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Religious Discourse in Attic Oratory and Politics

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REFERENCES

Andreas SERAFIM, *Religious Discourse in Attic Oratory and Politics*, Londres/New York, Routledge, 2021. 1 vol. 15,8 × 24,1 cm, 164 p. (*Routledge Monographs in Classical Studies*). ISBN : 978-3-16-159008-5.

- 1 In this book, Andreas Serafim sets out to investigate the use of religious discourse, by which he means any reference to religious ideas, beliefs, and attitudes in public speaking contexts in classical Athens. Like Gunther Martin (*Divine Talk: Religious Argumentation in Demosthenes*, 2009), Serafim examines religion primarily as a tool for persuasion, but he differentiates himself from Martin's book by offering a more comprehensive study: he aims to take into account all extant speeches from the ten Attic orators. The book consists of an introduction, four chapters, and a short conclusion.
- 2 Chapter one seeks to offer a "comprehensive, full-scale" survey of the "main" features of religious discourse in all the epideictic, forensic, and symbouleutic speeches which have come down to us from late fifth- and fourth-century Athens. Treating the orators one by one, the chapter lists (sometimes literally, as on p. 42–43) the types of religious references found in the speeches, such as prayers, hymns, and oaths, but also references to impiety and pollution, fate and divine agency, myth, and divine justice, among others. For those orators with a large corpus, such as Demosthenes, the discussion is usefully organized by genre of speech. While Serafim acknowledges rightly that it would be impossible to list every single reference to a religious element in the more than 100 surviving speeches of the orators, the absence of some important topics calls the claim to comprehension into question. For example, references to the gods as lawgivers (Antiph.1.3; Dem. 23.70; Lys. 6.10), to divine intervention in the

enforcement of law (Lys. 6.19, 6.20; Andoc. 1.137–139), or to divine signs as proof (Antiph. 5.81–83) are not mentioned or discussed in the book at all, despite the significance of such passages for our understanding of how the Athenians conceptualised the connection between the divine and human decision-making.

- 3 Chapter two provides an analysis of the material surveyed in the previous chapter, focusing in particular on explaining the differences in the use of religious discourse between various genres of oratory. Serafim argues that different institutions have different ‘logics of appropriateness’, affecting what could be said in the political sphere of the Assembly, the judicial setting of the law courts, or the various contexts in which epideictic speeches were delivered, such as funeral ceremonies or sophistic competitions. He argues that some features of religious discourse are ubiquitous, to be found in all genres of oratory, while ritual utterances, in particular oaths, occur only in forensic and symbouleutic speeches. As explanation for why some speeches have particularly high or low concentrations of religious discourse, he points to the idiosyncrasy and style of particular orators and specific circumstances affecting the choice of rhetoric. One might have expected here to see more attention paid also to the specific charge of a trial, which also could impact significantly on the prominence of religious discourse in the judicial sphere.
- 4 In Chapter three, the reactions of speakers and audiences to the use of religious stimuli in oratory is investigated. In the section on physical and sensory reactions, Serafim looks at voice and gestures of speech, building on the work he has done in his first book, *Attic Oratory and Performance* (2017). The analysis here is limited to the ritual speech acts of oaths and prayers, which, Serafim contends, would often be accompanied by raised voices and hand gestures, producing an emotionally heightened effect for speaker and audience. Much of the argument is rather speculative, in particular the suggestion that speakers’ use of imperatives to exhort their audience to pray would have made the audience immediately react with prayers and accompanying hand gestures. The second half of the chapter examines ‘cognitive/emotional’ reactions, posing a question that is difficult to answer: how does religious discourse influence people’s thoughts and emotions? Again, the analysis focuses on oaths, which Serafim argues often function emphatically: they regularly occurred together with other emphatic tools, such as figures of speech which amplify the vividness of the argument, medical imagery, or the use of the imperative to create a sense of urgency. According to Serafim, religious references such as oaths elicited fear in the audience of judges or Assembly goers by acting as a reminder that the gods are all-seeing. While the focus on the emphatic function of oaths is convincing, it is not clear how religious references then differ from other appeals to emotion.
- 5 Ritual utterances, in particular oaths, make up a significant part of the religious discourse which Serafim discusses in this book, reading in them also “a means of putting mental and emotional pressure on the judges to make the most righteous and polis-benefiting decision”. Yet his discussion of oaths does not take sufficient account of notable variety within the kind of oath-swearing which occurs in these forensic and symbouleutic speeches. The majority of oaths sworn by litigants or speakers in the Assembly are informal oaths, made up simply of a particle and the name of a deity, most often Zeus or ‘the gods’. It is hard to imagine elaborate hand gestures made or emotional pressure applied every time such an oath was sworn, especially oaths to Zeus, such as $\nu\eta\ \Delta\acute{\iota}\alpha$: as Alan Sommerstein and Isabel Torrance have argued, these

latter often function simply as a sentence-adverbial, a signpost for a change in speaker, usually a hypothetical objection by the speaker's opponent (*Oath and Swearing in Ancient Greece*, 2014). Other oaths are, of course, much more marked: there are four occasions in Attic oratory where a speaker swears an oath more elaborate than an informal oath, including explicit oaths statements or self-curses (Dem. 19.172, 23.5, 32.31, 54.41). Yet none of these passages are discussed by Serafim in this book.

