

The
International Journal
of Homiletics



Volume 1 No 1 (2016)

Editorial

1. An International, Ecumenical and Interreligious Journal of Homiletics

Welcome to the first issue of the “International Journal of Homiletics” – a peer-reviewed, open-access online journal presenting international and ecumenical articles in homiletics.

The international conversation in homiletics is currently the cutting edge of the field. Other academic disciplines have been engaged in international collaboration for years. However, beyond the biennial meetings and publications of the international homiletics guild, *Societas Homiletica*, insufficient attention has been given to international collaboration in the field of homiletics, possibly because of the inherently contextual nature of preaching. In recent years, these international conversations have increased, facilitated by *Societas Homiletica* meetings, improved communications technology, and a deepening sense of the importance of global homiletical dialogue.

Almost 500 years ago, the Reformers in Europe (re-)discovered the importance and centrality of preaching in the vernacular as the basic way of connecting people with the gospel and of thus changing people’s lives. The Reformation was a movement spread mainly by sermons (and hymns), and Luther was convinced that there should not be any Christian gathering without a sermon. The sermon can still be perceived as a distinctive mark for Protestant services all over the world – sometimes with problematic consequences for the ‘rest’ of the liturgy. In the meantime the sermon has also become a central part of every Catholic Sunday Mass. Fifty years ago the Second Vatican Council emphasized the importance of preaching the words of the Bible. And recently Pope Francis reaffirmed the importance of preaching: “Let us renew our confidence in preaching, based on the conviction that it is God who seeks to reach out to others through the preacher, and that he displays his power through human words” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 2013, 136). Moreover, this emphasis on preaching is not just limited to Christian traditions. Since the 19th century’s Jewish reform movement the sermon (*derashah*) has again become of central and vital importance for Judaism. And on Friday mornings ‘sermons’ (*khutbah*) are preached in mosques all over the world. It is time to start a journal stressing the centrality of the international, ecumenical, and inter-religious context of preaching. Toward this end we plan to present voices from different nations, traditions, and social and political contexts.

Whenever homileticians meet in international gatherings, we realize how inspiring it is to learn from each other. Different methods are used in the research on preaching, and different themes are important depending on the diverse social, political, and ecclesial contexts. We believe that by

sharing these ideas from all over the world, this journal will contribute to the internationalization of homiletical research--an internationalization that has the potential to deepen the awareness of the profoundly local, yet also liminal, multicultural genre of preaching.

2. The Editorial Board and Plans for the Journal

The International Journal of Homiletics will publish scholarly, peer-reviewed articles from homileticians around the world and will work on the establishment of an interactive component to stimulate ongoing dialogue among homileticians from different national and cultural contexts. At the same time, our journal is – as stated – not only *international*, but also *ecumenical* and even *inter-religious*. This is reflected in the composition of the *editorial board*, which consists of Christian and Jewish homileticians from five continents.

Júlio César Adam, Associate Professor of Practical Theology, São Leopoldo, Brazil

Charles Campbell, Professor of Homiletics, Duke Divinity School, USA

Johan Cilliers, Professor in Homiletics and Liturgy, Stellenbosch University, South Africa

Katsuki Hirano, Director of the School for Preachers, Japan

Dimitria Koukoura, Professor of Homiletics, University of Thessaloniki, Greece

Donyelle McCray, Assistant Professor of Homiletics and Director of Multicultural Ministries, Virginia Theological Seminary, USA

Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, Professor of Preaching and Worship, Bethany Seminary, USA

Margarete Moers Wenig, Rabbi and Instructor in Liturgy and Homiletics, Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion, New York, USA

The journal is co-edited by Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen (Professor of Practical Theology, University of Copenhagen, Denmark) and Alexander Deeg (Professor of Practical Theology, University of Leipzig, Germany) with the help of Ferenc Herzig (Wiss. Assistant, Leipzig University), our managing editor.

Articles in our journal will be published in English or in both English *and* the original language – as can be seen in *Júlio César Adam's* paper, which is published in English and Brazilian Portuguese.

The journal will be published once or twice a year. In order to draw the contours of the scope of the journal – and to introduce readers to the board – board members have written most of the articles in this first volume – and reviewed each others' work. This volume is, consequently, not peer-reviewed in the formal sense.

3. The First Issue: Preaching in Times of Transition

For our first two issues we chose the theme *Preaching in times of transition*, and we asked homiletical scholars from different parts of the world to write an article related to this theme and to their specific contexts.

We as the editors were happily surprised by the different approaches of our authors: *Júlio César Adam* presents critical challenges in the current societal and ecclesial situation in Latin America, connecting homiletical reflections with basic Latin American theological insights, especially liberation theology. Instead of importing homiletical models and methods from the ‘North,’ Adam seeks to develop an “incarnational and incultured” theology and homiletics.

Johan Cilliers looks back to *the* great transition in South African history in the late 20th century and reflects on homiletics and hermeneutics in late apartheid times (1987), as well as in the year in which the first democratic elections took place (1994). He presents and analyzes a sermon by Desmond Tutu, showing how preaching can help people enter a new situation without denying the painful past or present-day problems.

Addressing one of the most significant transitions in Europe today, *Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen* presents the results of an empirical study of a significant Christian congregation in Copenhagen that is composed of both refugees from the Middle East and ethnic Danes. Through the use of Søren Kierkegaard’s category of *repetition* she describes preaching as a genre of both authentic repetition and significant *interruption*. She broadens the perspective by also stressing the importance of music and liturgy.

Michael Marmur, Jewish scholar, teacher, and preacher from Jerusalem, shares insights into Jewish preaching in Reformed contexts today by presenting and analyzing one of his own sermons. Through his analysis he develops the notion of the sermon as a “sanctification of time”.

Marmur’s essay connects directly to *Donyelle McCray’s* article, which concentrates on the *spirituality of time* and its importance for the sermon’s ecclesiology, pneumatology, and performance.

In every issue of our journal we intend to present a *homiletical squib* – a short and sharp text presenting one idea or insight that is of special importance for the author. *Charles Campbell* is convinced that “God is not afraid of new things” – and thus preachers should not be afraid of standing with their congregations in the perpetual liminal and transitional movement from the old age to the new creation.

Our first issue shows that *preaching in times of transition* is a theme for homileticians in different contexts all over the world and a fruitful starting point for our discussions. Our second issue will continue this theme and present more voices from other homiletical contexts.

4. First steps towards ‘inter-activity’

As stated above, the *International Journal of Homiletics* plans to be interactive, using the possibilities of the internet to facilitate the communication between homiletics around the world. This component of interactivity is still to be established. We are working on it. In the meantime, we are glad to receive all your comments, critiques, suggestions, and ideas by sending an e-mail to one or all of us:

Ferenc Herzig

Alexander Deeg

Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen

Managing Editor

Co-editor

Co-editor

ferenc.herzig@email.de

alexander.deeg@uni-leipzig.de

mrl@teol.ku.dk

It is our hope that this journal will contribute to the growing international dialogue in homiletics, inspire its readers, present new perspectives for homiletical research, and encourage the preaching of God’s word with conviction and humility in different contexts and cultures

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

(Isa 55:10f.)

Alexander Deeg

Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen

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Preaching in Transition

A Homiletic Perspective from Latin America and Brazil

Júlio César Adam

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to reflect on homiletics and Christian preaching in the context of Latin America, in the current times of transition. In order to provide a better understanding of the approach, initially aspects of the Latin American religious and cultural context will be analyzed. Then there will be considerations on aspects of the development of Christian preaching, creating a space to think about the relationship between Christian preaching and theologies that are relevant to the context, such as liberation theology. Finally a few challenges to Christian preaching in times of transition will be pointed out. Due to the delimitation of the article, it will focus on the homiletic development of the historical Protestant churches on the continent, above all in the Brazilian context.

Introduction

“Preaching does not consist essentially in communicating new ideas,
but in re-telling a story,
that of the grace of God in our salvation,
and hoping that God will speak and act again through this story.”¹

Reflection on Christian preaching in times of transition based on and in the context of Latin America and Brazil requires a precise delimitation and conscious choice of particular aspects. It is impossible to talk about preaching in times of transition without saying something about the religious context or about aspects of Christian preaching in this context. Therefore I have divided this article into the following parts: first I will broadly discuss the religious context of Latin America and the relation of religion with the Latin America and Brazilian cultures themselves; then I will discuss aspects of the development of Christian preaching, creating a space to think about the relationship between preaching and liberation theology; and finally I will point out some challenges to Christian preaching in times of transition. The study will focus on Christian preaching, its form and content, in the historical Protestant churches of the continent, taking the Brazilian context as its main reference.

¹ Juan Stam, Fundamentos teológicos de la predicación, in: Y el Verbo se hizo carne. Desafíos actuales a la predicación evangélica en la América, ed. Amós López Rubio, La Habana 2010, 13f.

1. Aspects of the Latin American Religious and Cultural Context

The religious and cultural context of Latin America and Brazil is marked by the phenomenon of religion. This religious phenomenon is cultural, diverse and syncretic. The first thing the Portuguese did when they invaded Brazilian territory in 1500 was to celebrate mass. This episode prompts us to think about two characteristics that would mark the cultural and religious development in this context. The first characteristic is the imbrication between religion and conquest, legitimized by the patronage regime.² The second characteristic is the impossibility of holding a dialogue with other forms of culture and religion already present in the context. These two characteristics somehow prevail up to the present time: the mixture of religion with the other spheres of life, on the one hand, and the refusal of dialogue among the different religious expressions, on the other.

It was not only the official form of the Catholic Christian faith that prevailed in the context. From the beginning, forms of religious syncretism with the indigenous religions and later with the religions of African origin marked the religious context of Latin America, which also led to a sui generis cultural and religious miscegenation. Later the Protestant traditions and those of other religions were added to this religiously syncretic and culturally miscegenated context, transforming Brazil into a large cauldron of religions and religiosities, mixed with its culture, as shown by the data of the last census performed in 2010.³ The Protestant and later the Pentecostal contribution are part of the religious miscegenation, even as they deny it. In other countries on the continent, save for the due differences, the same phenomenon occurs to a large extent.

Currently in Latin America, the effects of this religious effervescence are experienced daily. It might almost be said that in Latin America there is an excess of religion that surpasses the religious field itself. Religion is part of the culture, society, politics and the economy. “Already at the beginning of the 1990s, a new church was founded every weekday in the Metropolitan Area of Rio de Janeiro alone.”⁴ Research in this field has defined studies on this religious effervescence, such as religious transit and mobility.⁵

“Religious mobility is a social phenomenon that has its own dynamics, stimulated by individual subjectivities, by rapid changes in modern societies and by the socio-historical appeal that challenged the social place of official religions, but did not abolish fascination about religion. [...] About 23%, that is, one out of every four persons (interviews in the

² Cf. *Alessandro Bartz/Oneide Bobsin/Rudolf von Sinner*, *Mobilidade religiosa no Brasil: conversão ou trânsito religioso*, in: *Religião e sociedade. Desafios contemporâneos*, ed. Iuri Reblin and Rudolf von Sinner, São Leopoldo 2012, 238.

³ Cf. *José Rogério Lopes*, *Censo 2010 e religiões: reflexões a partir do novo mapa religioso brasileiro*, in: *Cadernos IHU*, São Leopoldo, 11/182 (2013).

⁴ *Bartz/Bobsin/Sinner* (note 2), 232.

⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 231ff.

study performed by the authors) had changed the religion to which they belonged at least once in life.”⁶

Besides the surprising rise of new churches and religious movements, research on religious transit and mobility analyzes the bricolage or hybridism of these new proposals and to what extent this trend corresponds to a culture that has always been syncretic and miscegenated. Although at the level of discourse several of the traditional churches, such as Roman Catholic and historical Protestant ones, and even the Pentecostal and Neopentecostal churches advocate a dogmatic, exclusivist discourse, in practice the understandings and practical experiences of the people involved are highly syncretic, dynamic and hybridized. This phenomenon makes religious transit easier and drives it, and it largely influences Christian preaching in all religious tendencies, including historical Protestantism.⁷

A study by Bobsin discusses the existence of a religious underground, a way of experiencing religion outside the realm of the official beliefs. He analyzed the case of the Lutheran church, i.e. an ethnic church, formed by German immigrants, a historical Protestant church, but where some members, although secretly, experience a syncretic religiosity. According to the author, the official theology of the church – I would say homiletics – needs to operate with at least two worlds when dealing with the phenomenon of religion in Brazil, viz. with “the rational and the mythical element, the traditional and the modern, the existential and the liberating, the official and the clandestine, not forgetting life’s ambiguities, so present in the phenomenon of religion.”⁸

In the Christian sphere, the denominations and tendencies could nowadays be classified as follows: on the one hand, there is the predominance of classical and Romanized Catholicism, and of popular, syncretic Catholicism; and, on the other hand, there is the presence of Pentecostalism and Neopentecostalism with their individualized and emotional religious practices, with a moral and economic appeal (theology of prosperity). In the middle or on the margins are the churches of historical Protestantism – of missionary origin or derived from immigration – that actually appeared on the scene from the 19th century onward.

The project of the historical Protestant and Evangelical churches, especially those derived from the missionary enterprise, were exclusivist in nature and stood in opposition to Catholicism in its popular and Romanized versions. According to Cunha, the theology that sustains the Protestant and Evangelical undertakings in Brazil, for instance, is conservative and exclusivist from its inception: “[...] the theology that shapes the Brazilian Evangelical world (is) Arminian-Pietistic-Puritanical, millenarian and fundamentalist, based on a duality of two paths that is imposed as a

⁶ Ibid., 243.

⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 234f.

⁸ *Oneide Bobsin*, O subterrâneo religioso da vida eclesial. Intuições a partir das ciências da religião, in: *Estudos Teológicos*, São Leopoldo, 37/3 (1997), 279.

choice to be made.”⁹ While in the churches of historical Protestantism these more conservative tendencies to a certain extent gave way to an attitude that was more open to ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue, and advanced towards a socio-political commitment, the Pentecostal and Neopentecostal churches reinforced these tendencies. It should however be said that in the case of the Neopentecostal churches such as, for instance, the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (IURD) [Universal Church of the Kingdom of God], there are markedly syncretic tendencies with Umbanda (Brazilian religiosity of African origin) in its rituals and symbols, despite the strongly exclusivist discourse.¹⁰

2. Aspects of the Historical Trajectory of Preaching in Latin America

Speaking about preaching in the Latin American context means to take into account four large denominational currents: the Roman Catholic Church, the historical Protestant churches, the Pentecostal and the Neopentecostal churches, all of them more or less permeated by the phenomenon of syncretism and religious hybridism, or the so-called religious mobility, as seen above. All currents have influenced and continue to influence the preaching of each of the currents by itself, even if it is via a contrary reaction or opposition. Hahn, in his history of Protestant worship in Brazil, shows that both the Catholic Church and the indigenous and African religions and religiosities exerted a great influence on the construction of the identity of Protestantism in this context.¹¹

There is one aspect that became common to all denominations. In all of them preaching is characterized by an adaptation of sermons from the North, from Europe and the United States, especially emphasizing the individual conversion of souls, mainly of people who are members of Latin American Catholicism, in truly proselytizing campaigns from the pulpit.

“In general, preaching in Latin American Evangelical churches has been influenced by the evangelistic sermon of the Revival experiences of previous centuries. The pillars of this preaching have been conversion and sanctification. In this current there is an emphasis on the feelings and emotions as the path to repentance and rebirth in Christ. The important aspect is to experience divine grace that leads to the total transformation of life.”¹²

Even the studies on homiletics were translated from the North. In the mid-1970s, Moraes finds an absence of an original bibliography on homiletics in Portuguese, in Brazil.¹³ The material used in the seminaries was translated material, mostly from North America. In other words, the model of

⁹ Magali do Nascimento Cunha, *Religião na esfera pública. A tríade mídia, mercado e política e a reconstrução da imagem dos evangélicos brasileiros na contemporaneidade*, in: *Religião e sociedade. Desafios contemporâneos*, ed. Iuri Reblin and Rudolf von Sinner, São Leopoldo 2012, 174f.

¹⁰ Cf. Bartz/Bobsin/Sinner (note 2), 249.

¹¹ Cf. Carl Joseph Hahn, *História do culto protestante no Brasil*, São Paulo 1989, 223ff., 291ff.

¹² López Rubio (ed.), *Y el Verbo se hizo carne* (note 1), 9.

¹³ Cf. Jilton Moraes, *Ensino da homilética no Brasil*, in: *Simpósio*, São Paulo, 11/51 (2014) 38–44.

preaching adopted largely in the Latin American Protestant context was the classical model of preaching of the Protestant churches of the North. This is to a large extent an expository, rational and academic sermon, fixed on the content and constructed through a careful exegetic, hermeneutic and homiletic labor. Ramos calls this type of preaching “medieval”. “[...] it is characterized by the meticulous concern with the dogmatic, doctrinal and catechetical content. The preaching represented here intends to reproduce, duplicate a given body of religious knowledge conveyed mainly by the oral-verbal and literary route.”¹⁴

Maraschin strongly criticizes this sermon imported from the North.¹⁵ According to him, besides being a logocentric, rational and clerical model, this model has not managed to dialogue with the culture and communication models peculiar to Latin America. It was a model imposed with an aura of sacredness, as a part and parcel of the project to colonize the continent. According to the author, this model has become obsolete, something that makes effective communication of the Word of God as *viva vox Evangelii* difficult in the Latin American context.

Thinking about preaching in the historical Protestant churches, I speak of a feeling of unease in the pulpit. This unease is also related to the imported homiletic model.

“There is a feeling of unease about preaching and the sermon. This unease has already been around for quite a time. We might say that there is unease in the church as a whole [...]. Uncertainty is one of the main symptoms of this unease. How do we perceive this unease? Has the church’s sermon become obsolete for this society? The sermon – in its form and content – does not communicate what it should. The historical churches that maintain a particular style of preaching, the classical sermon, are being emptied. We consider the classical sermon to be a way of speaking, integrated into a worship service, carried out with the interpretation and application of Scripture by a member called from the congregation, usually by a minister. Sermons, besides not communicating, are not pleasing, they do not have the social, cultural and spiritual effects of yore. They do not nurture as they used to nurture. They no longer help to answer and show solutions for the crises of the new times. This sermon appears not even to have managed to edify congregations. If at least it would nurture the faith of the members of the church more vigorously, but even this appears not to be happening.”¹⁶

Moraes has also reflected on this crisis of the classical preaching in historical Protestantism. In his book, *O Clamor da Igreja* [The Clamor of the Church], based on empirical research, Moraes points

¹⁴ Luiz Carlos Ramos, A pregação na idade humana. Horizontes homiléticos para a igreja do futuro, in: Tear Online, São Leopoldo, 1/2 (2012) 139.

¹⁵ Cf. *Jaci Maraschin*, Da leveza e da beleza. Liturgia na pós-modernidade, São Paulo 2010, 28.

¹⁶ *Júlio C. Adam*, Mal-estar no púlpito: repensando teologicamente a pregação cristã na sociedade da informação, in: Estudos Teológicos, São Leopoldo, 53/1 (2013), 161.

out a certain carelessness and generalized lack of preparation. These elements show a certain lack of direction of preaching by Evangelical churches in Brazil.¹⁷

Currently, this homiletic stalemate in historical churches has become more intense for at least two reasons: the Pentecostal and charismatic preaching and the spectacular preaching, used mainly in the Neopentecostal churches. The Pentecostal and charismatic sermon is marked by sensory experience, instead of Protestant rationality, with a view to solving common problems of everyday life.¹⁸ “The sermon, as a rational element that is responsible for articulating the intelligence of faith (theological doing), is replaced by a type of psychosomatic preaching that seeks to provoke physical effects: tears, laughing, chills, ecstasy, etc.”¹⁹ The spectacular sermon extends these characteristics to the sphere of the media and communication technologies. As opposed to the so-called classical sermon, the spectacular sermon or sermon of the “media” age, as Ramos calls it as opposed to medieval sermons, has been strongly influenced by the media culture, the society of shows and entertainment.²⁰ Whereas previously, in classical sermons, the concern was content, in spectacular sermons the concern is form, displacing attention from verbal-oral-literary elements to imagetic-visual-iconic ones.

“Preachers who operate in this context adapt to the expectations of the cybernetic generation that prefers imaginative narratives to abstract verbal discourses; that is impatient at the slow flow of information and when it takes long to obtain answers; that generally, during the sermon, does not concentrate exclusively on preaching, but is at the same time fingering their iPods, mobile phones and tablets, in a process of social interaction that may or not have something to do with the content of the sermon; and that, rather unscrupulously, shares their faithfulness by zapping through ‘different channels’ to follow several religious ‘programs’ (churches and movements), simultaneously.”²¹

3. Liberation Theology and Preaching in the Latin American Context

Liberation theology influenced the historical Protestant churches also in preaching.²² Content and form of the sermon were influenced by it in one way or another.

“Another tendency on the continent points to the incarnate and prophetic preaching, along the lines of social preaching in the United States, which had a very peculiar expression in the African-American preaching of which Martin Luther King Jr. was the

¹⁷ Cf. *Jilton Moraes*, *O clamor da Igreja. Em busca da excelência no púlpito*, São Paulo 2012.

¹⁸ Cf. *Elisabeth Salazar-Senzana*, *Predicación y pentecostalismo*, in: *Y el Verbo se hizo carne* (note 1), 131–142.

¹⁹ *Luiz Carlos Ramos*, *A pregação na Idade Mídia. Os desafios da sociedade do espetáculo para a prática homilética contemporânea*, São Bernardo do Campo 2012, 78.

²⁰ About the discourse in the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, see *Leonildo Silveira Campos*, *Teatro, templo e mercado. Organização e marketing de um empreendimento neopentecostal*, Petrópolis/São Paulo/São Bernardo 2019, 297ff.

²¹ *Ramos* (note 19), 140.

²² Cf. *ibid.*, 70ff.

main exponent. Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero's preaching in El Salvador has become a paradigm for incarnate preaching. In his messages Monsignor Romero used to define two moments: applying the Word of God to the church's reality and to the political, economic and social reality of the country."²³

One of the great differences for preaching will be firstly of a hermeneutic nature. The hermeneutic change provokes a homiletic change. Instead of beginning with the Bible text, one begins from reality. "As regards the direction taken by the sermon, the path of liberation theology reinforces the need to begin with reality. [...] one starts from a given fact or situation experienced by the congregation; the latter is analyzed and seen in the light of a biblical text which, in turn, leads the congregation to act according to the will of God regarding the initial fact."²⁴

Liberation theology itself criticizes the classical way in which the church gives access to the Bible, as though church and theology held the authority to interpret and preach the Word. The people, the congregation or community begin to be seen as protagonists in preaching the Word. The main instrument of liberation theology in this regard is the popular reading of the Bible, an authentic form of reading, interpreting and preaching the Word, based on the reality of exclusion and suffering of the people, into the same reality, as a form of sociopolitical and cultural transformation. "Our people, when they are confronted with the Bible and with the results of modern exegesis, ask questions, present difficulties and take attitudes."²⁵ The method of popular reading of the Bible did not have an impact on the pulpit of the historical Protestant churches and was not even taken as a new, contextual form of preaching.

In the Catholic Church and in some sectors of the Protestant churches, not only new ways of preaching, but also a new way of being the church arise with liberation theology. In this new way, there is suspicion about the pulpit itself and the person of the preacher as the bearer of the hierarchical and institutional discourse. "The hegemony of the sermon is a sign of a church that is still vertical, authoritarian, mass-based, impersonal."²⁶ On the other hand, "the search for new forms of homily coincides with the search for a horizontal, democratic, personalized church."²⁷

Driven by liberation theology, a homiletic aid called *Proclamar libertação* [Proclaiming Liberation] appeared in the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession. This initiative in the field of homiletics has been around for more than three decades as a valuable tool providing guidance and suggestions for preachers in their task of announcing the gospel in a way that is committed to the

²³ López Rubio (ed.), *Y el Verbo se hizo carne* (note 1), 9.

²⁴ Edson E. Streck, *A prédica ao longo da história da Igreja*, in: *Estudos Teológicos*, São Leopoldo, 33/2 (1993), 178.

²⁵ Carlos Mesters, *Por trás das palavras. Um estudo sobre a porta de entrada no mundo da Bíblia*, Petrópolis 1984, 39.

²⁶ Guimarães *apud* Ramos (note 19), 75.

²⁷ Castro *apud* Ramos (note 19), 75f.

sociopolitical context. This homiletic aid basically offers exegetic information about Bible texts, meditations for the preparation of sermons and liturgical suggestions for celebrations.

“The idea of a series of homiletic aids of our own began in 1975, by initiative of a group of teachers and ministers of the IECLB. [...] Those were the harsh years of the military regime, with its policy of repression and violation of human rights, censorship of freedom of information and speech, arbitrary persecutions and arrests, torture rooms and mysterious disappearances. In this environment voices were increasingly heard clamoring for an autochthonous church that would be able to denounce the abuses that were being practiced and to express, based on the gospel, its commitment to a democratic society and to social, economic and political transformation in the country. ‘Proclaiming Liberation’ arose in this context and was part of this movement which occurred within the church. Many of the ministers in that time still knew the German language well and sought information for their preaching in homiletic material from Germany. However, this solution was increasingly considered unsatisfactory, indeed a sign of theological alienation and unfaithfulness to the gospel, which is designed to become incarnate in the real situation of people. As the title given to the series suggests, ‘Proclaiming Liberation’ proposed to offer, besides solid exegetic information and contextualized meditation, also political and social reflections, so that preachers could witness to the gospel prophetically, amid the context of repression and censorship in which they lived.”²⁸

Liberation theology in consonance with the Pentecostal experience can illuminate a preaching based on a living and dynamic God involved in the context of contradictions, suffering and conflict also in the present.

“Speaking of God involves the problems and promises that make up people’s life [...]. A God who is theological, dogmatic, static silences the pulpit. We speak of a God to be understood, and people seek a God to be experienced, God the Holy Spirit. The God who speaks and speaks fully in Jesus Christ is a God who articulates, moves, communicates Godself. It is a dynamic, living God, involved in the life and in the dramas of God’s creation. The person of Jesus, content and form, attitudes and ways of articulation should be recovered in our sermons. The topic of the Kingdom of God, which was one of the central topics of synagogal preaching and the great novelty of the Gospel, should also continue to be a topic of Evangelical preaching.”²⁹

²⁸ *Verner Hoefelmann*, Proclamar Libertação: retratos de uma busca por uma proclamação contextualizada do evangelho, in: *Religião e sociedade*, ed. Reblin and Sinner (note 2), 148.

²⁹ *Adam* (note 16), 168f.

4. Preaching in Times of Transition: Challenges

From the reflection presented above, one can see that transition has been a constant in the religious and cultural development in Latin America. It would be no different also in the case of Christian preaching. In a context of permanent transition, the homiletic response was often to adopt models originating in other contexts, especially from the North, as a form of protecting oneself and addressing the pulsating and permanent cultural and religious transition. This posture, however, made a homiletic work in dialogue with one's own context and its transience more difficult. Liberation theology proved to be a movement that, to a certain extent, managed to find paths for a preaching that takes the context seriously.

The purpose of Christian preaching in the context of Latin America with its social and cultural problems appears to be a key issue. Why preach the gospel in this context? Liberation theology offers a good answer: preaching as a way of transforming the reality of vulnerability to which most people are subjected.³⁰ Considering the immense challenges of all kinds in this context, it seems to me that paying attention to the human side involved in preaching—the hearer, the preacher, the reality into which one preaches—the different Christian and religious experiences and voices, such as, for instance, Pentecostalism,³¹ and even the syncretism and hybridism so present in Latin American culture, the exegetic, hermeneutic and homiletic zeal in preaching are aspects that can help us reinvent preaching, a Brazilian and Latin American preaching.

Ramos speaks of preaching in the middle ages, a preaching that is rational and emphasizes the dogmatic and theological content, of preaching in the media age, a preaching that is emotional, emphasizing form and the media resources of a show and entertainment, and also of preaching in the human age, precisely as a way of combining the best of both worlds and promoting a sermon that contributes prophetically to constructing spaces of life, of resistance, of human dignity and of hope.

“Homiletics in the human age is no longer a specialization, but rather presupposes a relational, interdisciplinary, multimedia and interactive epistemology. As regards memory, we are homiletics practitioners-scientists who look critically and meticulously at the archeology of faith; as to the present reality, we are homiletics practitioners-prophets who dare challenge and resist, unresigned and unsubmitive to the hegemonic system; and as to the future, we are homiletics practitioners-poets who hope against all hope (see Rom

³⁰ Cf. *Júlio C. Adam*, *Pregando vulnerabilidade. A Teologia da Libertação, a Ética do Cuidado e a pregação no contexto brasileiro e latino-americano*, in: *Estudos Teológicos*, São Leopoldo, 54/2 (2014) 350-362; *Francisco Rodés*, *El púlpito y la ética*, in: *López Rubio* (ed.), *Y el Verbo se hizo carne* (note 1), 27–40.

³¹ Cf. *Salazar-Senzana* (note 18), 131–142.

4:18) and dream about ‘what is going to be real’ (from the song ‘Coração Civil’, by Milton Nascimento).”³²

Thinking about preaching and vulnerability³³, I advocate the need for an openly political preaching for Latin America, as a way of bringing back life.

“Preaching in the vulnerability in the Latin American context means to acknowledge the need for a political sermon. There is no preaching that is not political, as Ione Buyst says: ‘No liturgical celebration is politically ‘neutral’: it always brings in itself a proposal for life in society and in a society that is split among the rich and the poor it will always choose to support one of the sides’. Preaching therefore needs to be openly political, choosing the cause of vulnerability. Political preaching names the reality that is neglected, forgotten and marginalized, makes the invisible and absent people visible, with all the inherent challenges and risks. An openly political preaching makes absent people present. ‘It is a paradoxical task, because it implies making those who are currently excluded become present in the political structure and promoting, in this structure and through it, values that are now forgotten or repressed in it’ (Stalsett). Preaching has this gentle, discrete force of naming the vulnerable. Based on it, preaching can trigger and articulate the creation of spaces for reflection and struggle beyond the pulpit. Political preaching is also a utopian preaching, full of hope and healing. It points to the resurrection and to the Kingdom of justice, peace and dignity.”³⁴

In Latin America it is therefore time to face the transition and articulate a homiletics incarnated in life, based on an insistent incarnational and incultured theology. In the transition in which we permanently find ourselves, the challenge is to engender a preaching that believes less in closed theological ideas and in ready-made homiletic models, imported mainly from the North, and that believes more in what happens, the reality of what God did and does in a context of transition. The gospel is not primarily a theology. The gospel is a voice, God’s Word, creating and recreating the world, amid the transition in Latin America.

Júlio César Adam, born 1972, is Associate Professor of Practical Theology in São Leopoldo, Brazil

julio3@est.edu.br

³² Ramos (note 14), 146.

³³ Theme of the Societas Homiletica Conference in Madurai/India, in 2014.

³⁴ Adam (note 30), 357.

Pregação em transição

Uma perspectiva homilética desde América Latina e Brasil

Júlio César Adam

Resumo

Este artigo tem por objetivo refletir sobre a homilética e a pregação cristã no contexto da América Latina, em tempos atuais de transição. Para tanto, afim de propiciar uma melhor compreensão da abordagem, analisar-se-á aspectos do contexto religioso e cultural latino-americano, num primeiro momento. Em seguida, refletir-se-á sobre aspectos do desenvolvimento da pregação cristã, dando espaço para pensar a relação entre a pregação cristã com teologias relevantes para o contexto, como a Teologia da Libertação, para, finalmente, apontar alguns desafios para a pregação cristã em tempos de transição. Devido a delimitação do artigo, o enfoque estará concentrado no desenvolvimento homilético das igrejas protestantes históricas do continente, sobretudo do contexto brasileiro.

Introdução

La predicación no consiste esencialmente en comunicar nuevas ideas sino en narrar de nuevo una historia, la de gracia de Dios en nuestra salvación, y esperar que Dios vuelva a hablar y a actuar mediante esta historia.¹

Refletir sobre a pregação cristã em tempos de transição a partir e no contexto da América Latina e do Brasil requer uma delimitação precisa e a escolha pontual de determinados aspectos. Não seria possível falar sobre a pregação em tempos de transição sem falar algo sobre o contexto religioso ou sobre aspectos da pregação cristã neste contexto. Por isso, dividimos este artigo da seguinte maneira: primeramente falaremos de forma ampla sobre o contexto religioso da América Latina e relação do religioso com a própria cultura latina e brasileira; num segundo momento falaremos sobre aspectos do desenvolvimento da pregação cristã, dando espaço para pensar a relação entre a pregação e a Teologia da Libertação, para, finalmente, apontar alguns desafios para a pregação cristã em tempos de transição. O enfoque do estudo será na pregação cristã, forma e conteúdo, das igrejas protestantes históricas do continente, tomando como referência principal o contexto brasileiro.

¹ Juan Stam, Fundamentos teológicos de la predicación, in: Y el Verbo se hizo carne. Desafíos actuales a la predicación evangélica en la América, Org. Amós López Rubio, La Habana 2010, 13s.

1. Aspectos do contexto religioso e cultural latino-americano

O contexto religioso e cultural latino-americano e brasileiro é um contexto marcado pelo religioso. Este religioso é cultural, diverso e sincrético. A primeira ação feita pelos portugueses quando invadiram o território brasileiro em 1500 foi rezar uma missa. Este episódio nos faz refletir sobre duas características que irão marcar o desenvolvimento cultural e religioso neste contexto. A primeira característica é o imbricamento entre religião e a conquista, legitimado pelo regime do padroado.² A segunda característica é a impossibilidade de diálogo com outras formas de cultura e religião já presentes no contexto. Estas duas características, de certa forma, prevalecem até os dias de hoje: a mistura do religioso com as demais esferas da vida, por um lado, e a negação do diálogo entre as diferentes expressões religiosas, de outro.

Não apenas a forma oficial da fé cristã católica prevaleceu no contexto. Desde o início, formas de sincretismo religioso com as religiões indígenas e, mais tarde, com as religiões de matriz africana marcam o contexto religioso da América Latina, o que gerou, também, uma miscigenação cultural e religiosa *sui generis*. Mais tarde, agrega-se a este contexto religiosamente sincrético e culturalmente miscigenado as tradições protestantes, bem como outras religiões, fazendo do Brasil um grande caldeirão de religiões e religiosidades, mescladas com sua cultura, como demonstra os dados do último censo, realizado em 2010.³ O aporte protestante, e mais tarde pentecostal, faz parte da miscigenação religiosa, mesmo quando a negando. Em outros países do continente, resguardada as devidas diferenças, em grande medida dá-se o mesmo fenômeno.

Na atualidade vive-se na América Latina cotidianamente os efeitos dessa efervescência religiosa. Quase podemos dizer que se vive na América Latina um excesso de religião que excede o próprio campo religioso. Religião faz parte da cultura, da sociedade, da política e da economia. “Já no início da década de 1990, uma nova igreja era fundada a cada dia útil apenas no Grande Rio.”⁴ A pesquisa nesta área tem definido os estudos sobre esta efervescência religiosa, como trânsito e mobilidade religiosa.⁵

“A mobilidade religiosa é um fenômeno social com dinâmica própria, estimulado pelas subjetividades individuais, pelas mudanças aceleradas das sociedades modernas e pelo apelo sócio-histórico que questionou o lugar social das religiões oficiais, mas não aboliu o fascínio pelo religioso. [...] Cerca de 23%, ou seja, uma de cada quatro pessoas (entrevistas

² Cf. *Alessandro Bartz/Oneide Bobsin/Rudolf von Sinner*, Mobilidade religiosa no Brasil: conversão ou trânsito religioso, in: *Religião e sociedade. Desafios contemporâneos*, Org. Iuri Reblin and Rudolf von Sinner, São Leopoldo 2012, 238.

³ Cf. *José Rogério Lopes*, Censo 2010 e religiões: reflexões a partir do novo mapa religioso brasileiro, in: *Cadernos IHU*, São Leopoldo, 11/182 (2013).

⁴ *Bartz/Bobsin/Sinner* (nota 2), 232.

⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 231ss.

no estudo realizado pelos autores) trocou de pertença religiosa pelo menos uma vez na vida.”⁶

Além do surpreendente surgimento de novas igrejas e de movimentos religiosos, a pesquisa sobre trânsito e mobilidade religiosa analisa a bricolagem ou hibridismo dessas novas propostas e o quanto esta tendência corresponde a uma cultura desde sempre sincrética e miscigenada. Mesmo que no discurso várias das igrejas tradicionais, como a Igreja Católica Romana e as protestantes históricas, e mesmo as igrejas pentecostais e neopentecostais, defendam um discurso dogmático, exclusivista, na prática as compreensões e experiências práticas das pessoas envolvidas são altamente sincréticas, dinâmicas e híbridas. Este fenômeno facilita e impulsiona o trânsito religioso e irão influenciar em grande medida a pregação cristã em todas as tendências religiosas, inclusive no protestantismo histórico.⁷

Um estudo de Bobsin fala da existência de um subterrâneo religioso, uma forma de vivência do religioso fora do âmbito da crença oficial. O caso analisado foi da igreja luterana, ou seja, uma igreja étnica, de imigração teuta, protestante histórica, mas onde membros vivenciam, mesmo que secretamente, uma religiosidade sincrética. Segundo o autor, a teologia oficial da igreja, nós diríamos a homilética, precisa trabalhar com no mínimo dois mundos, quando tratam do religioso no Brasil, com “o racional e o mítico, o tradicional e o moderno, o existencial e o libertador, o oficial e o clandestino, sem esquecer das ambiguidades da vida tão bem presentes no religioso.”⁸

No âmbito cristão, as denominações e tendências poderiam ser hoje assim classificadas: predominância do catolicismo, clássico e romanizado e do catolicismo popular, sincrético, de um lado; e o pentecostalismo e o neopentecostalismo, com suas práticas religiosas de cunho individualizado e emocional, com apelo moral e econômico (teologia da prosperidade), de outro lado. No meio, ou na margem, estão as igrejas do protestantismo histórico, de origem missionária ou de imigração, que efetivamente entram em cena a partir do século XIX.

O projeto trazido pelas igrejas protestantes e evangélicas históricas, principalmente aquele trazido pelos projetos missionários, foram de cunho exclusivista e em oposição ao catolicismo nas suas versões popular e romanizada. Segundo Cunha, a teologia que sustenta o empreendimento protestante e evangélica no Brasil, p. ex. é desde sua origem conservador e exclusivista: “[...] a teologia que forma o mundo evangélico brasileiro, (é) arminiana-pietista-puritana, milenarista e fundamentalista, baseada numa dualidade de dois caminhos que se impõe como uma escolha a ser

⁶ Ibid., 243.

⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 234s.

⁸ *Oneide Bobsin*, O subterrâneo religioso da vida eclesial. Intuições a partir das ciências da religião, in: *Estudos Teológicos*, São Leopoldo, 37/3 (1997), 279.

feita.”⁹ Enquanto nas igrejas do protestantismo histórico estas tendências mais conservadoras deram, em certa medida, espaço a uma postura mais aberta ao diálogo ecumênico e inter-religioso, avançaram para um comprometimento sócio-político, as igrejas pentecostais e neopentecostais aprofundaram estas tendências. Deve-se dizer, porém, que no caso de igrejas neopentecostais, como p. ex., o caso da Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (IURD) há tendências marcadamente sincréticas com a umbanda (religiosidade brasileira de matriz africana) em seus rituais e símbolos, apesar do discurso fortemente exclusivista.¹⁰

2. Aspectos da trajetória história da pregação na América Latina

Falar sobre a pregação no contexto da América Latina significa levar em consideração quatro grandes correntes denominacionais: a Igreja Católica Apostólica Romana; as igrejas protestantes históricas; as igrejas pentecostais e as igrejas neopentecostais, todas permeadas mais ou menos pelo fenômeno do sincretismo e hibridismo religioso, ou a chamada mobilidade religiosa, visto no ponto acima. Todas as correntes influenciaram e influenciam a pregação de cada uma das correntes isoladamente, mesmo que pela via da reação contrária ou oposição. Hahn, em sua história sobre o culto protestante no Brasil, mostra que tanto a Igreja Católica, como as religiões e religiosidades indígena e africana tiveram grande influência na construção da identidade do protestantismo neste contexto.¹¹

Um aspecto será comum a todas as denominações. Em todas elas a pregação se caracteriza por uma adaptação da prédica do norte, da Europa e dos Estados Unidos especialmente, com acento na conversão individual de almas, principalmente de pessoas membros da catolicismo latino-americano, em verdadeiras campanhas proleletistas através do púlpito.

“De manera general, la predicación en las iglesias evangélicas latino-americanas há sido deudora del sermón evangelístico de las experiencias de avivamientos de los dos siglos anteriores. Los pilares de esta predicación han sido la conversión y la santificación. Se destaca en esta corriente el énfasis en los sentimientos y las emociones como vía al arrepentimiento y el renacimiento en Cristo. Lo importante es experimentar la gracia divina que lleva a la total transformación de la vida.”¹²

Inclusive os estudos de homilética foram traduzidos do norte. Moraes constata em meados da década de 1970 a ausência de bibliografia de homilética original em português, no Brasil.¹³ O

⁹ Magali do Nascimento Cunha, Religião na esfera pública. A tríade mídia, mercado e política e a reconstrução da imagem dos evangélicos brasileiros na contemporaneidade, in: Religião e sociedade. Desafios contemporâneos, Org. Iuri Reblin and Rudolf von Sinner, São Leopoldo 2012, 174s.

¹⁰ Cf. Bartz/Bobsin/Sinner (nota 2), 249.

¹¹ Carl Joseph Hahn, História do culto protestante no Brasil, São Paulo 1989, 223ss., 291ss.

¹² López Rubio (Org.), Y el Verbo se hizo carne (nota 1), 9.

¹³ Cf. Jilton Moraes, Ensino da homilética no Brasil, in: Simpósio, São Paulo, 11/51 (2014) 38–44.

material utilizado nos seminários era material traduzido, na maioria proveniente da América do Norte. Ou seja, o modelo de pregação adotado em grande parte no contexto protestante latino-americano foi o modelo clássico de pregação das igrejas protestantes do norte. Trata-se em grande medida de um sermão expositivo, racional e acadêmico, fixado no conteúdo e construído através de dedicado labor exegético, hermenêutico e homilético. Ramos chama este tipo de pregação de “medieval”. “[...] se caracteriza pela preocupação minuciosa com o conteúdo dogmático, doutrinário e catequético. A pregação aqui representada pretende reproduzir, reduplicar um determinado corpo de conhecimento religioso veiculado principalmente pela via oral-verbal e literária.”¹⁴

Maraschin faz grande crítica a esta prédica importada do norte¹⁵. Segundo ele, além de ser um modelo logocêntrico, racional e clerical, este modelo não conseguiu dialogar com a cultura e os modelos de comunicação próprios da América Latina. Foi um modelo imposto com aura de sacralidade, como peça integrante do projeto de colonização do continente. Segundo o autor, este modelo tem se tornado obsoleto, algo que dificulta uma comunicação efetiva da Palavra de Deus, como *viva vox Evangelii* no contexto latino-americano.

Refletindo sobre a pregação nas igrejas protestantes históricas, eu falo de um mal-estar no púlpito. Este mal-estar tem relação, também, com o modelo homilético importado.

“Há um mal-estar em relação à prédica e ao sermão. Este mal-estar já perdura faz algum tempo. Podemos dizer que há um mal-estar na Igreja como um todo. [...] A incerteza é um dos principais sintomas do mal-estar. Como percebemos este mal-estar? A prédica da Igreja se tornou obsoleta para esta sociedade? A prédica – em sua forma e conteúdo – não comunica o que deveria comunicar. Há um esvaziamento daquelas igrejas históricas que mantêm um determinado estilo de pregação, a prédica clássica. Entendemos por prédica clássica uma forma de falar, integrada num culto, efetuada com interpretação e aplicação da Escritura, por um membro chamado da comunidade, via de regra por um pastor. A prédica, além de não comunicar, não agradar, não surte os efeitos sociais, culturais, espirituais de outrora. Não alimenta como alimentou. Não mais ajuda a responder e apontar saídas diante das crises dos novos tempos. Nem mesmo edificar comunidades esta prédica parece ter conseguido. Se pelo menos ela alimentasse a fé dos membros da igreja de forma mais vigorosa, mas nem isso parece estar acontecendo.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Luiz Carlos Ramos, A pregação na idade humana. Horizontes homiléticos para a igreja do futuro, in: Tear Online, São Leopoldo, 1/2 (2012) 139.

¹⁵ Cf. Jaci Maraschin, Da leveza e da beleza. Liturgia na pós-modernidade, São Paulo 2010, 28.

¹⁶ Júlio C. Adam, Mal-estar no púlpito: repensando teologicamente a pregação cristã na sociedade da informação, in: Estudos Teológicos, São Leopoldo, 53/1 (2013), 161.

Moraes tem refletido também sobre esta crise da pregação clássica no protestantismo histórico. No seu livro *O Clamor da Igreja*, com base em pesquisa empírica com os ouvintes da prédica clássica, Moraes aponta para um desleixo e um despreparo generalizado, elementos que configuram uma certa falta de rumo da pregação de igrejas evangélicas no Brasil.¹⁷

Na atualidade, este impasse homilético nas igrejas históricas tem se intensificado por, pelo menos dois motivos: a pregação pentecostal e carismática e pela prédica espetacular, utilizada principalmente nas igrejas neopentecostais. A prédica pentecostal e carismática é marcada pela experiência sensorial, em lugar da racionalidade protestante, com vistas à solução de problemas comuns da vida diária.¹⁸ “A prédica, como elemento racional que tem a responsabilidade de articular a inteligência da fé (fazer teológico) dá lugar a um tipo de pregação psicossomática que procura provocar efeitos físicos: lágrimas, riso, arrepios, estases, etc.”¹⁹ A prédica espetacular, amplia estas características para o âmbito das mídias e tecnologias da comunicação. Em contraposição à chamada prédica clássica, a prédica espetacular, ou prédica da idade “mídia”, como Ramos a chama, em contraposição à prédica medieval, tem sido fortemente influenciada pela cultura midiática, a sociedade do espetáculo e do entretenimento.²⁰ Se antes, na prédica clássica a preocupação era com o conteúdo, na prédica espetacular a preocupação é com a forma, deslocando a atenção do verbal-oral-literário para o imagético-visual-icônico.

“Pregadores/as que atuam nesse contexto se adaptam às expectativas da geração cibernética, que prefere narrativas imaginativas a discursos verbais abstratos; que se comporta de maneira impaciente com a lentidão no fluxo da informação e quando há demora na obtenção de respostas; que em geral, durante o sermão, não se concentra exclusivamente na pregação, mas ao mesmo tempo está a dedilhar seus iPods, celulares e tablets, em um processo de interação social que pode ou não ter a ver com o conteúdo da prédica; e que, sem maiores escrúpulos, dividirá sua fidelidade zapeando por ‘diferentes canais’ para acompanhar vários ‘programas’ religiosos (igrejas e movimentos), simultaneamente.”²¹

3. A Teologia da Libertação e a pregação no contexto latino-americano

A Teologia da Libertação influenciou as igrejas protestantes históricas, também na pregação.²² Conteúdo e forma da prédica foram, de uma ou outra maneira, influenciados por ela.

¹⁷ Cf. *Jilton Moraes*, *O clamor da Igreja*. Em busca da excelência no púlpito, São Paulo 2012.

¹⁸ Cf. *Elisabeth Salazar-Senzana*, *Predicación y pentecostalismo*, in: *Y el Verbo se hizo carne* (nota 1), 131–142.

¹⁹ *Luiz Carlos Ramos*, *A pregação na Idade Mídia*. Os desafios da sociedade do espetáculo para a prática homilética contemporânea, São Bernardo do Campo 2012, 78.

²⁰ Sobre o discurso na Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus, ver *Leonildo Silveira Campos*, *Teatro, templo e mercado*. Organização e marketing de um empreendimento neopentecostal, Petrópolis/São Paulo/São Bernardo 2019, 297ss.

²¹ *Ramos* (nota 19), 140.

²² Cf. *ibid.*, 70ss.

“Otra tendencia em el continente apunta hacia la precicación encarnada y profética, el la línea da la predicación social em los Estados Unidos, la cual tuvo una expresión muy peculiar en la predicación afroamericana que tiene a Martin Luther King Jr. como su más alto expoente. La predicación de monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, el El Salvador, se há convertido em paradigma de predicación encarnada. En sus mensajes, moneñor Romero definía dos momentos: la aplicación de la Palabra de Dios a la realidade eclesial y a la realidade política, económica y social del país.”²³

Uma das grandes diferenças para a pregação será de ordem hermenêutica, primeiramente. A mudança hermenêutica provocou uma mudança homilética. Em vez de partir do texto bíblico, parte-se da realidade. “No que toca ao encaminhamento da prédica, a caminhada da teologia da libertação reforça a necessidade de partir da realidade. [...] parte-se de um determinado fato ou situação vivido pela comunidade; este é analisado e visto à luz de um texto bíblico que, por sua vez, leva a comunidade a agir, de acordo com a vontade de Deus, em relação ao fato do qual se partiu.”²⁴

A própria Teologia da Libertação critica a maneira clássica através da qual a Igreja dá acesso à Bíblia, como se a Igreja e a Teologia fossem detentoras da autoridade para a interpretação e pregação da Palavra. O povo, a comunidade, passam a ser vistos como protagonistas da pregação da Palavra. O principal instrumento da Teologia da Libertação, neste aspecto, será a Leitura Popular da Bíblia, uma forma autêntica de leitura, interpretação e pregação da Palavra a partir da realidade de exclusão e sofrimento do povo, para dentro desta mesma realidade, como forma de transformação sócio-política e cultural. “O nosso povo, quando confrontado com a Bíblia e com os resultados da exegese moderna, faz perguntas, apresenta dificuldades e toma atitudes.”²⁵ O método da leitura popular da Bíblia não teve impacto sobre o púlpito das igrejas protestantes históricas e nem mesmo foi tomado como uma forma nova e contextual de pregação.

Na Igreja Católica e em alguns setores das igrejas protestantes, surgem com a Teologia da Libertação não só novas maneiras de pregar, mas uma nova maneira de ser igreja. Dentro desta nova maneira, o próprio púlpito e a figura do pregador como detentor do discurso hierárquico e institucional é visto com suspeita. “A hegemonia do sermão é sinal de uma Igreja ainda vertical, autoritária, massiva, impessoal.”²⁶ Em contrapartida, “a busca por novas formas de homilia coincide com a busca de uma igreja horizontal, democrática, personalizada.”²⁷

²³ *López Rubio* (Org.), *Y el Verbo se hizo carne* (nota 1), 9.

²⁴ *Edson E. Streck*, *A prédica ao longo da história da Igreja*, in: *Estudos Teológicos*, São Leopoldo, 33/2 (1993), 178.

²⁵ *Carlos Mesters*, *Por trás das palavras*. Um estudo sobre a porta de entrada no mundo da Bíblia, Petrópolis 51984, 39.

²⁶ *Guimarães apud Ramos* (nota 19), 75.

²⁷ *Castro apud Ramos* (nota 19), 75s.

Impulsionados pela Teologia da Libertação, surgiu na igreja evangélica de confissão luterana um auxílio homilético, o Proclamar Libertação. Esta iniciativa na área da homilética existe há mais três décadas, como uma valiosa ferramenta de subsídio para pregadores e pregadoras em sua incumbência de anunciar o Evangelho de forma comprometida com o contexto sócio-político. O auxílio homilético Proclamar Libertação oferece, basicamente, informações exegéticas sobre textos bíblicos, meditações com vistas à prédica e auxílios litúrgicos para as celebrações.

“A ideia de uma série própria de auxílios homiléticos nasceu em 1975, por iniciativa de um grupo de professores e pastores da IECLB. [...] Viviam-se então os duros anos do regime militar, com sua política de repressão e violação dos direitos humanos, de censura à liberdade de informação e expressão, de perseguições e prisões arbitrárias, de salas de tortura e desaparecimentos misteriosos de pessoas. Cresciam nesse meio as vozes que clamavam por uma igreja autóctone, capaz de denunciar os abusos que vinham sendo praticados e de expressar, a partir do evangelho, seu compromisso com uma sociedade democrática e com a transformação social, econômica e política do país. Proclamar Libertação nasce nesse contexto e é parte desse movimento que se verifica dentro da Igreja. Boa parte dos pastores dessa época ainda dominava a língua alemã e buscava subsídios para as suas pregações em material homilético vindo da Alemanha. Mas cada vez mais essa solução era tida como insatisfatória, na verdade, como sinal de alienação teológica e infidelidade ao evangelho, em sua busca por encarnar-se na condição real das pessoas. Como sugere o título que a série veio a adquirir, Proclamar Libertação se propunha a oferecer, além de informação exegética sólida e meditação contextualizada, também reflexões de natureza política e social, para que pregadores e pregadoras pudessem testemunhar o evangelho de maneira profética, em meio ao contexto de repressão e censura em que se vivia.”²⁸

A Teologia da Libertação em consonância com a experiência pentecostal pode iluminar, uma pregação a partir de um Deus vivo e dinâmico, implicado com o contexto de contradições, sofrimento e conflito, ainda hoje.

“Fala de Deus envolve os problemas e as promessas que perfazem a vida das pessoas. [...] Um Deus teológico, dogmático, estático emudece o púlpito. Falamos de um Deus para ser entendido, e as pessoas buscam um Deus para ser experimentado, Deus Espírito Santo. O Deus que fala e que fala plenamente em Jesus Cristo é um Deus que se articula, se move, se comunica. É um Deus dinâmico, vivo, entrelaçado na vida e nos dramas da sua criação.

²⁸ *Verner Hoefelmann*, Proclamar Libertação: retratos de uma busca por uma proclamação contextualizada do evangelho, in: *Religião e sociedade*, ed. Reblin and Sinner (nota 2), 148.

A pessoa de Jesus, conteúdo e forma, atitudes e formas de articulação deveriam ser recuperadas em nossos sermões. Assim também o tema do Reino de Deus, que foi um dos temas centrais da prédica sinagoga e a grande novidade do Evangelho, deveria, sim, continuar sendo tema da prédica evangélica.”²⁹

4. Pregar em tempos de transição: desafios

A partir da reflexão acima apresentada, percebe-se que transição tem sido uma constante no desenvolvimento religioso e cultural da América Latina. Não seria diferente também no caso da pregação cristã. Frente a um contexto em permanente transição, a resposta homilética foi, muitas vezes, adotar modelos oriundos de outros contextos, principalmente do norte, como forma de proteção e enfrentamento da própria transição cultural e religiosa pulsante e permanente. Esta postural, porém, dificultou um labor homilético em diálogo com o próprio contexto e sua transitoriedade. A Teologia da Libertação mostrou-se como um movimento que conseguiu, em certa medida, encontrar caminhos de uma pregação que leva o contexto a sério.

O propósito da pregação cristã no contexto da América Latina com suas mazelas sociais e culturais, parece ser questão chave. Para que pregar o Evangelho neste contexto? A Teologia da Libertação oferece uma boa resposta: pregar como forma de transformar a realidade de vulnerabilidade a que a maioria do povo está sujeitado.³⁰ Diante dos imensos desafios de toda ordem neste contexto, me parece que um olhar para o lado humano implicado na pregação – o ouvinte, a pessoa que prega, a realidade para dentro da qual se prega, as diferentes vozes e experiências cristãs e religiosas, como, p. ex. o pentecostalismo³¹ e, inclusive, o sincretismo e o hibridismo tão presentes na cultura latino-americana, o zelo exegetico, hermenêutico e homilético na pregação, são aspectos que podem nos ajudar a reinventar a pregação, uma pregação brasileira e latino-americana.

Assim como Ramos fala de uma prédica na idade média, racional, com ênfase no conteúdo dogmático e teológico; de uma prédica na idade média, emocional, com ênfase na forma e nos recursos midiáticos do espetáculo e do entretenimento; ele fala também da prédica na idade humana, justamente como uma forma de combinar o melhor de dois mundos e propiciar uma prédica que contribua profeticamente para a construção de espaços de vida, de resistência, de dignidade humana e de esperança.

²⁹ *Adam* (nota 16), 168s.

³⁰ Cf. *Júlio C. Adam*, *Pregando vulnerabilidade. A Teologia da Libertação, a Ética do Cuidado e a pregação no contexto brasileiro e latino-americano*, in: *Estudos Teológicos*, São Leopoldo, 54/2 (2014) 350-362; *Francisco Rodés*, *El púlpito y la ética*, in: *López Rubio* (ed.), *Y el Verbo se hizo carne* (nota 1), 27-40.

³¹ Cf. *Salazar-Senzana* (nota 18), 131-142.

“A homilética da idade humana não é mais uma especialização, mas pressupõe uma epistemologia relacional, interdisciplinar, multimídia e interativa. No que diz respeito à memória, somos homiletas-cientistas que perscrutam crítica e criteriosamente a arqueologia da fé; quanto à realidade presente, somos homiletas-profetas que ousam contestar e resistir, inconformados e insubmissos ao sistema hegemônico; e quanto ao futuro, somos homiletas-poetas que esperam contra toda esperança (cf. Rom 4.18) e que sonham “o que vai ser real” (da canção “Coração Civil”, de Milton Nascimento).”³²

Refletindo sobre a pregação e a vulnerabilidade³³, I defendo a necessidade de uma prédica assumidamente política para a América Latina, como forma de resgate da vida.

“Pregar na vulnerabilidade no contexto latino-americano significa reconhecer a necessidade de uma prédica política. Não há pregação que não seja política, como diz Ione Buyst: ‘Nenhuma celebração litúrgica é ‘neutra’ politicamente falando: sempre traz em seu bojo uma proposta para a vida em sociedade e, numa sociedade rachada entre ricos e pobres, sempre fará opção para apoiar um dos lados’. A pregação precisa, portanto, ser assumidamente política, optando pela causa da vulnerabilidade. A pregação política nomeia a realidade negligenciada, esquecida e marginalizada, torna visível os invisibilizados e ausentes, como todos os desafios e riscos que isso implica. Uma pregação assumidamente política torna presente aquelas pessoas ausentes. ‘É uma tarefa paradoxal porque implica tornar presentes, na estrutura política, aqueles e aquelas que hoje são excluídos e promover, nessa estrutura e através dela, valores que hoje são esquecidos ou reprimidos nela’ (Stalsett). A pregação tem essa força suave e discreta de nomear os vulneráveis. A partir dela, a pregação pode desencadear e articular a criação de espaços de reflexão e luta para além do púlpito. A pregação política é também uma pregação utópica, carregada de esperança e cura. Aponta para a ressurreição e para o Reino de justiça, paz e dignidade.”³⁴

Na América Latina é, portanto, tempo de encarar a transição e articular uma homilética encarnada na vida, baseada numa insistente teologia encarnatória e inculturada. Na transição que permanentemente nos encontramos, o desafio é engendrar uma prédica que creia menos nas ideias teológicas fechadas e nos modelos homilético prontos, importados sobretudo do norte, e que creia mais no que acontece, a realidade daquilo que Deus fez e faz em um contexto de transição. O Evangelho não é uma teologia, em primeiro lugar. O Evangelho é uma voz, Palavra de Deus, criando e recriando o mundo, em meio a transição na América Latina.

³² Ramos (nota 14), 146.

³³ Tema da Conferência da Societas Homiletica, em Madurai/Índia, em 2014.

³⁴ Adam (nota 30), 357.

Just Preaching ... in Times of Transition

South African Perspectives¹

Johan Cilliers

Abstract

In this paper, a brief overview is given of two research projects that were done in South Africa during 1987 (a particularly difficult time under apartheid), and 1994 (the year that the first democratic elections took place), respectively. Some of the findings are discussed under the keywords: silence, transition, reservation, new vision. Reference is made to a historic sermon preached by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town only three days before the first democratic elections were held in South Africa on the 27th of April, 1994. The paper concludes with a reflection on an artwork by the South African artist, Willie Bester.

1. Just Preaching?

The well-known American homiletician, Fred Craddock, who has been called the father of inductive preaching,² tells the story of a preacher who, in familiar tradition, stood at the front door of the church building after the service, shaking the parishioners' hands as they were leaving the building. As per custom, many parishioners uttered some trivial comments about the sermon, e.g. "Good sermon, reverend!"; "Thank you for your moving words"; etc. Then one particular man, looking distraught, took the preacher's hands and said in a stern voice: "This changes everything."

The preacher was taken aback, not knowing what to think of this comment. "What do you mean?" he asked. The man replied:

"What you said in the sermon ... If it's true what you said, it changes everything ... What I mean is that, well, none of us here can just go home and do what we thought we were going to do this afternoon. We're not here just for that ... for the lawn mowing or the 4:00 football game. Our world is not right ... Preacher, *you're right*. We are called to put in

¹ Abbreviated version of a paper delivered at the International Summer School held at the Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany during 10–13 June 2015 on the theme: Religion, Law, and Justice. In collaboration with the University of the Western Cape, The University of Stellenbosch, and the University of Kwazulu-Natal.

² Inductive preaching is seen as the forerunner to the so-called "New Homiletics". For a good overview of the "New Homiletics", see *Charles Campbell*, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology*, Grand Rapids 1997, 134–144; 156ff.; also *David Reid/Stephen Bullock/Jeffrey Flier*, *Preaching as the Creation of an Experience: The Not-So-Rational Revolution of the New Homiletic*, in: *The Journal of Communication and Religion* 1995/Vol. 18, 1, 1–9.

place here and now God's reign and God's care for the planet and for every person.

Everything has changed."

The preacher was shook up by this utterance, and blurted out without realizing what he was saying: "Now Jim, don't get so worked up. I was *just preaching*."³

Just preaching. On a certain level, many sermons could indeed be described in this manner: a minister going through the motions of a (sometimes tedious) ecclesial ritual, often without expecting much in terms of an (ethical) outcome. In particular, not expecting any meaningful action or ground-breaking impulse towards the upholding or restoration of societal justice in and through this act of just preaching. Just preaching can in fact be thoroughly without justice, completely justice-less.

But what do we then mean by "just preaching" or "preaching justice"? Obviously there are many ways to describe this. For the sake of this paper, I restrict myself to three keywords, used by Walter Brueggemann, when he talks about the role of the Old Testament prophets in their passion for justice, namely; *judgement*, *pathos*, and *new beginnings*. Brueggemann uses these terms against the backdrop of the experience of exile in Israel, a state of transition in which the plight of the marginalized in Israel was often only articulated by the prophets, while issues like displacement and loss were not on the horizon of those in power. This experience of liminality, of being in-between, asked for a specific form of prophecy, namely one

"[...] that witness to the terrific loss that comes on the community, what in prophetic parlance is *judgment*, but judgment communicated with more sadness than rage [...] that testify to the *pathos* of God, to the pathologies of human community that contribute directly to God's own pain, a pain that reaches an extremity on the cross" [...] that find around the edges of failure *new beginnings*, new social possibilities that are given here and there in the midst of the deathliness as the prophets watch for and discern signs of newness."⁴

2. Silence ...

This witness of judgement, pathos, and new beginnings stands in stark contrast to the syndrome of less-than-just preaching referred to above. A prime example of the latter can also be found

³ Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, ed. Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, St. Louis 2001, 52–53.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Ancient Utterance and Contemporary Hearing, Just Preaching. Prophetic Voices for Economic Justice*, ed. André Resner, Jr., St. Louis, Missouri 2003, 74. Of course, liminality as such is also not a new concept. It had already been coined in 1909 by Arnold van Gennep, when he used the term *limen* (threshold, outlines, margins) to describe human rituals marking the passage from one life cycle to the other. Since then several other authors have made use of it, especially Victor Turner, who distinguishes between the phases of separation, liminality, and aggregation. He also made use of the idea of "pilgrimage" – which is essentially anti-structure and anti-status quo – but ultimately ends up with the formation of a new community ("communitas"), which can in turn become a new structure that eventually might need to be deconstructed. *Arnold van Gennep, Les rites de passage*, Paris 1909; *Victor Turner/Edith Turner, Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, New York 1978, 64.

in certain periods of South African history and within certain sectors of the South African context. I was part of a South African based Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) project, entitled: *An investigation into tendencies in South African religious broadcasts of the SABC and the hermeneutical and homiletical principles behind these broadcasts* (1987) that did extensive empirical research on sermons being broadcast during 1987. One of the findings was that a large part of the church – at least those that were in a position to broadcast their sermons – was silent during the time of apartheid. *Silence is a distinct form of unjust preaching*. It either expresses fear for the status quo, or acceptance thereof. It stabilizes and legitimizes the powers that be. It presupposes a certain ethical stance, which says: the status quo is good, or at least bearable – even if it is in reality inundated by injustices of all sorts.

The details of this period need not be repeated here; suffice to say that the country was balanced on a knife-edge, with a full scale civil war and unimaginable bloodshed a real possibility.⁵ The period from 1960 to the early 1990's was, on the one hand, characterized by post-war prosperity among a large part of the white population, and, on the other hand, by a growing relational problem and alienation among the various population groups. In this respect, the events at Sharpeville (1960) formed a type of watershed, and focused the world's attention on South Africa, with increasing foreign isolation, sanctions, and internal unrest and violence. South Africa's subsequent withdrawal from the Commonwealth (May 1961) caused its greatest economic crisis since the depression of 1930 to 1932. A combination of political, economic and social factors escalated into another watershed moment for South Africa, with the youth taking to the streets in the Soweto-uprising of 1976, resulting in a governmental clamp-down, called the "state of emergency." During this state of emergency, there were numerous violations of human rights, perpetuation of economic and social injustices, illegal detentions, etc.

So, how did preachers respond to this context of *structural injustice*? The research referred to above indicated that the religion that was then offered to ordinary, mainly Afrikaans-speaking people was almost always *imperative* in nature, but not as an appeal that affects daily and concrete reality. Rather, it was a type of alien-to-daily-life, non-existential appeal on the grounds of pietistic potential. The programmes' *contents* said virtually nothing about the issues that, for instance, received attention in the daily press. This interdisciplinary research, conducted in conjunction with the Departments of Sociology and Journalism at the University of Stellenbosch, found that *not one* of the ten most commented on issues of the day was reflected in the sermons that were broadcast.⁶

⁵ For an extensive discussion, cf. C.F.J. Müller (ed.), *Vyfhonderd jaar Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis*, Kaapstad 1980, 510–520.

⁶ Cf. B.A. Müller, *An investigation into tendencies in South African religious broadcasts of the SABC and the hermeneutical and homiletical principles behind these broadcasts*, Stellenbosch 1987), 44–46. Allan Boesak, a well-known South African preacher articulates his aversion of pietistic traditions and preaching in the church in no unclear terms, stating that "this kind of theology is often the handmaid of authoritarian structures that preserve the status quo within the church, with the result that the church is being held back to an era that has irrevocable passed." For Boesak, the gospel – and preaching – is about *this* world, not an "other-worldly theology". *Allan Boesak, The Finger of God, Sermons on Faith and Responsibility*. Translated from Afrikaans by Peter

Socio-political issues like the following, received no, or very little attention in a total of 165 sermons and meditations preached on television and radio between April and November 1987:⁷

- Violence, including murder and crime: 0,06%
- Human Rights: 0,03%
- Detention and political trials: 0%
- Freedom of press: 0%
- Military violence, Governmental acts: 0%
- The Right to protest, protest actions: 0%
- Group Areas Act 0%
- Discrimination, e.g. in education, health services, wages, etc.: 0%
- Poverty, hunger, housing: 1,38%
- Joblessness: 0,03%
- Sexuality: 1%
- Drugs, alcoholism: 0,06%
- Ecological issues: 0%

This is truly remarkable; even more so, sad.⁸ Nothing to be said over the Group Areas Act in 1987, and the forceful removal of millions of people? Not a single word about discrimination? Not one sermon on poverty and hunger? Complete silence on justice? Simply... just preaching?⁹

The intensified political turmoil of the late eighties and early nineties eventually led to the release of Nelson Mandela, resulting in the first democratic general elections on 27 April 1994, which were described by many as “nothing short of a miracle.” Time and space constraints again do not allow me to describe the momentous events leading up to this breakthrough in detail.¹⁰ It

Randall, Johannesburg 1979, 4–5.

⁷ *Müller* (note 6), 10, 29.

⁸ Allan Boesak's words ring true: “[...] the silence that some want the church to maintain on these issues means that they are affirming the status quo.” *Boesak* (note 6), 11.

⁹ Of course, preachers like Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, Beyers Naude and others were very vocal in their resistance to exactly these issues. Their voices were however not heard and in fact not allowed to be heard on the official broadcasting programmes, under strict control of the then National Party Government.

¹⁰ For an overview of this period, cf. *Herman Gilliomee/Bernard Mbenga* (Eds.), *New History of South Africa*, Kaapstad 2007, 330ff. Cf. also *Johan Cilliers*, *Prophetic preaching in South Africa: exploring some spaces of tension*, in: *Dutch Reformed Theological Journal*; NGTT .Volume 54 (1&2), 2013, 1–15.

was indeed a time of liminality, of transition, of being in-between the old and the new, a time filled with potential, but also the pitfalls of wrong decisions being made, and disastrous routes being taken.¹¹

The question of importance here is: How did preachers respond to the dawn of the “new South Africa” with its concomitant promises of “justice for all”? *If they were silent about injustice in the past, how would they speak about justice in the present?* Could any change in fact be detected in preaching in South Africa during this transition from socially structured injustice to socially structured justice?

3. Transition ...

I had the privilege of again being part of a Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) project, working with a group of content analysts at the Faculty of Theology, The University of Stellenbosch that posed exactly these abovementioned questions during the year of our first democratic elections (1994). This project, again done as interdisciplinary research, conducted in conjunction with the Departments of Sociology and Journalism at the University of Stellenbosch, was entitled: *Preaching in contexts of change. An investigation into preaching on Radio South Africa, Afrikaans Stereo and Radio Pulpit before and after the general elections of 1994*. The selection of sermons was made from worship services being broadcast on the two Sundays before the election (27 April 1994) on Afrikaans Stereo, Radio South Africa and Radio Pulpit. This was followed by analyses of sermons broadcast one month and again three months after the election. In terms of content, we were especially interested in how people *thought and indeed spoke literally about the situation of change*.

The project did not claim that the selection was representative of all sermons during this time, merely that particular noteworthy trends could be identified. These trends were described by following literal pronouncements of preachers as closely as possible. Here are some of the findings:

3.1 Silence ... again.

There were a surprising number of sermons that completely circumvented the circumstances at the time – much like the sermons of 1987. In these sermons references were only made to general human problems like the pressure of competitiveness, tensions between parents and children etc. Biblical directives were given for various life problems, specific to the more affluent part of society, those who own swimming pools, sports cars and barbeque rooms! Apparently the sermons were

¹¹ Essentially liminality implies an ambiguous phase between two situations or statuses. Often this in-between space or liminal displacement is filled with potential and/or danger. It breathes “a sense of displacement, that sense of being in no man’s land, where the landscape appears completely different, there is no discernible road map, and where the journeyer is jolted out of normalcy”. *Arnie Franks/John Meteyard*, Liminality: The Transforming Grace of In-between Places, in: *The Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (2007), 215–222. Characteristically the liminal phase is constituted by the convergence or interweaving of qualities of both categories between which it is sandwiched: “Since the liminal is neither fully one type of space (category) nor the other, it will take on aspects of both; it is this indeterminacy of quality and therefore predictability that creates the aspect of danger”. *Seth Daniel Kunin*, *God’s Place in the World. Sacred Space and Sacred Place in Judaism*, London/New York 1998, 30.

directed at people who were living spiritually isolated from what was happening in the country. In one sermon the preacher actually said: “As long as we enjoy life, everything is fine” – apparently a life without problems like unemployment, poverty etc. ...

The imperative in these kinds of sermons seems to be entirely in terms of the “spiritual” and personal aspects of life, admonishing people to come to a new spiritual approach. Such a changed spiritual approach could of course have had implications for the situation in the country – but the sermons did not address these implications in any way. It seems that the situation in the country was not really seen as a problem and definitely not as an emergency – the problems in life are viewed on a spiritual level for which the sermons offered Christ as the patent solution. Not a single word is uttered on issues like social and economic justice, and not a single confession of guilt in view of the past is heard.

The sphere in which these sermons operate remains the inner state of the religious hearer; the hermeneutical space remains reduced to the pious inner circle of the *homo religiosus*. The same pious material is used again and again, and ultimately, most of these sermons end up with “an invitation to invite Jesus into your lives.” This stereotypical pious encircling of biblical texts bypasses the reality outside the circle, in this case the reality of South Africa in a time of transition. The hearers find themselves in uncertain times, but they are not called to make decisions and act *within* this situation; they are rather *taken out* of this to a pious sphere where they must (for how many times still?) make a decision for God and to “invite Jesus into their lives.”¹²

3.2 In-between the Old and the New ...

The majority of the sermons were, however, delivered with the clear understanding that the church and society were experiencing a historically significant moment, were in fact standing at crossroads, in the in-between space of the “old” and the “new” South Africa. Many of the sermons presume that *ambivalent feelings* regarding this transition prevail in their audiences: from hopeful anticipation of a new dawn for which many sacrificed their lives to tension and uncertainty about the future; from anxiety about the demonic spiral of violence, to hope for a spiral of love and reconciliation. There is a focus on two worlds that interplay: the world in which God ultimately triumphs over demons, and the world of confusion and struggle in which God and Satan clash. A closer reading revealed that this corpus of sermons could be divided into three categories:

¹² Cf. *Johan Cilliers*, Disabling God in an able world? Analysis of a South African sermon, in: Ned Geref Teologiese Tydskrif (NGTT) 2012; 53 (1): 1–12.

3.2.1 Euphoria ...

A number of sermons consider the new situation with optimism, almost euphorically. In these sermons the preacher tries to articulate the political responsibility of believers in the historically tense situation. In some sermons one can find almost the entire rhetoric of election education, sprinkled with a dose of religiosity: the moral obligation to cast your vote, to do so in secret before God, to act as responsible citizen, etc. A simplified exemplary application between Biblical texts and current situations, so popular in nationalist preaching, is also used here to legitimize the political process and ideals.¹³ The foci of many biblical texts are uncritically brought to bear on the national need for reconciliation and unity.

In the process, many theological shifts take place. The new humanness that Christ has wrought in the church as his body is equalized with the achievement of national unity. Using the notion of *imitatio Christi*, one sermon even incites the congregation to protest against injustice and division in the party-political arena. With the help of biblical analogies, new, albeit hidden, God-with-us images become visible again: God becomes the Liberator who makes our slogans come true; God becomes a Candidate in the election and fights for human dignity, etc.¹⁴ In these sermons church and society slot into one another uncritically as the new state becomes representative of the new humanness in Christ – the antithesis disappears completely.

In these sermons there is a tendency to spout beautiful theological truths about God, but one could ask whether the effect is not that God is manipulated into being a principle of piety or a program for freedom of democracy etc. In most of these sermons a religious person that has the potential to live, to choose, to reign in the right way is presupposed. These religious persons' – or voters' – commitment to or utilization of the historical situation of the election makes God's work effective. *Here we find no trace of confession of guilt for the wrong-doings of the past at all. The road to the new "justice for all" does not go via confession of guilt for the injustices of the past, but is mediated through a type of conversion programme.* This conversion is not based on a fundamental consciousness of guilt in terms of the "old regime"; nor admittance of any involvement with or responsibility for it. The future is left in the hands of believers who can live differently from what they did in the past, without admitting *how* they lived in the past.

3.2.2 Reservations ...

The largest number of sermons fall into an interesting middle group in which the situation is seen, at the surface, as "the most important transition in 300 years," a transition that can bring "new

¹³ Cf. idem, *God for Us? An Analysis and Assessment of Dutch Reformed Preaching during the Apartheid Years*, Stellenbosch 2006, 15–40.

¹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 77–83.

hope and new life for all.” Superficially everything seems very positive and the church has the important job of generating courage, hope, and a vision for the future. The transition is seemingly an opportunity for new relationships, values, and responsible actions that can contribute to a new society in which hope for the future is born. But with a closer reading the description of a situation “that could include good things” reveals an undertone of fear of things that could go wrong. Therefore worry, uncertainty, misery surrounds us, and even more: “something big has been lost.” Alongside the apparent positive spirit lies an undertone of melancholy, lurks the possibility of chaos and violence that lead to the “darkest mood” of hopelessness. The church is actually in a crisis situation, in a raging rapid that can lead to disaster. Therefore the church must search for God’s will in order to live in a difficult situation, filled with (apocalyptic) threats, and especially how to still be witnesses for Christ in an undesirable situation.

On deeper levels, these sermons express serious reservations about the “new South Africa.” By implication, they consider the new dispensation as a forced situation that has overwhelmed believers much like fate, to which they need to adapt and of which they need to make the best. But for this they have the necessary religious resources; here, also, listeners can cross the historic watershed without confession of guilt as the basis for real renewal and change. The call to conversion and witness is mostly a call to a type of domesticated and civilized piety, to general religiosity and morality. Believers are piously called upon to simply pray and trust in the Lord to ensure the future.

It is interesting to note the manner in which the biblical texts are utilized to describe the contemporary situation. It is implied that the church today, as in the time of these texts, is living in an apocalyptic dispensation; that the text is also a letter to us as we are “living in the last days,” a life of possible persecution by strange religions and even a heathen government! Here, too, Biblical situations are seen as a mirror of our circumstances through analogy. Through this method of analogy and insinuation the sermons create the space for underlying negative and morose feelings that many congregants surely did experience during the time of transition. It is, however, well hidden behind a positive overtone that only seems to encourage listeners to try and adapt to the new situation.

One could wonder whether such *indirect insinuation* in the use of Scripture is not much more dangerous than the overt exemplary method described above. This method reveals a kind of *homiletic sub consciousness* that can lie hidden in the sermons, in the hearts of preachers and congregants, and act as a filter in the listening process. Such preaching in fact does not lead to transformative thinking and behavior or to institutions preparing themselves for a new situation, but to a regressive blockage – because existing negative feelings find a religious handhold in them.

It justifies a kind of distrust towards the new situation instead of a positive acceptance of responsibility, of ownership.

In these sermons, certain ambivalences are visible in their views of God and society. The indicative of God's salvation is underlined. Christ is offered as the only solution. But this is done to such an extent that one can almost say the sermons dump the entire responsibility for changing the society on God in a deterministic sense. Believers must simply search for God's will and then trust in God. The rhetoric of conditional sentences is used extensively: the church will survive if it is obedient; the future is beautiful if people make the right choices, etc. The new society in these sermons is basically dangerous; ugly things can happen. Therefore the sermons survey the situation with suspicion and even distrust, or at least with reservation.

3.2.3 A new vision for the future ...

A number of sermons demonstrate a strong awareness of the potential of the historic moment and want to facilitate and empower listeners to a new vision for the future. Through the text of the sermon the social reality is read from God's surprising perspective. This perspective generates hope for an alternative situation. The ambivalent situation is sketched as reality, of forces at play that bring both hope and uncertainty. Especially in this ambivalent situation, the promise and indicative of the text is heard, the cosmic victory of God in Christ over evil is proclaimed in the sermon and celebrated in the liturgy. Fate and the overwhelming forces of evil are actually – according to these sermons - illusions. God has already triumphed and through this victory we dream of God's new alternative of peace, reconciliation and justice. This dream invites the congregation to actively and responsibly help to build a new societal culture, new values, and a new public ethos in which we strive for human dignity, justice, and reconciliation. Then not only political dreams come true, but God's comprehensive dream becomes a reality. Most of the sermons in this group simply strive to articulate this new faith, vision and hope.

The sermons in this group have a robust God-image: in God's mercy, God breaks open the apparently closed reality of anxiety, inability, and vulnerability of believers. It is true that believers live in a situation in which both God and evil forces operate, and in which hope and trust, but also danger, frustration, and uncertainty are generated. But God intervenes in our life of *cul de sacs*, and the church becomes a space, created by God, in which the old patterns of injustice are replaced by God's alternative possibilities and realities of justice. The sermons are seen as a means through which the new society could be inaugurated from the future and the congregation as a space in which this new society could be manifested.

4. Just Preaching: Judgement, Pathos, and New Beginnings

One sermon in particular from this last mentioned group caught the eye of the research team. It was moving, not only in proclaiming the vision of a new dispensation, but somehow also initiating and celebrating this dispensation. In it the congregation literally enters the new situation and leaves the old behind, filled with hope.

The preacher? Archbishop Desmond Tutu, preaching a historical sermon in St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town only three days before the first democratic elections were held in South Africa, on the 27th of April, 1994. He takes his cue from Psalm 77:14 (*You are a God that works wonders*), and speaks about "The God of surprises, the God who lets miracles unfold before our eyes."¹⁵ In this sermon, fear and reservation are substituted by joy, by amazement – Tutu starts his sermon, characteristically, with a *Wow!* and ends with a *Hey!*

Here we hear no denial, or masking of the past, like in many of the sermons referred to above, when Tutu declares:

"We are all wounded people, traumatized, all of us, by the evil of apartheid."¹⁶

We are again reminded of Walter Brueggemann's description of "just preaching" which entails "[...] that witness to the terrific loss that comes on the community, what in prophetic parlance is *judgment*, but judgment communicated with more sadness than rage." Tutu speaks openly of the wounds, trauma, and evil of the past, but his judgement is characterized by tones of sadness. Quite striking is his *inclusive language* – preaching over the radio to a wider public, probably comprised of perpetrators and victims alike of the evil of apartheid – using words and phrases like "we...all of us" throughout his whole sermon. Indeed, "it is clear that some of the most effective 'prophetic preaching' in our time by such dazzling voices as Desmond Tutu [...] has the power of indignation, but comes across as utterances of hope-filled, compassionate truth-telling largely free of rage."¹⁷ One could say that the hallmark of Desmond Tutu's preaching always was, and still is, inclusivity. In this case, his sermon proclaims *inclusive judgement*, beginning with himself.

But Tutu's sermon does not end here, does not articulate sorrowful and inclusive judgement alone. He speaks passionately of God's pathos for human beings, irrespective of who they are, or where, particularly in the South African context – God's pathos as demonstrated in the life and death of Jesus. In Tutu's own words:

¹⁵ *Desmond Tutu*, *The Rainbow People of God: the making of a peaceful revolution*, ed. John Allen, New York 1994, 261.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹⁷ *Brueggemann* (note 4), 73.

“The Cross is God’s mark of the depth of his love for us, for you, for me [...] You are very special to God. You are of infinite worth to God [...] Each one of us is of infinite worth because God loves each one of us, black and white, with his infinite, everlasting love.”¹⁸

This again links to Brueggemann’s understanding of just preaching, as acts “[...] that testify to the *pathos* of God, to the pathologies of human community that contribute directly to God’s own pain, a pain that reaches an extremity on the cross.” Throughout the sermon, Tutu emphasises the inclusivity of God’s pathos, for “[...] you and I, all of us, black and white.”¹⁹ Again, we are struck by the inclusivity of his approach; in effect, depicting the *inclusive pathos of God* against the exclusivity that characterized South African society under Apartheid for so long. Time, after time, we hear in his sermons: “All of us, Black and White together, shall overcome, nay, indeed have already overcome.”²⁰

But, also here, Tutu’s sermon does not end. He opens up new visions of hope for the future, more than that, he also calls upon his listeners, to act upon this gift of justice that has been given to South Africa, a justice that now needs concrete embodiment. He states:

“There is life after April 28. [...] We all need healing and we, the Church of God, must pour balm on the wounds inflicted by this evil system. Let us be channels of love, of peace, of justice, of reconciliation. Let us declare that we have been made for togetherness, we have been made for family, that, yes, now we are free, all of us, black and white together, we, the Rainbow People of God!”²¹

This again echoes Brueggemann’s vision of just sermons, “[...] that find around the edges of failure *new beginnings*, new social possibilities that are given here and there in the midst of the deathliness as the prophets watch for and discern signs of newness.” Tutu’s sermon invites the future into the present, by way of speaking, as the *novum* of God’s in-breaking advent. In this sermon, which could be called eschatological in nature, the (present) time is taken forward, toward the future. Or better: it is interpreted in such a manner that the future is brought backward toward the present, i.e. is discovered, as already being in the present.

The God-image in this sermon is of One that surprises, that is not fixated in any pattern, but free to unfold the future in unthought-of ways. In a masterful rhetorical manner, Tutu repeats the words “No” and “Yes” throughout his sermon, using them as codes for judgement and hope; for

¹⁸ Tutu (note 15), 261f.

¹⁹ Ibid., 261.

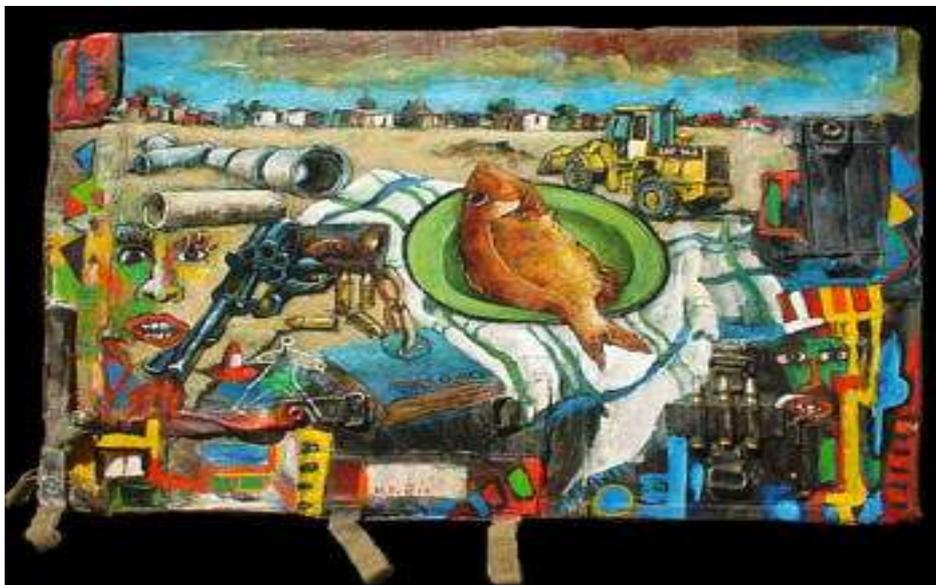
²⁰ From a sermon preached at the funeral of Steve Biko, one of the most influential and gifted black leaders during the time of apartheid; he was murdered while in police custody. *Desmond Tutu, Hope and Suffering: Sermons and Speeches*, Skotaville 1983, 15.

²¹ Tutu (note 15), 262.

facing the past (“We are all wounded people, traumatized, all of us, by the evil of apartheid.”), as well as the future (“There is life after April 28.”). For Tutu, justice is not a nebulous concept, but a reality that must and can be concretized within the community, which he describes as “We, the Church of God ... family ... all of us, black and white together, we, the Rainbow People of God!” He repeatedly asks: “Can we go on like in the past? ‘No!’” And in contrast to that: “Do we have a future? ‘Yes!’”

Tutu imagines, no, rather *inclusively re-imagines* a new society, built on the justice of God’s alternative. In the words of Patrick Miller, Tutu’s sermon is filled “with imagining a different way, with envisioning and announcing the new possibility of God’s way in the world [...]”²² This is a vision in which there is no silence about the injustices of the past, also no false euphoria, but also no reservation; rather re-imagination of an alternative where justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.²³ But all of this is done in view of inclusion, of community, of the “Rainbow People of God”.

Perhaps this hopeful vision of new beginnings could be illustrated by means of an artwork by South African artist, Willie Bester, considered to be one of South Africa’s most important resistance artists. He incorporates recycled material in his paintings, compositions, collages and sculptures. He especially comments on human rights issues and political injustice.²⁴



²² Patrick D. Miller, Jr., “The Prophet’s Sons and Daughters” Amos 7:10–17; Acts 3:17–26. Just Preaching. Prophetic Voices for Economic Justice, ed. André Resner, Jr., St. Louis, Missouri 2003, 80. It would seem that the notion of *imagination*, as being part and parcel of the prophetic tradition, runs throughout almost all descriptions of prophetic preaching, cf. the classic work by Walter Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, Philadelphia 1978, 33ff.

²³ Cf. Amos 5:24.

²⁴ Willie Bester was born in 1956 in Montagu, Western Cape, and currently lives in Kuilsriver. The media he uses are mostly everyday objects: pieces of steel, paper, etc – because he was initially too poor to buy artist’s material.

His colorful painting *Township Plight*²⁵ is full of levels of meaning. At one level, it depicts the realities of the squatter camp, the fragile housing structures, the culture of violence (the gun with bullets), the bulldozer that can demolish houses, a tin with gasoline that can ignite fires, faces reflecting fear, etc. But central to the painting is also a fish – sign of food – and also an ancient Christian symbol of peace and life. There is a cloth – does it portray homeliness and warm humanity? And there is a book. Is it the Bible? Is it in chains? The painting portrays the destructive effect, the heritage of Apartheid, but also the triumph of the human spirit, the (colorful) transcendence of the raw realities of the South African history of Apartheid.

Is this not a vision of new beginnings, in the midst of human struggle? Not unlike Desmond Tutu's sermon?

Just preaching? No, *just* preaching.

Johan Cilliers, born 1954, is Professor in Homiletics and Liturgy at Stellenbosch University, South Africa

jcilliers@sun.ac.za

²⁵ Source: www.williebester.co.za; used with permission of the artist.

Preaching as Repetition – in Times of Transition

Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen

Abstract

In this article, I present insights from an empirical study of a congregation which consists of a medley of refugees from the Middle East who have recently converted from Islam and ethnic Danes whose families have belonged to the Lutheran Church for generations.¹ The empirical material is analyzed in light of Søren Kierkegaard's category of repetition, in the sense of receiving anew, because this phenomenon appears crucial, not only to the genre of preaching but to preachers and listeners alike – especially, in times and situations of transition. I suggest that the Kierkegaardian notion of repetition may be useful as a homiletical category with regard of scholars' method, preachers' preparation and listeners' appropriation of preaching.

Introduction

Preaching to a diverse congregation composed of a mix of migrants, who are in transit geographically and religiously, and ethnic Danes, who have grown up in a culture that perceives itself as Christian, may appear to be an impossible task. However, in the congregation of the Apostles' Church in the city of Copenhagen, which has been the object of our empirical study, the presence of refugees of different ethnic and religious backgrounds appears to stimulate interaction with preaching toward a repetition of the gospel in a way that simultaneously provides the international newcomers with stable spiritual food and nudges the local congregation to hear it differently than before.

Our interviews showed that although the two groups both emphasized the need for repetition, they experienced and expressed it in different ways. The migrants who were in the process of conversion expressed a need to share the gospel with others through Bible studies, distribution of the Eucharist, musical expression and cooking for the congregation. The local Danes, on the other hand, described how the mere presence of the migrants in the life of the congregation had a

¹ The empirical study has been conducted in collaboration with Professor MSO in New Testament Exegesis, University of Copenhagen, Gitte Buch-Hansen and is part of the international research project *Reassembling Democracy. Ritual as Cultural Resource* financed by the Norwegian Research Council. For additional insights see *Gitte Buch-Hansen/Kirsten Donskov Felter/Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, Ethnographic Ecclesiology and the Challenges of Scholarly Situatedness*, in: *Open Theology*, 2015, vol. 1. Open access: www.degruyter.com/view/j/opth.2014.1.issue-1/opth-2015-0009/opth-2015-0009.xml.

transformative effect on the way they listened to preaching and related to God. The empirical study indicated that the situation of the refugees reminded the members of the state-like Lutheran church of the vulnerable pilgrimage² that is at the core of Christianity. This motif is obvious for migrants trying to find a home away from home, but often forgotten by those of us who live in a rather stable, homogenous society which can be seen as one of the world's most secularized countries,³ yet describes itself as Christian⁴.

The thesis of this article is that the Kierkegaardian category of repetition, in the sense of a receiving anew, is crucial both to the preachers who interpret the canonical texts for preaching and to listeners' appropriation of the gospel.⁵ I therefore suggest that repetition may be useful as a homiletical category with regard to scholars' homiletical method, preachers' preparation and listeners' existential appropriation of preaching.

In order to give a portrait of preaching in this composite Scandinavian context I have chosen to analyze the interaction between the congregation at the Apostles' Church and the preaching they relate to in light of the category of repetition. The choice to use repetition as a homiletical category is motivated by three aspects: 1) the role of the Gospel in the genre of preaching; 2) the preaching in the Apostles' Church seen in light of the pastor, Niels Nymann Eriksen's Ph.D. dissertation: *Kierkegaard's Category of Repetition*; and 3) our empirical studies of the congregation in the Apostles' Church.

These three aspects structure the article so that the first part includes a short introduction to the theoretical category of repetition, followed by a description of the methodological approach to the present qualitative study in light of the turn toward the 'world in front of the text' shared by biblical scholars and homileticians. In order to contextualize the interviewed refugees' encounter with the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELCD) I also sketch out a brief historical background of the ELCD. The article's middle part focuses on the theme of repetition in the preaching proclaimed in the Apostles' Church, and the final part consists of analyzed excerpts from interviews with a

² The notion of Christian existence as pilgrimage is also characteristic of the preaching heard in the Apostles' Church, eg. the sermon titled "To travel easily"/"At rejse let" on Isaiah 10,1–3 and Luke 12,32–48. Held 9th Sunday after Trin. on Aug. 16th 2014 by *Niels Nymann Eriksen*.

³ Cf. *Phil Zuckerman*, *Society without God. What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us About Contentment*, New York 2008.

⁴ Cf. the declaration for the new government of the Danish parliament of 2015 which states that "Denmark is a Christian country, and the Evangelical-Lutheran church has special status as the national church. The Government wishes to preserve this special status. It is also vital for the Government that people are free to have their own beliefs, provided these are practised with full respect for the rights of others to do the same." Accessed July 20th 2015 at: http://stm.dk/multimedia/TOGETHER_FOR_THE_FUTURE.pdf

⁵ Other recent qualitative studies of listeners to preaching confirm that the gospel is appropriated through repetition in the sense of creative interpretation and appropriation. See *John S. McClure et al.*, *Listening to Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies*, St Louis 2004, and *Marianne Gaarden*, *Prædikenen som det tredje rum*, Frederiksberg 2015. English online version: *The Third Room of Preaching*, forthcoming, Louisville 2016.

Kurdish man and an Iranian woman. Both have come to Denmark as refugees and describe their ways of repeating the Christian proclamation through musical composition, Bible studies, and distribution of the Eucharist in ways that echo the focus on authentic repetition in the preaching of Eriksen. The interviews with the people of Middle East descent is followed up by some of the ethnically Danes' description of the impact of the presence of refugees in the congregation.

1. The Kierkegaardian Category of Repetition

In this article, the category of repetition is primarily oriented towards analysis of the empirical study of refugees' encounter with the church in Denmark rather than philosophical⁶ reflections on the notion. The practice of preaching with which the congregation of the Apostles' Church interacts, however, is analyzed in light of their pastor, Niels Nymann Eriksen's theoretical reflections on the category of repetition as developed in his dissertation, *Kierkegaard's Category of Repetition: A Reconstruction*. Although Eriksen rarely quotes Kierkegaard in his preaching, the following analyses of the empirical material will show that his understanding of preaching as the word of God echoes his Kierkegaard-inspired understanding of repetition. Before we embark upon an analysis of the empirical material, however, a brief description of the Kierkegaardian analysis of repetition, in dialogue with Eriksen's interpretation, will be introduced.

The Danish word for repetition is *Gjentagelse*, which literally means "taking again." This is crucial to Kierkegaard's use of the category, as it implies the surplus of "receiving anew" rather than just performing the same act twice, as the Latin *repetere* might infer. In the work titled *Gjentagelsen*⁷ (*The Repetition*) Kierkegaard refers continuously to the book of Job.⁸ The emphasis on the book of Job underscores that the Kierkegaardian understanding of authentic repetition is intricately connected with negativity and loss. In the case of Job, as well as today's refugees who have lost their family and livelihood, the losses are very tangible and concrete. The negativity connected with the repetition of preaching is furthermore characterized by an acknowledgement of the human incapability of preaching, grasping and possessing the Word of God. Repetition, as an experience of receiving anew, can thus be seen as an active passivity in the sense that it has an impact that lies beyond the intention or capability of the doer. The human capability of repetition can, from this

⁶ For a philosophical analysis of the concept in dialogue with Kierkegaard, see Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*, Paris 1968, English translation, New York 1994, 5–11.

⁷ Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, *Gjentagelsen. Et Forsøg i den eksperimenterende Psychologi*. Published under the pseudonymous name, Constantin Constantius, Copenhagen 1843. Online access: <http://sks.dk/G/txt.xml>. English translation: Kierkegaard's Writings VI: Fear and Trembling/Repetition. A Venture in Experimental Psychology, translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton 2013.

⁸ Cf. Kierkegaard (note 7), *Gjentagelsen*, SKS 4, 66.

perspective, be seen as constituted by a divine repetition. In Kierkegaard's interpretation, the act of repetition is even at the heart of divine creation, as he states:

“If God himself had not willed repetition, the world would not have come into existence. Either he would have followed the superficial plans of hope or he would have retracted everything and preserved it in recollection. This he did not do. Therefore, the world continues, and it continues because it is a repetition. Repetition – that is actuality and the earnestness of existence.”⁹

In his interpretation of Kierkegaard, Eriksen describes authentic repetition as the phenomenon of “receiving as a gift what seemed most obviously to belong to oneself, namely one's past.”¹⁰ Eriksen distinguishes authentic repetition from its ordinary sense, claiming that mundane repetition happens all the time in everyday life because we continue to perform similar, habitual acts in a world in continuous transition. Repetition is, in this mundane sense, something that happens *within* the world, but it does not make a real difference *to* the people in this world.¹¹ Authentic repetition, on the other hand,

“does not happen to something in the world, but only to the world itself. From this, it follows that repetition is not a matter of something of the past occurring anew; rather, it is the entire past that becomes new in the moment of repetition. Repetition, therefore, according to its essence, is a moment in which nothing is changed, but everything has become new or when, in the language of the New Testament, the old has become new (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17 and Rev. 21:5).”¹²

In accordance with this understanding, authentic repetition can be seen as an event that breaks in and interrupts mundane repetition. In continuity of the claim that repetition can make the old become new Kierkegaard emphasizes that repetition is an orientation forward rather than backwards. He even describes this forward movement as characteristic of Christianity in contrast to Greek philosophy, which cherishes the category of memory and recollection. As an example, the Kierkegaardian pseudonym Constantine Constantius claims that “[r]epetition and recollection

⁹ Idem (note 7), *Repetition*, 133.

¹⁰ Niels Nymann Eriksen, [Kierkegaard's Category of Repetition: A Reconstruction](#), Berlin/New York 2000, 42.

¹¹ Ibid., 111–112.

¹² Ibid.

are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward.”¹³

In his dissertation, Eriksen shows how the forward movement of repetition differs from the backward movement of recollection not only in its orientation toward time but also in relation to the other and the question of alterity. This interpretation is of particular relevance for the contemporary homiletical turn toward other-wise listeners and their interpretation and repetition of the Gospel in the world in front of the text. Eriksen summarizes the fundamental difference between memory and repetition as a matter of other-oriented transfiguration through a relationship with the other rather than merely an exercise within the consciousness of the individual that subsumes the alterity of the other as follows: “In short, whilst ‘recollection’ is a repetition *in* consciousness whereby the other is integrated in the self, ‘repetition’ is a repetition of consciousness, the transfiguration *of* the self through the relation to the other.”¹⁴ This understanding of repetition, as a forward oriented transfiguration through the other, is crucial to the methodological approach of the present study of the refugees’ encounter with Christianity as described in the following.

2. Methodological Repetition toward the World in Front of the Text

The empirical material at the center of this article is gathered through a methodological approach that analyses the proclamation and appropriation of the gospel through an orientation toward the listeners in front of the text rather than the writers of the world behind the text. The research project of participant observation and qualitative interviews took place in collaboration between a scholar of New Testament exegesis and a homiletician, and signifies a common development within the disciplines of biblical exegesis and homiletics. The corresponding development within the two disciplines has been described as the ‘turn toward the listeners’ in the homiletical context and the turn toward ‘real readers’ (as opposed to ‘implicit readers’) within exegetical studies. This development is linked with a shared exploration of how theological scholars may let their research enter into interaction with lay interpreters, or ‘other-wise’¹⁵ dialogue partners.

Biblical scholars and homileticians alike have underscored the need not only to interpret the world behind or within the text,¹⁶ as historical and narrative criticism suggested, but also to interpret

¹³ *Kierkegaard* (note 7), *Repetition*, 132. Danish original: “Gjentagelse og Erindring er den samme Bevægelse, kun i modsat Retning; thi hvad der erindres, har været, gjentages baglænds; hvorimod den egentlige Gjentagelse erindres forlænds.” Cf. *idem*. (note 7), *Gjentagelsen*, SKS 4, 9.

¹⁴ *Eriksen* (note 10), 167.

¹⁵ Cf. *Gerald O. West* (ed.), *Reading Other-wise: Socially Engaged Biblical Scholars Reading with Their Local Communities*, Atlanta 2007; *John S. McClure*, *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics*, St. Louis 2001.

