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Jesuit Comparative Theorhetic

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Comparative rhetoric can be defined as an angelic instrument working across cultures. This definition builds on Bruno Latour's distinction between information networks and translation processions. We might call this a rhetorical distinction between institutionalized procedures for transferring messages versus unpredictable processes of transforming hearers. The former—transferring messages—Latour calls *instruments*, and the latter—transforming hearers—he calls *angels*.¹ Bridging this opposition, comparative rhetoric not only translates information across cultures but also produces effects both on targeted audiences and in the rhetors themselves. As a practice, comparative rhetoric mediates difference and explores similarities; as a theory or metapractice, it accounts for how such mediation and exploration take place.

Comparative rhetoric as an angelic instrument “examines communicative practices across time and space by attending to historicity, specificity, self-reflexivity, processual predisposition, and imagination” (“A Manifesto”). I’d like to focus on one historical example of this comparative rhetoric, an example derived from the ministries of the Word as theorized and practiced by the Society of Jesus, commonly known as the Jesuits. This Roman Catholic order has a long tradition of rhetoric, *eloquentia perfecta*, developed from its spiritual exercises, preached from its pulpits, taught in its schools, and performed in far-flung missionary efforts over four centuries. The Jesuits’ uniform plan for education, the 1599 *Ratio Studiorum*, prescribes that training toward perfect eloquence includes written and oral rhetoric (poetry and oratory), combined with an erudition based not only on Church doctrine but also on the study of the “history and customs of nations.” That is, a certain cross-cultural attunement forms an explicit part of Jesuit rhetorical education. If we define *theorhetic* as talking to, for, and about God, I am suggesting that Jesuit rhetoric from the beginning was a comparative theorhetic, an angelic instrument, partly designed to work across cultures, most specifically in its missionary teaching and preaching.²

The Jesuits developed a particular communicative strategy, part of what they called their “way of proceeding,” to accomplish various ministries of the Word.³ John O’Malley calls this strategy “rhetorical accommodationism”: studying the audience and adjusting one’s rhetoric to the audience’s abilities and interests (255–56). Jesuits performed this rhetorical accommodationism not only in their churches with congregations but also in private spaces directing retreatants in spiritual exercises, in confessionals with persons confessing, in classrooms with

individual students cooperating and competing with other students, and, most important here, in their cross-cultural missionary work with native peoples.⁴ In this last rhetorical context, the Jesuits developed their own response to Paul's missionary advice in his *First Letter to the Corinthians*: proclaim the gospel truly and boldly but be all things to all people to convert at least some (1 Cor 9:22). But unlike Paul, Jesuits did not reject classical rhetoric, Greek eloquent wisdom, in their rhetorical theory (1 Cor 2:1–5). Rather, Jesuits trained their own by immersing them in a *rhetorica generalis* derived from Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, often emphasizing the classical definition of rhetoric as *vir bonus dicendi peritus*—the good person speaking well. In so doing, Jesuits built into their teaching of rhetoric a specific ethics and politics, a kind of virtue ethics and a comparative theorhetoric of cross-cultural accommodationism.

Especially during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Jesuits translated European Christianity for native peoples in foreign missions and translated foreign cultural beliefs and practices back to Europe. In intention and effect, Jesuit comparative rhetors acted as brokers between European Christianity and the missionary populations of Asia, Africa, and the Americas.⁵ Unfortunately for the Jesuits, their accommodationist mode of missionary work came under virulent attack from within and outside the Roman Catholic Church. A number of their fellow Catholics condemned Jesuit accommodationism as corrupting the essence of Christianity in an attempt to gain converts in non-European lands. This criticism was a version of the popular anti-Jesuitism that attacked Jesuit casuistry as justifying any means to achieve a desired end. Later critics of the Jesuit missionaries condemned them for ethnocentrically distorting foreign cultures and lumped their projects together with other missionary efforts as serving the interests of European cultural and political imperialism.⁶

To best understand Jesuit comparative theorhetoric, both its effectiveness and its vulnerabilities, one must attend to the small details of Jesuit *practical* accommodationism. Their adaptive rhetorical practices included not only their preaching but also practices of dress, eating, ceremonial rituals, and language-learning in addition to translating native discourses of literature, philosophy, and religion. Jesuit practices of language-using and meaning-making were embedded in other native practices, changing them and being changed by them. This was a rhetorical brokering that altered the Jesuit missionaries as it translated Christianity to affect their audiences in both Europe and non-European lands. That is, again, Jesuit comparative theorhetoric was an angelic instrument of cross-cultural translation that transferred a message and transformed its producers and receivers.