- 6 Chapter four examines the use of religious discourse for the construction of political or civic identities. While the idea that religion can be used for identity construction is far from new, Serafim does a good job demonstrating how exactly this worked in the case of Attic oratory. He argues that orators used religious references to construct an ideal communal identity in which piety and patriotism were intricately tied: speakers regularly appeal to civic pride and religious values and present themselves as sharing these values with their audience, while their opponents are cast as outsiders. There is a good discussion here of the use of the civic address to the audience in judicial oratory and the role autochthony plays in Athenian self-definition. Serafim also maintains that examples of ideal citizens, in particular heroes and statesmen, are used as mirrors for ideal and aberrant identities. It is not always clear, however, how much these references to mythical and historical figures (e.g. Aesch. 3.257–259; Dem. 18.127) really rely on religious discourse to make their point, as opposed to simply being examples of the well-known use of the past as *paradeigmata* for citizen behaviour.
- 7 The book's strength lies in its demonstration of the pervasiveness of religious discourse in the rhetorical strategies used by public speakers in various settings in classical Athens. When he dives into specific passages, Serafim often provides appealing and convincing analyses, combining linguistic observations with rhetorical deconstruction to good effect. The book makes some persuasive and interesting points, building on Martin's analysis of the different ways in which religious insults, exhortations of piety, or acclaims to divine favour are employed in different settings, from private or public cases in the law courts to funeral orations.
- 8 However, the strength of the book's argument is marred by some methodological issues. First, it takes a very quantitative approach to religion, counting the numbers of sections in speeches which feature a religious reference. Serafim makes judgements about the importance of religious arguments in different types of speeches, or the corpus of a specific orator versus others, based on quantity—without considering that the content or quality of such references to a religious element, practice, belief, or habit might considerably affect the weightiness of religious argumentation in an oration. Other issues arise with such a quantitative approach too. For example, Serafim states that there are religious references in 460 sections out of 4,224 sections of the full corpus of Demosthenic speeches (or 10.9 %). This gives Demosthenes a rank of six out of the ten Attic orators in frequency of use of religious discourse. But what does that rank really tell us about Demosthenes, if it is based on a corpus which includes speeches not written nor delivered by him (e.g. Dem. 59) and also speeches whose authenticity as fourth-century orations is disputed (such as Dem. 25)?
- 9 Second, Serafim aims for comprehension in his study, but covering such a large number of sources in this case carries with it a lack of attention for the context of these sources. For example, he compares Demosthenes' symbouleutic speeches with those of Isocrates, without mentioning that the latter are a very different type of oration, never actually spoken or performed in the Assembly. So too, speeches with disputed

authorship or even authenticity (including of inserted documents) are used without any reference to their disputed nature, even in the footnotes. And while the book aims to cover all three genres of oratory, the many passages discussing only judicial and political decision-making makes the epideictic material sometimes feel like an afterthought.

- 10 While the book tells us much about Athenian rhetoric, it tells us less about ancient religion. Serafim situates his approach to Greek religion within the *polis* religion model, taking religion primarily as an element which serves the *polis*' interests as a tool for constructing group and individual identity, as argued in chapter four. The book often makes very general statements about religion, which is presented as something cross-culturally ubiquitous and all-powerful across time, a soothing balm for the human psyche's longing for reassurance and a provider of answers to the great questions in life (p. 12, 41, 48). This rather outdated understanding of religion does not always apply well to the ancient Greek context: we may wonder, for example, how relevant a statement about religion's promise of salvation is to understanding the religious beliefs and practices of the ancient Greeks (p. 12).
- 11 At times, the book is lacking in rigour and sustained reflection on the types of evidence it brings to substantiate its arguments. The choice of *comparanda* often seems rather arbitrary. For example, to demonstrate the importance of oath-swearing Serafim briefly refers to a social psychology laboratory experiment about 'players' who were considered more trustworthy after swearing oaths as well as to literature on oaths in the Qu'ran and in the New Testament, while the plentiful evidence for the importance of oaths in the political, judicial, social, and religious spheres of fourth-century Athens is ignored, as is the critical work done on the topic by the Nottingham Oath Project (see Sommerstein and Torrance 2014). Serafim has a tendency to use evidence from later periods to corroborate claims about fourth-century Athens, without making explicit why he thinks this is justified. For instance, literature on Hellenistic kingship is adduced for a discussion of heroic kings in Isocrates' rhetoric (p. 133), while Serafim claims that sacrifices to Apollo and Artemis Boulaia were regularly made before Assembly meetings, without making clear we have evidence of this practice only for 259/8 BCE onwards (our only source for preliminary sacrifices in the fourth-century Assembly is Aeschin. 1.23, which unfortunately does not specify divine recipients).
- 12 In addition to such gaps, there are a number of errors in the book. On p. 8, the dikastic and bouleutic oaths are muddled, with Kapparis' quote said to be about the judicial oath, when he is discussing the bouleutic. Serafim also credits the term "bouleutic oath" as "belonging to Kapparis (1999), 171" (n. 33, p. 23) although it has been widely used since the early twentieth century (see e.g. Wade-Gerry, "Studies in Attic inscriptions of the fifth century", *ABSA* 33 [1932–1933], p. 117–122 and P.J. Rhodes, *The Athenian Boule*, 1972, p. 190–199). Likewise, Demosthenes' *Against Androtion* is said to be a public indictment for impiety, but it is a *graphe paranomon*, a prosecution for proposing an illegal decree (p. 52). In Andocides' speech *On the Mysteries* 33, the banishment from temples for impiety is not a general rule but a specific clause of the decree of Isotimides (p. 142). Page numbers are also missing for some references (e.g. p. 92 and p. 141, n. 26).
- 13 The reader should bear in mind the methodological issues mentioned here above. Nonetheless, the book does provide an informative overview of the varied ways in which religious discourse could be used in rhetorical strategies in classical Athens. It

also highlights the centrality of the divine to the public decision-making processes which the speeches of the Attic orators so vividly depict.

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