¹⁶ For reflections on preaching in relation to the different worlds of the text, see *Albrecht Grözinger*, *Homiletik*, Gütersloh 2008, 99–

the world ‘in front of the text’¹⁷. In order to study the world in front of the text, theologians have started to supplement their traditional historical and literary methods with those of ethnography in order to study how real readers and listeners interpret and interact with canonical texts. It is important to note that the contemporary turn toward readers and listeners does not imply a dismissal of hermeneutical studies of Scripture. To the contrary, exegetical studies of contemporary text reception often lead to renewed interest in and need for studying the canonical texts. As an example, qualitative interviews with people of cultural backgrounds and life experiences different from academic biblical scholars have led to a renewed focus on questions of slavery and prostitution in the biblical texts.¹⁸

Within a homiletical context, Charles Campbell has collaborated with New Testament scholar Stanley Saunders on the study of biblical texts in places that differ from traditional academic settings. Campbell and Saunders have approached the world in front of the text, not only in their research, but as part of their teaching of homiletics and exegesis by letting divinity students study the Bible in collaboration with inmates in the local prisons¹⁹ and homeless people on the streets. In their joint book, *The Word on the Street: Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context*, Campbell and Saunders describe how the methodological choice of exposing one’s studies to the practice of ‘dislocated exegesis’ does not differ from traditional exegesis in the choice of texts and methodological approach. Yet, it becomes as new because of the perspective from which the texts are approached. They describe, in summary, the impact of engaging with the world in front of the text as follows: “where we learn shapes what we learn, and where we read shapes how we read.”²⁰

Similar insights are shared by many scholars and students influenced by the ethnographic turn. As an extension of my exploration of repetition as a homiletical category, I suggest that the shared turn toward the contemporary world of other-wise interpreters *in front of the text* rather than an exclusive historical orientation toward the world *behind the text* can benefit from Kierkegaard’s reflection on genuine repetition as a forward movement in contrast to the backward movement of recollection or memory as cherished by ancient Greek philosophy.

176, and *Wilfried Engemann*, Einführung in die Homiletik, Tübingen 2011, 123–132.

¹⁷ Cf. *Paul Scott Wilson*, Marks of Faithful Preaching, in: Thomas G. Long & Leonora Tubbs Tisdale (eds.), Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy, Louisville 2008, 187; *Charles L. Campbell/Stanley P. Saunders*, The Word on the Street: Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context, Grand Rapids, MI 2004.

¹⁸ *Gitte Buch-Hansen*, Det eksegetiske kalejdoskop. Tre perspektiver på de bibelske læsninger i gudstjeneste og prædiken, in: Bibelen i gudstjenesten, edited by Gitte Buch-Hansen and Frederik Poulsen, Copenhagen 2015; *West* (note 15).

¹⁹ I am grateful to Charles Campbell and the students participating in the course ‘Powers and Principalities,’ taught in Butner Federal Prison, North Carolina in 2012 for having experienced this kind of dislocated exegesis and homiletics first-hand.

²⁰ *Campbell/Saunders* (note 17), 89.

3. The World in front of the Text: the Apostles' Church

The empirical study at the center of this article was conducted in a congregation which belongs to the majority church of Denmark, namely, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (ELCD) in 2014. The ELCD congregation is called the Apostles' Church²¹ and is situated in the center of Copenhagen. Approximately one-third of the congregation at the Apostles' Church consists of refugees from Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan, and two-thirds are ethnic Danes. Most of the refugees have either recently converted to Christianity from Islam or are in the process of conversion. The Danish members of the congregation, for the most part, have grown up in the ELCD like the majority of their fellow Danish citizens.

The Apostles' Church has been designated a "profile church" for refugees and immigrants. Many of the refugees who attend the church participate in a catechesis course aiming at baptism and are simultaneously in the process of applying for asylum in Denmark. The interactions between refugees from a Middle Eastern Muslim background and the traditional members of the church are particularly interesting in consideration of the history of the relationship between the church and the nation-state of Denmark. Therefore, I will give a brief description of the background of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark as a framework for understanding this congregation.

4. Historical Background of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark

Traditionally, there has been a significant coincidence between Danish citizenship and membership in the ELCD. The intricate relationship between faith and national identity can be seen in light of the Protestant reformers' claim that Christianity is best appropriated through one's mother tongue. The emphasis on the value of one's native language carries extra weight in a small country like Denmark, which has only five million people to keep the language alive.

The close relationship between church and state also has its roots in the political implications of the Protestant Reformation in Denmark when the institutions of church and the state were merged into one. The political fusion gave the king the privilege of governing the church, but it also gave him the responsibility of taking over the church's traditional care of the people's spiritual, educational, physical and socio-economic needs. The contemporary so-called welfare state of Denmark with its provision for free education, health care, etc., for all citizens can be seen as a product of the historical merger of state and church.²²

²¹ Cf. the homepage of the church: <http://www.apostelkirken.dk/>

²² The Danish historian *Tim Knudsen* has documented the role of the church in the development of the universal welfare state in

The distribution of power and responsibilities inherent in the Lutheran notion of the two governments or kingdoms presupposed that God was in charge of both the secular and the spiritual realm. The king, thus, governed with responsibility toward God, and the role of the church was focused on preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments without interfering in the political rule of the country.²³ The correspondence between the king's and the people's adherence to the Evangelical Lutheran church was supported by the conditions of the Peace of Augsburg agreement in 1555 as summarized in the statement, *Cuius regio eius religio* ("Whose realm, his religion"). The implications of this agreement were that the religious adherence of the ruler of a geographical region became decisive for the religion of the citizens of that area.

In 1848, the Danish National Constitution established freedom of religion in Denmark. However, the majority church, which was now called "the People's Church" (*Folkekirken*), continued to be governed by the Danish state. As is the case with other northern European Protestant churches, the interpretation of Christianity continues to be closely tied to the Danish tradition, identity and language.²⁴ This correspondence manifests itself in demographic statistics, which show that 78% of the population of Denmark were members of the ELCD as of January 1, 2015. If membership in the ELCD is seen from an ethnic perspective, the percentage of membership in the Danish Lutheran Church is significantly lower among non-ethnic Danes than ethnic Danes.²⁵

Although the ELCD has traditionally been seen as the primary representative of Christianity in Denmark, recent developments appear to be changing the historical intertwinement between citizenship and religion. Today, there are more than two hundred migrant congregations in the country, and it is estimated that more than half of the Christians who meet for worship on Sunday mornings in the area of Copenhagen are members of migrant churches rather than the traditional Lutheran majority church.²⁶ Even though there is a growing number of migrant congregations in Denmark and approximately a quarter of them are hosted by the ELCD, the migrant congregations and those of the ELCD tend to worship separately and are rarely integrated as a joint congregation.

contrast to other interpretations that see the Social Democratic Party as playing the leading role in the development of the Danish model. For readers of Danish, see *Tim Knudsen*, *Tilblivelsen af den universalistiske velfærdsstat*, in: idem. (ed.), *Den nordiske protestantisme og velfærdsstaten*, Århus 2000, 20–64. For an account of the relationship between church and state in the northern European context in English, see *Uffe Østergaard*, *Lutheranism, Nationalism and the Universal Welfare State* in: Katharina Kunter/Jens Holger Schjørring (eds.), *European and Global Christianity: Challenges and Transformations in the 20th Century*, Göttingen/Oakville (CN) 2011, 78–99.

²³ Cf. *Martin Schwarz Lausten*, *Reformationen i Danmark*, Copenhagen 1997.

²⁴ This interconnectedness of nationality and religion is the result of a compound of theological, historical and political motives as described in: *Buch-Hansen/Felter/Lorensen* (note 1).

²⁵ *Peter Luchau*, *Seks teser om danskernes medlemskab af folkekirken*, in: Hans Ravn Iversen et al. (eds.), *Fremtidens danske religionsmodel*, Copenhagen 2012, 311–328.

²⁶ www.danskekirkeksraad.dk/nyheder/nyhed/?tx_ttnews%5Bpointer%5D=2&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=29&tx_ttnews%5Bttnews%5D=203&cHash=07a5a711d712de6dad5f8f4ba2ac4010

The Apostles' Church sets itself apart from this typical situation since it has a history of attracting different ethnic groups and integrating them as part of the Danish-speaking congregation. The international group at the Apostles' Church has been dominated by different ethnic groups in the past ten years, but in 2014–15 it has consisted of a growing group of 70–80 Afghans, Kurds, Iraqis and Iranians, and 130–140 ethnic Danes.

As already described, Danish society is known for its homogeneity and social cohesiveness; yet, the migration characteristic of the 21st century, and the refugee crisis in Europe in 2015 in particular, has moved the Danish society and church into a significant process of transition. As an example, one of the bishops in the ELCD, Henrik Wigh-Poulsen, has described the present refugee crisis as a “game changer”²⁷ in the sense that it problematizes the traditional understanding of the church's role in the contemporary society.

The multicultural challenge is received as a motivating force by many, as exemplified in the Apostles' Church. Yet, it is also seen as a threat to the Danish culture and society by some. In the congregation we studied, the international influence and outlook appeared as a vital, even indispensable part of the congregation's ecclesiology and theology. In the following, I will analyze some of the interaction between preaching and the congregation at the Apostles' church, focusing on the notion of repetition as a homiletical category because it appears to express something essential about the refugees' lived experiences of theology, as well as the practice of preaching in a larger context.

5. Repetition in the Preaching at the Apostles' Church

During our interviews, almost all of the refugees emphasized the integrity between faith and life of the pastors of the Apostles' Church. They said that this integrity and care for the congregation were essential to their sense of belonging to the Church. The pastors²⁸ of the Apostles' Church were not described as charismatic figures to be imitated but as understanding people of faith who listened. The descriptions of the pastoral care and social work performed by the pastors and volunteers in the church were confirmed through our observation, in which we noted the array of social work the pastors and volunteers of the church conducted with the refugees – from personal counseling and pastoral care to helping with issues of housing, healthcare, education, and summer camps.

The refugees' emphasis on the ethos of the pastors is interesting in light of the preaching heard

²⁷ Interview with *Henrik Wigh-Poulsen* held Sept. 2nd 2015. Accessed Sept. 10th 2015 at <http://www.dr.dk/radio/ondemand/p1/mennesker-og-tro-2015-09-02#!/>.

²⁸ Although there are two pastors in the church who work together closely, I will for the purpose of this article focus on the preaching of *Niels Nymann Eriksen*, who has been a pastor there for the past ten years.

in the Apostles' Church. In consideration of the kind of social work that takes place at the church, one might expect that exhortations for political engagement and social justice issues would play a central role. Yet, although the preaching heard in the church does engage in questions of social justice, the congregation is, first and foremost, encouraged to engage in meditation on the Gospel and silence before God as a precondition for following Christ – even in the face of conflict and injustice.²⁹

In a sermon on Isaiah 55:6–11, and Mark 4:1–20, titled “Come Rain from on High,”³⁰ Eriksen claims that, in order for the Word of God to give life to humans, it needs to be repeated. In the sermon, he recounts how the reading of a scriptural text or the singing of a hymn in the context of worship can be repeated as a conscious act of meditation on the text. Of greater significance, however, is the kind of repetition that lies beyond the intentional consciousness of the individual. Eriksen describes it as an art to pay attention to those moments in which we are reminded of something we have heard earlier: “It can be a song that we have heard. Suddenly, it isn’t just us who sing, but the song sings itself in us.” In continuation of this phenomenon, Eriksen characterizes the Word of God as something that creates life through slow saturation. Another organic picture of the Word of God relates to the way in which it is incorporated by God’s creatures, as when he claims: “Spiritually, we are ruminants and the more times it [the Word of God] returns, the more we get out of it.”³¹

In accordance with his theoretical reflections on repetition as a forward oriented transformation in which the old becomes new rather than simply a reoccurrence of a past event,³² Eriksen’s preaching also illustrates the difference between repetition as a transformative event and trivial continuity. In the sermon “Come Rain from on High”, he describes the movement of the Word of God as rain that fertilizes the ground and does not return empty. Later, in the sermon, he contrasts this organic fertilization between heaven and earth with the movement of a ball that is thrown into the air and returns unchanged. The kind of repetition that characterizes the preaching at the Apostles’ Church is, thus, not a matter of rhetorical redundancy. Instead, the repetitive movement is described as an event that can come upon the congregation as they expose themselves to the word of God.

²⁹ Sermon titled “People in Prayer – King Hisjia” on 2Kings 19:14–19. Preached on the 6th Sunday after Easter, June 1st 2014 by *Niels Nymann Eriksen*. Accessed at: <http://apostelkirken.kw01.net/page/216/h%C3%B8r-en-pr%C3%A6diken-2014>.

³⁰ Preached on February 2nd 2015. Accessed at: <http://apostelkirken.kw01.net/page/164/h%C3%B8r-en-pr%C3%A6diken>.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Eriksen* (note 10), 111–112.

Although the preaching practiced in the Apostles' Church emphasizes the need to repeat the Word of God in meditation and prayer; the ultimate purpose of preaching does not appear to be individual reflection. Similar to the interviewed Iranian woman's description of her need to repeat the Gospel in company with others, as described in the following, the pastors emphasize on the link between preaching and community. This connection testifies to a different significant theological source in the preaching of Eriksen than the individual-oriented Kierkegaard³³ – namely, the German Lutheran theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

In an introduction to a Danish translation of Bonhoeffer's *Gemeinsames Leben*, Eriksen accentuates Bonhoeffer's view that the ultimate purpose of the Christian proclamation is community. In contrast to Karl Barth, who described revelation as a momentary impact on the history of humanity without relation to the surrounding history, Eriksen emphasizes Bonhoeffer's ability to find continuity between revelation and Christian fellowship. Granted that revelation is a matter of words from God, which cannot be transformed into the history of the world, these words create something that is real – namely, community, as developed in Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio* and later works.³⁴

The inspiration from Bonhoeffer can be used to elucidate the relationship between prayer and political engagement in the life of the Apostles' Church. Eriksen underscores the political consciousness embedded in Bonhoeffer's thoughts on community and claims that the relationship between contemplation and political action is one of the book's most important contributions. In a diagnosis of the present time, Eriksen problematizes the tendency for contemporary Christian communities either to close in on themselves in an interpretation of the Gospel that does not take the questions of today seriously or busily to occupy themselves in demonstrating their relevance through a political engagement that is not rooted in God's revelation.³⁵ Eriksen interprets Bonhoeffer's *Gemeinsames Leben* as an example of how political engagement can grow out of spiritual immersion and theological work.

As contemporary fruits of Bonhoeffer's thought, Eriksen refers to the *New Monasticism* movement, which is now developing in the US and Europe. These new communities consist of people who attempt to live out the Christian practice of fellowship locally by showing hospitality to and solidarity with those who are marginalized in society. The reasoning behind these

³³ For an analysis of Kierkegaard's complex relationship with congregation and church, see *Anders Holm*, Kierkegaard and the Church, in: George Pattison/John Lippitt (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, Oxford 2013, 112–128.

³⁴ Cf. *Niels Nymann Eriksen*, Forord til Dietrich Bonhoeffers "Det kristne fællesskab" [Foreword to a Danish translation of *Gemeinsames Leben*], Fredericia 2013, 11–12.

³⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 14–15.

communities is that it is through *fellowship in Christ* rather than the *proclamation of Christ* that the church is the salt of the earth. This does not mean that proclamation and theological thinking are unimportant but, rather, that the community is a test of whether proclamation leads in the right direction.³⁶ In what follows I will present excerpts from some of our interviews with the refugees in the Apostles' Church followed by conversations with ethnically Danish members of the congregation that show different ways in which the gospel is received anew through sharing with those who are other.

6. Repetition in the Lived Theology of Refugees: Two Case Studies

The qualitative study that provided the empirical material for this article was gathered through three months of participatory observation in worship services, shared meals, Bible studies and a weekend camp with the congregation in the spring of 2014. On the basis of these observations, informal conversations and field notes, we decided whom to invite for recorded interviews. We chose to interview ten people from the group of refugees. These ten people were selected on the basis of criteria such as ethnicity, gender and relationship with the church. This means that we interviewed men and women of Iranian, Afghan and Kurdish descent. Our dialogue with the Danish part of the congregation happened through conversations during our fieldwork as well as in relation to two gatherings in which we presented our research and received their response and further reflection. We were careful to get a mix of interviewees who occupied a central role in the life of the congregation as well as those who played a more marginal position within the church.

For the purpose of this article, I have chosen to focus on excerpts from our interviews with an Iranian woman and a Kurdish man because they describe something significant about the role of repetition in the Christian proclamation. The woman converted from Islam to Christianity in Denmark, whereas the Kurdish man is from a long line of Christian Kurds from Iraq.

7. Repetition as Musical Composition and Forward Movement – in the Life of a Kurdish Composer

The Kurdish man whom we interviewed told us that he had grown up as a Christian in Iraq before fleeing to Europe. Having lived his life in Iraq as well as among migrants in Denmark, the Kurdish man had close friends of both the Muslim and the Christian faith, and he expressed great respect and concern for the ability to live peacefully together regardless of religious adherence. Due to his close acquaintance with both Christianity and Islam, however, he also saw the differences between

³⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 15.21.

the two religions very clearly in life as it is lived.

The Kurdish man is a musician and composer; he often plays the piano in worship services at the interreligious Meeting Place, in which the Apostles' Church is also involved. In our interview, he told us that singing the hymns and listening to the music was crucial to his experience of worship. In his interpretation the musicality of worship is at the heart of Christianity and is among the most distinctive differences between Christian and Islamic worship.³⁷

The interviewee's analysis of musicality as the hallmark of Christianity is of particular importance in a homiletical context where the repetition of the Gospel requires creative interpretation rather than a perfect recital.³⁸ The American homiletician Charles Campbell has captured the potential of repeated scriptural interpretation by comparing preaching with jazz improvisation.³⁹ As Campbell describes it, jazz musicians share with preachers a commitment toward a repertoire of classical pieces, the so-called jazz standards. Campbell's analogy of preaching and jazz improvisation over the standards challenges traditional homiletical pitfalls of either repeating the texts to be preached mechanically or being so concerned with finding a creative expression that one neglects the canonical texts that were supposed to be the basis of the sermon.

In addition to describing musical interpretation and improvisation as crucial to Christianity, the Kurdish man also touched on Kierkegaardian notions of repetition in different ways. He described how he had learned Danish through the reading of Kierkegaard and that these studies initially gave him a shock and, consequently, had a transformative influence on his life.⁴⁰ As an illustration of the shocking wake-up call the study of Kierkegaard provided him, the Kurd recited most of the following passage from *Either/Or* during the interview:

“How sterile my soul and my mind are, and yet constantly tormented by empty voluptuous and excruciating labor pains! Will the tongue ligament of my spirit never be loosened; will I always jabber? What I need is a voice as piercing as the glance of Lynceus, as terrifying as the groan of the giants, as sustained as a sound of nature [...] That is what I need in order to breathe, to give voice to what is on my mind, to have the viscera of both anger

³⁷ Interview with Kurdish man in the Apostles' Church, June 2014.

³⁸ Several contemporary homileticians have analyzed the relationship between music and preaching. See *John S. McClure*, *Mashup Religion: Pop Music and Theological Invention*, Waco 2011, and *Luke A. Poverly*, *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope*, Minneapolis 2012.

³⁹ I am grateful for having experienced Charles Campbell's teaching of preaching as theological playfulness and jazz improvisation at Duke Divinity School, North Carolina in 2012/13. See *Charles L. Campbell*, *Von Jazz lernen. Ein US-amerikanisches Votum jenseits von Tradition und Innovation*, in: Peter Meyer & Kathrin Oxen (eds.), *Predigen lehren: Methoden für die homiletische Aus- und Weiterbildung*, Leipzig 2015, 355–362; *Charles L. Campbell*, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics* in Hans Frei's *Postliberal Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI 1997, 236–237.

⁴⁰ Interview with Kurdish man in the Apostles Church, June 2014.

and sympathy shaken. – But my voice is only hoarse like the scream of a gull or moribund like the blessing on the lips of the mute.”⁴¹

The Kurdish man had memorized the Kierkegaardian passage of a man longing to have his infertile soul and tongue be transformed into elements of nature, music and breath. He recited the passage during his account of how Kierkegaard had inspired him to live out a life as a musician and composer. The Kurdish man had studied classical music in Iraq before fleeing to Denmark and described how the works of Kierkegaard had encouraged him to cultivate and continue the life of music for which he was educated. He described how this contrasted with many of his fellow migrants who did not manage to use their education and talents in their new country and language and, typically, ended up as pizza-makers.⁴²

In addition to describing the heart of Christianity as a matter of creative, musical repetition of the gospel, the Kurdish man also struck another key element of the Kierkegaardian notion of repetition – namely, the movement forward rather than backwards. Repetition as a forward movement into the future rather than as a trip down the memory lane of the past was of utter importance to the Kurdish refugee, as it was to Kierkegaard. The implications of genuine forward repetition are crucial to authentic existence, according to the Kierkegaardian pseudonym Constantine Constantius in the work carrying the title of *Repetition*:

“When existence has been circumnavigated, it will be manifest whether one has the courage to understand that life is a repetition and has the desire to rejoice in it. The person who has not circumnavigated life before beginning to live will never live; the person who circumnavigated it but became satiated had a poor constitution; the person who chose repetition – he lives.”⁴³

Although it could be expected that a refugee who had to flee from his home, relatives and education, would be tempted to live in the past and long for his home country and cultural background, the Kurdish man insisted on living his life as a forward orientation rather than a backward recollection. This directedness manifested itself when he told of a time when he happened to encounter a very influential Danish theologian and Kierkegaard interpreter, Johannes

⁴¹ *Søren Kierkegaard*, *Either/Or*, Part I, 24, translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton 1987. The original Danish quotation, which the Kurdish man recited, is: “Hvor er min Sjæl og min Tanke saa ufrugtbar, og dog idelig piint af indholdsløse vellystige og qvalfulde Veer! Skal da Aandens Tungebaand aldrig løsnes paa mig, skal jeg altid lalle? [...] – Men min Stemme er kun hæs som et Maageskrig, eller hendøende som Velsignelsen paa den Stummes Læber.” EE1 Diapsalmata, SKS 2, 32.

⁴² Interview with Kurdish man in the Apostles’ Church, June 2014.

⁴³ *Kierkegaard* (note 7), 132.

Møllehave.⁴⁴ Since the Kurdish man had benefitted immensely from Møllehave's interpretation of Kierkegaard, he decided to approach the scholar and express his gratitude. During the conversation, Møllehave asked him, "So, where are you from, my friend?" – to which the Kurdish man replied, "Kierkegaard wouldn't have asked 'where are you from?' but 'where are you on your way to!'" Møllehave replied with recognition and laughter.⁴⁵

The hopeful forward orientation toward a new life in spite of a painful past characterized a surprisingly large number of the refugees in the congregation with whom we spoke during our field studies. Some of the accounts reminded us of the *Book of Job*, not only in the degree of loss but furthermore in the refugees' gratefulness in receiving anew what they once had. The following exemplifies this kind of gratefulness in the face of loss.

8. Repetition as Organ Transplant – in the Life of an Iranian Convert

One of the people whose story echoed that of Job was an Iranian woman who had fled from Iran approximately ten years earlier. She had converted from Islam to Christianity while in Denmark which had caused persecution and conflict not only for herself but also for her family. In the interview the woman told us that she had frequented a couple of different congregations earlier. When we asked why she and so many other migrants had chosen to stay in the Apostles' Church, she gave us a striking comparison between her experience of new life as a Christian in Denmark and an organ transplant:

"I know that, for many Danes, it is fine to go to church once a week, listen for an hour and then go home. But that is not enough for me to live on [...]. It is as if I have had my inner organs removed – my heart, my lungs, my blood – and now I need new organs and new blood in order to live. That is why I need substantial food – spiritual food."⁴⁶

The woman's description of why she attends the Apostles' Church refers not only to the quality of the proclamation that she encounters in that particular church, but also to the life that the proclamation entails for a follower of Christ in her experience. Listening to preaching and participating in the worship service is crucial to her life of faith. Yet, the way she appropriates and digests Christianity is through repeating it with others. However, the way she describes the repetition of what she has heard is far from an automatic repetition of a static message.

⁴⁴ Author of numerous books in Danish on Kierkegaard, Shakespeare and various theological subjects.

⁴⁵ Interview with Kurdish man in the Apostles' Church, June 2014.

⁴⁶ Interview with Iranian woman in the Apostles' Church, June 2014.

In ways that resemble what Kierkegaard presents as genuine, rather than mundane, repetition, the Iranian woman described her experiences of receiving anew, as a gift, what she has already been given. In the interview, she told us that, in order to digest what she had heard in the worship service on Sunday, she needed to repeat it in word and deed throughout the week. She recounted different ways in which this repetition takes place. Every week, she leads Bible studies with other migrants based on what she has heard in preaching and catechesis class in the Church.

The worship service at the Apostles' Church is conducted in Danish with simultaneous translation into Farsi and English through headphones. In addition, there is a mix of hymns and songs in Danish, English and Farsi. The lectionary readings are performed in Danish, English and Farsi by members of the congregation. The Iranian woman often reads the Gospel aloud in Farsi during worship services, and she explained that she understands the meaning of the Gospel at a much deeper level when she reads it aloud and shares it with the congregation in a worship setting than when reading it alone.

