progressive divine pedagogy. The phrase 'natural law' remains, but its context has been entirely displaced. This is nominalism of an officially enforced tradition.

Something more obvious happens in a second linguistic shift, the appropriation of a recent technical term with a polemical stipulation of its meaning. As Garbagnoli and Pecheny, Jones, Ariza show, this sort of operation happens regularly in the derogatory re-deployment of terms: 'gender ideology', 'gender feminism', and so on. It can also be found in apparently neutral words, like 'homosexuality'. Historical scholarship has done much to reveal the contested origins of this term and to situate it within the luxuriant sexological taxonomies of the late 19th century. Up into the 1950s and 1960s, 'homosexual' was still competing with alternate terms – like 'invert' or 'homophile'. Indeed, significant theological analysis in other Christian traditions depends on distinguishing these terms. Consider, for example, the influential pamphlet published in 1954 by an Anglican study group under the title, *The Problem of Homosexuality* (Church of England, Moral Welfare Council 1954). Both the title and some of the arguments are echoed three decades later by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in *Homosexualitatis problema* (1986). A key linguistic difference between the two is that while the Anglican pamphlet tries hard to reproduce current clinical language, the Vatican document takes the clinical term 'homosexuality' and simply stipulates new meanings for it.

My last example of a linguistic shift is something like the reverse of this. It is the introduction of new terms or concepts while claiming perfect continuity with Church tradition. Here the clear example is the notion of gender 'complementarity.' I am grateful for Case's illuminating history of the term's trajectory in official speech. I agree with her emphatically that it represents a new category masquerading as perennial doctrine. What is more, I am struck by the irony of claiming that this particular model of gender is gospel truth. The concept's sprawling genealogy reaches back through Catholic figures like Hans Urs von Balthasar and Edith Stein (or through Protestant figures like Karl Barth) into 19th-century philosophical and literary texts – including Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Goethe. Complementarity is not an ancient Christian doctrine. It belongs rather more to the imaginary of Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. The genealogy of gender complementarity leads not to Jesus of Nazareth but to Romanticism.

With these three examples, let me draw a more general conclusion about the linguistic shifts performed or registered in Vatican documents. What is striking about Vatican traditionalism is just how thoroughly modern it is – how completely captured by some of the worst ideas of modern sexology or forensic psychiatry or dogmatic psychoanalysis.

With other contributors, I continue to believe that it is worth saying this clearly and loudly. The hope is not to persuade the Vatican. It is to maintain some integrity in language. Perhaps there is also the hope – at least for me – of holding open a space in which to discern a truly evangelical teaching on what we now conceive as gender and sexuality. That work requires active resistance to many kinds of aggressive speech. It may also require remembering old rhetorical lessons. If some basic terms in official documents are thoroughly modern, many of the rhetorical devices are quite old. The rhetoric now used to stigmatize gender feminism was once used by St. Peter Damian, hermit cardinal, to attack the Sodomite. What we need is not a lexicon of supposedly corrupted terms so much as a genealogy of the devices of ecclesiastical polemic.

References

- Church of England, Moral Welfare Council. 1954. *The Problem of Homosexuality: An Interim Report*, London: Church Information Board.
- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. 1986. *Homosexualitatis problema* (October, 1st, 1986).
- Jordan, Mark D. 2015. "'Both as a Christian and a Historian': On Boswell's Ministry" in Mathew Kuefler (ed.) *The Boswell Thesis: Essays on Christianity, Social Tolerance, Homosexuality*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 88–107.
- Pontificio Consiglio per la Famiglia. 2003. *Lexicon: Termini ambigui e discussi su famiglia, vita e questioni etiche*, Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane.