

FIDEM TENE, VERBA SEQVENTVR.
RHETORIC AND ORATORY
IN THE *HISTORIA ECCLESIASTICA*
OF SOCRATES SCHOLASTICUS AND SOZOMEN

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RETÓRICA Y ORATORIA EN LA *HISTORIA ECCLESIASTICA*
DE SÓCRATES ESCOLÁSTICO Y SOZOMENO

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Abstract: This paper will explore how the Church historians Socrates and Sozomen interpreted the learning and practice of oratory and of rhetoric in their portraits of Christian figures in their historical accounts of events of the post-Constantinian Church. Their understanding of the impact and role of these disciplines was not only a subject of literary criticism but it was also inserted in a complex rationale that understood that the use and misuse of the practice of rhetoric and oratory functioned as a religious and an identity marker throughout the fourth and fifth centuries AD.

Keywords: Socrates, Sozomen, *Ecclesiastic History*, oratory, rhetoric.

Resumen: Este trabajo se centra en las interpretaciones de las apreciaciones estilísticas y de crítica literaria realizadas por los historiadores eclesiásticos Sócrates y Sozomeno en sus descripciones de figuras relevantes de la Iglesia post-Constantiniana. Su valoración del impacto y del papel de la oratoria y la literatura trascendió el campo de la crítica literaria, constituyendo parte del entramado ideológico con el que se juzgaron las creencias religiosas y filiaciones doctrinales de tales figuras en la Iglesia de los siglos IV y V.

Palabras clave: Sócrates, Sozomeno. *Historia Eclesiástica*, oratoria, retórica.

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For the past decades the study of Late Antiquity has revolved around the consideration of the rhetorical dimension of contemporary sources. Among the plethora of works dealing with late antique rhetoric, Pernot (1993), Cameron (1991) and Burrus (2000) —amongst many others— stand out as essential references that have paved the way to a better understanding of a period in which rhetoric was part of an intricate scenario where culture, religion and politics interacted. This field has also benefitted from contemporary approaches to late antique literature that have put a strong emphasis on the middle ground shared by rhetoric and historiography (especially van

Nuffelen 2012)¹. Similarly studies on the rhetorical dimension of self-presentation strategies in Late Antiquity have contributed to shed light on the socio-cultural milieu of the period (Gleason 1995; Vasiliu 2012).

With this in mind, it is noteworthy how little attention has been paid to the comments made by the Church historians Socrates Scholasticus and Sozomen on the literary prowess of the characters that feature in their works. It is clear that they have an important value as a fundamental source of the affairs of the post-Constantinian Church, but their works have not been sufficiently explored as a reservoir of information of the late antique *Kulturszene*. In this sense, one of the aspects deserving of the Church historians' attention was the implications of the rhetoric and oratory practiced by the Christian figures that appear in their *Historia Ecclesiastica*. The composition of religious treatises, writing of letters, the delivery of speeches, sermons and homilies by Christian elites are commonplace in the works of Socrates and Sozomen.

Thus, the aim of this chapter will be to adequately contextualize and to examine accounts of rhetorical deliveries in the works of the two Church historians from the fifth century AD. In my opinion, their narratives are very telling of the place and impact of rhetorical and oratorical displays in Late Antiquity in the context of the inter- and intra-religious debates. Following an understanding of rhetorical deliveries as a cultural practice in which an individual and a community interacted², I will explore Socrates' and Sozomen's accounts of rhetorical deliveries as instruments of literary characterization, and as extra-linguistic means capable of providing information on the religious allegiances of the performer. Therefore, I will argue that what the two Church historians were evaluating was not only the extent of the learning of the historical figures they portrayed, but more particularly how such learning was displayed and to what purposes it served.

TWO WELL-EDUCATED HISTORIANS

Thorough knowledge of Christian texts and of the Classical paideia was taken for granted among Christian elites (Kennedy 1983, 180-264), who had to learn how to efficiently deploy such knowledge and how to accommodate it to different circumstances. Unsurprisingly, Socrates and Sozomen dealt with these issues according to their agendas and their audiences. The aim of Socrates' *Church History* was to denounce the continuous dissensions and struggles within the Church after the Council of Nicaea as well as to advocate for religious consensus³. In this sense, without overlooking the cultural assessment of the historical figures, he principally focused on the religious consequences of the episodes that he wrote about. In the case of Sozomen, the interest of his work was more concerned with literary and cultural aspects, so it is not uncommon to discover that his treatment of religious and theological issues was not exhaustive. Not in vain Grillet, Sabbah and Festugière (1983-2008, 74) have highlighted some elements of 'laïcisation de l'histoire ecclésiastique' in Sozomen's work. His prose tended to wander towards the cultural

¹ Vid. also Plinius' *Ep.* V.8 for the relationship between oratory and history.