In the interview the Iranian woman described how she experiences the gospel as the greatest gift when she repeats it through sharing it with others. An excerpt from our field notes testifies to her experience of being able to serve others as a gift. At the worship service on Easter Sunday 2014, I noticed that she assisted the minister with the distribution of the host. After the service she told enthusiastically of her experience:

“As the women in the Biblical stories went out to the grave early in the morning, I also wanted to meet the risen Christ. While I was sitting in prayer, the minister arrived and asked me whether I had slept in the church. I hadn't – and I told him why I was here. Then, he asked me whether I wanted to assist him with the Eucharist today. It was such a precious gift for me!”⁴⁷

The Iranian woman's way of receiving the gospel was described as a grateful repetition of sharing what she had been given. Her appropriation of Christianity can thus be seen as an active passivity in which there is a subtle transition between a deliberate act of reading a text or participating in a ritual on one hand, and receiving or 'taking again', in the words of Kierkegaard, something that transcends the subject's own intentionality.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ MRL, field notes from Easter Sunday, 2014.

⁴⁸ For analyses of how liturgical acts can be experienced in a way that transcends the subjective intention see: *Bent Flemming Nielsen, Erlebnis Predigt im Ritual des Gottesdienstes*, in: Alexander Deeg (ed.), *Erlebnis Predigt*, Leipzig 2014, 141–161; idem, *Ritualization, the Body and the Church: Reflections on Protestant Mindset and Ritual Process*, in: Bent Holm/Bent Flemming Nielsen/Karen Vedel (eds.), *Religion, Ritual, Theatre*, Frankfurt a. M. 2009, 19–45.

The Iranian woman's analogy of her new life as a Christian in Denmark as a feeling of having had all her vital organs and blood taken out, while still living in the process of incorporating new ones, resembles the Kierkegaardian description of repetition as a receiving anew – in the face of loss. This kind of repetition implies a loss of the former existence, physically and spiritually, followed by participation in a new life that is bestowed from the outside. In this sense the Iranian woman's description of her process of conversion echoes analogies from the New Testament as when Paul exclaims: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me"⁴⁹ Interviews with the other refugees also echo the theme of grateful reception in spite of loss.

When the Iranian woman compared her experience of regaining new life as a Christian with organ transplantation, she recognized that her background and conversion set her apart from most Danes, who have grown up in a society in which Christianity has played a significant role for the past 1000 years. However, our field studies and informal conversations with people from the Apostles' Church suggest that the converts' experience of the Christian gospel often nudged other people who had been baptized as infants and grown up in a culture that considers itself Christian to receive anew what they otherwise tended to take for granted.

9. Receiving anew what tends to be taken for granted

The impact of the presence of the refugees on the lived theology of the Danish members of the congregation was portrayed explicitly at a meeting with the leaders of the church, which included pastors as well as volunteers. We, the scholars, were invited to present initial insights from our empirical studies to the leadership group and get their feedback. During the presentation, we asked the group whether the presence of the migrant group made a difference to them as a congregation and as individuals. In response to this question, some of the volunteers said that they listen differently to the reading of the biblical texts and the sermon when they hear it in the company of people who have been exposed to religious persecution and severe personal losses.⁵⁰

The ethnically-Danish part of the congregation said that the kind of suffering and persecution to which the migrants are exposed is a part of the biblical narrative but rarely of everyday life in the Danish society. In addition to the descriptions of the volunteers, one of the pastors explained that it makes a radical difference for him to see his own place through the eyes of another. He later

⁴⁹ Paul's Letter to the Galatians 2:20. English Standard Version.

⁵⁰ Meeting with the leadership group of the Apostles' Church, September 5th 2014.

added that he feels closer to God when he is with people who are vulnerable. Using a foreign perspective to see one's own faith and culture anew turned out to be a shared experience among most of the ethnic Danes who worshiped and talked with the migrant group.⁵¹

The interaction between faith and life in the case of the migrants, which influenced the ethnic Danes in the congregation, also worked the other way around. When we asked refugees why they had chosen to convert to Christianity, several of them told us that they had always believed in God, and this has not changed since there is only one God.⁵² However, what had prompted many to convert from Islam to Christianity was the way the two religions were lived by their followers and representatives. The love of enemies, which they described as characteristic of Christianity, was of crucial importance to people who had grown up with conflicts and warfare. This was particularly underscored in our interviews with some of the Afghan men from the congregation.⁵³ Converts from the Middle East, as well as Danes who had grown up in the Christian church, thus both stressed the importance of authentic repetition in the sense of integrity between faith and life. Both groups were deeply influenced by the way the interaction between life and faith, loss and grateful reception could be traced in the life of the other.

Conclusion

Preaching is a genre of repetition. The repetitiveness of preaching may cause indifference when it comes across as clichéd truisms that are taken for granted. Yet, authentic repetition of the Gospel, whether it be in the form of preaching, musical improvisation, liturgical participation or the telling of new narratives carries the potential for new understanding and existential appropriation. Our empirical study suggests that these kinds of repetitions open up possibilities for people to hear the Gospel differently – or, along the lines of Kierkegaardian repetition, receive anew what they have already received once. Authentic repetition can thus be seen as a kind of passive activity which cannot be attained by sheer deliberate action. However, the individual can expose him- or herself to it through the encounter with the other. Likewise, the Word of God can be seen as a divine interruption of the human repetitive activity that allows humans to receive the gospel anew.

Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, born 1975, is Professor of Practical Theology with special obligations in homiletics at Faculty of Theology, University of Copenhagen

mrl@teol.ku.dk

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Field notes from conversation with Iranian woman, March 2014.

⁵³ For these interviews, see *Buch-Hansen/Felter/Lorensen* (note 1).

Contemporary Jewish Homiletics: Some Key Components

Michael Marmor

Abstract

This article deals with the derasha, the Jewish sermon and offers an inventory of the key dimensions of the Jewish sermon as practiced today and in the past from a reformed Jewish perspective. It shows its connection to the particular moment, its functions (further distinguished as contextual, intentional, educational, and symbolic), its message, sources, structure, and the techniques involved in its delivery and gives a brief example of one of the author's own derashot from July 2015.

The *derasha*, a homily delivered usually in a Jewish liturgical or ritual context, has been a central feature of Jewish life for more than twenty centuries. It is one of the most significant loci where orality and literacy meet within Jewish culture. Despite enormous differences in frequency, form and content, the role of the spoken explication of and elaboration upon the Hebrew Bible in a communal setting has characterized Jewish society in Baghdad, Brooklyn, Budapest and beyond for two millennia.

This essay will not attempt a survey of the history of the Jewish sermon. Important books and articles have contributed much to this field of research ever since the groundbreaking work of Leopold Zunz, whose *Die Gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden* first appeared in 1832. Since then, historical understanding of the development of the Jewish sermon has developed greatly, and a number of studies of particular eras and geographical settings have been produced in recent years.¹

Rather than speak to the development of Jewish preaching in different eras and places, I want to offer two contributions to an understanding of contemporary expression of this ancient and

¹ The 1892 edition of Zunz's foundational work was translated into Hebrew and published by the Bialik Institute in 1954. Rather than offer a comprehensive bibliography of more recent works on the history of the Jewish sermon, I will mention only a small number of outstanding examples. These will feature multiple examples of the works of Joseph Heinemann and Marc Saperstein, who in an earlier era and in our day have set the pace and tone for understanding the development of the Jewish sermon. See *Israel Bettan*, *Studies in Jewish Preaching*, Cincinnati 1939; *Kimmy Caplan/Carmi Horowitz/Nabem Ilan* (eds), *Preachers, Sermons and Homiletics in Jewish Culture* [Hebrew], Jerusalem 2012; *Alexander Deeg/Walter Homolka/Heinz-Günter Schöttler* (eds), *Preaching in Judaism and Christianity*, StJ 41, Berlin 2008; *Robert V. Friedenberg*, "Hear O Israel" – The History of American Jewish Preaching, 1654–1970, Tuscaloosa 1989; *Joseph Heinemann*, *The Proem in the Aggadic Midrashim – A Form-Critical Study*, in: *Studies in Aggadah and Folk-Literature, Scripta Hierosolymitana XXII*, edited by Joseph Heinemann and Dov Noy, Jerusalem 1971, 100–122; *On Life and Death: Anatomy of a Rabbinic Sermon*, in: *Joseph Heinemann/Shmuel Werses*, *Studies in Hebrew Narrative Art*, *Scripta Hierosolymitana XXVII*, Jerusalem 1978, 52–65; *Shaul Regev*, *Oral Preaching and Written Sermons in the Middle Ages*, in: *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 9.1 (2015), 85–99; *Marc Saperstein*, *Jewish Preaching 1200–1800: An Anthology*, New Haven 1989; "Your Voice Like a Ram's Horn" – Themes and Texts in Jewish Preaching, Cincinnati 1996; *Exile in Amsterdam: Saul Levi Morteira's Sermons to a Congregation of "New Jews"*, Cincinnati 2005.

noble art. It should be noted at the outset that I am a Reform rabbi, heir to an approach which merged some traditional tropes of the Jewish sermon with practices learnt from the German Protestant church, and later influenced by trends within North American society. It is helpful to be aware of these influences. Of course, other practitioners of Jewish homiletics – preachers of North African origin, sermonizers in the Hasidic tradition – all bring their own influences to bear in the way they teach and preach. I certainly do not claim that the approach presented here has the monopoly on authenticity. It shows one way in which Jewish preaching is understood and practiced in our day. The degree to which the *derasha* in different cultural and denominational milieus has some essential similarity is an issue itself worthy of research. It speaks to a wider and controversial question – the extent to which Jewish cultural motifs continue to exercise some unifying influence over an increasingly various and fractured Jewish world.

My intention here is to offer an inventory of what might be considered to be the key dimensions of the Jewish sermon as practiced today, and to a significant degree how it has been practiced over the centuries. Secondly, I will offer a brief example of one recent sermon (one of my own) as a reflection of these various aspects at work. It is important to note that nothing stated about the contemporary Jewish sermon in the West is exclusively Jewish – none of the categories listed below would be out of place in a discussion of contemporary Christian preaching. Nonetheless, there is much in the history and current practice of Jewish preaching that is distinctly Jewish, and this essay will dwell on some of these aspects.

The classic Jewish setting for the *derasha* is the synagogue, but in the course of Jewish history other sub-genres, such as the words spoken to a couple at their wedding, have developed. The teaching of Rabbi Hananya ben Teradyon in the Mishnah² condemning any gathering in which words of Torah is not spoken became a mandate for the prevalence of the *d'var torah*, a word of Torah, at meals and other opportunities. These different settings span different lengths, styles and conventions. Regional and cultural variations also influence the style and scope of Jewish homiletics.

Despite this variety, there are a number of dimensions of a *derasha* which characterize many or most of them. It is to these dimensions to which we now turn.

1. Moment

The Jewish art of preaching is a reflection of time and context. The first question a Jewish preacher has traditionally grappled with has been: what is the particular moment in which these words are being uttered? First and foremost, this question will bring into focus the particular portion of the

² Mishnah Avot 3.2.

Torah which is being recited that week. This will be the primary focus even in services where the Torah is not being read, since the weekly portion sets the tone for the entire week. Second, proximity to a festival, a special Sabbath, a fast day, or some other moment in the Jewish calendar, will (or at least should) be in the mind of the preacher.

The *darshan*, the Jewish preacher, is often motivated to bring the great cycles of traditional Jewish life to expression. In this context the teachings of Franz Rosenzweig come to mind. Rosenzweig suggested that the cyclical time of the Jewish year, the cycle of eternity, is the time in which the Jew lives – the linear passage of historical time is not the main focus of the Jew. In Yehoyada Amir's formulation, "The Jew lives beyond history, in a time-cycle that anticipates eternity."³ As he wrote in his *Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig believed that "[i]n the cycle of weekly portions [...] the spiritual year is paced out".⁴

Rosenzweig notwithstanding, a Jewish preacher's reading of the moment reaches out beyond the self-contained cycles of the Jewish year. It is not just the cycle of liturgical readings and calendrical events which constitute the moment. Events in the life cycle of individuals within the community will play a role in constructing the message of the homily. Increasingly, it is also the case that contemporary events taking place in the wider world will also find their way into the discourse of the *derasha*.⁵

If one considers the events which have taken place in the course of the twentieth century, the lines between the cycle of eternity and the intrusions of contemporaneity have become blurred. Both the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel have found a place in the liturgical calendar. The tendency to relate to the present time does not only relate to events on the epic scale. Commentary on events in the news has become a familiar part of the *derasha*, particularly in more liberal Jewish circles.

The *derasha* is not only intended to reflect the moment, liturgical, personal and secular, which is taking place. At its best, the *derasha* can help give the moment, in all its complexity, a place within the context of Jewish tradition. The Jewish homily is designed both to reflect the moment and to illuminate it. A Jewish preacher should ask: what is happening today in the world, in our city, in our community? And what is happening in the various cycles of liturgical readings, the festival calendar and other expressions of 'Jewish time'? The Jewish sermon bridges between these various

³ Yehoyada Amir, 'Towards Mutual Listening: The Notion of Sermon in Franz Rosenzweig's Philosophy', in: Deeg/Homolka/Schöttler (eds), *Preaching in Judaism and Christianity* (note 1), 126.

⁴ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, ed. William H. Hallo, Notre Dame 1985, 310.

⁵ See Marc Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching in Times of War, 1800–2001*, London 2008; John Rayner as Preacher: *The Sermon in Response to Historical Events*, in: *European Judaism* 45.12 (2012), 50–57. There are many collections of sermons which illustrate sensitivity to changing times, and Marc Saperstein's use of the sermon as a source for historical as well as theological insight has opened an important vista of historical research. See Harold I. Saperstein, *Witness from the Pulpit: Topical Sermons, 1933–1980*, Lanham 2000. Marc Saperstein, the son of Harold Saperstein, edited and provided an introduction to that volume.

dimensions of the current moment.

In the list of troops who joined the side of David at Hebron in 1 Chronicles 12, those who come from the tribe of Issachar are described using the Hebrew phrase *yod'ei binah le'itim*. This translates to something like: those who understand the times. I want to suggest that the finest exemplars of the Jewish art of preaching strive to be descendants of Issachar, reading the moment – liturgical, communal, historical – in all its complexity, and offering words which both reflect and illuminate.

The best *derashot* have roots in “Jewish time” and simultaneously in the specific time of their delivery. If the preacher has been thoughtful and effective, it may be hard to tell if the starting point of the sermon was a particular reading, or a particular event on the local or national level. Of the sermons delivered in North America in the immediate aftermath of September 11th 2001 at the Jewish New Year, which was just a few days later, many responded to the momentous events. Some did not. The numbing impact of what had taken place, the fact that much work had already been done preparing a homily – for one reason or another, some decided to persevere with their previously-prepared *derasha*. In my reading of the essence of Jewish preaching, this was in some sense a dereliction of duty. It involved fealty to “Jewish time”, the spiritual cycle invoked by Rosenzweig, but no sensitivity to what was going on at that moment in the lives of every member of the congregation, and society in general.

There are certainly many examples to be found which indicate imbalance on the other side – in such cases the preacher is keen to relate to a burning issue of the day but does not manage (or is not interested) to find a basis for the homily within the cadences of “Jewish time”. Here, too, the basic criterion of attentiveness to the multi-faceted moment has not been met. The speech may be stirring and its values impeccable, but it is not a *derasha* in the fullest sense.

2. Function

The contemporary Jewish sermon fulfills a wide range of functions, often simultaneously. It is possible to distinguish between four kinds of function that a *derasha*, like other examples of vocal performance and homiletical proficiency, can be expected to fulfill: contextual, intentional, educational and symbolic.

By *contextual* I mean the particular situation in which the sermon is being delivered: not only the confluence of “Jewish” and “general” time, but also the proximate circumstances of the homily’s delivery. A homily delivered in synagogue on the Day of Atonement with a congregation expecting a thirty-minute address is likely to fulfill a different role from words offered under the wedding canopy or at the start of a committee meeting. Words spoken at a circumcision ceremony

will have a different tone and aim to achieve different ends than words offered at a memorial service.

The *derasha* does not always sit comfortably in its contexts. Consider the most frequent setting, as part of a prayer service. It has been observed that “the modern Jewish sermon became the very center of the liturgical structure, supporting the core of the religious experience and communicating an increasingly ethical message.”⁶ However, in Judaism throughout its history, a tension between the rhythm of the prayer service and the role of the homily has sometimes been present.

This tension is in fact as old as Rabbinic Judaism itself. It is recounted in the Babylonian Talmud⁷ that the Babylonian Sage known as Rava criticized his contemporary Rav Hamnuna for extending his prayers at the expense of study. In rebuffing the reproach, Rav Hamnuna declared that there are separate times for prayer and for study. Here (and ever since) the sometimes competing of the liturgical and homiletical thrusts of traditional Judaism come to expression. Rav Hamnuna was not expressing a view antithetical to the practice of Biblical exegesis. Rather, he was attempting to defend the integrity of the prayer service against what may have been perceived of a kind of creeping pan-intellectualism, where the study of Torah was considered core, and everything else peripheral.

It is interesting to note that one of the twentieth century’s leading theologians of Jewish prayer, Abraham Joshua Heschel, was distinctly unhappy about the trend to place increasing emphasis on the sermon at the expense of the authenticity of the prayer experience. His critique, offered originally at a conference of rabbis in 1953, left no doubt as to his opinions on this issue:

“The prominence given to the sermon as if the sermon were the core and the prayer the shell, is not only a drain on the intellectual resources of the preacher but also a serious deviation from the spirit of our tradition. The sermon, unlike prayer, has never been considered as one of the supreme things in the world [...] Preaching is either an organic part of the act of prayer or out of place.”⁸

Heschel’s resistance to the prominence of the sermon did not derive from any anti-intellectual predilection: he was one of the most learned Jewish theologians of his day, with a keen appreciation for the role of the sermon in Jewish history. Rather, his position mirrored that of Rav Hamnuna: he was concerned that by offering rhetorical pyrotechnics, the preacher may distract the worshipper from the hard work of prayer. The context of the two men’s defense of the prayer service was of course quite different, but there is a point of connection between them. Heschel was concerned

⁶ *Mirela Saim*, *The Modern Renewal of Jewish Homiletics and the Occurrence of Interfaith Preaching*, in: Robert H. Allinson (ed.), *A New History of the Sermon – The Nineteenth Century*, Leiden 2010, 460.

⁷ bT Shabbat 10a.

⁸ *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, *Man’s Quest for God. Studies in Jewish Prayer and Symbolism*, New York 1954, 79–80.

that a crisis in the prayer service was causing many to privilege the sermon (and often the charismatic individual delivering it) over the act of praying.

Rav Hamnuna may have been concerned to take a stand against peremptory fulfillment of prayer requirements in contrast with soulful and intentional acts of praying. For Heschel, his critique should be seen against the backdrop of a moment in American Judaism where the rabbi's sermon was likely to put the prayer service in the shade. As Marc Lee Raphael has summarized the life of the synagogue in the course of American Jewish history, "the highlight of worship services has fluctuated – at different times, in different wings of American Judaism, and in different locales – from the liturgy to the sermon, with the latter sometimes just a pause in the liturgical flow, other times the center of the worship experience."⁹ It was this fluctuation which was the cause of Heschel's disapproval. He did not want the sermon to overshadow or swamp the act of prayer.

One function, then, of the *derasha*, is to serve as an integral part of the wider context of which it is a part. Standing with a couple beneath the wedding canopy, at the pulpit during the Day of Atonement, in these and many other communal settings, the preacher has a responsibility to serve the needs of the particular situation. In that sense, our first category – *moment* – is at work in establishing the core function of the sermon. The *darshan* (the preacher) is charged with the task of reading the group being addressed and assessing what would be most appropriate and most needed. Heschel believed that the energy dedicated to oratorical proficiency would be better invested in building a worthy prayer experience. Others might argue that while liturgy is a closed book to many congregants, the *derasha* provides an opportunity to offer ideas and insights for congregants in search of meaning. The contextual function of the *derasha* is to enhance the particular ceremony or setting in which it is placed.

The *intentional* function relates less to the role of the *derasha* within the particular context of its delivery, and more to the intention of the *darshan* (or his female counterpart, the *darshaniit*). Am I trying to inform, entertain, distract, upbraid, focus, comfort, harangue, challenge, support, excoriate, congratulate, condemn? As I link this moment to "Jewish time", what else am I trying to achieve as I demand these people's attention for the next few minutes?

There is rarely one clear answer to any of these questions. The preacher may have a number of intentions in mind. The congregation comprises listeners with a range of interests, needs and intellectual capacities. This, too, is bound to influence the intentional function of the sermon. It is worth noting here that the Jewish sermon has long been subject to what be termed, in a paraphrase

⁹ Marc Lee Raphael, *Judaism in America*, New York 2003, 98. For the earlier phase of this development see Naomi W. Cohen, *What the Rabbis Said: The Public Discourse of 19th Century American Rabbis*, New York 2008. The experience of liberal Jews outside North America has been largely similar.

of Leo Strauss' phrase, persecution and the art of preaching. There are different layers, contrasting and even opposing messages, which may be placed in a sermon. This may stem from a wish to conceal esoteric content, or there may be a polemical political motivation. It is reported that the rabbi of the Jewish community of Wiesbaden, Rabbi Paul Lazarus, was imprisoned in 1938 following a sermon he preached on the verse from Psalm 90, "For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past". He was accused by the Nazi authorities of aiming a polemical dart at the "thousand year Reich".¹⁰ There is evidence that during this period some Jewish preaching and writing was indeed intended to conceal words of resistance or comfort at a time of impending doom.¹¹

Even when a *derasha* is being delivered in less extreme circumstances, the *darshanit* is motivated by a range of ambitions. Her words are likely intended to fulfill a number of goals. It is often the case that the longer the list of such goals, the greater the risk of dilution, diffusion and confusion. The ability to pitch a *derasha* on more than one level, and to ensure that it works simultaneously on each of them, is a sign of enhanced homiletical virtuosity. The *darshan* needs to ensure that the list of intended outcomes is short enough to be attainable but varied enough to account for the range of listeners present in the room.¹²

The *derasha* also has an *educational* function. As a preacher, I want to ensure that some features of Jewish (and other) culture have been imparted to my listeners. Those involved in frequent preaching know that it is difficult to utter some earth-shattering insight every time one speaks to a congregation. But so rich and vast is the store of Jewish tradition, that it ought to be possible on every occasion to bring some teaching, to shed light on some aspect of literature or history which may edify and enrich.

Some words of Torah, particularly short comments, may eschew some of the grander and less tangible goals of the *derasha* and prepare to act as a *d'var torah*, literally – a word of Torah. Modern preachers, who often function in conditions of radical assimilation, may regard it as an important end in itself to enhance the Jewish vocabulary of the congregation. In such a case, teaching key concepts and sources is not a by-product of the *derasha*, but rather a core function.

The last function to be mentioned here is termed *symbolic*. There may well be a specific teaching at the heart of the *derasha* (discussed in the following section), but there is also the general

¹⁰ http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/valley/wiesbaden/nazi_regime.asp

¹¹ For a contemporary example involving not preaching but popular writing in the *Gemeindeblatt* of Berlin, see *Michael Marmor, Traditional Exemplars in a Time of Crisis*, in: Michael A. Meyer/David N. Myers, *Between Jewish Tradition and Modernity: Rethinking and Old Opposition*, Detroit 2014, 192–208.

¹² It is interesting to note that in recent years more and more congregations have started streaming their services to people linking up through the internet. This has all kinds of implication, not least for the preacher, who can no longer know who is in fact in the virtual room.

disposition of the *darshan*, bearing witness or offering an example of a particular approach. I will offer two examples of this kind of preaching-as-testimony. In 1838 Abraham Geiger preached a sermon at the Great Synagogue in Breslau. It included these words on the dynamics of change within Judaism:

“The truth is that nothing has really changed. All that changes is the outer shell, only some outward forms undergo modification; the essence of things remains intact. Do not fear and be not misled by the talk of the foolish who view a few concessions to the times as tantamount to the collapse of the faith. [...] But neither must you allow yourself to be misled by those others who reject the whole faith of Israel merely because some outward forms are no longer to their liking, and who would say with the Israelites at the time of Ezekiel: *Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off.* No, our hope is not lost; the true faith of Israel remains unshaken [...].”¹³

This is not scholarship, or argument. Rather, it represents an attempt by Geiger to position himself in the long-standing tradition of defenders of Judaism. It is intended to console, inspire and reassure. Even at that relatively young age, the 28-year old Geiger was seen as a leader of the Reform tendency. By speaking for the essential unity and coherence of the faith of Israel, Geiger was assuming a conciliatory position before the wider Jewish community. He was also perpetuating the age-old tradition of offering a *nechemta*, a message of comfort, encouragement and consolation.

The second example is taken from a later age and a different continent. In March 1958 the Jewish Center in Nashville, Tennessee was dynamited by a white supremacist group. In a sermon delivered shortly after, Rabbi William Silverman offered words of testimony and resistance:

“WE WILL NOT YIELD TO EVIL. We will not capitulate to fear. We will not surrender to violence. We will not submit to intimidation but, as Reform Jews, we will continue to speak for truth; we shall continue to dedicate ourselves to social justice and to the brotherhood of ALL men, knowing and believing that all men are created in the divine image, and this includes Negroes as well as Caucasians.”¹⁴

The sermon does include a number of Biblical and other sources. But the main intention of these words is to demonstrate the refusal of that rabbi to be intimidated by threats, and his wish to bear witness to his convictions.

¹³ Quoted in *Max Wiener* (ed.), *Abraham Geiger and Liberal Judaism*, Philadelphia 1962, 248.

¹⁴ Quoted in *David J. Meyer*, *Fighting Segregation, Threats and Dynamite: Rabbi William B. Silverman's Nashville Battle*, in: *American Jewish Archives Journal* 60.1–2 (2008), 109.