We can see this complex rhetorical ecology at work in the most widely discussed example of Jesuit accommodationism, their missionary work in the contact zones of China. Here Matteo Ricci and his seventeenth-century companions

preached the Good News by adapting their rhetoric to the beliefs and practices of their Chinese hosts. In so doing, they attempted to preserve the essentials of their Christian message as they worked to convert their audiences and simultaneously found themselves transformed in the process. Changes occurred in the attitudes and actions of these Jesuit rhetorical brokers as they interacted in various ways with the Chinese people, from learning Chinese languages to adopting the attire of mandarin elites, from synthesizing Christianity and Confucianism to writing in the genres of the ancient Chinese classics, from participating in intellectual disputations to admiring late Ming literary and political culture (see Spence; Hsia).

Jesuit missionaries functioned as angelic instruments from around 1600 when Ricci was active to 1732 when Pope Benedict XIV issued the apostolic bull *Ex quo singulari*, ending not only the Jesuit accommodationist practices but also any further discussion of them in the Roman Catholic Church. As one Jesuit historian summarizes:

At issue was the problem of how Western man was to translate into the Chinese language the concepts of the divinity and other spiritual realities and how he was to judge, on a moral basis, the ceremonies performed by the Chinese in honor of Confucius and their ancestors. The controversy involved the whole field of cross-cultural understanding and missionary accommodation. (Minamiki ix)

Here the rhetorical-hermeneutic strategy of the Jesuits included *third-order* rhetorical practices directed to Chinese and European elites adopting and translating *first-order* native practices of dress, ritual, and language, so that Jesuit second-order rhetorical practices of preaching and teaching were more persuasive to their Chinese audiences yet still acceptable to European superiors in the Roman Catholic Church. In carrying out this strategy, Jesuits sometimes used the tactic of “redirected intentions”: for example, translating the ritual intention of ancestor veneration into the civic rather than religious realm, making the intention sociopolitical rather than supernatural and thus acceptable to Roman Catholic authorities in Europe.⁷

If we examine the historical detail of Jesuit comparative theorhetoric, as practice and theory, we can see it as a form of strong hermeneutic ethnocentrism combined with a weak ethnocentric politics. This is a general description not a specific criticism. It is my rhetorical pragmatist claim that a certain amount of ethnocentrism cannot be avoided.⁸ Jesuits necessarily appropriate the other while attempting to respect otherness, even when the other might at times not welcome them. Interpreting another culture is always done within one’s own culture, as is acting responsibly to respect the otherness of the other. Like all human beings,

Jesuit missionaries rhetorically and hermeneutically work from within their own context of cultural desires, beliefs, and practices. This Jesuit being-in-the-world as Christian Europeans was reflected upon and reinforced through their collective, individualized technologies of the self, the *Ignatian Spiritual Exercises* (see Foucault; Hadot). But that's another story, a necessary one if we are to understand more fully the practical detail of how Jesuit theorhetoric exemplifies comparative rhetoric as an angelic instrument.

Notes

¹Latour, "Thou Shalt," 225; *Rejoicing*, 32–33. For further discussion, see Mailloux, "Notes" 425–30.

²On Jesuit theorhetoric, see Mailloux, "Enactment" 31–38.

³For a recent account of the Jesuit way of proceeding, see 35th General Congregation, Decree 2.

⁴Cf. Arrupe on Jesuit inculturation.

⁵See McKevitt; cf. Obstfeld, Borgatti, and Davis.

⁶For an overview of the controversies, see Minamiki; and for a more recent bibliography, see Rubiés 237–44.

⁷Cf. the Jesuit casuistry famously satirized by Pascal in the seventh of his *Provincial Letters* (1656) and creatively discussed in Burke 154–58.

⁸Mailloux "Making Comparisons." This situated state of rhetorical being-in-the-world does not mean that specific Jesuit historical actions (for example, supporting the Inquisition or holding slaves) cannot be criticized. Quite the contrary. It is just that such criticism always takes place within its own ethnocentric world of values and meanings, which can be contingently changed but never absolutely transcended. See O'Malley 310–20; Murphy, *Jesuit Slaveholding* 215–22.