

HOMILETIC JOURNAL
Vol. 38, No. 1 (2013)

Table of Contents

Articles

Disruption, Initiation, and Staging: The Theological Challenge of Christian Preaching

Alexander Deeg 3

Coming to Terms with Barth's "Third Thing": Hans Frei, Paul Ricoeur, and the Possibility of Postliberal Homiletics

Lance B. Pape 18

Listeners as Authors in Preaching - Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives

Marianne Gaarden and Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen 28

Reviews

Bible

Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and His World: The Archeological Evidence*

Veronice Miles 46

L. Juliana M. Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God's Delivering Presence in the Old Testament*

Lisa L. Thompson 48

Marc Zvi Brettler, Peter Enns, and Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Bible and the Believer: How to Read the Bible Critically and Religiously*

Leah D. Schade 50

Walter Brueggemann, *Truth Speaks to Power: The Countercultural Nature of Scripture*

Carolyn Browning Helsel 52

Media, Art, and Culture

Johanna Sumiala, *Media and Ritual: Death, Community and Everyday Life*

Carol A. Cook Moore 54

Monica R. Miller, *Religion and Hip Hop (Routledge Research in Religion, Media and Culture)*

Michael Brandon McCormack 56

Practical Theology

Antony W. Alumkal, <i>Asian American Evangelical Churches: Race, Ethnicity, and Assimilation in the Second Generation (New Americans)</i>	
Sunggu Yang	58
Martyn Percy, <i>The Ecclesial Canopy: Faith, Hope, Charity</i>	
David Schnasa Jacobsen	60

Preaching

Pablo I. Rivera Madera, <i>Preaching to Hispanic Immigrants: Practical Advice for Effectiveness</i>	
Timothy Jones	62
David C. Norrington, <i>To Preach or Not To Preach: The Church's Urgent Question</i>	
Chris Altrock	64

Theology

Phil Snider, <i>Preaching after God: Derrida, Caputo, and the Language of Postmodern Homiletics</i>	
Jacob D. Myers	66
Medi Ann Volpe, <i>Rethinking Christian Identity: Doctrine and Discipleship</i>	
R. Alexander Tracy	68
Lance B. Pape, <i>The Scandal of Having Something to Say: Ricoeur and the Possibility of Postliberal Preaching</i>	
Jacob D. Myers	70

Worship

Bruce Ellis Benson, <i>Liturgy as a Way of Life: Embodying the Arts in Christian Worship</i>	
Michael Anthony Howard	72
Ronald P. Byars, <i>The Sacraments in Biblical Perspective</i>	
Nam Joong Kim	74
Ruth C. Duck and Maren C. Tirabassi, eds., <i>Touch Holiness: Resources for Worship, Revised and Update</i>	
Carol A. Cook Moore	76
Anscar J. Chupungco, ed., <i>What, Then, Is Liturgy? Musings and Memoir</i>	
Swee Hong Lim	78

Disruption, Initiation, and Staging: The Theological Challenge of Christian Preaching¹

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Abstract: *Is today's Christian preaching really perceived as the living word of God ("viva vox evangelii") or as boredom, irrelevance and the mere repetition of conventional formula well-known in and outside the Christian community? One hundred years ago Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen struggled to find new words for their sermons in order to come closer to what Luther once called the "nova sprach de resurrectione mortuorum." A century later their question will be asked again against the background of new philosophical insights ("disruption"), liturgical observations ("initiation"), and aesthetic/hermeneutic reflections ("staging/presentation"). A theological description of preaching in the eschatological context of expectation, longing, and astonishment will be suggested.*

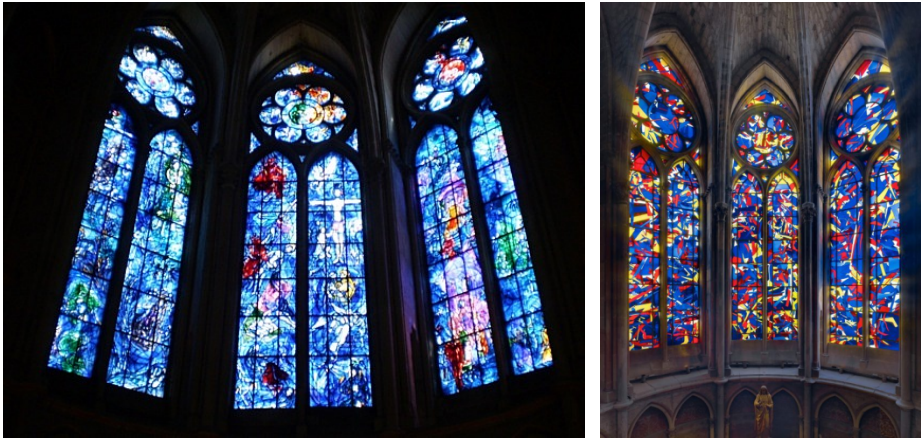
1. The new windows in Reims and the most protracted recital in the world — or: A break in perception

Reims in France is the town of the legendary baptism of Clovis I, the King of the Franks, by St. Remigius and his anointing with oil that came down from heaven. The mighty gothic cathedral has stood here since the 13th century — 140 metres long, between 32 and 55 metres wide and almost 40 metres high: the perfection of Gothic architecture! The French kings were crowned here. And here in 1974 Marc Chagall installed three windows in the eastern apse. In Chagall's work, too, there is perfect harmony — a merging and co-ordination of Old and New Testament, of Jewish and Christian, against a deep blue background.

For some months now the harmony of the cathedral has been broken. Responsible for this is Beuys' pupil Imi Knoebel, born in Dessau in 1940. For the 800th birthday of the cathedral Knoebel was commissioned to create three further windows to the right of Chagall's. Of all people a professed atheist has designed windows in a world-famous cathedral. The result (hardly surprisingly!) is by no means uncontroversial. Fragments of four different colours (blue, red, yellow, and white) characterize the windows. If one has gazed at Chagall's soothing patches of colour for long enough and grown accustomed to the mystic semi-darkness of the medieval cathedral, Knoebel's colours appear almost garish, disturbing, or even fairly "banal" — the colours of Lego pieces in comparison with the window-glass of classic church architecture. In the works of the abstract artist Knoebel, representations of figures are missing anyway. There is also restlessness in the Knoebel windows. Nothing remains fixed, unlike in Chagall, where the figure of Christ, dominating the central window, draws attention to itself. The impression of soaring space is broken.

The productions are called "Windows of Reconciliation." And it is not a coincidence that a German artist was given the contract. In 1914 German soldiers destroyed large parts of the cathedral of Reims. Not until 1938 the cathedral could be used again. Knoebel stages this "disruption" too.

¹ Lecture in Copenhagen, October 5th 2011, slightly revised.



The Chagall- and Knoebel-windows in the cathedral of Reims

A change of scene: from Reims to Halberstadt in Saxony-Anhalt. Something strange has been happening there since 5th September 2001. An organ-recital is being performed which will also be heard for years to come — more precisely: for 639 years! In Halberstadt, the longest and slowest recital in the world is taking place! The location, in which this is on offer, is no less strange: the Church of St. Burchard, almost a thousand years old, secularized at the time of Napoleon and used as a pig-pen after the Second World War. The musician John Cage once composed an organ concerto and added the instruction: “As slow as possible!” (Organ² ASLSP). Someone in Halberstadt had the idea of giving this recital really “slowly” and performing it in the half-ruined St. Burchard Church. Since then St. Burchard’s has been a magnet for tourists. People come from all over the world travel to the eastern German province, including people who have not been inside any church for years. Four films have already been shot on the subject of this recital, and the weekly newspaper “Die ZEIT” reported in its issue of 28th July 2011 on the project under the beautiful title “The Humming of God” (Das Summen Gottes).

What do the new windows in Reims and the slow notes in Halberstadt have in common? They interrupt. Both phenomena break customary perceptions: the windows at Reims a spatial impression of harmony and unity, the notes of Halberstadt a rhythm of life of the accelerating world with its imperatives of functionality and expediency (what can be rational in a recital which lasts 639 years?). In this way the two phenomena lead me to the *theological challenge of Christian preaching*. For this is my thesis: Christian preaching, i.e. a sermon which proclaims the foolish and distracting message of the Gospel (1Cor 1.18–31), disrupts connections and structures, disrupts— theologically speaking — the circles which the self-imprisoned subject has drawn around himself. And with that I propose a further excursion, this time leading to Switzerland.

2. “Not how one does it, but how can one ...” or: a homiletic re-reading of the dialectical breakthrough

The First World War breaks out on 1st August 1914. Karl Barth is working as pastor in Safenwil and is shocked — particularly because the German intelligentsia, among them even most of his theological teachers, join in the enthusiasm for war, reinforce it theologically, and exaggerate it. The date, 1st August 1914, becomes a day of transition for Barth. He writes: “For with this date there appeared — for me almost worse than the infringement of Belgian neutrality — the dreadful manifesto of the 93 German intellectuals who identified themselves openly before all the world with the war policy of Kaiser Wilhelm II and his Chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg. And among those who signed it I had to discover with dismay the names of almost all

my German teachers” “I experienced a twilight of the gods when I read how religion and science ‘were transformed completely into spiritual 42 cm cannon’.”²

At this period Barth sought new orientation and found it in the radical return to the Bible. He wanted to begin again from the beginning. Consequently he read the Letter to the Romans and writes: “I began to read it as if I had never read it before.”³ In another place he confesses:

“Paul — what a man he must have been and what kind of men were those for whom he could casually throw out and hint at these lapidary matters in a few confused fragments! . . . And then *behind* Paul: What realities must those be which could so move the man. What derivative nonsense we scribble together about what he says, of which perhaps 99% of the real content eludes us.”⁴

Barth wished to be more critical than the historically critical, more precise, he wanted to enquire more deeply — and he discovered a dynamism in Paul’s words. He discovered a Paul who wrestled with what he had suffered and experienced. One who came up against the boundary of language — and in his speech attempted to speak what could not be spoken.⁵

It is only consistent that Barth also raised the question of preaching and its possibility in quite a new way. The correspondence between Barth and Thurneysen in those years provides evidence of the significance of the work of preaching for the two Reformed theologians. In this correspondence one can read about preparation of the sermon and of reactions from the congregation; about sermons being exchanged, read, and commented on; about sermons by others from an earlier or more recent period being studied and criticized. And there, above all, is talk of the problem of preaching, of the intense rejecting and drafting up to the last minute: “I undertook the 5th and final onslaught on the whole at 6 o’clock on Sunday morning,” wrote Karl Barth.⁶ And later he writes: “Nice text for next Sunday: Isaiah 62.6–7; but how will the sermon turn out in this increasing recognition of the *a priori* impossibility of our preaching!”⁷

The sermon is, above all, the theological point where the existentially crushing question of God finds its expression and understanding — or does not find it. On 19 September 1915 Barth writes: “I preached today with the distinct impression: this *cannot* come through yet”⁸ And Thurneysen on 28 October 1917: “we are not really happy that we must in the meantime preach in this way, and the people, too, are not . . . But we must get through; other tones will come sometime, they are already discernible here and there.”⁹ In this way the struggle for the new language of theology was primarily an existential and also a biographically recognizable struggle for the language of the sermon.

Barth took his congregation into this battle, into this search, through his sermons. In a sermon from 1916 we hear: “What a helpless sighing and stammering this all is when we attempt to say something about it!”¹⁰ It is a matter of pressing through our stammering “to the living

² Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf. Nach seinen Briefen und autobiographischen Texten* (Gütersloh: TVZ, 1993), 93.

³ Ibid., 110.

⁴ Quoted according to Busch (n. 2), 111.

⁵ Cf. Christian Lehnert, “Meine Freude an Paulusbriefen,” *GPM* 64 (2009/2010): 134–42.

⁶ Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen, *Briefwechsel vol. 1: 1913–1921, Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe V/3* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1973), 119.

⁷ Ibid., 247.

⁸ Ibid., 83.

⁹ Ibid., 239.

¹⁰ Quoted according to Axel Denecke, *Gotteswort als Menschenwort. Karl Barths Predigtpraxis – Quelle seiner Theologie* (Hannover: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1989), 125.

God” (125); you dare not rest “until you can say ‘Du’ to him.” What remains is, according to Barth: to wait for God, to remain on the way, to remain seekers, “enquirers, hoppers, strugglers, discoverers of the living God. O would that we remain so. Would that we were so . . .” (126). We must all, according to Barth in this sermon, first become listeners: “O hear! Hear! . . . Hear that there is only *one affliction* in the whole of our lives: the painful struggle for life which involves the whole world. . . . Hear that there is only *one* help Hear: It is only *one* truth, life is right Hear all this. . . . But then let no one think: he *has* heard it already! O that dreadful ‘I know already!’ . . . No, we have not heard it all yet. . . . With all this it has not yet been said that you have already *heard*, you have already taken the word of God from *life*” (126).