² Fredal 1998, 3, 12-13: "The rhetor's art, *rhetorike*, was not a composing of words, but a performing of self through the skilful crafting of a rhetorical event". See also Goffman 1971, 26-27.

³ For his historiographical programme, see Périchon and Maraval 2004, 14-22. However, he has been considered to be partial and biased for his sympathies to Novatianism, see Urbainczyk 1997a, 26-28 and van Nuffelen 2004, 42-46.

scene, thus neglecting the full extent of the religious implications of the events that he narrated. As Leppin has pointed out (2003, 224), ‘His intended public consist of well-educated people who enjoyed literary style and disliked studying long canons or theological letters’. His more than likely access to Syriac and Aramaic sources contributed to adding an erudite tone to his work⁴. Thus, unlike Socrates, Sozomen prioritized the literary dimension of the practice of rhetoric over the ecclesiastical consequences of the passages he discussed⁵.

HERETICS AND CHARLATANS: ORATORICAL EXCESSES AND FAILURES IN SOCRATES’ *HISTORIA ECCLESIASTICA*

References to oratorical and rhetorical style are easy to find in Socrates’ work. In fact, when praising or rephending Christian figures, he usually included allusions to their education and to different facets of their oratorical ability. Philip of Side, for example, was portrayed as a deacon with a keen interest in literature who undertook the task of refuting some of the writings by the emperor Julian but was affected by the Asiatic style (*HE* VII.27). Asianism, according to Kennedy (1983, 32), was “a highly artificial, self-conscious search for striking expression in diction, sentence structure and rhythm. It deliberately goes to almost any possible extreme”⁶. Its use in the Christian milieu, as Auksi (1995, 144-156) pointed out, was part of a larger issue, namely to what extent Christian rhetoric had to resort to the rhetorical embellishments from the Classical tradition. This was a prevalent concern among Christian elites, who had to find the appropriate balance between rhetorical decorum and oratorical adornments to keep their audiences’ attention. According to Socrates, Philip of Side failed to do so, and was also unsuccessful in composing a *Christian History*, a work that Socrates considered to be ‘a very loose production, useless alike, in my opinion, to the ignorant and the learned’⁷.

In a similar vein, the Church historian tells that Nestorius —the founder of Nestorianism— was called to be ordained Archbishop of Constantinople because, as Socrates tells us (*HE* VII.29), he was ‘distinguished for his excellent voice and fluency of speech’. Far from being an ability from which he could have derived any gain (Wallraff 1997, 77-82), Socrates considered that his fluent oratorical style disguised his ignorance about the content of Scriptural texts and about the implications of his heretical tenets (*HE* VII.29): ‘for being a man of natural fluency as a speaker, he was considered well educated, but in reality he was disgracefully illiterate’. Socrates portrayed him as κενόδοξον, a moral flaw that was at the core of Socrates’ denunciation of the disputes within Christianity⁸.

These are not the only examples that illustrate how Socrates resorted to literary and rhetorical criticism when arguing about religious issues. In *HE* VI.7, Theophilus of Alexandria took advantage of his oratorical prowess to incite dissension among the monks of Egypt who questioned his doctrines. This passage clearly shows how Socrates proceeded in dealing with religious and cultural issues: he described how Theophilus deceived the monks by means of captious arguments (*HE* VI.7.77: τῷ σοφίσματι) and a flattering attitude (*HE*

⁴ Further particulars on the literary dimension of Sozomen’s work in Allen 1987, 373-376.

⁵ On the differences between the aims and style of both authors, see also Grillet, Sabbah and Festugière, 1983-2008, 59-87; Urbainczyk 1997b.

⁶ See also Pernot 2000, 81-82; 140-144. On the implications that Asianism could have in the Christian milieu, see Hägg 2006.

⁷ Socrates’ and Sozomen’s translations taken from Hartrant 1890 and Zenos 1890.

⁸ See Eucken 2001, 98-102.

VI.7.21: ὀφθεῖς αὐτοῖς κολακεΐα)⁹, a very fitting definition in the Christian imaginary for these helped describe the beliefs of a bishop who had switched his opinion on Christological matters. However, the monks were carried away with his arguments because they were (*HE* VI.7.69-70: συναρπάζει τοὺς πλείστους τῶν μοναχῶν, ἀνθρώπους ἀκεραίους μὲν, ἰδιώτας δὲ τῷ λόγῳ, τοὺς πολλοὺς δὲ ἀγραμμάτους ὄντας) ‘sincere but rude in speech, the greater part of whom were quite illiterate’¹⁰. The monks’ unfamiliarity with the pompous ways of Theophilus is not a reproach but rather it is a statement positively endorsed by a phrase from the New Testament (2 Co 11, 6: ἰδιώτης τῷ λόγῳ ἀλλ’ οὐ τῇ γνώσει)¹¹. In this way, Socrates confronted Theophilus’ mastery of a type of deceiving oratory with simpleminded monks whose attitude was approvingly sanctioned by the Scriptural reference.

Another case in point is Socrates’ narration of those parvenus that sought materialistic rewards in their preaching. The Church historian presents us with the case of Severian and Antiochus, two Syrians who came from their native towns to preach in Constantinople. According to Socrates (*HE* VI.11)¹², they excelled when delivering sermons and homilies, although at the beginning Severian did not achieve any success outside of the Syrian milieu because (*HE* VI.11.10-11: Ἑλληνιστὶ φεγγόμενος Σύρος ἦν τὴν φωνήν) ‘while speaking Greek he betrayed his Syrian origin’. Antiochus, on the other hand, was so successful that he was (unoriginally) nicknamed ‘golden mouth’ (Soz. *HE* VIII.10.1). His oratorical dexterity afforded him the possibility of earning vast sums of money with his sermons (van Nuffelen 2014b), which prompted Severian to come to the capital as a fortune-seeker. In Constantinople, he was well treated by John Chrysostom—bishop of the city at the time—until Severian’s preaching became more sophisticated and competed with John’s prestige, a situation that ended up in a troublesome situation for John that included an unpleasant episode with the empress Eudoxia. On this occasion, Socrates’ criticism was directed both to audiences and preachers; thus, the fact that Socrates mentioned Severian’s difficulties to deliver an oration in Greek is telling of how demanding audiences were on oratorical occasions, placing oratorical skills over spiritual benefits. In fact, Gregory of Nazianzus had already warned about the demands of churchgoers: “They look for orators”, he lamented (*Or.* 42.24), “not for priests”.

Severian is also reprehended for he conducted his preaching abilities in the wrong direction by prioritizing his personal career instead of focusing on providing guidance to his flock (van Nuffelen 2014b, 203-206). This may easily remind us of the cultural scenario of the competing orators in Philostratus’ *Life of the Sophists*. As van Nuffelen has stated (2014b, 203) ‘the Second Sophistic nexus of rhetorical performance, social status, patronage, and material benefits, can still be seen operating among Christian preachers’¹³. Consequently, the practice of rhetoric was of no avail to Socrates if its performance was not directed to the search of spiritual guidance and religious consensus, the leitmotiv of his *Church History*. The historian reproached those practices that were related to sophistry (composition and delivery of flamboyant yet empty speeches,

⁹ Wallraff 1997, 61-67. For a similar example see Socrates *HE* 4.7, where Eunomius is portrayed as the responsible of ‘fallacious arguments’ and with ‘a sophistical mode of reasoning’. See also Allen 1987, 372.

¹⁰ On monks’ illiteracy as a literary topos, see Cribiore 2013, 66-69.

¹¹ Also Eshleman 2012, 102-105, especially 103: “In the earliest Christian texts the *idiotēs* serves prima-

rily to position Christianity over against Greek culture (...) Embracing the position of *idiotēs* in this way challenges the value of Greek *paideia* while promoting Christianity as a better philosophy, superior in results and accessible to all”.