It is reasonable to claim that testimony is a less prominent feature of the Jewish sermon than of its Christian counterpart. Nonetheless, this fourth symbolic function is an aspect of the contemporary *derasha*.

3. Message

Students learning homiletics at the Jerusalem campus Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion are often given an unnerving task. They are asked to summarize what they are actually trying to say. If they are incapable of delivering such a summary to themselves, they are sent back to the drawing board, and asked to try again.

That this test often proves so difficult should not be a great surprise. Often the categories discussed above account for most of what happens in a *derasha* – linking the Jewish moment to the historical moment; suiting the liturgical setting; effecting some mood or sensibility; teaching an aspect of tradition; and offering some testimony. However, without a particular teaching or insight, without a challenging concept or controversial opinion, the *derasha* lacks focus.

The risks associated with assuming controversial stances, and the difficulty in keeping abreast of new ideas both account for the prevalence of platitude and cliché in many contemporary Jewish sermons. It is hard to take a stand on anything but the most bland of platforms, and this explains the frequency with which liberal congregations are told that life is a journey; that we are all partners in the work of Creation; that racial hatred is a bad thing; and that moderation is a virtue. It is hard for most congregants to find fault with any of these statements, but it is just as hard for them to find interest in them.

The precedents offered by those who do take a clear stand are not all encouraging. Judah Leon Magnes, who was later to become the first President of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, delivered a rousing sermon to the congregants of Temple Emanuel of the City of New York in April 1910. In his sermon Magnes, who had become a rabbi at Emanuel some four years earlier, offered a relentless critique of the assimilationist tendencies of many of the congregation's members:

“Look among you. Your sons and your daughters, many of them, are marrying outside the people. They are rearing their children with all modern accomplishments, but with no religion. Their homes are bare of piety and of the spirit of prayer. Some of them perhaps are engaged in charitable work, but [...] it is very seldom carried on in the spirit of Jewish brotherhood, but rather in a spirit of remote piety mingled with disdain.”¹⁵

¹⁵ *Arthur A. Goren* (ed.), *Dissenter in Zion: From the Writings of Judah L. Magnes*, Cambridge 1982, 109.

In the peroration at the end of the sermon, Magnes showed that he was fully conscious of the rhythms of Jewish time. Speaking on the festival of Passover, he referred to two Biblical sources related to that season – the Song of Songs and (like Geiger in the sermon quoted above) Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones.

“For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of the birds is come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.’ Will you share in the renewed hopes of the Jewish springtime? Will you celebrate this *z’man herutenu*, this season of Jewish freedom, by an indication to me and to the Jewish people of your willingness to take the road that has been pointed out to you? Will you, as the prophet of old, see the dead bones rise in the valley and stir with the breath of life? Will you have the courage to attempt the long journey? Will you have the vigor to cover the long distance should you attempt it? Will the blessing of God rest upon this congregation, or is it doomed to inanition? Look into your hearts and ask yourselves, do you or do you not wish to remain Jews? The way of life and the way of death is before you. Choose.”¹⁶

The congregation did indeed choose. Within three weeks Magnes had informed the congregation of his intention to resign. The rousing call had fallen on deaf ears. Here is an example of a preacher with the courage of his convictions, prepared to deliver an unambiguous message to his flock, and then unceremoniously driven from the herd. Such examples help encourage a degree of caution in many preachers which does much for their longevity but little for their forthrightness and intellectual honesty.

The contemporary preacher is faced with the challenge of deciding when the platform provided to her should be used to take a stand which may jeopardize their employment or cause fissures to form within the congregation. Not every message, of course, has to involve such dire professional or personal consequences. Often it can be enough to do the congregation the honor of reading, thinking and preparing. On occasion even such opinions can prove to be controversial. In April 2001 David Wolpe, a leading rabbi in the Conservative movement, told his Los Angeles congregation that “virtually every modern archaeologist who has investigated the story of the Exodus, with very few exceptions, agrees that the way the Bible describes the Exodus is not the way it happened, if it happened at all.” The resultant uproar was intense, and his remarks sparked a furore which few could have predicted.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid., 114–115.

¹⁷ <http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/15596/1-a-rabbi-creates-furor-by-questioning-exodus-story/>

The risk of saying something which may cause offence is a necessary part of the preacher's trade, and extreme aversion to controversy is usually a guarantee of shallowness and frivolity. One part of the *derasha*, then, is the punch it packs.¹⁸

4. Structure

At the turn of the twentieth century, and then again in the 1960s, an institution in Jerusalem named "Shirat Yisrael" (the song of Israel) was active in Jerusalem. Subjects taught included the cantorial arts, Jewish music of different kinds, and the art of the *derasha*. That homiletics and music were seen as connected is certainly no coincidence, in both cases, structure and form help bring control and focus to live performance. A preacher may not be able to hold a tune, but an appreciation of the structure and flow of the sermon has parallels with an appreciation for music.

There is a venerable history to Jewish sermon structure. Many methodological challenges confront scholars who have to decide if the literary remnant is a faithful reconstruction of the original *derasha*. While this problem is acute when considering ancient Rabbinic homilies,¹⁹ by the Middle Ages there is evidence in the form of guides to preachers in the spirit of Christian *ars praedicandi* literature. From these and other sources, Marc Saperstein has produced a fascinating summary of some of the structural options employed by Jewish preachers in that era.²⁰

The modern liberal sermon employs a different range of structural options, to be sure, but the necessity of employing structure has not lessened. Referring again to the musical parallel, the structure of a modern three-minute pop song offers one example of how the modern sermon is structured – after a brief introduction, the recurrent theme of the homily (parallel in this sense to the chorus) is interrupted by 'verses' in which elaborations on the original idea are presented. The conclusion of the song reminds the listener both of the main theme and of some of the supplementary nuance.

A more ambitious structure can be likened to a classical composition, in which two (or more) separate themes are presented, intertwined, and eventually linked. Yet another approach is in essence circular – each component leads on to the next, until the issues discussed come full circle and the original statement is underlined, repeated and often re-understood. Yet another approach, taken directly from classical Jewish sermons, would be to take a Biblical verse (known as a *noseh* in that earlier era) and to split it up, paying attention to each individual word or phrase.

¹⁸ For a case for substantive theological sermons, see *Louis Jacobs*, *The Pulpit as an Instrument of Theological Teaching*, in: *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly of America* 23 (1969), 9–24.

¹⁹ See *Günter Stemberger*, *The Derashah in Rabbinic Times*, in: *Deeg/Homolka/Schöttler* (eds), *Preaching in Judaism and Christianity* (note 1), 7–21. See also *Steven D. Fraade*, *Literary Composition and Oral Performance in Early Midrashim*, in: *Oral Tradition* 14.1 (1999), 33–51.

²⁰ *Saperstein* (note 5), 63–79.

It is not my intention to list all possible structures for the contemporary Jewish sermon. My point is that structural considerations are inescapable. It is true that there has been a shift in some circles away from an intellectual approach in favor of a more evocative and emotion-based emphasis. This might be understood in terms of a previous category, the sermon's intentional function – the preacher is interested to move the listener, rather than necessarily providing them with new ideas. This shift in emphasis does not mean, however, that structural considerations are less important. No less structure is necessary to evoke emotion than to provide intellectual stimulation.

W.E. Sangster has commented that “[n]o sermon is really strong which is not strong in structure too”,²¹ and this observation is as germane for Jewish preaching as it is for the Christian sermon. Analyzing a sermon from the perspective of structure is often a useful diagnostic to help identify weakness in the argument of the *derasha*. Frequently, extraneous material which does not serve the structure of the sermon interferes with the flow and thrust of the argument. Quite often the hardest part of sermon preparation is deciding what to leave out. Attention to structure can help make this decision easier.

5. Sources

Quotation has been a prevalent feature of Jewish culture since earliest times.²² Sources are cited to act as evidence, to provide *bona fides* for the person doing the citing, to engage with the persons and genres being quoted, and for many other reasons.

While the classical Jewish homily and its medieval version were always replete with traditional sources, this is not always the case for modern iterations of the genre. In his book on Jewish preaching, based on lectures given in 1941, the American Reform rabbi Solomon B. Freehof devoted a chapter to what he described as the non-Scriptural sermon. The chapter begins by drawing a contrast between Philo of Alexandria and the Jews of today. While Philo believed that the words of the Bible were holy in origin, employed allegorical and other methods of interpretation, and could assume that his listeners were acquainted with the Bible, the situation in modern times is quite different:

“For these reasons we modern Jewish preachers have developed a type of preaching which is almost without precedent in the past history of Jewish preaching, namely, the non-textual sermons.”²³

²¹ Quoted in *John R. W. Stott, I Believe in Preaching*, London 1982, 229.

²² See *Michael Marmor, Why Jews Quote*, in: *Oral Tradition* 29.1 (2014), 5–46.

²³ *Solomon B. Freehof, Modern Jewish Preaching*, New York 1941, 61.

One of the main distinctions between liberal and orthodox proponents of Judaism is to be found in the sources they quote and the way they quote them. Modernizing preachers have broadened the range of acceptable sources to include a wide variety of Jewish and non-Jewish texts and cultural references. Often they are shy of intensive quotation of canonical Jewish sources, because they are likely to evoke a response of distance, even alienation. On the other hand, a *derasha* which comprises a string of insights and aphorisms none of which is drawn from the wellsprings of Jewish creativity is hardly a *derasha* at all.

The opinion I am expressing here is partisan. There are many in the non-Orthodox camp who are happy to keep canonical sources to a minimum in their words, perhaps preferring immediacy and relevance to profundity and relevance. It is certainly true that care must be taken with the use of traditional sources, lest they leave the listener feeling overwhelmed and disenfranchised. However, while celebrating the fact that the range of sources we are prepared to quote from is wider and more inclusive than the strict canon enforced in more traditional circles, I am alarmed at the prospect of the non-textual sermon becoming normative. I believe that a non-quoting Judaism is unlikely to stand the test of time. How and what is quoted – that should be an area of change and creativity.

In the English speaking world in the twenty first century, the confessional and personal have become the key currency of discourse. On occasion it seems (to this biased listener) that the *darshan* has replaced the Five Books of Moses with the sacred book of their own life, from which they quote with frequency and solemnity. As I will argue in the next section, this is a perfectly acceptable technique, if it is used in the service of an aim which extends beyond self-indulgence or self-promotion. Preachers who tell of traumatic challenges in their own lives often manage to touch their listeners in profound ways. But the moment this testimony replaces the testimony of Jewish tradition, something vital is lost.

At its finest, the Jewish art of preaching finds a way to integrate sources from three thousand years of Jewish thought with other prompts and sources, and for that matter with excerpts from the Book of Life. In this context, it may be appropriate to quote from the conclusion of a lecture given by the great Rabbinic scholar Louis Ginzberg to students at the fledgling Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1929. In his closing remarks he referred to a Rabbinic interpretation of the Eden narrative which suggested that the Tree of Life was in fact encased within the Tree of Knowledge:

“The *haggadah* asks, why did Adam, who was very wise, act so foolishly as to eat first of the Tree of Knowledge, thus bringing upon himself mortality? [...] The *haggadah* answers this question that before he ate of the Tree of Knowledge he had no conception of the meaning of life, or, to use the style of the masters of the *haggadah*, the Tree of Life was

encased and concealed in the Tree of Knowledge; Adam was therefore constrained to eat of the Tree of Knowledge in order to reach the Tree of Life [...]

I beg you to remember, and never to forget, that there can be no life without knowledge and no renaissance of our People and Land without a renaissance of Jewish learning.”²⁴

While the use of Jewish sources in the act of preaching is subject to misuse and exaggeration, at its root it is predicated on the notion that the tree of life may not and should not be removed from the tree of knowledge. The sources deployed – from every era of Jewish creativity and beyond – are a mark of the identity and integrity of the *derasha*.

6. Techniques

The contemporary preacher has many techniques at her disposal, and she is well advised to make use of those which suit her particular style. In my view, anything which stays within bounds of decency and appropriateness and helps focus the congregation on the structure, message and sources of the *derasha* is to be welcomed. This would certainly include the use of references to popular culture, use of interactive and other styles of presentation, humor, surprise, techniques involving the voice and the body, and more.

On occasion the techniques can swamp the core content of the *derasha*. If an amusing anecdote is the only thing remembered about a sermon ten minutes after its conclusion, then the sermon can be thought of as a failure. If on the other hand the anecdote (or gesture, or reference) helps bring the congregation to an enhanced state of attention, if it makes the teaching more accessible and more memorable, then it can be thought of as a success.

My aim here is not to dwell on the technical aspects of the craft of the *darshan*, although it is fascinating to note that in texts such as Jacob Zahalon’s *Guide for Preachers* from the seventeenth century does include such advice as this:

“[The preacher] should not eat that which would be difficult to digest [and cause him discomfort. For example,] he should not eat olives, nuts, or salty foods, or cheese or legumes, for all these [foods] are [rather] harsh and harmful to the voice, and [even] tend to restrict [free] movement of the lips and the tongue.”²⁵

Then, as now, the *derasha* was understood to be an exercise in communication, and as such it required attention to be paid to physical and technical aspects of the activity – the extent to which one’s voice can be heard as much as the degree to which one’s words excited interest and

²⁴ Louis Ginzberg, *On Jewish Law and Lore*, New York 1981, 123–124.

²⁵ Henry Adler Sosland, *A Guide for Preachers on Composing and Delivering Sermons – The Or ha-Darshanim of Jacob Zahalon*, New York 1987, 151.

engagement.

Like the dimensions discussed in the previous sections of this essay, neglect of the technical dimensions of delivering the *derasha* can render the whole enterprise futile. It may be that changes in cultural habits and mores will have a profound impact on the Jewish sermon. We live in a less frontal and declaratory age, and the *darshan* may seek ways to involve the congregation in various ways in the *derasha* – drama, modern communication technology, music, and more may find their way to the preacher’s toolkit. Attention to technical aspects is a necessary (though not sufficient) aspect of the preacher’s craft.

7. An Example

In this article I have presented a number of dimensions which anyone giving, listening to, or assessing a *derasha* may wish to bear in mind – its connection to the particular moment; its functions (further distinguished as contextual, intentional, educational, and symbolic); its message; sources; structure; and the techniques involved in its delivery. These categories help provide a heuristic for assessing the efficacy of the *derasha* and suggesting ways it might be improved.

I will conclude this essay by offering the outline of a *derasha* I gave in the Murstein Synagogue of the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion in Jerusalem. The date was July 4, 2015 the same weekend as the Jewish fast of the seventeenth of Tammuz, and the weekly portion was Balak (Num 22:2–25:9). It is worth noting that the sermon was delivered in English by a person of English extraction, to a congregation comprising a high percentage of Americans.

Every Sabbath begins with an act of separation and an act of connection. The lighting of the candles represents a break from the week, but the light generated is carried over from the workaday world into the world of Sabbath. Today I want to talk about separation and connection, sanctity and proximity.

Separation is a prevalent and sometimes painful topic – it relates to the people of Israel, the Palestinians and other peoples in the region. It relates today to the people of Greece, who risk being cut off from the rest of the world. And despite my accent, I want to give you another topical expression of separation, from a document promulgated on this day in 1776:

“When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to separate.”

It is interesting to note that the American Declaration of Independence gives such central significance to the issue of separation. Freedom and separation are profoundly related.

In this week's Torah portion, separation also plays an important role, for example in the memorable verse from the prophecy of Balaam:

For from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him: lo, the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations (Num 23:9).

The Hebrew phrase here is subject to many different interpretations. Some (like the Ari, Rabbi Isaac Luria in the sixteenth century) take it to mean that God does not account the same significance to the other nations as He does to the People Israel. Others interpret it as saying that the Jews are of little significance in the eyes of the nations. The twelfth century Rabbi Joseph Bechor Shor understood the verse as saying that the People of Israel are not a nation like the others, and therefore cannot be cursed as others are. It is as if the usual rules of history pertaining to the nations of the world do not apply to the Jews.

The founder of neo-Orthodoxy, Rabbi Raphael Samson Hirsch, offered an intriguing interpretation of our verse, extrapolating the idea that it behooves the Jewish people to act as an *am*, a national social entity, and not to be tempted to act as a *goy*, a political entity in the family of nations.

At least one Rabbinical reading offered a message of toleration from the words of Balaam. Rabbi Pinchas Horowitz (eighteenth century) argued that the fact that the Children of Israel sits apart should be interpreted as meaning that we hold no grudge against other peoples, that we do not wish for their downfall or discomfort. Rather, our interest is in living out our distinct destiny.

This brief selection of interpretations of one verse from our portion demonstrate the broad range of approaches elicited by Balaam's vision of Jewish separation – for some this is a commentary on Divine will, for others a reflection on non-Jewish attitudes. For some it demonstrates the preferred status of the Jews, and for others it is taken as a warning and a call for humility and toleration.

In our day, it seems that separation is an unmitigated evil. Consider the scourge of racism gripping so many part of the world. In the immediate aftermath of the dreadful shootings in Charleston, it is hard not to bring this plague to mind, and we know with a heavy heart that this plague has not passed over the doorposts of the Israelites, as more and more expressions of fanatical separatism are to be found within our own society. And a glance at what is being perpetrated in the Middle East in the name of purity and separation is enough to show how pernicious and dangerous this threat has become.

In the face of all these examples, it is tempting to conclude that wherever barriers exist, they should be removed. However, Jewish tradition has long maintained the importance of some kinds of separation and distinction. Indeed, separation is the very first act of creation, and it is difficult to think of Jewish civilization without this urge to draw lines of distinction, along with lines of comparison.

Sometimes the breaking down of barriers is regarded as tragic. Tomorrow we will be marking the seventeenth day of Tammuz. According to the Mishnah one of the five sad events which took place on this day was that the city walls were breached ahead of the destruction of the Temple. In this part of the communal memory of the Jews, the tearing down of divisions is experienced as trauma and catastrophe.

Every Sabbath begins with an act of separation and connection, and so every Sabbath ends. The ritual of *Havdalah*, separation, is also a way of connecting with a long tradition of those who have marked the distinction between the Day of Rest and the working week in previous ages, and who do so today in very different situations than our own.

While it is tempting as liberals to adopt a position of intractable opposition to all separation, I want to suggest that as Jews and as thoughtful human beings that is too sweeping and indiscriminate a stance. I am well aware that in this city, a kilometer or two from where we pray today, there is a separation wall dividing populations. The debate about the effectiveness of this measure, and whether it is primarily connected to security or to political interests, is a debate I will not enter here. But I will say that separation enforced by concrete cannot last for long. I believe that we will need to find a way to reach out beyond the barriers and find each other in openness and dialogue.

Even closer to this place is another wall, a remnant of the ancient Temple. I hope that it stays for centuries and millennia – not rebuilt as a new center for animal sacrifices, but not removed either. While the words of the poet Robert Frost may resonate with us, we may ask when they do and do not apply:

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,

That wants it down!

I believe that even liberals and moderns, maybe especially we, need to make distinctions about distinctions. It would be convenient and simple to take an intransigent stance and speak for strict divisions in every walk of life. It is even more tempting to call for the blurring of every distinction (so many interesting things happen when traditional distinctions are challenged and undermined!). But neither of these options can work if adopted without nuance, without reflection.

As we make our Havdalah, our ceremony of distinction later today, may we know how to distinguish between a breach and a breakthrough, between a distinction of identity and a barrier of prejudice.

Balaam's prophecy of separation resonates as strongly in the 21st century as it ever has before. So much of what is taking place around us, in this society and elsewhere, could be described as the politics of separation. How can our people dwell in its singularity but not hide behind a fence? How might we envisage a future in which each of us can follow our particular path, yet feel part of a human enterprise larger in scale and significance than our own personal track?

On this day marked by some as a celebration of independence and separation, on this day of Balaam's blessing and his curse, on this day when the breach of the wall is called to mind, on this Sabbath of separation and connection, may our separations bring us closer to each other, to the Other, and indeed to the God of possibility, of solidarity, of unity.

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Since the author of this *derasha* is unlikely to be offended, I can reveal that it was not chosen for inclusion in this essay because of any particular virtue or quality. Instead, the intention is to consider a particular example in the light of the dimensions set out in this article. Rather than express a simple opinion of aesthetic preference, it may be helpful to the *darshan* for a sympathetic yet critical listener to ask – have you captured something about the particular web of moments spun on that particular day? Have you a clear sense of the kind of outcome you were attempting to engender with your remarks? Does the *derasha* fit into the context of the service during which it was delivered? Do the sources you have chosen enrich or overwhelm your argument? Is there, indeed, a structured argument which moves from A to B to C in a way which your listeners have a chance of following? Do you have a message worth delivering? Have you employed literary and performative techniques which help people to hear and engage with your words? These and other generative questions may help the *darshanit* reflect on her craft and ensure that a venerable tradition continues to be vital and resonant. They may also help the listener reflect on what would constitute a worthwhile claim on fifteen minutes of their Sabbath rest.

In this article I have not related to the *derasha* as a religious act, but it is with this notion that I would like to bring this survey of key dimensions of the Jewish sermon to a close. In his article about Leo Baeck as a preacher, Walter Homolka offers a moving evocation of a man bringing great qualities of mind and spirit to the act of preaching.²⁶ This image of a modern Jew confronting modernity both in its sublime and demonic forms and bringing forth words of truth and tradition

²⁶ *Walter Homolka, Leo Baeck – Preacher and Teacher of Preaching*, in: Deeg/idem/Schöttler (eds), *Preaching in Judaism and Christianity* (note 1), 136–154.

is a powerful one. Baeck and many others offer an example not of ‘effective public speaking’ but rather of something more elemental and more profound: the conviction that words can bolster and maintain, comfort and support, challenge and undermine. Words may even create, although the preacher would do well to avoid comparisons with the Creator, Who spoke and the world came to be. Before standing before busy and thoughtful people and taking minutes of their time, it behooves a person to place their efforts in a spiritual perspective. If a poor *derasha* is a waste of time, a worthy one can be a sanctification of time. Can there be a greater ambition than to utter a true word of Torah?

Rabbi Michael Marmor, born 1962, is the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Provost at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, Jerusalem

mmarmor@huc.edu

What's at Stake in a Preacher's Spirituality of Time?

Donyelle C. McCray

Abstract

A preacher's spirituality of time may seem like a peripheral issue, but this realm is one where much is at stake. In this article I argue that the preacher's approach to time scaffolds the overall endeavor. I begin by considering the church's unique position in time, arguing that the church is fundamentally an event or a happening rather than an institution. Then, I explore ways preaching can foreground the church's identity as an event. After describing preaching as the narration of a theological moment in the church's life, I turn to practical implications. In addition to homileticians, my primary interlocutors for this piece include two renowned spirituality scholars, Evelyn Underhill and Abraham Joshua Heschel. I conclude that ecclesiology, pneumatology, and performance are all profoundly shaped by a preacher's appreciation for the holiness of time.

Back in 2001, I made a trip to Mbale, Uganda alongside a large group of American missionaries. On our first full day serving I noticed that our stay at a given church was taking longer than expected. Mindful of the additional churches, house visits, hospital visits, and worship services scheduled for the afternoon, I turned to one of my hosts and asked what time we would be leaving for the next church. He smiled and said, "Americans have all the watches but Africans have all the time." That phrase tickled me and refocused my attention to the power of the present moment. More than a decade later, the maxim continues to offer a strong critique of Western hegemony, capitalist accumulation, and acquiescence to the clock and calendar. Even more pointedly, the saying nudges me to be more attentive to the moment for without that full engagement, how is ministry possible? How is it possible to delight in the Holy Spirit, let alone proclaim the Spirit's work among us?

While these questions began as personal ones, they have a broader relevance for the contemporary church as it negotiates periods of rapid transition. A preacher's theological posture towards time shapes the preaching endeavor in significant ways, driving ecclesiology, pneumatology, and performance. Time is not an ancillary dimension of preaching but an essential factor in caring for souls. Abraham Joshua Heschel describes time as "a predominant feature of

prophetic thinking” and notes that “The day of the Lord” is more important to the prophets than “the house of the Lord.”¹

Yet, too often preachers demonstrate a thin sense of the spirituality of time. Sometimes sermons are cluttered with a preoccupation with the past when God seemed to be doing interesting things or at least seemed more engaged in human affairs. Or, at the other extreme, sermons are absorbed with the future when God will act mightily in the consummation of the ages and listeners are left to tread water until that Great Day. In other instances preachers demonstrate little understanding of how and why time is hallowed, surmising perhaps, that a moment is hallowed because it takes place in liturgy or because a cleric is speaking. But the holiness of a moment hinges on its effect on the soul. A moment can be called holy when it satisfies some aspect of the soul's longing and emboldens God's church in its witness to the world. The preacher who regularly contributes to such moments has a dynamic vision of the church.

1. Seeing the Church as an Event

The late twentieth-century theologian, William Stringfellow had it right when he compared the American church to a principality:

“Sometimes the church yields or gravely imperils its integrity as the church by becoming the handmaiden of the ruling principalities of race, class, or commerce. At other times the church becomes so preoccupied with the maintenance and preservation of its own institutional life that it too becomes a principality.”

As Stringfellow continues, his scathing label ends up describing a church that has lost its daring, its curiosity, its willingness to reckon with the depth of the world's brokenness, and its sense of the spiritual dimensions of time.² The church-as-principality is not completely bereft of virtue, but its compassion is outmatched by an obsession with safety. The glaring symptom of this diagnosis is the prioritization of its own survival and an insistence on ease. Whether a church is becoming a principality can be determined by the answer to one simple question: Is this congregation more of an institution or more of an event?