In his expressionist form of speech Barth drives his congregation to that point where theology became new for himself: Those who know should become listeners! Barth wanted to take his colleagues in the ministry with him in this movement. Consequently in 1922–1924, Barth, in the meantime advanced to a chair in Göttingen, delivered his three famous homiletic lectures. Here the central question was: “Not how one does it, but how can one?”¹¹ If in preaching it should be a matter of speaking about God, if it is a fact, as Bullinger formulated it in the 16th century: “Praedicatio verbi Dei est verbum Dei”, then as a human being I must humbly and simply confess: I cannot do it! In his lecture “The Affliction and Promise of Christian Proclamation” in 1922 Barth asks:

“What are you doing, you human person, with God’s word on your lips? How do you come to this role of mediator between heaven and earth? Who authorized you to put yourself there and generate a religious mood? . . . Where can the talk of the wrath of God be more serious as about us ministers? . . . Moses and Isaiah, Jeremiah and Jonah were truly aware of why they did *not* want to put themselves in the situation of preacher. Church is really an impossibility. One can in fact not be a preacher.”¹²

This must first be said again to a church which has become used to proclaiming the Gospel by transmitting or conveying it (or, as we would say today: breaking down [“herunterbrechen”]). According to Barth the risk of this would be simply telling people what they want to hear. With an *either-or*, typical of early dialectical theology, Barth brings the problem of preaching before us. In his lecture “The Word of God as Task of Theology” Barth says: The preacher is a rambler on a “narrow ridge,” so narrow that you can only walk on it but not stand still — “or you would fall down.” On the one side lies the way of dogmatics—for Barth the way of a naïve, uncritical supernaturalism. On the other lies the critical way upon which we would only speak about God in constant negations (the *via negationis*) or simply say nothing. Not the one and not the other, but also not the one without the other — and that is precisely what Barth calls the *dialectical way*.

“The true dialectician knows that this medium is incomprehensible and unclear, hence he will seldom allow himself to be carried away to making direct statements . . . knowing that all direct statements *about* . . . are *not* statements *about* but are always *either* dogmatics *or* critique. You can only walk on this narrow ridge, not stand still, otherwise you would fall down. . . . So there remains only one fearsome drama for all who suffer from vertigo; to relate both, position and negation, *reciprocally to each other*.”¹³

¹¹ Cf. Barth, *Not und Verheißung*, quoted according to Denecke (n. 10), 103.

¹² Ibid., *Not und Verheißung*, quoted according to Denecke (n. 10), 118f.

¹³ Ibid., *Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe*, quoted according to Denecke (n. 10), 171f.

Preaching is not for those who cannot stand heights! So Barth calls out to his colleagues in the ministry! And I believe that about ninety years later it is necessary to hear this call again. We still need to hear this objection, for it urges us to attend to the task of the theology of preaching as a fundamental *question* and salutary destructive *questioning* in contrast to every form of preaching enterprise as boring routine. Admittedly, we have to reformulate this question *aesthetically* — for it cannot simply be a matter of cutting out the question of *form*, as Barth and Thurneysen all too quickly intended. Hence in what follows I shall take a twofold aesthetic-theological step, but first I shall attempt — ninety years on from Barth — to grasp the basic problem of today's preaching.

3. “Nova sprach”? — or: The Problem of Convention

If I were to name the greatest problem in preaching in the present day (at least in my German context) I would bring it down to one term: *conventionality*. I could also call it boredom or far too great predictability. Frank Michael Lütze describes the phenomenon expressively, which is why I shall give my colleague at Leipzig University a chance to speak in greater detail. Lütze reflects that in listening to a sermon a strange feeling could creep up on a person:

“You are already aware of that somehow. The intonation. The structure. The pulpit-jargon. The appellative undertone. The dramatic tension between text and reality which is guaranteed to be resolved immediately. And that mixture of a slightly bad conscience — whatever for is usually forgotten again by the end of the sermon — and a vague edification left behind by the sermon. . . . If this sense of *déjà-vu* was restricted to the sermons of one pastor one could put it down to his distinctive individual style or his simplicity, and the case would be closed. What is enigmatic, however, is the continuity which goes beyond person and place of certain characteristic features of preaching. Some motifs are encountered only sporadically, others appear to be related to particular styles of piety, others again are so widespread that without them a sermon hardly sounds like a sermon. What is the cause of this impression which is often described in homiletics but is only occasionally investigated? . . . There is much to be said . . . for the assumption that numerous tacitly codified rules and restrictions exist which direct the writing and delivery of sermons as well as their hearing and reading.”¹⁴

According to Lütze there is a convention for preaching (deliberately taken over or unconsciously integrated), which leads to an “It preaches” rather than an “I” preach. This convention is just the opposite of what should be heard — according to Martin Luther — in view of the novelty of the Gospel.

Luther was an enthusiastic preacher, because he had recognized how the “external word” works and so can reach, change, and liberate people. For Luther the *verbum externum* becomes individual experience and a theologically qualified event and remains that word which I myself cannot say, but for which means — preaching and the Sacraments — are employed (Confessio Augustana 5). For Luther, the dogmatic search for the *verbum externum* was homiletically bound to the search for the “nova sprach,”¹⁵ the “new language” in view of Christ's Resurrection and the good news of justification — a “new language” which can break through the “language

¹⁴ Frank Michael Lütze, “Die forma formans der Predigt. Zur vernachlässigten Rolle der Predigttradition,” in *Bibelwort und Kanzelsprache. Homiletik und Hermeneutik im Dialog*, ed. Alexander Deeg and Martin Nicol (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2010), 115–36, 115f.

¹⁵ WA 36, 644, cf. Dörte Gebhard, *Glauben kommt vom Hörensagen. Studien zu den Renaissance von Mission und Apologetik*, APTLH 64 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 109.

games” (Wittgenstein) of this world and which Luther brought into play against a Humanism à la Erasmus on the one hand, and a Roman Church, bound by tradition, on the other. This language makes children of God out of those who were far from God, and does not simply talk *about* Christian freedom but leads *into* Christian freedom. Of course it is the Holy Spirit, who changes our attempts to speak — no matter how imperfect — into *God’s* speech. This certainty, however, cannot minimize the task of preaching nor reduce the challenge of preaching. It dare not lead to the result that sermons are simply “made” and that the risk of preaching is taken into account as little as its beauty and potential.

There is, in my opinion, a negative circle of decreasing pastoral motivation that can be observed in many preachers at the present time: the sermon does not produce anything — this is the experience of some pastors. And because it produces so little but makes so much work, less effort is put into the sermon. The Internet offers one or another. And a little bit of convention can also be added. Preachers who are so little motivated ascend the pulpit and are surprised that there is even less response, etc.

In my opinion an escape from this negative circle only seems possible if the question of the *theology of the sermon* again comes into the focus of attention. Here there are three aspects which should be taken into consideration for preaching — I call them *disruption*, *initiation*, and *staging* and combine with them reflections on the content and form of a sermon which hopes that in, with and under the words of the sermon the word of the living God will occur anew and liberating.

4. Disruption or: *Xenology* and the *verbum externum*

The disruption succeeds for Knoebel in Reims and Cage in Halberstadt. Modes of seeing and hearing are challenged. The circle of the constantly renewed confirmation of what is already known and understood is broken — and people react in different ways: enthusiastic or enraged, delighted or appalled. Sermons are scarcely heard as such disruptions. They are, as I said above, too much convention. Perhaps here and there they offer a little counselling or one or other interesting piece of information or at least agreeable entertainment. All of these are, on the whole, not bad (and I am neither opposed to counselling nor to information and certainly not to entertainment or humour!). But the theological challenge of the sermon is not even in sight here. I see this as the promise and obligation to bring the disrupting *verbum externum* into view — I could also say: the word which in the contexts of our world remains *alien* and is yet *close* to us. With the key word *alien*, a cultural-philosophical discourse has been called upon, which appears to me to be significant for homiletics.

I will only take up one trail here and bring to mind Bernhard Waldenfels (born in 1934), who in the German-speaking regions has perhaps most intensively looked critically at the “Sting of the Other/the Alien” [“Stachel des Fremden”] and so developed xenology further.¹⁶ The leading question of the Bochum philosopher is: “How can we enter into something which is alien without neutralizing or denying its challenges and demands by the way we deal with its effects?”¹⁷ Here it is taken for granted that there is something alien, not just something not yet understood but, as Waldenfels formulates it, “something radically alien . . . that does not arise from any simple deficiency of comprehension and understanding but belongs in its inaccessibility to the subject and consequently also to the discourse itself.”¹⁸

Waldenfels differentiates three ways in which the “alien” can be talked about and introduces for their differentiation Latin concepts which in German can all be translated by

¹⁶ Cf. Bernhard Waldenfels, *Der Stachel des Fremden* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1990); cf. also Waldenfels, *The Question of the Other* (Albany: State Univ. of New York, 2007).

¹⁷ Bernhard Waldenfels, *Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2006), 9.

¹⁸ Bernhard Waldenfels, *Vielstimmigkeit der Rede. Studien zur Phänomenologie des Fremden 4* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1999), 9.

“fremd” but stand for different things: what is alien can be understood as “externum,” “as something external which stands over against something *internal*.”¹⁹ A second understanding sees alien as “alienum,” as something that belongs to others. A third possibility of understanding alien comes from the term “insolitum,” which describes “something which is of a different kind, which is exotic, sinister, and strange.”²⁰

In this classification Waldenfels connects the *radically alien* with the *externum*. This is not only *different* but abidingly alien.²¹ “The radicalism of what is alien does not imply that the alien is totally different from what is one’s own and familiar, but it certainly implies that it is neither derived from what is particularly one’s own nor can it be subsumed under the general.”²² [„Radikalität des Fremden besagt nicht, daß Fremdes ganz anders ist als das Eigene und Vertraute, es besagt aber sehr wohl, daß es weder aus Eigenem hergeleitet noch ins Allgemeine aufgehoben werden kann.“]

I pause here because Waldenfels’ considerations are on the one hand complex, but on the other directly suggest the transition to the theology of the sermon. The *verbum externum* could be classified precisely in this category of the *radically alien*. It is in principle in no way totally different from “what is one’s own and familiar” (how could it be, for the *verbum externum* remains for the time being *verbum*, a word which does not elude the connection to language). But in spite of this proximity it can “neither be derived from what is particularly one’s own nor can it be subsumed under the general.” Perhaps both — homiletically interpreted — are the great dangers in homiletic dealings with the external word. It can appear either as a function of what is one’s own, as an utterance of the pulpit-ego, as an expression of a strong subject in faith, as a personal idea — instead of the preacher referring to that word which even a theologically-trained pulpit-ego cannot utter from itself. Or — and this is the other danger — it dissolves into the general, homiletically most likely into the thin air of a correct theological conceptuality.

For Waldenfels the radically alien is primarily *topographically* determined and describes a specific heterotopy (Foucault), which could be called u-topian rather than a-topian. “Alien,” Waldenfels writes, “is a place where I am not and cannot be and where, however, I am in the form of this impossibility.”²³ What is alien leads to an “other side beyond *this* world.”²⁴ “Something alien which, being exceptional, goes beyond the scope of possibility of one order can be to that extent described as im-possible, and that not, for example, in the sense of an ontological, epistemic, practical or logical but in the sense of an experienced im-possibility. In both cases the hyphen points out that that which goes beyond the orders does not lead into a world beyond this world but to another side of this world.”²⁵

With the category of the radically alien the philosopher marks a moment of the transcending of this world and its perceived orders and structures. Precisely this is the disruption that in my view is what we must seek in homiletics. Not just any disruption, which brightens up the perhaps boring everyday life with something humorous from the pulpit or soothes the hectic daily life with meditative words from the pulpit, but a disruption which leads to a specific other side and so opens up new possibilities in this world. As problematic ways of dealing with what is alien Waldenfels shows us two extremes: the extreme of “*a functionalistic underestimation*” on the one hand and the extreme of a “*fundamentalist transfiguration*” on the other.²⁶ The alien may neither

¹⁹ Waldenfels, *Grundmotive* (n. 17), 111.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 112.

²² Ibid., 57.

²³ Ibid., 114.

²⁴ Ibid., 31.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 33.

be merely functionalized nor simply transfigured — and so kept at a distance from the world. Waldenfels is searching to describe a different, dialogical dealing with the phenomenon of the alien. How is such possible?

For Waldenfels what is first of all decisive is the relativization of a subjectivity strongly marked by modernity. It is modern for a strong subject to subordinate its objects. What counts here is to relativize this strong subject. And this occurs in the confrontation with the alien. The “sting of the alien” according to Waldenfels “penetrates its own flesh.”²⁷ The subject is constituted in the encounter with the alien but is thereby simultaneously restricted in its own high-handedness and power of definition. Waldenfels describes this encounter as “interplay of demand and answer”: It is “based on reception and oriented on response.”²⁸ There are “experiential demands” which *create*, provoke answers.²⁹ The subject-object relationship is replaced by a “patient”-“respondent” relationship, i.e.: In my dealings with what is alien I am initially a sufferer and only then and only as such the one who answers,³⁰ whereby suffering and answers intertwine with one another.

Based on reception and oriented on response — the homiletic treatment of the *verbum externum* could also be described in this way, if a strong subject does not think it can subjugate this word but also, vice versa, not that a merely externally alien word is venerated and admired.

Waldenfels also poses the difficult question of how we can speak of what is alien. For as soon as I find my own words, what is alien is in danger of becoming the object of my appropriation. Without uttering a single word about the theological and homiletic challenge Waldenfels hints to something like a doctrine of the language of faith. He asks:

Does a person who speaks about an alien which cannot be made one’s own not act like one “familiar with the alien” who “understands the incomprehensible”? Would he not do better “to worship in silence what he does not understand”?³¹

With a simple “Yes” to this question Waldenfels’ reflections on language in relation to what is alien would have been ended — and so would the homiletic task. Mystic silence would be the only possible reaction. This, however, would also lead to a further problematic appropriation of the alien, because the impact of the alien would become “dependent on our good will, our humble adoration or simply our curiosity.”³² Instead Waldenfels turns our attention to the way of “indirect” speech,³³ which does not “take care of” what is alien by a linguistic assault but keeps it alive in its own speech. With Mikhail Bakhtin he encounters heterophonies — and above all the *quotation* as a speech-form of this indirectness.³⁴

A person who quotes a speech is not repeating something which was said, *he is repeating the alien statement* The reduplication and multiplication of something said includes the fact that alien voices sound along with one’s own voice One who quotes is not per se the lord or lady of what is said or written. The speech within the speech is at one and the same time *a speech derived from another speech*.³⁵

²⁷ Waldenfels, *Der Stachel des Fremden* (n. 16), 8; cf. Waldenfels, *Grundmotive* (n. 17), 7.

²⁸ Waldenfels, *Grundmotive* (n. 17), 34.

²⁹ Waldenfels, *Der Stachel des Fremden* (n. 16), 7.

³⁰ Cf. Waldenfels, *Grundmotive* (n. 17), 45; cf. also the whole passage 34–55 [Zwischen Pathos und Response].

³¹ Waldenfels, *Vielstimmigkeit der Rede* (n. 18), 10.

³² Ibid.

³³ Cf. Kierkegaard’s notion of „indirekte Mitteilung“, below 7.

³⁴ Cf. Waldenfels, *Vielstimmigkeit der Rede* (n. 18), 159.

³⁵ Ibid., 161.

The quotation sits “on the *threshold between what is one’s own and what is alien*.”³⁶ With a twinkle one could note: Too bad that Waldenfels does not realize that with his “phenomenology of what is alien” he is also simultaneously formulating a theology of preaching: A theology which is just as aware of the disruption through what is alien as of the restrained subject and the limits of direct speech. In this way Waldenfels clearly leads farther forward beyond the simple disruption.

5. Initiation — or: The divine-human verbal exchange and the sermon

Waldenfels sees the quotation as an infiltration of alien speech, the opening of the monologue for dialogue. Homiletically this dialogue is embedded in the liturgical event, in the service of worship, which Luther described as a verbal exchange between God and man. When in 1544 he consecrated the castle chapel in Torgau and preached there, he spoke words that had an astonishing effect. Since the 19th century sentences from Luther’s sermon have been called the “Torgau Formula” and been made fundamental liturgical axioms (prominent, though not explicitly marked, even in the first Declaration of the Second Vatican council on the Holy Liturgy!). Luther believed that in this house nothing else should happen than “our dear Lord speaking to us through his holy word and we for our part speaking to him in prayer and hymns of praise.”³⁷

We have become accustomed to this definition of worship. At the same time, the statement found in it is tremendous: We, as human beings, enter into a (joyful) verbal exchange with the living God. This promise, this expectation lies over what happens in the service of worship as a whole. It also characterizes the sermon, which is not simply a dialogue exchange of a preacher with the congregation but only succeeds if in, with and under this horizontal another dimension breaks into the sermon and God himself speaks his word. How? Contrary to all enthusiastic directness Luther was certain: not without the word of the Bible! Hence the theology of the sermon coincides with homiletical hermeneutics.

For Luther the reading of the Bible — if it succeeds in the theological sense — means its being changed into the justifying word and so the new establishment of human existence in the external word of Scripture. Luther already stresses this in his first lectures on the Letter to the Romans in 1515/16 on Rom 3:4 along with the quotation from Ps 51:6 included in it: “Vincit [i.e. God; AD] enim in verbo suo, dum nos tales facit, quale est verbum suum, hoc est Iustum, verum, Sapiens etc. Et ita nos in verbum suum, non autem verbum suum in nos mutat.”³⁸

The central position of the sermon follows this hermeneutic-soteriological foundation; more precisely: a sermon that leads into the movement of the justifying word. Consequently Luther concludes the first section of his *Kirchenpostille*, a collection of “sermon meditations,” with the urgent call:

Therefore enter in, enter in, dear Christians, and let my interpretation and those of other teachers be only a scaffold for the true building, so that we ourselves can grasp the simple, pure, word of God, tasting it and abiding in it. For there resides God alone in Zion. AMEN.³⁹

The sermon — like every interpretation of Scripture — does not put itself in the place of Scripture but sees itself as a scaffold, with the help of which the long-completed (!) building of

³⁶ Ibid., 167.

³⁷ WA 49, 588.

³⁸ WA 56, 227, 2–5.

³⁹ WA 10, 1, 1, 728, 18–22.

Scripture can be used and inhabited in the expectation of meeting in this building the God who has made his dwelling there.

En passant, this fundamental orientation provided by Luther is taken up in Rudolf Bohren's teaching on preaching when he writes: "The preacher who *stays on the way to his text* and consequently is amazed at the infinity of the word of God and at the patchwork character of what he says will never be afraid of being bored."⁴⁰ Karl Barth, too, in his homiletic seminar described the "entry into the movement of the word"⁴¹ as the fundamental condition for the "biblicity of the sermon."⁴²

Consequently I describe a sermon as an *introduction* to the biblical word — and consider this term hermeneutically far more appropriate than if we were to talk of the sermon as an *interpretation* of the word. I encountered such a way of introduction in Rabbinic Judaism. There (in the first centuries CE) a form of sermon appears to have existed where the preachers held their sermon (d'rasha) *before* the reading of the section of the Torah intended for the Sabbath. It culminated and came to an end in the first verse of the reading of the Torah, which then followed. Thus the human word of the sermon leads into the word of the Torah, which can be heard as God's word to the congregation. The sermon opens up Scripture — and in this way, both in content and in form — points to the lasting externality without which it could not exist.⁴³

6. Staging — or: Intertextuality instead of Metascripturality

In course of this essay the main question is to be pondered more and more practically, and thus the question of homiletic hermeneutics gives rise to one of homiletic practice. How does the introduction into the words, metaphors and stories of the Bible succeed? Already several years ago Henning Luther, the practical theologian in Marburg, described the sermon as "staging." He, too, initially is led by a hermeneutic observation. He writes: "Understanding preaching as a 'staging' of a biblical text means taking leave of an understanding of *interpretation* according to the *representation model of meaning*."⁴⁴ The meaning does not lie *in* the text like biscuits in a biscuit-packet.

Meaning is . . . not something which is hidden behind (or deep within) the sentences of the language but something which takes place when different sentences/texts collide, texts come into context and *in this way* first produce meaning.⁴⁵

Consequently biblical texts must be staged, i.e. set in scenes, brought into relationship to scenes of our lives and experience. It is a matter of staging the biblical texts in the hope that truth can occur in the "constellation of different texts, of the biblical text in scenes of our world."⁴⁶

I myself proceed from a similar fundamental hermeneutic differentiation and have suggested the two concepts of scripturality and metascripturality as a heuristic hermeneutic framework.⁴⁷ Metascripturality signifies the (problematic) way of interpretation, which extracts

⁴⁰ Rudolf Bohren, *Predigtlehre* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1993), 384.

⁴¹ Karl Barth, *Homiletik. Wesen und Vorbereitung der Predigt* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1986), 62.

⁴² Cf. *ibid.*, 58–64.

⁴³ Cf. Alexander Deeg, *Predigt und Derascha, Homiletische Textlektüre im Dialog mit dem Judentum*, APTLH 48 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), esp. 475–528.

⁴⁴ Henning Luther, *Frech achtet die Liebe das Kleine. Biblische Texte in Szene setzen. Spätmoderne Predigten* (Stuttgart: Radius, 1991), 11.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁷ Cf. Alexander Deeg, „Skripturalität und Metaskripturalität. Über Heilige Schrift, Leselust und Kanzelrede,“ *EvTh* 67 (2007), 5–15.

from Scripture sentences of harmonious truths and (once these have been recognized!) in fact no longer has need of the words, metaphors and stories of the Bible. In the homiletic execution the biblical word has then done its duty at a particular point in the preparation of the sermon and can be dismissed; in another metaphor: the Bible is simply the springboard from which the preachers come upon their ideas. It is different in the *scriptural* paradigm. Here “meaning” does not appear to be that which is mediated beyond the concrete linguistic structures of a text and then can be “taken” and distributed, but as the occurrence which, in the interplay *with* the biblical text and one’s own words, happens ever (and diversely) new.

Hence the motto for a successful sermon is: Intertextuality instead of metascripturality! Homiletically it is a matter of staging an interplay of the text and contexts in the expectation that meanings are thus set free for the listeners and that the living God himself intervenes in the interplay and speaks *the* word.

This conception is significant for those preaching and those listening: In this model I as preacher have a role that is both modest and expectant. I dissociate myself from desiring to know precisely what “my” audience needs today and what I can dispense to them from the rich treasury of my knowledge or experience. I dissociate myself from distributing the “message of the Gospel” (which I apparently “have”!), passing it on or breaking it down as fittingly as possible. In other words I put an end to that well-used form of massively treating our audiences as children which is the result of a downward slope between me and them. I remain modest and settle with the hearers in the words, metaphors and stories of the Bible, take with us our world and what we meet in it, raise questions, make observations. And then let myself be surprised by what the listeners (after the sermon) tell me they have experienced.

At the same time I speak as one who is present, but am always aware that my presence dare not be “total.” My own homiletic presence,⁴⁸ if things go well, at one and the same time opens a wide space for the listeners and their direction on the one side and on the other for God’s intervention.

At this point at least a glance at a concrete sermon is requisite. According to the pericope-selections of the Lutheran Church in Germany, on Trinity Sunday quite a difficult Old Testament text is set for the sermon: Isa 6:1–13 — the account of Isaiah’s vision and vocation and his instructions to harden the hearts of the people. Michael Ebener has put a sermon on this on the page of the “Göttingen Sermons in the Internet.” Dresden, the city of the rebuilt Frauenkirche, is drawn into the vocation of Isaiah, in this cryptic text that speaks of God’s holiness as well as of the destruction of the people. The sermon time after time interweaves words of the biblical text with pictures and stories from the history of Dresden.

After the reading of the text it begins as follows:

“Should I speak now about prophets?

Of the holiness of God and this impossible demand?

Should I talk of Aramaeans and Assyrians in the 8th century before Christ and changing political coalitions?

Should I assess the manoeuvring of the King of Israel and the half-heartedness of the people who put their trust in horses and chariots rather than in the word of God?

Should I surrender myself to such a God who makes the *heart* unrepentant, the *ears* deaf and the *eyes* blind so that his people *do not repent and recover* but run unchecked into disaster?

I shall do so, but differently ...

⁴⁸ Cf. Alexander Deeg, Michael Meyer-Blanck and Christian Stäblein, *Präsent predigen. Eine Streitschrift wider die Ideologisierung der ‚freien‘ Kanzelrede* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011).

I imagine this:

In the year in which so many people died, and even the ‘greatest commander of all time’ [Hitler] met his end, initially much is as usual.

The high dome stands in heaven and rises over the city as it has done for years. The river flows peacefully under bridges made by rulers, past the Florentine backdrop: palaces, once for kings, now for art, the vault of the Treasury built of green stone. On the terraces theatre and opera, finely traced by pruned saplings.

Amidst all these stands the *Temple* — the building with the high dome!

Stands there, a little in love with itself, as always.

It is the church in which the town comes together, even *in this year*.

And inside there is light and peace, and a high sound. And an *altar*, so *high*, so sky-blue and golden, so *exalted* like a *throne*, worthy of heavenly hosts.

But no *seraphim* have ever flown through this room, not with two and not with six *wings*. Not through the arches and over the galleries. Not along the rows of seats in the round vault. The angels here are plaster and stucco — the Protestant soul is not allowed anything more.

But when one’s eyes travel upwards one senses the heaven where God dwells: *Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory* sings the building in playful innocence.

And the people sing upwards with them — sing until those days *in the year*: 13th and 14th February 1945!

Then *the thresholds* shake and *the house was full of smoke*.

And the thresholds of all the other houses in that city, poor or magnificent, shake — all full of smoke. And cave in upon their occupants who seek protection from this violent shaking in cellars and projections, behind doors and bathtubs.

The building with the high dome also crashes to the ground. In the morning of 15th February, after it has been consumed from the inside outwards by blazing hot fire, the sandstone bursts with the heat and can no longer hold the dome. It falls with all its gold and heavenly blue!

Now only pieces of architecture rise on a waste of rubble like the cramped hand of a buried giant, stretched towards heaven.

But in heaven there is no longer a sun, simply the buzzing of aircraft motors. Not angels but English bombers resound. And there is no light, simply will-o’-the-wisp tracers of the anti-aircraft guns. The bombs fall out of the tailboards like *burning coals*.

They fall on Dresden.

The city on the Elbe with its Florentine backdrop.

The city and its dome-high Frauenkirche.

And those whose *lips* are not yet burned cry: *Woe is me! For I am lost!*

On the streets the firestorm rages.

But the suffering does not make atonement — no guilt is taken away, no *impurity* wiped out, the lips not purified by an angel’s gift from the altar fire.

They also do not see God, the LORD, who weeps behind the clouds. They are not overcome by holiness because they no longer see a heaven. They die in glowing burning brightness.

And they do not understand, never understand — the horror, the night and the hell.”

Then at the end of the sermon — after having talked about the rebuilding of the Dresden Frauenkirche in 2005 — we read:

“If this church has risen again from the rubble, this does not repeat the miracle of the very first day of Creation, but it reflects the creative potential which God, the Father, has drawn upon all his human children: *Holy*.

If this church has risen again from the rubble, this is not Easter, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, but it is evidence of the strongest hope to which our faith is capable — namely that nothing is so dead and lost that it cannot be brought back to life with the help of God: *Holy*.

If this church has risen again from the rubble, it is not Whitsun [Pentecost], the pouring out of God’s Spirit upon disheartened little people, but rather a reference to the unbridled vitality and power to console in the dullest people in our world, under the rubble of so many lives, which continues to hold a sacred seed from which everything will become new: *Holy*.

If this church stands again, everything that is in us and our world which still lies *utterly desolate* can rise again.

Again and again.

The dark stones alongside the light preach this to us — the whole of the high vaulted building sings with all the seraphim:

Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts,

The whole earth is full of his glory.

AMEN.”

Certainly — there is still much left for discussion on this sermon with its many allusions and its Trinitarian ending. Nonetheless in my opinion this is a fine example of how a sermon can appear which puts a text in a new setting without explaining it first and then applying it. A sermon which does not proceed in the two hermeneutic steps of *explicatio* and *applicatio* — and in so doing all too easily tends to leave the text lying somewhere in the past — but lets it become new today amid our texts and pictures without abandoning it metascripturally and without treating the audience like children with an all too simple “message.”

7. On towards astonishment — or: Fra Angelico and the white in the picture⁴⁹

As a conclusion to me it seems to be suitable to undertake a final excursion in the context of this short homiletic journey through Europe, this time leading to Italy. Fra Giovanni, born 1395, died 1455, was a Dominican monk and one of the most significant artists of the 15th century. Soon after his death he was called the angelic one, “Il beato Angelico” or Fra Angelico. His most important works are without question the frescos which he created for the monastery of San Marco in Florence, among them the picture which has become famous under the title of “the Virgin of the Shadows.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Cf. Alexander Deeg, “‘Erkennbar besser’? Zur Diskussion um Qualität in Gottesdienst und Predigt,” *PTh* 99 (2010), 435–448.

⁵⁰ Fra Angelico, *Sacra Conversazione* (Madonna dell ombre), between 1438 and 1450, Fresco and Tempera, San Marco, Florence; cf. John T. Spike, *Fra Angelico. Leben und Werk* (München: Hirmer, 1997), 142f.



The Parisian philosopher and aesthete, Georges Didi-Huberman, was also inspired by the artistic monk and his works. He visited the monastery of San Marco in Florence — and stood astonished in front of the fresco of the “Virgin of the Shadows.” He knew it from many reproductions — and the details had always fascinated him. But what amazed him was something quite different. The picture in the corridor of the dormitory actually consists in the original of two parts.⁵¹



Almost all the art-historical books on Fra Angelico’s depiction ignore this. Under the well-known picture there are also four quite conspicuous coloured areas. On viewing this one might perhaps think: simply imitation marble in a stylized frame. *Marmi finti*, as art history calls it. “Decoration” according to Gabriele Bartz in her book on Fra Angelico.⁵² Not exciting for art historians. But for Didi-Huberman very much so.⁵³ He is amazed that one can so easily ignore something which is directly visible at eye-level. He looks further at the work of the Italian master and establishes: Areas of colour — similar to those under the “Virgin of the Shadows” — appear frequently in Fra Angelico’s paintings. Mostly in pictures of Mary, very frequently in representations of the Annunciation.

⁵¹ Cf. for the picture Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico. Unähnlichkeit und Figuration* (München: Fink, 1995).

⁵² Gabriele Bartz, *Guido di Piero, genannt Fra Angelico, um 1395–1455* (Königswinter: Ullmann Publishing, 2007), 80.

⁵³ Cf. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico* (n. 51); cf. George Didi-Huberman, *Der Mensch, der in der Farbe ging* (Zürich et al.: Diaphanes, 2009), esp. 22–25.

Didi-Huberman concludes: A considerable aspect of the artist's mastery lies precisely in that which the world interested in art ignores.⁵⁴ For Fra Angelico was aware of the limits of the representation of figures. He desired to show more than simply figures. He wanted to point to the mystery, the mystery of the Incarnation. God becomes man — and Mary represents this completely incomprehensible combination of the divine and the human. The meeting of heaven and earth cannot be pictured in detail — and Fra Angelico has found a representation which corresponds to this.

This thesis can certainly be debated in the history of art, but it appears interesting hermeneutically. In an analogy to preaching and the service of worship one can ask: Are not exactly these things decisive in worship and preaching, which are not easy to express, and which cannot be transmitted directly? Are here, too, — metaphorically speaking — the areas of colour not at least as important as the painted figures? This elegant sentence stems from Søren Kierkegaard:

It is not knowledge which is lacking in a Christian country but something other, and one person cannot directly communicate this other to another person.⁵⁵

That is why Kierkegaard sees proclamation as *indirect communication*.⁵⁶ In the meantime our more or less Christian societies may be lacking of knowledge; but what is decisive in preaching lies as before in what is not “simple”, what cannot be transmitted “directly.” What matters is the disruption which teaches a new way of perceiving, the introduction which leads us into the words, metaphors and stories of the Bible, and the staging of that intertextuality which transcends and changes our world — and which altogether make the expectation great that our verbal attempts, our stammering and stuttering, lead us to that word which God himself speaks to us — terrifying or liberating.

⁵⁴ Cf. also Mark Rothko's paintings which were to a large extent influenced by Fra Angelico; cf. Diane Cole Ahl, *Fra Angelico* (Berlin: Phaidon, 2008), 224.

⁵⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Abschließende unwissenschaftliche Nachschrift zu den Philosophischen Brocken*, 2. Teil, in: *idem, Gesammelte Werke*, 16. Abteilung, vol. 2, (Düsseldorf et al.: Diederichs, 1958), 328.

⁵⁶ Cf. also Alexander Deeg, „Predigt oder ‘Sonntags-Geklapper’? Homiletische Fragen im Anschluss an Albrecht Haizmanns Darstellung der Predigtlehre Kierkegaards“, *PTh* 96 (2007), 431–442.

Coming to Terms with Barth's "Third Thing": Hans Frei, Paul Ricoeur, and the Possibility of Postliberal Homiletics¹

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Abstract: *In the wake of modernity and all across the theological spectrum, preaching has proven adept at evading or enlisting the Bible, but resistant to taking it seriously on its own terms. Karl Barth's theology is an important resource for moving beyond this impasse, but does not offer a compelling account of how biblical language and sermonic language properly conformed to it participate in God's free act of self-communication. The narrative hermeneutics of Hans Frei and Paul Ricoeur point the way toward such a critically informed postliberal homiletic. In particular, Ricoeur's notion of threefold mimesis is appropriated to propose criteria for evaluating sermons in terms of their ability to pay against three debts: a debt to the actual (mimesis₁), a debt to the real (mimesis₂), and a debt to the possible (mimesis₃).*

Although it is common to label contemporary preaching as either liberal or conservative, most of the hermeneutical moves made in North American pulpits on any given Sunday are better understood simply as modern. The distinction between "left" and "right" may serve well in identifying clusters of ethical priorities and socio-political commitments, but it does not, as some suppose, correspond to a great difference in approaches to scripture.² The modern bid to manage and explain the Bible rather than listen to it may manifest as "liberal" embarrassment at the Bible's cultural infelicities and skepticism at its audacious claim to name God's agency in the midst of human contingency; it may also manifest as a settled "conservative" certitude that refuses to risk encounter with an untamable Other, and so reduces mystery to a system of propositions, or worse, tips for living. All across the theological spectrum, autonomous modern selves have proven remarkably adept at evading or enlisting the Bible, but highly resistant to taking it seriously on its own terms.

For those seeking theological resources for moving beyond this impasse, Karl Barth is a key figure. Barth's context placed him at odds with theological liberalism, but only those who fail to read him carefully can easily dismiss him as conservative. Rather, Barth insisted that the real issue for preachers—liberal, conservative, or otherwise—is the deep and often hidden question on the hearts of those who find their way to church on Sunday: "Is it true, this talk of a loving and good God, who is more than one of the friendly idols whose rise is so easy to account for, and whose dominion is so brief?"³ This question may be buried; its askers may have half-forgotten it. The danger is that they may be all too willing to be put off the question, at least for a while, by preaching that soothes them in their bourgeois complacency, or scatters their deep wonderings before a hail of relentlessly practical bullet points. When preaching is reducible

¹ The ideas and much of the language presented in this article are part of a larger project, *The Scandal of Having Something to Say: Ricoeur and the Possibility of Postliberal Preaching* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013).

² For the claim that conservative interpreters who profess a "high" view of scripture should be characterized as modern (albeit *early-modern*) in their hermeneutical disposition, see George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 117.

³ Karl Barth, "The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 108.

without remainder to the saying of the best things we humans can think of to say to one another, it makes a mockery of the deep theological question the hearer brings to the preaching moment. Barth's charge is that people really have been put off by such preaching, and that the modern decline of the church is an indication of how "unspeakably disappointed" people have become with an institution that has refused to understand, to take seriously, and to respond courageously to their ultimate need.

Barth insists that the very possibility of a preached word that speaks to, and not merely out of, this situation rests with the question of the Bible. The great need to know the truth about God is met in the promise of *biblical* preaching. This is the place where the notion of Christian preaching as a conventionally plausible human word offered earnestly and with great good will meets its crisis; such preaching always pretends to be biblical, yet one can scarcely imagine a less likely resource for this kind of well-intentioned human talk than the Bible. The Bible is poorly suited to such efforts not only in the case of the occasional "text of terror"—not only where its cultural remoteness is most acutely felt—but in its entirety. For when it is taken seriously, the Bible opens onto a vista that is bewildering to human eyes in every age, a "strange new world" that claims to be nothing less than "the world of God."⁴ Indeed, so strange and awful is the promise of the Bible for Christian preaching that it will speak to the people's question by first exacerbating it; it will probe the need and recast the question until it is truly a need for and a question about the God who speaks through scripture.

It is in light of this exegesis of the extraordinary practical situation presupposed in the preaching moment that Barth proffers his theology of preaching as a word (1) spoken to the human situation from beyond the human situation, and (2) mediated by the Bible. These two aspects of Barth's theology of preaching are present in his definition of preaching⁵ and become explicit in his discussion of that definition: "First, God is the one who works, and second, we humans must try to point to what is said in scripture. There is no third thing."⁶

The "Third Thing"

But there is a "third thing," and it is precisely the thing that is missing from Barth's own attempt at building a homiletic from this foundation. Based on lectures given at Bonn in 1933, Barth's *Homiletics* is a polemical work shaped by extraordinary circumstances. Barth was convinced that preaching in Germany had lost its grounding in the authority of scripture and so had nothing to say to a culture moving rapidly to the brink of ethical catastrophe. With Nazis beginning to surveil his lectures and the undistinguished and aging homiletics instructor at Bonn already firmly in the camp of the German Christians, he announced that he would be giving a series of lectures on homiletics. Not surprisingly these lectures, published from the notes of an admiring student some thirty years later, are monomaniacal in their focus on exegesis and without nuance in their critique of rhetorical considerations that Barth associated with preaching's ineffectual and accommodationist past.⁷ As a result, *Homiletics* is forceful and clear in what it rejects, but less helpful in advancing a constructive proposal. Calling simply, perhaps simplistically, for the preacher to conform the sermon to the "distinctive movement of thought in

⁴ Karl Barth, "The Strange New World within the Bible," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 33.

⁵ "Preaching is the Word of God which he himself speaks, claiming for the purpose the exposition of a biblical text in free human words." Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, trans. Geoffrey William Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 44.

⁶ Barth, *Homiletics*, 45.

⁷ See William H. Willimon, *Conversations with Barth on Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 160.

the text,”⁸ Barth launches an eloquent assault on rhetoric arguing against sermon introductions and conclusions, against contextual relevance, and against imaginative aesthetic evocation. The resulting homiletic is inspiring in its clarion call for preaching that leverages the otherness of the text in order to have something to say to the context; but it is also, ultimately, unworkable. Missing is an account of what is actually involved in identifying and then sermonically representing the “distinctive movement of thought” in a biblical text.

Barth was suspicious of hermeneutical theory, which he understood as a misguided attempt to solve an illusory problem: the supposed gulf between the ancient text and the contemporary context. For Barth, elaborate second-order accounts of how texts should be interpreted tend to recast the meaning taken from the biblical text as a human achievement, and ultimately represent yet another form of evasiveness before the God that addresses us in scripture. Following Kierkegaard, Barth insists that the gulf at issue in the preaching situation is of the infinite and qualitative variety—a distance and difference beyond the powers of any hermeneut, and so traversable only from the other side by a miracle.

But even if we—preachers who want to have something to say in response to the profound theological question presupposed in the preaching moment—agree with Barth that scripture is best approached as a word addressed to the present by a living God, the fact remains that such an address is mediated by language that must be appropriated. One need not question God’s sovereign freedom to meet (or refuse to meet) us in the text in order to note that such encounters are borne by carefully chosen language through which something is both said and done. In other words, the mandate for clear thinking about hermeneutics, rhetoric, and poetics is not primarily a concession to the cultural distance at issue in Bible reading, but rather a consequence of the nature of language itself, especially written language. Interpretation theory cannot truly be avoided in theology; when ignored it simply goes uncriticized.

Of course Barth could not really shun such considerations, even if he refused to integrate them explicitly into his homiletic. I am certainly not the first to note a discrepancy between Barth’s invective against rhetoric and his own practice as both a preacher and prose author.⁹ On some level Barth understood that there must be a “third thing,” but he failed to appreciate its true significance for theology and preaching. In brief, the “third thing” means thinking more about how scriptural language and sermon language participate in God’s free act of self-communication. Such thinking is indispensable for those who want to understand Christian preaching more deeply and teach it more effectively; and it is the central concern of this project.

So while Barth’s theology supplies a solid framework for thinking about the challenges preaching faces in the wake of modernity, the task of expounding a workable homiletic consistent with his vision remains and depends upon the intermediate work of explicitly wrestling with issues of hermeneutics and poetics implicit in his practice, but absent from his homiletical theory. More specifically, the task is to venture an account of how the language of scripture (and in turn the language of the sermon properly conformed to scripture) does what Barth claims that it does: mediate a word from beyond the human situation to the human situation.

⁸ Barth, *Homiletics*, 49.

⁹ For examples of rhetorical sophistication in his preaching, see Karl Barth, *Deliverance to the Captives* (New York: Harper, 1961). With respect to his prose, Stephen H. Webb has shown that Barth’s peculiar brand of theological poetics was structured around a rhetorical one-two punch of first exacerbating the crisis of doubt (hyperbole), before twisting conventional assumptions in a surprising reversal (irony). Webb, *Re-Figuring Theology: The Rhetoric of Karl Barth*, SUNY Series in Rhetoric and Theology (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

Hans Frei and Paul Ricoeur: Toward a Postliberal Homiletic

In 1982 Haverford College hosted a Symposium on Narrative Theology at which the two most prominent scholars in the field at that time, professors Hans Frei and Paul Ricoeur, were invited to present papers and respond to one another's work. To this day, these two figures make exceptionally generative conversation partners for anyone interested in exploring the "third thing." But in many ways, it is surprising that Frei and Ricoeur would even be mentioned in the same breath. In fact, the symposium was, so far as is known, their only meeting, and one can scarcely imagine more divergent paths to a shared destination.

While Frei wrote slowly and published little, virtually all of it in the highly circumscribed field of biblical hermeneutics, Ricoeur enjoyed a long, prolific, and very public career, with a record of scholarly production legendary for its quality, scope, and volume. His published intellectual odyssey is staggering, engaging every major figure in the philosophical tradition and including "detours" of remarkable depth and insight into fields as diverse as psychoanalysis, general and biblical hermeneutics, philosophy of language, historiography, and narrative theory. Frei called himself a theologian and a historian, but had little regard for philosophy; Ricoeur described himself precisely as a philosopher, albeit one who was also "a listener to Christian preaching."¹⁰ Frei understood himself as a Christian whose life's work was to give an account of how Christians have read and should read the Bible; Ricoeur's work in biblical hermeneutics is just one exercise among many in service of the his larger project of exploring what it means to be human. Although he has been highly influential in biblical studies, a few years ago when Ricoeur passed away, many of the public eulogies celebrating his intellectual accomplishments and praising his irenic spirit showed no interest in or even awareness of his contributions to Christian theology and biblical hermeneutics. By contrast, though Frei's work commanded significant and growing interest among specialists in biblical studies and theology, his untimely death in 1988 went largely unnoticed in the wider academic world. So despite their shared passion for exploring the meaning of biblical narrative, Ricoeur and Frei come to the conversation from very different intellectual backgrounds.

Yet despite their contrasting intellectual contexts and styles, in the field they share, the interpretation of biblical narrative, the similarity of their approaches is striking. Though they come at the problem of the "third thing" from very different perspectives, any differences between Frei and Ricoeur are best understood against the backdrop of their shared convictions—a common ground that makes the tensions between their approaches all the more salient and generative.

Three features common to their approaches to biblical interpretation merit consideration. First, both agree that modernity's search for the meaning of the Bible (and so the essence of Christianity) "behind," "above," or otherwise apart from the biblical text is misguided. Ricoeur's work presumes that religious language is meaningful in its own right, and he privileges its ancient forms, speaking of the need to "get as close as possible to the most *originary* expressions of a community of faith."¹¹ When Ricoeur thinks of getting to the heart of the matter, he thinks not of the history or experience concealed behind the text, or abstract religious truths floating above the text, but of a return to the language of the text itself.

This turn to language means that Ricoeur, like Frei, vigorously rejects the assumption that the genre of narrative—the form of the biblical witness—is a dispensable vehicle for the

¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, "Naming God," in Wallace, Mark I., ed., *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress: 1995), 217.

¹¹ Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," in Wallace, 37 (emphasis in original).

transport of some abstractable religious freight that can and should now be borne with greater precision by categories less taxing to the credibility structure of the modern sensibility. They agree, in other words, that narrative is integral to the Christian understanding of God, and it is *in* and *in terms of* the biblical stories themselves that such understanding is properly sought.

Second, and following closely from this shared interest in paying close attention to the language of the biblical witness, is their agreement that the language of the text signifies by making available an alternative “world.” Both of these theorists want to speak of a textual world in order to communicate how immersive, immediate, and pervasive for the reader are the new options that open through an encounter with the language of the text. For both thinkers, to speak of a textual world is an attempt to name the way a text mediates access to “something more” than one is able to achieve independently through reflection on experience. The textual world is not primarily a window into other times, places, and events, but a present alternative to the reader’s prior settled construal of life and its possibilities.

Ricoeur is more explicit and precise than Frei in elaborating this notion of a textual world; and for Ricoeur this is not a special feature of biblical discourse, but a general hermeneutical claim about written discourse. Furthermore, for Ricoeur the world of the text is a site of interaction with, not domination of, the reader’s pre-self-understanding. Frei makes no general claims about the world-making power of texts, but asserts that the church, through long practice, has come to understand the function of this particular collection of “realistic narratives” as establishing the world in terms of which the ecclesial reader comes to understand her life. Frei emphasizes that for most of its history, the Christian church understood the Bible to offer a seamless account of “the one and only real world”¹² from its created beginning to its anticipated consummation—a depiction that functions to incorporate and provide the context for making sense of the reader’s present everydayness. It was Frei’s Yale colleague and close ally George Lindbeck who put the matter most memorably: “It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text.”¹³ In a post-critical context, this claim must exchange descriptive for prescriptive force: now that even the ecclesial reader is aware of other compelling ways of construing the world, the Bible’s proffer of an inhabitable world of meaning that may transform human subjectivity depends upon the reader’s cooperation.

This leads to a third feature of biblical hermeneutics broadly shared by these theorists: the conviction that full access to the world of meaning made available by the biblical text is necessarily a function of one’s cooperative disposition toward the text. Again, for Ricoeur this is a general hermeneutical principal applicable to all texts. And Ricoeur maintains that this sympathy with the textual itinerary of meaning is always held in tension with the need for critical distance. The move toward appropriation can be described as reading under a “vow of obedience,” which is in turn balanced by distanciation under a “vow of rigor.”¹⁴ Ricoeur employs a number of metaphors for this disposition of cooperation with the textual agenda, ranging from the more passive notion of allowing oneself to be drawn into the “aura” of the text,¹⁵ to a more

¹² Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 3.

¹³ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 118.

¹⁴ “Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience.” Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 27.

¹⁵ “But then I must quit the position, or better, the exile, of the remote and disinterested spectator.... No interpreter in fact will ever come close to what his text says if he does not live in the aura of the meaning that is sought.” Paul

determined and intentional willingness to “follow the arrow of the sense.”¹⁶ Ricoeur understands that the biblical text in particular makes exceptional demands upon the disposition of the reader that correspond to the extraordinary nature of its subject matter and its claim to “name God,” but the idea that textual meaning is a function of cooperative reading is universal for Ricoeur. For Frei on the other hand, the disposition of the believer toward the Bible is not a regional instance of a general hermeneutical principle. Rather, this particular text has a special relationship with ecclesial readers. It is only within the church with its distinctive practices and commitments that the text can be properly followed. Christian community is the concrete situation, the particular form of life, from within which the unique and unsubstitutable identity disclosed in the New Testament can be recognized and embraced as the risen Lord. As is so often the case, Ricoeur and Frei follow very different routes to similar judgments.

A Ricoeurian Proposal: Preaching as Threefold *Mimesis*

While I have emphasized the features common to their hermeneutical projects, there are important differences between Frei and Ricoeur. Frei was not engaged in an attempt to show how the Bible is true according to some external canon of truth. As a believer, Frei was surely committed to the truth of the biblical story, but as a thoroughgoing nonfoundationalist, he saw no advantage to arguing the case publicly. Shunning talk of truth and reference, Frei was satisfied with the more modest project of explaining how the Bible is meaningful for its ecclesial readers. Furthermore, his eventual focus on the idealized ecclesial community of interpretation as the guarantor of textual meaning bypasses the important issues of context and poetics that complicate the text-to-sermon move. For all its strengths, Frei’s account does not offer what homiletics requires, namely, guidance about how to shape sermonic language that is at once creative in its fidelity to the text, and faithful its engagement with a novel context. The modesty of Frei’s project limits its capacity to fund a robust and pedagogically useful account of the text-to-sermon process.¹⁷

Ricoeur’s project was more ambitious. As a Christian, Ricoeur shared key features of Frei’s basic orientation toward biblical narrative; but as a philosopher, he wanted to make claims about the truth of the Bible that could be argued publicly. Doing so involved him in the complicated philosophical project of challenging the modern epistemological assumption that all real knowledge is verifiable knowledge about objects that is available to an autonomous and objective knower. For Ricoeur, the Bible does make (potentially falsifiable) claims about what is the case, but it makes them in a domain more akin to poetic than scientific or descriptive discourse. Frei and Ricoeur would agree that close attention to the form of biblical narrative supports the conclusion that what we have in scripture is not accurate report, but rather adequate testimony. But it was Ricoeur who accepted the challenge of thinking more about the truth-bearing capacity of such testimony, and about how the truth claims mediated by poetic testimony

Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 294.

¹⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 94.

¹⁷ In his carefully argued book *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), Charles Campbell has worked out the homiletical implications of Frei’s work in detail. For a discussion of Frei’s project, and a critical engagement with Campbell’s homiletical appropriation, see Pape, *The Scandal of Having Something to Say*, 17-48.

are appropriated contextually by cooperative readers. As a result, Ricoeur's hermeneutics are a rich resource for homiletics.¹⁸

For those who think about preaching, one of Ricoeur's most generative proposals is his account of narrative hermeneutics as threefold *mimesis*. Appropriated for homiletics, Ricoeur's narrative theory offers a glimpse at the inner workings of the text-to-sermon move, a way to think with some precision about how the Bible's poetic testimony does its work on the preacher who reads on behalf of a community. Ricoeur's account of the narrative function builds upon the Aristotelian notion of *mimesis*, which is best understood not as slavish "imitation," but rather as the representation of human action in time through emplotment. In order to develop and extend this notion, Ricoeur divides mimetic activity into three parts, or moments, which he designates *mimesis*₁, *mimesis*₂, and *mimesis*₃.

*Mimesis*₁ points to the way all narrative is built upon pervasive assumptions that make narration possible—shared conceptual strategies for imagining human action (e.g., agent, motive, goal). In other words, *mimesis*₁ names a basic assumed competence in the categories of practice, an ability to recognize and navigate the practical field, which can be imagined as a network of interrelated answers to questions of "what," "why," "who," "how," "with whom," "against whom," and so on.¹⁹ This is the conceptual apparatus that permits us to distinguish human action from mere movement. The poetic representation of human action begins with, works within, and builds upon such given cultural codes for recognizing, organizing, and evaluating human action. *Mimesis*₁ is Ricoeur's acknowledgement that every experience worthy of the designation "human" has already been *prefigured* within a framework that renders it patient of narration.²⁰ *Mimesis*₁ means that we come to every narrative text with a readiness to see our own lives as a story, indeed with some vague sense of our lives as already an inchoate narrative.²¹ We are searching for the plot.

*Mimesis*₂ is the domain of the poetic work proper; it designates the characteristics of a narrative text as a composition. Ricoeur emphasizes that *mimesis*₂ is explicitly an operation through which brute temporal experience is augmented and rendered intelligible.²² It is not

¹⁸ Although Ricoeur's work is widely recognized as homiletically suggestive, detailed appropriation of his work for preaching is surprisingly rare. Though not developed extensively, two exceptions with respect to the application of Ricoeur's narrative theory to homiletics are Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 45-53, and Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1996), 93-99. For a discussion of Ricoeur's general interpretation theory in relation to homiletics, see Nancy Lammers Gross, *If You Cannot Preach Like Paul...* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 92-105. For an extended discussion of Ricoeur's philosophy of language, theory of metaphor, phenomenology of reading, hermeneutics of testimony, and narrative theory applied to the question of biblical discourse and preaching properly conformed to it, see Pape, *The Scandal of Having Something to Say*, 49-146.

¹⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 55.

²⁰ This is close to what Stephen Crites has called "the narrative quality of experience." Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 65.

²¹ Homiletician Thomas Long elaborates this Ricoeurian notion, describing our sense of our everyday lives as fragmented but suggestive almost stories: "But even though life at the level of *mimesis*₁ is a cluster of shards and fragments, nevertheless all of the ingredients for a narrative are in place.... There are actors, there is action, and there are motives, partial and fragmented though they may be. This is *mimesis*₁—a narrative lurking beneath the rippled surface, a narrative ready to happen." Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, 46.

²² "[L]iterary works depict reality by *augmenting* it with meanings that themselves depend upon the virtues of abbreviation, saturation, and culmination, so strikingly illustrated by emplotment." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 80 (emphasis in original).

simply the mimicking of human action, but the creative reworking of incidents into a whole in accordance with the logic of a rule-governed imagination. The “one thing after another” of a raw episodic sequence is *configured* as a plot through a number of devices including (1) the selection of events, (2) their arrangement and discursive expansion so as to achieve the more or less subtle attribution of cause and effect relationships, and especially (3) the demarcation of a beginning, middle, and ending, thereby supplying the governing framework within which all of the plot’s incidents must be appreciated as belonging to an intelligible whole.

Finally, *mimesis*₃ refers to the dimension of mimetic activity related to reading and appropriation. In the case of narrative discourse, appropriation means that the reader’s own temporality is *reconfigured* in light of the configuration (*mimesis*₂) encountered in the text. Because they are normally told in the past tense, narratives create the surface impression of “referring back” to something behind them, but they actually “refer forward” in the sense that only through the act of reading is a narrative’s world unfolded and its discursive destiny fulfilled. *Mimesis*₃ points to that site “between” the text and the reader where the world projected by the text intersects with the world of the reader and, through what Gadamer has called a “fusion of horizons,” engenders new possibilities for being in time. In other words, *mimesis*₃ names the way the reader’s own life narrative interacts with and is transformed by the encounter with the narrative text: “I shall say that *mimesis*₃ marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader; the intersection, therefore, of the world configured by the poem and the world wherein real action occurs and unfolds its specific temporality.”²³ To appropriate a narrative is not just to understand it at arm’s length, but to understand oneself and one’s relation to reality anew before it, and thus to put it to work in the world of action.

The essential point for successfully appropriating Ricoeur’s narrative theory for homiletics is that just as the preacher’s engagement with the biblical text during sermon preparation can be grasped in three mimetic moments, so also the preached sermon in the hearing of the church will be marked by each of these three mimetic moments.²⁴ Formally, the sermon is an instance of *mimesis*₂. But because the sermon is a performed interpretation explicitly tied to the preacher’s prior hermeneutical encounter with the biblical text on behalf of the church, it is a special form of *mimesis*₂ activity that will itself more or less adequately reflect each of the three mimetic moments of the preacher’s engagement with the text. By analyzing a sermon through the lens of threefold *mimesis*, prescriptive criteria emerge for evaluating its capacity to navigate the demand for a discourse that is creative in its fidelity, and faithful in its novelty. The sermon can be judged according to its ability to discern and represent the congregation’s narrative prefiguration (*mimesis*₁), its willingness to engage and display the narrative world configured by this particular biblical text (*mimesis*₂), and its capacity to render seriously imaginable the refigured way of being made available through an encounter with this textual world (*mimesis*₃).

Understood through the categories of threefold *mimesis*, the preacher’s task in the sermon can be evaluated in terms of its success in paying against three debts. *Mimesis*₁ shows us that in order to read well on behalf of others the preacher must appreciate the narrative self-understandings that have shaped them. But the relevance of *mimesis*₁ to homiletics goes beyond the preacher’s conscious attempt read so as to mediate a hermeneutical encounter that will

²³ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 71.

²⁴ In *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, homiletician Thomas G. Long briefly explores the implications of Ricoeur’s threefold *mimesis* for preaching (45-53). In what follows, and especially in the lengthier treatment in *The Scandal of Having Something to Say* (121-146), I attempt to build upon Long’s insight of relating Ricoeur’s narrative theory to homiletics.

recognizably belong to the congregation. There is also a sense in which the sermon—though itself a mimesis₂ discourse—will have more or less explicit features traceable to this mimesis₁ aspect of the preacher's surrogate hermeneutical engagement during the sermon preparation process. Because the sermon is a performed interpretation that recapitulates the preacher's engagement with the biblical text on behalf of the congregation, specific features of the congregation's prefigured narrative self-understanding will manifest in the sermon in a variety of ways. In other words, the sermon must pay against a *debt to the actual* circumstances and prefigured temporality of the congregation.

Mimesis₂ draws attention to the obligation of sermonic discourse to be conformed to—both funded and constrained by—the biblical text. If mimesis₁ calls for the preacher to go to the text on behalf of this particular ecclesial community, mimesis₂ reminds us that it is this particular text to which she is sent on the church's behalf. The second mimetic moment directs the preacher's attention in minute detail to the language of this biblical text and the world it displays. More profoundly, mimesis₂ points to the way the preacher's task in preaching is conducted under a *debt to the real*—namely, the reality of God that is the issue of the biblical text. God is not an object that can be referenced directly by descriptive discourse. But biblical faith confesses that God has given signs of God's self in history, and thus biblical poetics is a bid to bear witness to the reality that lingers beyond the horizon of all our significations in stories that give language to the mysterious reality of God's presence amid the contingencies of human history. These stories show the reader a world organized around the reality of God and invite her to explore the possibility of her own world transformed by that reality. Understood in this way, mimesis₂ suggests that preaching is biblical only to the extent that it wrestles with the reality of God named in scripture.

Finally, the third mimetic moment emerges as a synergistic interaction between the first and the second. Mimesis₃ is the site of a meaning event in which something new is generated that did not already exist in either the reading community or the inscribed text alone. The given prefigured temporality of the community meets the configured temporality of the plot to generate a third thing: the congregation's self-understanding reconfigured through an encounter in the world projected in front of this biblical text.

During sermon preparation, the preacher's surrogate reading is the locus of the original sighting of this new world of possibilities. She has consciously taken up the prefigured temporality of the church as her own and approached the biblical text's configured plot on their behalf. As she reads there is an expectation that something will be seen—something new and previously unavailable that will emerge from this particular reading, for this particular people, at this particular moment. We can speak of “going into” the world in front of the text to see this new possibility, but it is just as true that mimesis₃ marks the site of reentry into the domain of practice, for the adventure in the world in front of the text is at once a departure from the given, and a confrontation with new possibilities that are practicable in the everyday world of human affairs. The eventfulness of the third mimetic moment has the quality of a discovery for the reader/preacher. She knows when something has happened, when the spark of imagination leaps between the prefigured situation and the configuring plot, showing by its quick light the new thing that is possible. Just as the first two mimetic moments, mimesis₃ will also be reflected in the preaching event itself. The sermon will give voice to this new thing that the preacher has experienced in the world in front of the text. As performed interpretation and model reading, the sermon will facilitate the community's appropriation of the biblical text by pointing toward the new way of being it makes available. If mimesis₁ entails a “debt to the actual” prefigured

situation of the church, and mimesis₂ insists that the preacher work under a “debt to the real” referenced by the biblical text, mimesis₃ places the preacher under an obligation of equal seriousness, namely, a *debt to the possible*. In other words, just as the preacher is liable for interpreting on behalf of this particular community, just as she is responsible for ensuring that it is this particular biblical text that receives her obedient attention, it is equally true that she must preach under an obligation to a new thing that for now only she has seen. Understood in terms of mimesis₃, to preach is to keep faith with a hard-won vision of what is possible now for this church in light of its encounter with this text. The preacher must strive to find language adequate to the new thing she has seen.

Conclusion

In this brief introduction to my larger project, I have tried to suggest how both Frei and Ricoeur make exceptionally demanding and rewarding conversation partners for anyone wishing to explore the possibility of a critically engaged postliberal homiletic. I have also made a proposal about the way Ricoeur’s narrative theory in particular helps us understand the workings of biblical narrative in relation to preaching. Of course, the theological claim that God speaks does not depend upon any theoretical demonstration that this is possible. God does not speak at the pleasure of the preacher, much less the homiletician. But preaching does seek to join itself at God’s pleasure to the word of God, which is not merely possible, but which is always and already articulate in the church and in the world. Then in turn, it is the homiletician’s desire and duty to think and say more about how preaching participates in God’s living and active Word. Such are the theological understandings and commitments that motivate this project, and situate its appeal to the best theoretical resources available under the logical priority of the conviction that God speaks, and therefore we have something to say.

Listeners as Authors in Preaching: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives

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Abstract: *Based on new empirical studies this essay explores how churchgoers listen to sermons in regard to the theological notion that “faith comes from hearing.” Through Bakhtinian theories presented by Lorensen and empirical findings presented by Gaarden, the apparently masked agency in preaching that infuses faith can be described as a polyphony of voices, which is not limited to the liturgical room or the sermon, but is activated by it. This polyphony creates a room, where the churchgoers, through different kinds of dialogical interaction (categorized as associative, critical, and contemplative) create new meaning and understanding. It is not a room that the listener or the preacher can control or occupy, but a room in which both engage.*

The preacher as facilitating an implicit dialogue: the empirical perspective

How do churchgoers listen to sermons when they participate in services? The traditional protestant theological conviction ascribes an inherent religious function to the listening process, as “faith comes from hearing” (Rom 10:17).² In the original Greek text, the verb “come” is not explicit, but it has nevertheless been understood as “comes” in the 3rd person singular. Our question is: Who or what initiates this faith to *come*? The sentence “faith comes from hearing” is an indirect passive construction which masks the primary agency of faith. It seems imply that God is behind the mask, as only God himself can inspire faith. However, the passive construction of the sentence is open to interpretation. How are we to understand this masked agency in preaching? In this article we will suggest that this agency can be interpreted in accordance with the way contemporary people listen to preaching.

The empirical survey at the heart of this essay is a part of Marianne Gaarden’s Ph.D. dissertation in progress. The project includes 29 interviews with churchgoers from five different churches and five interviews with the corresponding ministers.³ The churches are all part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark.⁴ As the survey is based on qualitative, not

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² The Greek text (Nestle-Aland 26th edition) is: “ἀρα ἡ πίστις ἐξ ἀκοῆς, ἡ δ ἀκοὴ διὰ ῥήματος Χριστοῦ.” Direct translated: “Then faith [comes] from hearing, and hearing through [the] word of Christ.” In the *21st Century King James Version*, it is translated: “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.” In NRSV “So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.”

³ The research was designed the following way: Right after the sermon, the pastor announced from the pulpit that he or she was participating in this project. When the churchgoers left the service, they were handed a piece of paper with the three questions: 1. What did you experience in the worship? 2. What did you hear in the sermon? 3. What did the sermon do to you? In this way, the informants (the unpredictable number of people who were willing to give an interview) had the opportunity to write down their answers immediately after the service. These answers formed the basis of the interview, which lasted approximately one hour and took place either the same day or the day after.

⁴ In October 2012, 79.2% of the Danish population was members of this church.

quantitative data, the research does not aim at representation, but at variation.⁵ The used methodology is inspired by grounded theory in which every attempt is made to operate with no preconceived set of theoretical statements.⁶ The raw empirical data have formed the categories, which emerged inductively during the process of analysis. This methodical approach allows unexpected categories to arise, and some of these unexpected results will be presented here.

It is our hope that the results of the empirical analysis presented here, though situated in a Scandinavian context, transcend this cultural and ecclesial context and might be helpful in illuminating the kind of sermonic interaction that takes place in other settings too. A recent Dutch empirical study,⁷ which also uses qualitative interviews and grounded theory, takes another epistemological and theological starting point; it presupposes the act of listening to sermons to have a religious dimension.⁸ We do not assume the process of listening to have a religious dimension. Instead, we investigate what happens when churchgoers interact with the sermon, and put the results in relation to the theological conviction which ascribes the listening process an inherent religious function.

Empirical surveys like the ones described in the present article can easily be categorized and criticized for being inclined to take a liberal theological position, because they emphasize the dominant roles inner words/dialogues play for individual meaning-making in the practice of preaching. Such categorizations, however, reveal the epistemological assumption of the critic, namely the notion that human beings have access to an objective truth about God *outside our own prior understanding*. This thinking, however, has been contradicted by the last two hundred years of epistemological understanding of human reasoning.⁹ It is impossible to think, understand, or talk about God independent of our own thoughts and understandings. We understand theology as an interpretative enterprise within which the divine revelation is interpreted by human beings who are always situated and contextually bound – bound to their own assumptions, concepts, and language. As human beings do not have access to an objective divine truth, the subjective, situated self has to create meaning and interpret the truth in relation to her own context.¹⁰

This is exactly what the churchgoers interviewed did when they listened to sermons. They created their own meaning in a dialogic interaction with the sermonic discourse interwoven in the entire service. It is striking that the churchgoers tended to describe their impression of the minister, when they were asked about the sermon. Thus, the first impression of what remained in

⁵ As a consequence the congregation was chosen with respect to wide geographical, demographical and size dispersion and the preachers with respect to variation in gender, age and theological starting point.

⁶ Grounded theory (first formulated by Barney G & Strauss, Anselm L. in: *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, (Chicago, Aldine Publishing Company, 1967)) is a widely used general methodology in social science for developing theory that is grounded in data, systematically gathered and analyzed. The methodology aims to produce theoretical statements about empirical data in a way that these statements reflect the patterns in the data. The theory seeks not only to uncover relevant conditions but also to determine how the actors under investigation actively respond to those conditions, and to the consequences of their actions. (Corbin & Strauss 1990) A computer program for data-processing, called NVivo, has been used for coding of the transcriptions of the interviews.

⁷ Theo Pleizier: *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons: A Grounded Theory Study in Empirical Theology and Homiletics* (Eburon Academic Publishers Delft 2012)

⁸ We find it problematic, using grounded theory with no category in advance and at the same time presuppose something religious happens in the act of listening to sermons.

⁹ A tradition beginning with Emanuel Kant's epistemology and further extended in the phenomenology (Husserl) and the hermeneutics (Weber).

¹⁰ In order to be consistent we use the personal pronouns 'she,' unless it is a quotation from the interviews then original pronoun is kept.

the churchgoers' memory right after the service was the experience of the preacher as a person, who was evaluated according to her degree of authenticity.

The simple question of whether the churchgoer *liked* or *disliked* the minister had a surprisingly strong impact upon the churchgoer's experience of the entire service and the act of listening in particular. In this sense, the churchgoers indicated that their *relation* to the preacher was essential to their construction of meaning.¹¹ Preaching involves a reciprocal relation, because it is something the churchgoers and the preacher share; the preacher depended on the congregation's willingness to interact with the sermon, and the churchgoers' meaning-production depended upon an authentic preacher. Accordingly, the preacher was important for the churchgoers, as the relation was crucial to their personal meaning production in dialogical interaction with the sermon.