¹² On the complex transmission of this passage, see Périchon and Maraval 2006, 306-314. See also Soz., *HE* 8.10.

charges of obtaining pecuniary benefits when preaching), and managed to create a combination in which sophistry and heresy were interwoven concepts. The claims made by John Chrysostom in his *De Sacerdotio* (more specifically, books IV and V), or Augustine in his *De Doctrina Christiana* (especially book IV), endorsing rhetoric as a means to widespread the Christian faith and as a discipline whose practice did not pursue material rewards, seem to be behind Socrates' denunciation of the misuse of rhetoric and oratory as an instrument of promotion and competition. In the particular case of Severian, the aim was to climb the ecclesiastical ladder.

There is further evidence that Socrates esteemed rhetoric as a useful and rewarding discipline as long as it was exercised for the advantage of Christian affairs. His acknowledgment of the pagan sophist Libanius as a gifted writer who put his oratorical and literary skills to the service of the wrong cause (i.e. paganism) bears witness to the historian's estimation of rhetoric as an instrument that had to be adequately manipulated¹⁴. In dealing with the relationship between Libanius and the emperor Julian, Socrates thought that the sophist had lent his support to Julian only because the latter was the emperor, thus insinuating that Libanius fell short of being an arriviste. 'But I confess, indeed', Socrates concludes in *HE* 3.23.3, 'that he was an excellent rhetorician, but am persuaded that had he not coincided with the emperor in religious sentiment, he would not only have given expression to all that has been said against him by Christians, but would have magnified every ground of censure as naturally becomes a rhetorician'¹⁵. Socrates put particular emphasis in the last part of his sentence ('would have magnified every ground of censure as naturally becomes a *rhetorician*'), an opinion that he complemented with another statement in *HE* 3.23.6: 'since then he has spoken in the spirit of a pagan, a *sophist*, and a friend of him whom he lauded'. The historian used the word σοφιστής when describing Libanius as a rhetorician and a sophist, and in both instances he insists in likening the figure of a σοφιστής to an unreliable writer with a tendency to magnify the deeds of the emperor Julian. The negative connotations of the term "sophist" were strongly felt in the Christian milieu. "In early Christian texts", Eshleman (2012, 13) tells us, "the word "sophist" generally bears its disparaging Platonic overtones, used to mark the difference between Christian truth and bot Greek culture and "heretical" error"¹⁶.

In addition to this, it should be noted that throughout these chapters (*HE* 3.22-23) Socrates had set himself to refute the content of some passages from Libanius' *Funeral Oration over Julian* in which the sophist (*HE* 3.22.13) 'thought proper to take occasion to inveigh against the Scriptures of the Christian faith', which in turn prompted Socrates to inveigh against Julian's views on religion and divinity. His criticism of a key figure of the rhetorical scene of the fourth century AD such as Libanius was substantiated by the sophist's misuse of rhetoric as he deployed it in order to scold the Christian doctrine and by the consideration of the σοφιστής as a fickle figure. As Célérier has recently pointed out (2013, 393-414), these features were not only antagonistic with the appropriate use of rhetoric for Christian purposes in Socrates' agenda but also contributed to the creation of the negative portrait of Julian in the book 3 of the historian's work.

¹³ In the same vein, see Eshleman 2012, 223.

¹⁴ On Socrates' estimation of Libanius, see Criboire 2013, 11; Nesselrath 2006, 182-185; 2012, 112-114, 124-15.

¹⁵ In relation to this passage, see Criboire 2013, 12: 'this claim is a curious one and is noteworthy

particularly because Socrates next mentions the sophist's alleged flattery and changes of opinion –was he questioning the steadfastness of Libanius's paganism?'

¹⁶ Also Nesselrath 2006, 187-191.

In contrast with this denunciation of the misuse of rhetoric as a flattering and damaging tool, this passage should be compared with the Socrates' portrait of Atticus (van Nuffelen 2004, 17-22), the bishop of Constantinople. Although his rhetorical compositions (*HE* VII.2) 'were not such as to be received with much applause by his auditors, not to deserve to be committed to writing', Socrates tells us that Atticus made efforts to improve his knowledge of secular literature and that he steadily progressed in the practice of his oratorical deliveries despite their not entirely successful outcome. He managed, however, to develop some literary and rhetorical abilities that gave him enough knowledge of secular literature (*HE* VII.2): 'he assiduously labored in perusing the writings of the ancients, and often spent whole nights in the task; and thus he could not be confused by the reasoning of the philosopher, and the fallacious subtleties of the sophists'. Atticus is not presented as an accomplished orator yet Socrates gave him some credit by admitting that the bishop had learned enough as to not be fooled by the usual sophisms of the pagans. In this sense, Atticus' efforts to improve his eloquence are not regarded as a type of charlatanry but as a duty that Christian figures had to fulfil in order to avoid heretic opinions from interacting with their audiences and to confront the argumentative rhetorical arsenal deployed by pagans. Moreover, the portrait of Atticus as an unskilful rhetorician yet a firm pillar of the religious orthodoxy was meant to contrast with the figures of two masters of eloquence, John Chrysostom and Nestorius, whose rhetorical prowess did not gain Socrates' esteem¹⁷. Following Eshleman's words (2012, 33), Socrates was acting as those architects of orthodoxy that, in their efforts "to distill a single, unified identity from this exuberant diversity struggled to bring the lines of affiliation and identification among believers into accord with the lines they perceived between salvific truth and blasphemous falsity".