Stringfellow sees the church as an event that happens “wherever there are no longer any separations in any separations in any dimension of creation, whether within one's self, or with others, or with any things, or between and among any of them.”³ He envisions a mystical community that flares up and flashes with divine light, though sometimes just for an hour.⁴ When

¹ *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*. Introduction by Susannah Heschel, New York 1951; 2005, 79.

² Cf. *ibid.*, 6.

³ *William Stringfellow*, *Essential Writings*. Selected with Introduction by Bill Wylie-Kellermann, Maryknoll, NY 2013, 127.

⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 124–125. Stringfellow's views here are compatible with Barth's understanding of the sermon as God's event. Stringfellow

the church happens it has the character of a movement and “breaks through time, transcends time, anticipates within time the abolition of time.”⁵ Though Stringfellow has a high view of the church, he recognizes it as intrinsically flawed. He sees the Bride of Christ as one with pimples on her face as well as deep-seated personality flaws (including paralyzing timidity and unchecked self-absorption). These shortcomings may hinder her ministry but they do not disqualify her.

I sense that Stringfellow is right on an even more fundamental level. The church is an event because, as Christ's very body, the church is alive. Further, the church lives in the very bowels of the world. In this providential position, the church proclaims life in the midst of death. The church is itself a continual utterance above and beyond whatever may be said in its liturgies. So, while the church has an institutional dimension, this character is secondary to its identity as an event, a happening, a movement. Ironically, this aspect of the church's identity may be most obvious during periods of transition. As a congregation experiences the destabilization of the church's institutional status, this true life as an event becomes clearer. In these cases, what emerges is a community of people who are trying desperately to reach out to God, to one another, and to the world.⁶ Though members of a congregation may shudder at the magnitude of the world's brokenness, they do not retreat from the world, try to control it, or silence its moaning.⁷ Instead, by the power of the Holy Spirit, they embrace and befriend the world. The church's primary gesture, then, is one of opening, unblocking, and clearing paths for God's slow work of healing and renewal.⁸ Consequently, preaching and liturgies are dimensions of time wherein a person “becomes aware that every instant is an act of creation, a Beginning, opening up new roads for ultimate realizations.”⁹ The church's posture toward time is critical because “time is the presence of God in the world of space, and it is within time that we are able to sense the unity of all beings.”¹⁰

Since the true church is an event, something is at stake in its proclamation. There is a tenor of urgency that cannot be reduced to dramatic effect. Instead, this urgency surfaces organically as the community witnesses the depth of the world's suffering. With the goal of helping the church reckon with this horror, preaching becomes less pristine, less self-conscious, and includes provisional nuggets of truth offered to the community for reflection, dissent, and refining.¹¹ The preacher also

had a strong appreciation for much of Barth's theology.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁶ Cf. *Evelyn Underhill, Life as Prayer and Other Writings of Evelyn Underhill*, ed. Lucy Menzies, London 1946; Harrisburg, PA, 1991, 56.

⁷ Cf. *Dorothee Soelle, Essential Writings*. Selected with an Introduction by Dianne L. Oliver, Maryknoll, NY 2006, 33–38.

⁸ Cf. *Mark Lewis Taylor, The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World*, Minneapolis, 2011, 135.

⁹ *Heschel* (note 1), 100.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Cf. *Lucy Atkinson Rose, Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church, Louisville 1997*, 100–101. “Proposal” and “wager” are the key terms Rose uses to discuss the need for provisionality in preaching.

manages to enter spiritual territory inaccessible to those who refuse to address the ways people are caught in the grip of the powers and principalities.¹²

The Black Church is instructive here on at least two levels. First, the Black Church offers a long history of activism and has from its genesis linked Christianity with social justice. The preacher articulates the community's dissent with the structures of oppression and holds out both a history of suffering and the conviction of black agency. Indeed, this dissent is even cultivated within the preaching moment itself as listeners openly dialogue with the preacher through call and response.¹³ The sermonic space is understood as a sphere in which evil is named, resisted, and challenged. In the best cases, this space is also one in which varying perspectives are accommodated even as a common Christian identity is affirmed.

On a second level, the Black Church provides insight on the cosmic nature of the preaching task. Sermons are not only occasions to reckon with good and evil, but occasions to reckon with good and evil in ways that challenge Western notions of temporality. Black Church ecclesiology often relies on an African cosmology in which the worshippers are understood to be not only those physically seated in the pews but also the dead and those yet to be born. This sharing of rhetorical space resembles the gathering of the church, saints, and angels at the Eucharist.

The impact of this understanding of sermonic space is exemplified in a *New Yorker* cartoon of Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Pastor Emeritus of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, President Barack Obama's former church. The cartoon grows out of the media scrutiny directed toward excerpts from two of his sermons, "The Day of Jerusalem's Fall" and "Confusing God and Government."¹⁴ In the image, Wright speaks to a congregation that includes figures of Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr.¹⁵ Though these men have long since died, their continuing influence is so profound that black preachers like Wright tend to engage scripture in a way that honors their legacies.¹⁶ Addressing the cosmic influence of the powers and principalities is an essential aspect of the preaching task.

In keeping with the Black Church tradition, the broader church is called to engage the world as well as the cosmos. This dual orientation has a long history. Christianity is comparable to Judaism in its respect for the aesthetics of time. As Heschel explains:

¹² Cf. Charles L. Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching*, Louisville 2002, 92. Other helpful homiletical reflections on the ways people are constrained by oppression can be found in *Milhaven's Sermons Seldom Heard* and *John McClure* and *Nancy Ramsay's Telling the Truth: Annie Lally Milhaven*, ed., *Sermons Seldom Heard: Women Proclaim Their Lives*, New York 1991; *John S. McClure/Nancy J. Ramsay, Telling the Truth: Preaching Against Sexual and Domestic Violence*, Cleveland, 1998.

¹³ Cf. bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* Boston 1989, 9.

¹⁴ Cf. *Keleja Sanneb, Project Trinity: The Perilous Mission of Obama's Church*, in: *The New Yorker*, April 7, 2008.

¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.* While not portrayed in the cartoon, the imagined listeners would have also included the likes of Harriet Tubman, Ella Baker, and Chicago's own Ida B. Wells-Barnett.

¹⁶ Of course, another figure present is Christ, who as Bonhoeffer suggests, walks through the congregation as the Living Word. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Worldly Preaching: Lectures on Homiletics*. Edited and translated by Clyde E. Fant, New York 1991, 101.

“Judaism is a *religion of time* aiming at the *sanctification of time*. Unlike the space-minded man to whom time is unvaried, iterative, homogeneous, to whom all hours are alike, qualitiless, empty shells, the Bible senses the diversified character of time. There are no two hours alike. Every hour is unique and the only one given at the moment, exclusive and endlessly precious.”¹⁷

The preacher needs to know how to read time, to distinguish the mood, color, and spiritual flavor of one moment from another.¹⁸ On a phenomenological level, it helps to think of the liturgy as “the conversion of time.”¹⁹ Fueled by memory, liturgy draws past and future together and magnifies the present. The gathered community experiences the present as a space of heightened vitality, a space where Christ cradles temporality and is proclaimed Lord of Time.²⁰ Moreover, the congregation experiences Sunday, the eighth day, as a “radical beginning” in which time is renewed, no longer defined by its fragmented divisions.²¹ The mutability of the created order is pronounced good and the inevitable changes and transitions of contemporary life are reframed as part of the God's design. This understanding of time raises fundamental questions about the role of the sermon in liturgy.

2. Preaching as the Narration of a Theological Moment

A sermon narrates a theological moment. The preacher's first task is to recognize the weight of the moment and the way the Holy Spirit is flooding that moment with meaning in order to help listeners dwell within it faithfully.²² By describing preaching as the narration of a theological moment, I also intend to de-emphasize the ends of scriptural exposition and pastoral care.²³ These play a vital role in helping the preacher unlock the vibrancy of the moment but they do not become ends in themselves. They remain tools for marking the theological significance of a given moment and imparting spiritual meaning to the present.

The idea of preaching as the narration of a theological moment may raise eyebrows but the approach has a long history. We might, for instance, point to the preaching of martyrs who re-narrated Roman spectacles into moments of proclamation. The martyrs awakened listeners to

¹⁷ Heschel (note 1), 8.

¹⁸ Heschel speaks to this idea when he asks, “Everyone will admit that the Grand Canyon is more awe-inspiring than a trench. Everyone knows the difference between a worm and an eagle. But how many of us have a similar sense of discretion for the diversity of time? [...] A special consciousness is required to recognize the ultimate significance of time.” Ibid., 96.

¹⁹ Alexander Schmemmann, *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann, 1973–1983*, Crestwood, NY 2000, 78.

²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 78; cf. Brandon Gallagher, *Chalice of Eternity: An Orthodox Theology of Time*, in: *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 57.1 (2013), 23–24.

²¹ Cf. Schmemmann (note 19), 78.

²² Admittedly, I am influenced by the transformational school of preaching, the idea that preaching's “primary purpose is to facilitate an experience, an event, a meeting, or a happening for the worshippers.” Rose (note 11), 60. My concerns, however, are rooted in the spirituality of time. It is also important to note that Heschel alludes to the spirituality of time when he suggests that the “higher goal of spiritual living” is to “face sacred moments.” Heschel (note 1), 6.

²³ This is not to say, that there is never a case in which a preacher might center a sermon on comforting the congregation or explaining a specific passage of scripture but that generally the preacher's task is a more integrated one.

God's active presence, thereby transforming an occasion devoted to Caesar's sovereignty into one that disclosed Christ's. In a much less dramatic way, occasional sermons rely heavily on the narration of a given moment such as a wedding, a funeral, a baccalaureate. In early New England, this list would have also included public executions or perhaps the ground-breaking of a municipal building.²⁴ In each case, the preacher relies on a heightened sense of the time and occasion. In the best cases, the preached word will break open a sense of union with God. Worshippers will experience the mutual longing between Christ and the church and gain an increased sense of the freedom inherent in Christian identity.

This assertion that the sermon is the narration of a theological moment rests on the premise that God is found in time and that a moment can be sanctified by an act of the will.²⁵ The critical issue for the preacher, then, is how to shape sacred time.²⁶ How might the preacher shape sacred time so as to proclaim God's sovereignty over time? How might the preacher shape sacred time so as to deepen the experience of unity among the listeners? Can the preacher orchestrate a moment that will affirm the congregation's agency or christen them to ask embarrassing questions of powerful people and institutions?²⁷ Can the preacher fashion the moment in such a way that listeners leave with enough pluck and grit to speak truths that desperately need to be heard--even at the risk of being insulted or misunderstood?²⁸ Ultimately, the sacred moment of the sermon ought to unify and embolden the congregation to act on the gospel's ethical imperatives. The goal here is not mere action in the world but "democratized" mysticism, the extension of holy time beyond the Sunday liturgy.²⁹ In essence, the goal might be more directly described as "union with God."

The concept of union with God tends to be reduced to a feeling of bliss that emerges from a pious moment. Yet, the renowned scholar of mysticism, Evelyn Underhill, urges a different view. She speaks of the fundamental "awfulness" of union and this awfulness is more of what I have in mind here.³⁰ Underhill describes union with God as "entire self-giving to the Divine Charity, such identification with its interests, that the whole of our human nature is transformed in God, irradiated by His absolute light, His sanctifying grace."³¹ This kind of self-offering or oblation forms

²⁴ Cf. *Scott D. Seay*, *Hanging Between Heaven and Earth: Capital Crime, Execution Preaching, and Theology in Early New England*, DeKalb, IL 2009, 14.

²⁵ Heschel says we find God's presence in time rather than in space and asserts that the Judaism is concerned with the holiness in time. Cf. *Heschel* (note 1), xiii-iv, 8. He goes on to note that sanctity is a quality "we create." *Ibid.*, xiv.

²⁶ This question was first posed by *Heschel*, *ibid.*, xiv.

²⁷ Cf. *Edward W. Said*, *Representations of the Intellectual: The Reith Lectures*, New York 1996, 11; Underhill urges continuity between the inward life of oblation and the outward life of cooperation with God's work in the world. *Underhill* (note 6), 127.

²⁸ Cf. *Andre Lorde*, *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*, in: *Sister Outsider*, Freedom, CA 1984), 40-41.

²⁹ Cf. *Soelle* (note 7), 33-34.

³⁰ Cf. *Evelyn Underhill*, *The School of Charity: Meditations on the Christian Creed*, London: Longmans, 1934; Harrisburg, PA 1991, 49.

³¹ *Ibid.*

the substance of union, weaving the church into God's creative and redemptive activity in the world.³² Union, then, means being entangled in God's free-flowing love for humankind and becoming attuned to the Spirit's work of unblocking the institutional and psychic barriers that prevent human thriving.³³ Union with God immerses the church in the ugliness of the world and yields a holiness that is "most at home in the slum, the street, the hospital ward."³⁴ If sermons in a parish regularly bear the fruit of union and oblation, the preacher is probably on the right track.

3. Practical Implications

3.1 Affirming Communal Identity

Thus far I have argued that the church is not merely an institution but an event that witnesses to God's action in the world and, that preaching involves the narration of a theological moment in the church's life. I now turn to a few practical implications and the first concerns audience. The preacher should envision his or her audience as one listening community rather than a group of individuals.³⁵ Evelyn Underhill speaks to this issue by saying the church prays "as an organism, not as a mere crowd of souls."³⁶ When this communal identity is underscored it becomes much easier for the church to recognize itself as an event. Only in community can the members of the church face the depth of the world's suffering without being overwhelmed.³⁷ Without this communal identity, the church cannot maintain its prophetic voice or thrive on the social and spiritual frontier.

Along this line, preachers may find a particularly helpful resource in the Desert Tradition of Christian spirituality. Preachers are called to the daring task of beckoning entire congregations into the wild life of the Spirit and this approach begins on the frontier with John the Baptist's "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."³⁸ John the Baptist's model was adapted and improvised by preachers like Simeon Stylites who fashioned a metaphorical desert on an elevated platform and later by the medieval English anchoress Julian of Norwich who performed a desert through her anchoritic enclosure. Despite their vocations of withdrawal, these desert preachers continually emphasized communal identity and demonstrated sensitivity to the spirituality of time.

Narrative almost always provides an opportunity to follow the desert preaching model. A narrative can speak to a community of listeners and carry the group into a different experiential

³² Cf. *ibid.*

³³ Underhill alludes to God penetrating the tangled world and using the church as channels for love. *Ibid.*, 64, 71. *Mark Lewis Taylor* describes this activity of unblocking in his discussion of Jean-Luc Nancy's "transimmanence." Taylor (note 8), 135. Taylor also sees unblocking as resisting homogeneity; *ibid.*, 138.

³⁴ *Underhill* (note 30), 67.

³⁵ Cf. *Charles L. Campbell*, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology*, Grand Rapids 1997, 221–224.

³⁶ *Underhill* (note 30), 92.

³⁷ *Campbell* (note 12), 3.

³⁸ Matt 3:2 NRSV.

realm. As Margaret Atwood explains, "Going into a narrative is a dark road."³⁹ Narrative also tends to operate on a fairly sophisticated understanding of time. Through story, preachers honor the holiness of time and enable listeners to inhabit multiple dimensions of time at once. Further, the unitive power of narrative rests in its penchant for uniting the living and the dead and in doing so in such a way that the dead make a claim on the living in the present moment. As Atwood explains, the dead "want the blood of the living, or at least they want that blood put at risk on behalf of their own cause."⁴⁰

Literary masters like Atwood also know that narrating a moment is spiritual work and rides on a current of desire. Preachers likewise do their best work when they understand the church as a community that longs for God. The church gathers in the hope that a mystical moment will break open and in it the preacher will offer a credible testimony of God's movement in the world, whether at the edge of the world's brokenness or at its epicenter. This narration of God's active presence is manna, encouragement, consolation, and most of all, a love token, a sign of God's reciprocal desire for the church. This narration also carries the invitation to continue discerning the Spirit's voice.

3.2 Providing a Posture of Discernment

And here again, the preacher's spirituality of time is central. The preacher's primary offering to the congregation is a posture of discernment.⁴¹ This posture is far more important than the preacher's homiletical method or hermeneutical skill, however snazzy it may be. The church is in a historical moment when it needs preachers who are less slick and more available in heart, mind, and body. In other words, the church needs preachers who are spiritually and emotionally engaged in the moment. Sermon preparation, then, is akin to preparation for the celebration of the Eucharist in that both roles require bringing a certain gravitas to the moment.

Ironically, that gravitas might emerge most clearly through play. Playfulness requires a certain investment in the moment. Play often indicates the preacher's appreciation for the beauty of a given moment and a refusal to rush through it.⁴² Time and again, this embrace of holy time is accompanied by speaking in a fresh and lively way and imparts a palpable spark of energy to the congregation. As a result, the congregation may suddenly find itself dwelling in the "spiritual wonderland of time."⁴³ This delightful experience carries an immediate bliss and is thus distinct

³⁹ *Mark Lewis Taylor* (note 8), citing Atwood, 157.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Evelyn Underhill understands this modeling as more of a requirement of congregational leadership than an offering; cf. *Underhill* (note 6), 140.

⁴² Underhill notes this significance when she says, "The spirit of Joy and the spirit of Hurry cannot live in the same house. But Joy, not Hurry is an earnest of the Presence of God; an attribute of the creative life." *Underhill*, *The House of the Soul and Concerning the Inner Life*, London 1947/Minneapolis 1990, 46.

⁴³ *Heschel* (note 1), 18.

from an experience of hope in the eschaton.⁴⁴ A playful sermon yields a healthy restlessness with time and serves as a joyful reminder of Christ's lordship over time. Play also interrupts routine and opens up new possibilities and perspectives.⁴⁵

3.3 Offering Language and Images

Language and images go a long way in affirming the church's identity as an event and shaping the preaching moment. The preacher's mode of describing divine action has particular significance in shaping theology. Surprisingly, it may help to speak of God as an event. Dorothee Soelle explains: "In the narratives of the New Testament God appears, God happens. If we tell stories of God and are concerned about the narrative method, we are telling what God does or how God conceals himself, how God acts. And in prayer we ask God to do something worth telling of, to appear, to show power for good, to change us. In these two linguistic forms we talk of God more as an event than as a substance. We speak from and to God, instead of 'about' him."⁴⁶

Speaking of God as an event seems to underscore the fullness of God's personality and communicate the depth of God's engagement in the world. Recognition of both these attributes strengthens the church's identity as an event.

This identity is similarly bolstered by utilizing different images for God and the church. For many mainline and evangelical denominations in the U.S., the foundational images of God and the church are king/vassal, shepherd/sheep, and father/child.⁴⁷ The power dynamics associated with these duos call for new anchoring images. One might consider, for example, the synergy of God the Potter who gently nudges the clay and does not become discouraged by the clay's flaws.⁴⁸ Foundational images for the church as event might also include the figure of God as midwife (and the church as mother), God as pregnant woman (and the church as midwife or doula), God as nursing mother (and the church as growing child).⁴⁹ Other images might include the figure of God as Cloud and Pillar or of Christ as Way.⁵⁰ In different ways, these images invite the church to see itself as an evolving community in need of continual cooperation with the Spirit.

⁴⁴ Luke Powery offers a compelling argument about the centrality of hope in preaching. *Luke A. Powery, Dem Dry Bones: Preaching Death, and Hope*, Minneapolis 2012.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Charles L. Campbell/Joban H. Cilliers, Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly*, Waco, TX 2012, 163–165.

⁴⁶ *Soelle* (note 7), 39.

⁴⁷ Lauren Winner criticizes such limited images and suggests alternatives. *Lauren F. Winner, Wearing God: Clothing, Laughter, Fire, and Other Overlooked Ways of Meeting God*, New York 2015, 5.

⁴⁸ Cf. Jer 18:1–6; Evelyn Underhill alludes to this idea of the Potter and clay when she describes the Spirit as "indwelling and moving Creation." *Underhill* (note 6), 89.

⁴⁹ Cf. Ps 22:9; Isa 42:14, 49:15.

⁵⁰ Cf. Ex 13:21–22; John 14:6.

3.4 Attending to Culture

Finally, as preachers reflect on their theologies of time, it helps to remember that time is culturally construed. The cultural dimensions of time often seem invisible but they play a pivotal role. Consider, for instance, the way William Stringfellow links time to the Fall:

“The Fall is not, as the biblical literalists have supposed, an event in time, the Fall is the era of time as such—the Fall is the time of time, as it were. Human knowledge is temporal, fallen, and, as Saint Paul emphasizes, in bondage to death. Time is the realm of death.”⁵¹

The reign of empire with its accompanying acceleration of time, multitasking, and consumerist frenzy would certainly seem to underscore the fallen nature of time.⁵² While Stringfellow's argument is a compelling one, his perspective bears a strong Western imprint. In contrast, John Mbiti, a Kenyan theologian, demonstrates a far less pejorative understanding of time. In his work he focuses on cultures that celebrate the “vividness of now” and hold an elastic sense of the present.⁵³ The result is a striking comfort with time. While they come to different conclusions, both Stringfellow and Mbiti see time as providing a grammar for understanding who God is, how God is known, and what it means to be human-- three issues that propel much of the theological content of preaching. The cultural predispositions that inform their theologies should not be overlooked.

Conclusion

For good or ill, preaching is undergirded by the spirituality of time. When preachers grasp the holiness of time, they can more effectively reinforce the church's character as a movement or witnessing event. They also become more intentional about orchestrating moments in the sermon to deepen spirituality. The ultimate result is a church that recognizes its true identity and chimes in with Dorothee Soelle's edgy “Credo:”

“I believe in god
who did not create an immutable world
a thing incapable of change
who does not govern according to eternal laws
that remain inviolate

⁵¹ *Stringfellow* (note 3), 32.

⁵² Cf. *ibid.*

⁵³ Cf. *John S. Mbiti*, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Portsmouth, NH 21990, 16, 22. Mbiti recognizes the great cultural diversity in Africa. He deliberately uses a broad brush in this project in order to delineate patterns of thinking that persist across Christianity, Islam, and various indigenous African religions.

or according to a natural order
of rich and poor
of the expert and the ignorant
of rulers and subjects
I believe in god
who willed conflict in life
and wanted us to change the status quo
through our work
through our politics.”⁵⁴

The church that proclaims this creed holds a sense of its own agency, a stake in the world's redemption, and an appreciation for the holiness of time.

Donyelle McCray, born 1974, is Assistant Professor of Homiletics and Director of Multicultural Ministries at Virginia Theological Seminary, USA

dmccray@vts.edu

⁵⁴ Soelle (note 7), 167.

Squib: Preaching with Élan

Charles L. Campbell

“God is not afraid of new things.” Pope Francis proclaimed this word at the beatification of Pope Paul VI, who implemented the vast changes of Vatican II. “God is not afraid of new things.” That is a critical word in times of transition: God is a living, moving, fearless God. Israel has repeatedly witnessed to this God of new things. This God told Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gen 12:1). This God reminded Moses at the burning bush, “I will be who I will be.” This God spoke new and unsettling words through the prophets: “Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing” (Isa 43:18–19). Similarly, Christians live and move in perpetual, unsettled transition – the transition from the old age to the new creation. Christians live in the fluid, liminal space in which the old age has been interrupted, but not yet fully overcome, by the new. In that space the Spirit blows where she will (John 3:8), repeatedly forming and re-forming the church.

The living God is not afraid of new things. Rather, this God repeatedly *instigates* newness, interrupting those places where human beings are held captive by the static and oppressive systems and structures of the world. As preachers, we do not need to fear transitions. Dynamic, unsettled change is at the heart of our lives as a covenant people who seek to serve the living God.

This homiletical orientation is particularly important today, not simply because we serve the living God, but because of the context in which we minister. Synagogues, churches, societies, and the earth itself are in transition. The old ways seem to be dying, but there is no clarity about the new that is being born. Preaching takes place in a liminal space, an in-between, threshold space in which old identities are being left behind, but new identities remain uncertain and fluid. And the death of the old can be frightening; it can lead to a kind of narrow, dogmatic seriousness. Circle the wagons! Fix the boundaries! Maintain orthodoxy! Uphold the tradition! The seriousness is warranted, for these are challenging times. But the fear and narrowness are misplaced.

In the service of the living God, there is no reason for “closed seriousness.” Rather, preaching in these times calls for Mikhael Bakhtin’s *open* seriousness, which is characterized by fearless laughter in the face of change.

“Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naivete and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being forever incomplete. It restores this ambivalent wholeness.”¹

Open seriousness is “always ready to submit to death and renewal. True open seriousness fears neither parody nor irony, nor any other form of reduced laughter, for it is aware of being part of an uncompleted whole.”² Open seriousness characterizes preaching that trusts the living God.

At the top of each of my course syllabi I have begun placing a quotation from the daring classical pianist, Hélène Grimaud: “A wrong note that is played out of *élan*, you hear it differently than one that is played out of fear.” In the midst of ecclesial, demographic, economic, political, and environmental transitions, the greatest danger for preachers is fear. The alternative is *élan*, even if we hit some wrong notes and need to laugh at ourselves along the way. And we dare to preach with *élan* because we serve the God who liberates the captives and raises the dead. We serve the God who is not afraid of new things.

Charles L. Campbell, born 1954, is Professor of Homiletics at Duke Divinity School, Durham, NC.

ccampbell@div.duke.edu

¹ *Mikhail Bakhtin*, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky, Bloomington, Indiana 1984, 123.

² *Ibid.*, 122.