Confronted with the foreign words used by the preacher, different kinds of dialogical interaction took place inside the churchgoers in order for them to produce meaning, understanding, or create a state of being. The degree of creativity of this interaction was so profound that the preacher's sermon, transposed to the listeners' context, even could seem like a new sermon with a different semantic meaning. Throughout the interviews the preacher was perceived as an interlocutor for this dialogical discourse. This was clearly expressed by one churchgoer, a 53-year-old woman working as an assistant professor. She talked about the crucial importance of the preacher's person by emphasizing the dialogical nature of the reception of the sermon:

That is because it is . . . a dialogical form, where I communicate with the [preacher] [laughs]. . . . But nevertheless it is a communication which takes place, and why should I engage into the dialogue if the person communicating the message does not stand behind his words or is speaking from his heart?

In her mind, she was conversing with the preacher, even though she did not say anything out loud. Another churchgoer, a 66-year-old man who participated in a service in a prison church, where the culture is less controlled and formalized, did not refrain from entering into explicit conversation:

And I tell her, if I disagree with her. Then I interrupt the sermon by saying "it's not quite right," and then she tries to convince me. . . . Sometimes we disagree wildly, but then you would have heard! . . . I would have opposed her.

In this way, he also indicated that his listening process took the form of a dialogue, even though he did not use the word dialogue. He was simply blunter and would interrupt the sermon and turn it into an explicit dialogue, if he felt that there was a need for it. The utterances of these two informants, representing different cultures, backgrounds, and contexts - an associate professor and an inmate - reveal this consistent feature in the interviews: that listening to the preacher's voice activates, at a cognitive level, the churchgoer's personal flow of thoughts, which in different ways is triggered by her dialogical interaction with the sermon.

This interaction was described as a dialogue causing a struggle to create personal understanding and meaning. When the churchgoers were asked about what they have heard of the sermon, they expressed what they had been thinking in relation to the fragments of the sermon they had actually heard. It was almost impossible to disentangle what the listeners had

¹¹ The significance of the ethos of the preacher in a Danish context appears to be similar in a North-American context: "*The 'Listening to Listeners to Sermons Project'* . . . , discovered that sermon listeners hear more and hear better when they believe they can relate to their preacher in meaningful ways" (McClure 2012).

heard, which the preacher had actually said, and what the listeners had been thinking, activated by their encounter with the sermon. What the churchgoers remembered and reported was completely interwoven with and inseparable from their own thoughts in dialogue with the sermon. What remained in the memory of the churchgoers was not what had actually been said from the pulpit, but their personal meaning production, activated by dialogical interaction involving the listener's own life situation and existential reflections.

It was the encounter or clash of the preacher's foreign words and the churchgoers' own understanding, often based on preconceptions or personal experiences, that activated, induced, or even provoked the subjective production of meaning. Thus, the words of the sermon were processed in an implicit dialogue, contextualizing and adjusting the words to the listeners' own thoughts. When the preacher's ethos was granted such significance, it was because the preacher's personality was one part of the reciprocal relationship that influenced the internal dialogue taking place between the listener and the preacher. The character of the relation was essential for the subjective production of meaning of the churchgoers. The preacher's personal interpretation of the Gospel presented in the sermon appeared to create a room for dialogical interaction. The preacher had no control of this room, as the subjective meaning-production was not controlled by the preacher's intentions. Nevertheless, the preacher played a crucial role as facilitator of this room.¹²

Churchgoers as primary authors of preaching: the theoretical perspective

In previous works we have explored ways in which others, different from the designated preacher, influence contemporary preaching practices and, in that sense, can be seen as co-authors. Some of the guiding questions for these studies have been oriented toward how preachers expose their preaching practices to interaction with their listeners and how homiletics might incorporate this other-wisely co-authored impact in homiletic theories.¹³

Although it is an ongoing quest to explore to what extent churchgoers have an active, creative impact on the sermonic discourses of preachers, the present empirical studies have caused us to shift our perspective away from the agency of preachers toward that of churchgoers. In recognition of insights gained through recent qualitative interviews with listeners of preaching¹⁴ our aim is to unfold possible theological and homiletic implications of the thesis that *churchgoers are to be understood as the primary authors of preaching and that preachers have the role of co-authors*.

Gaarden's empirical survey documented how different kinds of dialogical interaction with the heard sermon were essential for the subjective meaning production and experience of churchgoers. The creativity of this interaction was so profound that the sermon the listeners referred to after the worship service often appeared as a different – and sometimes even totally divergent – discourse compared to the one held by the preacher. The implicit dialogue that churchgoers refer to when describing their experience of listening to sermons stands in significant contrast with traditional notions of communication as a one-way transfer from an active speaker to passive listeners.

¹² The preacher is only partly facilitating this interactive event as also many other factors in the entire worship contribute to this process, as the hymns and singing, the church room with other churchgoers, prayers and readings, the liturgy with the Eucharist etc.

¹³ Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, *Preaching as a Carnavalesque Dialogue - between the 'Wholly Other' and 'Other-wise' Listeners* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, forthcoming 2013) and Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, "Carnivalized Preaching - in Dialogue with Bakhtin and Other-Wise homiletics," in *Homiletic: A review of publications in religious communication* 36(1, 2011): 26–44.

¹⁴ Primarily Marianne Gaarden's empirical study, but central insights from this study are confirmed by the project Listening to the Listeners Project lead directed by Ron. J. Allen, et al.

The empirical documentation of listening to preaching as a matter of dialogical interaction, rather than one-way reception, resonates deeply with the studies of literary critic, communication theorist, and dialogue philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin.¹⁵ The critical engagement displayed by the listeners makes good sense when analyzed in light of Bakhtin's epistemological studies, indicating that "understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other."¹⁶ Analyzing the empirical material of listeners of preaching through the lens of Bakhtinian theories of dialogicity leads us to rethink the roles traditionally assigned to preachers and listeners in the practice of preaching, particularly the question of agency and authorship.

Dialogue is crucial, not only to human communication but also to human processes of reasoning and understanding according to Bakhtin. Rather than see dialogue as a pedagogical product based on individual reasoning, he describes how dialogical interaction and the words of others provide the epistemological foundation for creative thinking and the development of individuals.¹⁷

Bakhtin is of particular value for studies of the complex genre of preaching, because he combines sociolinguistic understandings of how people communicate in everyday life with literary analyses of how authors like Fyodor Dostoyevsky and François Rabelais orchestrate ideas, characters, events, and social circumstances in creative ways. Bakhtin's emphasis on authorship transcends the field of literary texts, because he pursues the question of authoring in everyday life where meaning emerges in the interaction of embodied dialogue partners.¹⁸

Bakhtin categorizes everyday communication and interaction as *simple speech genres* in contrast to the *complex* genres, such as preaching and essays, in which the response of one of the dialogue partners is usually indirect or delayed. Crucial to this distinction, however, is the claim that the way we communicate with each other in everyday life functions as a prism through which we can analyze the relationship between the other and the self as well as more complex genres, such as preaching.

Addressees play either explicit or implicit parts as co-authors of the written as well as oral discourses according to Bakhtin's analyses. In this sense, "the listener becomes the speaker."¹⁹ Since addressees always play a co-authoring part, the crucial question is whether the primary author approaches that part dialogically or monologically. The determining difference between monological and dialogical approaches depends on whether the words of the other are allowed to transform the architecture, or if they are used simply as scaffolding, which might be used as stepping stones in one's own development, but are not allowed to have a lasting impact on the discourse itself.²⁰

This other-oriented approach to epistemology and communication, emphasized by Bakhtin, causes two of his primary interpreters and biographers, Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, point out the relationship between his communication theory and theology:

Bakhtin's insistence on the necessity of "understanding" the position not only of the other but of all others, by adding communication theory to theology, extends the meaning of Christ's biblical injunction to treat others as we would be treated ourselves,

¹⁵ Mikhail M. Bakhtin lived in Russia from 1895-1975.

¹⁶ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" In: *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* Michael Holquist (ed.) (Austin: University of Texas, 1981), 282.

¹⁷ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Emerson and Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 67-68.

¹⁸ Clark, Katerina & Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1984), 88.

¹⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 202.

²⁰ Bakhtin: *Dostoevsky's Poetics* 187.

to take on, in other words, the role of others with the same depth of sympathy and understanding that we bring to our own perception of ourselves. In Bakhtin's system this is not merely a moral imperative but an epistemological requirement.²¹

From the Bakhtinian perspective the activity of dialogical authorship is comparable with architectonic engineering. The successful building depends on a strong as well as flexible relationship between the other and I. The authorship of a text corresponds with the development of human existence, which develops in continuous interaction between the self and the other. In order to keep this relationship flexible and strong, communication and co-authorship are central to the development of human life, relationships, and texts.²²

Recent homiletical studies have explored ways in which preachers invite addressees into conversations about biblical texts in order to work collaboratively on preaching preparation.²³ The present empirical study, however, has encouraged us to reverse the perspective and investigate how and to what extent churchgoers allow preachers, among others, to have a dialogical input on their inner reflections, or implicit sermonic discourses during the polyphonic event of preaching.²⁴

Three kinds of interaction: the empirical perspective

In light of Bakhtin's emphasis on dialogue as crucial to processes of understanding, it makes sense to understand the interviewed churchgoers as the primary authors of the sermon. This authorship, evident in all the interviews, emerged from the listeners' interaction with the sermon that caused an internal dialogue. This dialogue can best be described as a polyphony of *voices* interwoven in the listening process. One churchgoer, a 63-year-old man working as a journalist, illustrates this polyphony, the perspectives of which often shift:

I've heard this before also in relation to other texts: that you have to take care of your neighbor. Well it was a fantastic picture in the text to build upon. . . . In fact, I think the text was interesting because it is commonly known – or at least the idea that a poor life on Earth is a ticket to Heaven, and this perspective has been used politically against Christianity. . . . But we can all of us and the church as well, try to be better persons and live in accordance with the essence of the faith.

This churchgoer moved quickly through a chain of associations in dialogue with only a small fragment of the sermon: take care of your neighbor. First, he identified the topic of the sermon in other texts, then he evaluated the text, considered the effect of the text in history, and subsequently he interpreted the text in his own way, concluding what the church and the congregations ought to do. This is very different from what the preacher said. Through this polyphony of voices, he created his personal understanding of the sermon, making him the primary author of the sermon.

The character of the polyphonic dialogue gathered into three clusters, which can be categorized as: *associative*, *critical*, and *contemplative* (unlike the first two, the last category is

²¹ Clark & Holquist: *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 208.

²² Clark & Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 64.

²³ John S. McClure, *Other-wise preaching: a postmodern ethic for homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).

²⁴ Polyphony is a phenomenon that Bakhtin takes from its original musical setting where it is used to describe one of several ways of creating harmonies. In a polyphonic performance several melodies are sung or played at the same time by different voices.

less or even non-cognitive). The first two categories were the most frequent, but the third was also found in some of the interviews, and there were clear traces of this contemplative modus in many of the other interviews. Although the categories are listed as three separate categories here, they rarely appeared in isolation. More often they dynamically overlapped. Thus, the churchgoer could move from being associative to critical and back again to associative or suddenly move to the contemplative modus.

Associative interaction: the empirical stance

The first and most frequent interaction was the associative way of reasoning. The meeting with the preacher's foreign words activated a chain of associative thoughts. In this chain of associative thoughts the churchgoers drew upon their own life experiences and preconceptions in order to explore personal understanding and meaning. Often only one or a few fragments of the sermon – an image or a sentence – which initiated the chain of thoughts, stimulated the churchgoers' associations. What they remembered was the history of the personal authorship generated by association, sometimes far from the semantic contents of the sermon.

The two churchgoers quoted above, the assistant professor and the inmate, described this listening process very accurately. (Both are cited here, because they were the only ones who expressed meta-reflections on their reception of the sermon). The 53-years-old female assistant professor says:

When I listen to the sermon, it is a combination of listening and thinking. I hear something, and if it really affects me or has an impact on something which I'm already occupied with . . . then I continue to elaborate on it for a while by going on another path for myself. That's fine. And then I come back thinking, 'where are we now?'

The 66-year-old man who worshipped in prison expressed himself in a similar way:

When you are listening, you get derailed in a way, and then suddenly you get caught by what is said . . . then your thoughts rush away, and in a moment you are inattentive to what has been said – and then you form your own version.

The two churchgoers express a central characteristic of all the interviews: it was the churchgoers' personal thoughts that mattered and were referenced. Listening to a sermon implied thinking oneself into the listening process, which was always situated in the context of the informant's life. When the churchgoers recounted what they had heard, they recounted their associative reflections, considerations, and evaluations in dialogue with the parts of the sermon they had heard and experienced. Understanding and meaning were constructed by means of association.

This was emphasized by a common feature of the interviews: the churchgoers talked about issues not raised in the sermon, but in their own minds. For instance, a 55-year-old preacher had talked about justification by faith. In the interview he said that he hoped the congregation had heard that the Gospel is for real sinners – not simulated sinners. A 63-years-old male churchgoer working as a blacksmith compared the concept of justification to his understanding of the Muslim concept of justification. During the sermon he had been dwelling on a Muslim anthropology, even though the preacher had not been talking about Muslims or other religions. It was the churchgoer's inner constructed meaning, a result of his encounter with the preacher's outer words, he referred to, when he recounted what he had heard in the sermon.