A (SLIGHTLY) DIFFERENT APPROACH: THE PURPOSES OF RHETORIC IN SOZOMEN'S *HISTORIA ECCLESIASTICA*

The practice of rhetoric and oratory among Christian figures features prominently in Sozomen's *Church History*. In his work, an important element of their characterization rested on the extent of their prowess and command of such disciplines. Thus, his narrative of the organization and *modus operandi* of the monks he cohabitated with during his period of spiritual formation (Grillet; Sabbah and Festugière, 1983-2008, 13-14) portrayed them as unskilful yet straightforward interlocutors in their addresses to the population. In fact, they are the central characters of a number of long passages that detail their lives and achievements (*HE* III.14 and, especially, VI.28-34). According to Sozomen's description (*HE* 1.12.1), the monks did not heed 'the technicalities of dialectics (διαλεκτικῆς τεχνολογίας)' but they communicated by utterances (*HE* 1.12.8) 'clothed in modesty and prudence, and devoid of vain and meretricious eloquence'. The key word of this passage is καλλωπισμοῦ (translated as 'vain'), a word that bears Platonic reminiscences. In his *Cratylus*, on the context of a discussion on the nature of language and nouns, Plato made Socrates say (Plt., *Crt.* 414c): 'My friend, you do not bear in mind that the original words have before now been completely buried by those who wished to dress them up, for they have added and subtracted letters for the sake of euphony and have distorted the words

¹⁷ Périchonn and Maraval 2007, 23: "Le portrait d'Attikos entend souligner le contraste de son caractère avec celui de Jean Chrysostome, mais aussi avec

celui de Nestorius, persécuteur des dissidents, et, malgré son éloquence, mauvais connaisseur des écrits des anciens".

in every way for ornamentation (ὑπὸ καλλωπισμοῦ) or merely in the lapse of time¹⁸. In a similar vein, Callicles tells Socrates in *Gorgias* 492c that ‘in good truth, Socrates —which you claim to be seeking— the fact is this: luxury and licentiousness and liberty, if they have the support of force, are virtue and happiness, and the rest of these embellishments (τὰ καλλωπίσματα) —the unnatural covenants of mankind— are all mere stuff and nonsense¹⁹. Καλλώπισμα, therefore, alludes to the use of means to embellish words for unnecessary purposes or to expletive adornments of no real use in a life worth living. The insertion of this term in Sozomen’s text should be understood as a defence of the way monks communicated their wisdom without the rhetorical ostentation to which other Christian figures resorted. The educated audience for whom Sozomen composed his work would understand the innuendos of the usage of καλλώπισμα and its implicit contrast with Christian common dictates on the use of *logoi* (e.g., St. Paul’s dictum in I Cor 1.17: οὐκ ἐν σοφίᾳ λόγου)²⁰.

However, Sozomen adopted a more conventional view to describe the performance and practice of rhetoric when it came to issues pertaining to city and ecclesiastical affairs. An exceptional example is that of Didymus the Blind. Portrayed as a polymath capable of mastering different disciplines (*HE* III.15), we are told that he became versed in a great variety of knowledge (including, needless to say, rhetoric and the pagan *logoi*) despite his blindness (*HE* III.15.2): ‘it is said that he learned the letters of the alphabet by means of tablets in which they were engraved, and which he felt with his fingers; and that he made himself acquainted with syllables and words by the force of attention and memory, and by listening attentively to the sounds’. In the same chapter yet in sharp contrast with the narration of Didymus’ skills, Sozomen provides a brief account of the life and intellectual dimension of the heretic Aëtius. The Church historian comments that Aëtius (*HE* III.15.7) ‘was a dialectician, apt in syllogism and proficient in disputation’. Here, again, emerges the image of a Christian who mastered rhetoric and oratory. However, his Arian faith and his acquaintance with an unfriendly figure for the orthodox Christianity such as the Caesar Gallus (*HE* III.15.8) were factors that discredited his skills. Although it may seem surprising that the historian dealt with two figures that were poles apart since they professed different religious doctrines, Sozomen himself clarifies why he treated these two figures in the same chapter (*HE* III.15.10): ‘let it not be accounted strange, if I have bestowed commendations upon the leaders or enthusiasts of the above-mentioned heresies. I admire their eloquence (εὐγλωττίας), and their impressiveness in discourse (τῆς ἐν τοῖς λόγοις δεινότητος). I leave their doctrines to be judged by those whose right it is. For I have not been set forth to record such matters, nor is it befitting in history; I have only to give an account of events as they happened, not supplementing my own additions. Of those who at that time became most distinguished in education and discourse and who used the Roman and Greek languages, I have enumerated in the above narrative as many as I have received an account of²¹. This statement is very telling of the historian’s intention when composing his work, and makes *HE* III.15 a programmatic passage in that it reveals that Sozomen was far more interested in the biographical and cultural dimension of the protagonists of his work than in constructing a proper *Kirchengeschichte* in which individuals would be subject to the evolution of the history of the Church since the Constantinian times. Therefore, unlike Socrates’ perspective, Sozomen’s

¹⁸ Translation taken from Fowler 1926.

¹⁹ Translation taken from Lamb 1925. Dodds 1959, 296 indicates that Plato borrowed this term in this context from Euripides’ *Cyclops* (vv. 316 f.).

²⁰ See also Auksi 1995, 110-173.

²¹ A similar remark in Soz. *HE* VI.27.7. See also Grillet; Sabbah and Festugière 1983-2008, 48-58.

positive evaluation of the literary and rhetorical dexterities of a Christian figure did not rely entirely on the adherence to the Christian orthodoxy, and took into account the extent to which such oratory and rhetoric were commanded by unorthodox figures.

Perhaps the most illustrious case in point is that of the narration of John Chrysostom's dexterity in the oratorical arena. In Sozomen's account, Chrysostom combined rhetorical savoir-faire, an unparalleled ability when delivering at the Church, and the possession of inspiring personal virtues. John's rhetorical prowess is introduced in the form of an anecdote: on his deathbed, the sophist Libanius, if we are to believe Sozomen²², confessed that he would have chosen Chrysostom as his successor of the prestigious school of rhetoric in Antioch (*HE* VIII.2.2) 'had not the Christians taken him from us'. In Sozomen's work, Chrysostom epitomizes the climax of Christian oratory. In *HE* VIII.5.2 we are provided with a picture of how crowded his deliveries were: 'as the people pressed around him, and could not get enough of his words, so that when they were pushed hither and yon, and were pressing one another, they incurred danger; and each one was forcing his way to go farther, so that by standing near, he might hear more accurately what John was saying, he placed himself in the midst of them upon the platform of the readers, and, having taken a seat, taught the multitude'.

His towering figure represented for Sozomen a truly *vir sanctus dicendi peritus*, the perfect embodiment of what a Christian orator should be for the power of his persuasiveness was not only artfully achieved: 'For by living a divine life', Socrates explains in *HE* VIII.2.4-5, 'he imparted zeal from his own virtues to his hearers. He produced convictions similar to his own, because he did not enforce them by rhetorical art and strength (οὐ τέχνη τινὶ καὶ δυνάμει λόγου βιάζεται), but expounded the sacred books with truth and sincerity. For a word which is ornamented by deeds customarily shows itself as worthy of belief; but without these the speaker appears as an impostor and a traitor to his own words, even though he teach earnestly. Approbation in both regards was due to John. He devoted himself to a prudent course of life and to a severe public career, while he also used a clear diction, united with brilliance in speech'. Other texts from the fifth century AD confirm that John Chrysostom's rhetorical deliveries were scrutinized and considered to be valid assets, and came to constitute the yardstick that determined how Christian elites should deploy their oratorical powers. In the anonymous *Funerary Speech for John Chrysostom*, for instance, John is portrayed as the paragon of the appropriate practice of rhetoric. In a passage that describes Chrysostom's rivalry with Theophilus of Alexandria, the use and display of rhetoric of the former is contrasted with Theophilus and his allies (45): 'the others <acted because> by using his sermons not to flatter the ears as they <did>, but rather to nourish souls, <John> had completely deprived them of the opportunity to make money'²³.

These lines, which prove that the correct performance of rhetoric was one of the main touchstones in encomia and blames in the Christian milieu of the fifth century AD, echo Sozomen's treatment of the figure of Chrysostom as an orator who used his rhetorical prowess solely for fair and Christian purposes (*HE* VIII.2.11): 'By the same eloquence, John attracted the admiration of the people; while he strenuously convicted sinners even in the churches, and antagonized with boldness all acts of injustice, as if they had been perpetrated against himself. Sozomen continued praising the benefits that Chrysostom's rhetorical prowess bestowed upon Antioch and Constantinople. The Church historian emphasizes the variety of audiences on which

²² Grillet; Sabbah and Festugière 1983-2008, 235 cast serious doubts about the authenticity of this anecdote.

²³ Translation taken from Barnes and Bervan 2013.

he had an influence (*HE* VIII.5.1): ‘crowds of people daily resorted to him; some for the purpose of being edified by listening to his discourses, and others with the intention of tempting him. He, however, pleased and attracted all classes, and led them to embrace the same religious sentiments as himself’. John Chrysostom, therefore, stands out from the rest of Christian figures in Sozomen’s work when it comes to rhetorical and oratorical activities. The interests of the historian’s intended audience, as it has been stated above, lay in cultural aspects rather than in theological or ecclesiastical issues. This may explain why Sozomen’s opinion of Chrysostom was less ambiguous than Socrates’, whose judgment of John was influenced by the latter’s hostile attitude toward the Novatians, a group that had Socrates’ sympathies (van Nuffelen 2004, 26-36; Vogt 1968, 258-260; Wallraff 1997, 55-58, 235-257).

Another way of approaching the use of rhetoric in Sozomen’s *Church History* is to be found in his account of the preambles of the Council of Nicaea. In meetings previous to the celebration of the Council, the different Christian groups engaged in debates on the topics to be discussed. In this context, Sozomen relates (*HE* I.18.1; see also Athanasius’ *VA* 74-80; Rufinus’ *HE* 10.3) that some pagan philosophers participated in such debates, ‘desirous of taking part in them; some, because they wished for information as to the doctrine that was inculcated; and others, because, feeling incensed against the Christians on account of the recent suppression of the pagan religion, they wished to convert the inquiry about doctrine into a strife about words [εἰς ἔριδας λόγων], so as to introduce dissensions among them, and to make them appear as holding contradictory opinions’. When one of the malicious philosophers mocked the priests and boasted on his rhetorical capacity, an old and ignorant layman (γέρον ἀπλοῦς τις) converted him into a Christian after delivering a short speech stating the basic principles of Christianity (*HE* I.18.3): ‘There is one God, the maker of Heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible (...) And He will come again to judge each of us as to the deeds of the present life. We believe these things to be true with all simplicity (ἀπεριέργως πιστεύομεν)’.

This type of rhetorical contests in which the Christian *simplicitas*²⁴ was contrasted with the intricate reasoning of pagans became a leitmotiv in Christian texts. What is of interest for the purposes of this paper is that this layman’s reference to *simplicitas* voiced a common concern in the late antique Christian milieu that became part of the rhetorical weaponry of accusations between orthodox and heterodox groups: namely, the ability of skillful orators to persuade people to embrace heretic tenets. As Maxwell pointed out (2006, 35-36), ‘just as philosophers dismissed ornate style and complicated reasoning as tools of deception, orthodox Christians accused heretics of being sophists who confused the laity with their deceptive reasoning’.

An additional value of this passage is that it gives us an insight into the way religious debates and disputes were held. Contemporary scholarship is reassessing the role of dialogue and discussion in Christian debates in which doctrinal or ecclesiastical issues were at stake. Peter van Nuffelen (2014a) and Averil Cameron (2014) are heralding a new trend that considers such debates not as fictional literary devices that helped writers to support their arguments but as real events that contributed to the decision making process or to deal with heretic opinions. In the case of the debates right before the celebration of the Council of Nicaea, Socrates also described (*HE* 1.8) a scene in which such debates (προαγών is the word he used, a term with evident oratorical and sophisticated connotations) were held among Christians. This suited his historiographical agenda

²⁴ On the difficulties to create a comprehensive theory of the implications and attitudes to the Chris-

tian *simplicitas* in the rhetorical milieu, see Auksi 1995, 9-32.

for his intention was to condemn the lack of consensus within Christianity. Sozomen, in turn, preferred to literaturise the episode by taking recourse to a Christian literary topic, the conversion of a pagan philosopher after hearing the Christian doctrine from the lips of an unsophisticated Christian.

CONCLUSIONS

Several conclusions can be inferred from the aforementioned texts. First, they show that in Late Antiquity religious and cultural identities were closely intertwined. Socrates and Sozomen dealt with the ambiguous status of the learning and display of the Classical *paideia* and rhetoric in a milieu that advocated for the simplicity of language yet did not completely disdain oratorical adornments to engage audiences (Allen 1987, 380)²⁵. In this context, accusations of sophistry were tantamount to charges of heresy or deviations from the orthodox doctrine. As Eshleman has remarked (2012, 11), “the question of *what* counts as authentic Christian belief and behavior is wrapped up with the question of *who* is to be accepted as a member of the Christian community”. However, at the same time, it was felt that rhetorical prowess and oratorical skills were a requirement when it came to intra- and interreligious disputations and to the mission of divulging the Christian doctrine. For example, in the *Funerary Speech for John Chrysostom*, the anonymous author adds a passage in which John refrained himself from entering disputations with Severian because he did not want to impress his audiences with his oratorical abilities, but the situation reached a point in which he could not hold it any longer (18): “when he had with difficulty persuaded that fellow to keep quiet because he had nothing to say, he then arose and released the stream <of his eloquence>, a stream which imitated the one in Paradise”²⁶.

Second, although each author had their own ideological agenda, Socrates and Sozomen aimed to create an ideal of the Christian orator, and seemed to have agreed in choosing Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil of Caesarea as the perfect models. Both historians (Soz. *HE* VI 17; Soc. *HE* IV 26) constructed the figure of two gifted students that preferred to pursue the learning of the Scriptures rather than the professional practice of the secular rhetoric despite their mastery of these disciplines²⁷. They practiced the type of rhetoric that John Chrysostom advocated for in his treatise *On Priesthood* (IV.5): “In short, to meet all these difficulties, there is no help given but that of speech, and if any be destitute of this power, the souls of those who are put under his charge (I mean of the weaker and more meddlesome kind) are no better off than ships continually storm-tossed. So that the priest should do all that in him lies, to gain this means of strength”²⁸. In this way, Socrates and Sozomen were trying to reconfigure the role of secular disciplines in the Nicene Christian order. In their works, Christians were encouraged to be proficient orators and dialecticians as long as this entailed the ability to defend the religious orthodoxy and to properly negotiate in religious disputes. Conversely, a number of the testimonies of the Church historians

²⁵ See also Criboire 2013, 55: “the chief purpose of this section is to show how permeable the boundary between pagan and Christian could be, and how willing we must be to accept that not only did pagan and Christian literary traditions not ignore each other, but each consciously drew on elements common to both”.

²⁶ Translation taken from Barnes and Bevan 2013.

²⁷ For a thorough study of their conception of rhetoric and its theological implications, see Spuntarelli 2012, 211-292. For their importance in the creation of the Christian orator, see Schamp 2006, 322-328.

²⁸ Translation taken from the website <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf109.iv.i.html>.

(especially those of Socrates) reveal certain resentment against those ‘Philostratean Bishops’ that preached for chrematistic and mundane purposes²⁹.

Finally, the laudatory tone of some passages in which bishops are depicted practicing rhetoric simply to promote religious consensus or to refute heterodox opinions may mislead us if we take it at face value. Although we are led to believe by Socrates’ and Sozomen’s narrative that their religious affiliation made them leave behind the highly competitive cultural milieu of the fourth and fifth centuries AD, the emphasis on their eloquence and how it was deployed in order to maintain the orthodoxy within Christianity (e.g. Soc. *HE* 4.26) should make us aware of Christian internal competitions in order to obtain a better position in the ever-growing hierarchical system of the post-Constantinian Church (van Nuffelen 2014b, 216-217).

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²⁹ In a similar vein, see Acerbi 2013.

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