An interesting aspect of the churchgoers' associative reasoning was identifying – not

answers – but questions. The churchgoers used the statements of the sermon to personally attempt to identify questions, regardless of whether they understood, accepted, or adopted the preacher's point of view. Their encounter with the preacher's words stimulated the churchgoers' search for personal understanding, expressed in new questions. In different ways, the preacher's foreign words encouraged the churchgoers to formulate personal questions, even though this was not the preacher's intention.

A 38-years-old male preacher described the normative aim of one sermon as follows:

. . . one is to paint Christ here and now for the congregation, so that he becomes present, so they can receive him and take him with them. Preaching has to take place so that the Gospel is heard and received.

This preacher's congregation included a 44-year-old churchgoer, a professor of art and father of a child who was baptized. He explained in the interview that he attended service to be refilled. When he was asked what he was filled with, he answered questions which he would not have asked himself and which would not have appeared in his mind by reading newspapers or watching television. What the churchgoer received and brought with him was not the preacher's painting of Christ or understanding of the Gospel, but the churchgoer's personal questions:

I feel very much that when I myself can hear the questions, . . . then the following week is characterized by them. How they are constantly in my thoughts. I see the questions in different places, and hopefully, and very often, I will find the answers to the questions during the week. . . . Therefore, the sermon most of all activates me . . . causing me to seek answers.

In this prominent way, the churchgoer demonstrated from an empirical perspective how the Gospel is heard and received, namely as an implicit dialogue, encouraging the listener to seek answers. The churchgoer's personal authorship was not limited to the service of the day, but is best described as an ongoing search for meaning. Other informants explained in similar ways how they transformed the clearly formulated statements or messages of the sermon into questions, leading to new trains of association and attempts to answer the questions.

This questioning did not lead to either acceptance or rejection of the preacher's message, but encouraged the churchgoer to look for personal answers. Thus, the empirical findings do not support the existentialistic tradition of interpretation deriving from Rudolph Bultmann and Søren Kierkegaard, which emphasizes the encounter with the Gospel as a moment of personal decision making. Instead, the encounter activated a series of associations in a search for personal meaning.

Associative interaction: the theoretical stance

Corresponding with the churchgoers' descriptions of their implicit dialogical interaction with the preacher, Bakhtin emphasizes the constructive importance of alterity and outside perspectives in human communication and understanding.²⁵ With the focus on otherness Bakhtin suggests that rather than try to understand something foreign through empathic identification, speakers as well as listeners, benefit from encountering one's dialogue partner from the outside as another actively 'authoring' subject:

²⁵ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Response to a Question from the Novy Mir Editorial Staff," in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 7.

A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning; they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. . . . Without one's own questions one cannot creatively understand anything other or foreign Such a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched"²⁶

Bakhtin's analysis of the importance of foreign perspectives is developed in connection with his critique of an epistemology that aims at total identification between the other and the I. Dialogical understanding of a foreign person, or ancient text, depends, in this understanding, on the irreducibility, rather than the identification of both participants. Whether the author/ sees the addressee as her own 'alter ego', creating him in the author's own image, or tries to leave herself behind in order to identify or sympathize with the other, Bakhtin claims that constructive, fruitful understanding cannot be reached:

In what way will the event be enriched if I succeed in fusing with the other? If instead of two, there is now just one? What do I gain by having the other fuse with me? He will know and see but what I know and see, he will but repeat within himself the tragic dimension of my life. Let him rather stay on the outside because from there he can know and see what I cannot see or know from my vantage point, and he can thus enrich essentially the event of my life.²⁷

The fact that people who communicate can rarely completely identify or empathize with each other is interpreted in terms of the outsideness of each participant's perspective.²⁸ This outside perspective is seen as a constructive distance by Bakhtin, since it implies a surplus of views and, thereby, creative understanding.

In light of the Bakhtinian descriptions as well as empirical findings concerning the ways in which churchgoers enter into associative dialogues with the heard sermon in order to create their own sermon we suggest seeing the role of the preacher as "theological reflector".²⁹ The theological reflector may try to "paint the living Christ" before the eyes of the listeners. Yet, rather than copy and "take home" the preacher's image of Christ, as one of the interviewed preachers suggested,³⁰ churchgoers seem to project their own presuppositions and life experiences onto the reflector and grasp those associations that return in more or less fruitfully disturbed shapes. In this way, both the churchgoers and the preacher's original discourse are transformed in the encounter with the foreign perspective and turned into something new.

²⁶ Bakhtin, "Response to a Question", 7.

²⁷ Tzvetan Todorov's translation of Bakhtin's passage from "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity." Cf. Todorov, Mikhail Bakhtin: *The Dialogical Principle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984), 108.

²⁸ Cf. Bakhtin's description of the role of outsideness in the intersubjective encounter in Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 22–23.

²⁹ We are indebted to Deborah Organ from the Catholic Association of Teachers of Homiletics who in the presentation of her paper "Preaching as Apocalyptic Interruption" at the Academy of Homiletics meeting in Chicago, Nov. 15th.- 17th 2012 suggested the image of theological reflector for preachers.

³⁰ This is described in the section Associative Dialogical Interaction: the Empirical Perspective by the 38-year-old male preacher who was interviewed about his own intentions with the sermon.

Critical interaction: the empirical perspective

According to the Bakhtinian interpretation, churchgoers will never completely be able to identify or empathize with the preacher's outside perspective. This theoretical explanation is fully documented by the empirical findings and emphasized in the second category of interaction: *the critical voice*. Some churchgoers expressed a direct critical response, generated by their encounter with the outer words of the sermon. The outer words of the sermon clashed with their inner understanding, and as a consequence the listening event was formulated as objections and took the form of an implicit critical dialogue. The internal objection activated a search for alternative understanding and meaning. This critical dialogue was always situated in relation to the churchgoers' comprehension, which seemed to be constituted on the basis of either *preconceptions* or *life experiences*.

The critical response based upon preconceptions was most likely not to be moved by the encounter with the sermon, while the one based on life experience was more fluent and willing to be moved in the dialogical process of reasoning and understanding. It was remarkable, however, that regardless of whether the critical dialogue related to preconceptions or life experiences, the churchgoers were the primary authors of the sermon and the preacher served as interlocutor, facilitating dialogue. Consequently, the preacher was perceived to give a personal interpretation of the biblical text, rather than recount the Word of God as a God-given objective truth. This did not mean, however, that some of the churchgoers did not operate with an objective truth given by God and revealed in the Bible. Nevertheless, they also considered the preacher an interlocutor they could respond to critically.

In this way, a 74-year-old retired woman, listening to a radio-transmitted service,³¹ explained that she turned off the radio when the preacher did not speak the Word of God. Asked how she could determine whether it was the Word of God or not, she answered that the spirit told her. And to the question how she did know it was the spirit, she answered, she had learned that in Sunday school as a child. Her critical response was related to her own preconceptions and she was not willing to be moved in her critical dialogue – she simply stopped listening by turning off the radio.

This listener was typical of a few churchgoers who related their response critically to their pre-conceptions. Following a Bakhtinian understanding of dialogical authorship, it “depends on a strong, though flexible relationship between the other and I,” which was not found in the critical dialogue with regard to the churchgoers' own preconceptions. These churchgoers operated with an objective truth given by a metaphysical God and revealed in the Bible, which they had direct access to. From their point of view, the Bible was an unambiguous text, which they could identify and empathize with, and in that sense they were in control of the truth and unwilling to be moved.³²

It was notable, however, that the critical responses to the sermon (regardless of whether the listeners referred back to their own preconceptions or life experiences) were not necessarily identical with the critical perception of the preacher. The churchgoers could express great appreciation of the minister and still be critical toward the sermon. What primarily decided the churchgoers' sympathy with the minister was whether the latter was considered authentic. One churchgoer, a 63-year-old female social worker, valued the preacher, but at the same time she listened to the sermon and responded critically to it by relating it to her own life experience:

³¹ Eight of the 29 interviews were informants listening to a radio-transmitted worship.

³² A correspondingly critical voice could here draw parallel to Martin Luther's concept of the unambiguous text (*sola scriptura*), when he in Worms 1521, stated that all doctrines and dogmata of the Church not found in Scripture should be discarded.

I thought, this can't be true, she (the preacher) knows someone like this . . . ,
you project it to your own experiences: 'Do I know someone who is like this?'
I don't think so, it can't be true, there is no-one like this.

In this case, the churchgoer was moved and she ended up accepting the words of the preacher after critically evaluated them. The criteria for the evaluation process were the churchgoers' life experiences. Churchgoers who were accustomed to going to church from childhood had a tendency to relate their critical responses to their preconceptions. These preconceptions were likely to be based on an understanding of the Bible as an external authority, containing one objective truth to which they had direct access. Listen, for example, to this 46-year-old inmate:

Sometimes . . . I move into another story about how the text actually is supposed to be understood. Sometimes I feel like I am in contact with those who wrote it [and it is as if they are saying]: "Hey listen, this might be what the text says, but that's not how it should be understood.

Churchgoers who had not gone to church regularly in childhood had a tendency to draw on their life experiences in their critical dialogue. It is noteworthy that these experiences were not just everyday life experience, but were more likely to be existential life experiences, such as loneliness, forgiveness, to be sinful, to be in love, etc. What constituted the persuasive element of the sermon that could move the churchgoer in new directions was not the Bible as an authority, but their internal critical dialogue, producing new meaning by relating the sermon to their personal life experiences.

The above churchgoer, the 44-year-old professor of art, is a good example of this; he created his own version of the sermon through critical dialogue, relating what he had heard to his childhood experiences. He was aware that his interpretation differed from the preacher's and that he elaborated on the sermon. He improved on the picture the preacher had painted in the sermon to make it suitable to his own experiences.

In the sermon based on Luke 16:19-31, Lazarus and the rich man, the preacher said that there was a gap between Heaven and Hell, making it impossible to move from one to the other. The churchgoer, however, explained that he filled the gap with water in his imagination, even though he knew that it was not what the preacher had meant; it was important for him to bridge the gap between Hell and Heaven. He created an analogy based on the fact that it was possible to see from one place to the other. By means of association he identified Hell as loneliness; here lonely people could look into Heaven and see people in community. In the interview he explained how he as a child had experienced loneliness and felt isolated, standing on one side of a gap that separated him from the people around him. Obviously it was important for him to make his way out of loneliness and become part of a community. In his imagination, Jesus filled water into the gap, making it possible to pass to the other side. When asked what the water was, he answered forgiveness. Yet the preacher never mentioned the words loneliness, community, or forgiveness in the sermon.

This churchgoer demonstrated some typical features of the critical interaction: the listener expressed great appreciation for the minister, but at the same time he was critical toward the sermon, as he was unable to identify or empathize with the preacher's outside perspective. The listener's private sermon was activated by his encounter with the preacher's foreign words and constructed through implicit critical dialogue in his search for personal understanding and meaning. The new understanding of the sermon emerged in relation to the listener's personal life experiences. The churchgoer's own sermon differed radically from the preacher's sermon, and the listener was aware of this different semantic meaning. But it was not the actual sermon that

counted for the listener; it was the new created meaning. The sermon was seen as disturbing outer words that crashed with inner convictions, creating a third new meaning. The churchgoer expressed a longing for being disturbed in his own way of thinking, triggering new meanings and broadening his perspective upon life; that was actually why he attended church.

Critical interaction - the theoretical perspective

Churchgoers describe the importance of their interaction with the preacher for their experience of preaching, yet at the same time they refer to a discourse that echoes their own life experiences more than the sermon held by the preacher. Furthermore, preachers seem to initiate a process that is crucial for the listeners, but which they are unable to control. These insights prompt us to explore what the relationship is between the preacher's outer, authoritative words based on canonical texts and the listeners' inner associations and life experiences.

The empirical descriptions of how churchgoers' responses to preaching varied depending on whether their disagreement with the preacher emerged out of theological/dogmatic preconceptions or personal life experience can be analyzed in light of Bakhtin's reflections on human development. According to Bakhtin, human selves are shaped in a continuous creative struggle³³ to integrate one's own experientially based "innerly persuasive words," with "outer authoritarian words" in the sense of dominant discourses of religious, political or other authorities.³⁴ Although Bakhtin describes the sharp contrast between inner and outer words, he also accentuates that even what we perceive as our own words and new insights are in fact products of an on-going creative interaction between the words of the self and the other:

. . . the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else's. Its creativity and productiveness consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organizes masses of our words from within, and does not remain in an isolated and static condition. It is not so much interpreted by us as it is further, that is, freely, developed, and applied to new material, new conditions; it enters into interanimating relationships with new contexts. More than that, it enters into an intense interaction, a struggle with other internally persuasive discourses.³⁵

From a theological perspective, Bakhtin's description of inner, persuasive versus outer, authoritarian words resonates with medieval and Reformation discussions of the *verbum externum* and *verbum internum*.³⁶ In the Danish Lutheran tradition, in which the present interviews were conducted, there is a tendency to emphasize that it is through the *verbum externum* of the gospel, preaching, and sacraments, rather than in the *verbum internum*, in the sense of individual introspection, that one can find assurance of God's grace.³⁷

³³ Bakhtin, *Dialogical Imagination*, 342.

³⁴ Bakhtin, *Dialogical Imagination*, 345.

³⁵ Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 345-346.

³⁶ See also Barth's interpretation of Luther's description of the *verbum externum* in relation to preaching in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 1 (London and New York: T&T Clark, 1989), 121-122.

³⁷ This understanding was confirmed by one of the interviewed preachers, who summarized his understanding of the relationship between human requests and the address of the word as "the liturgy of the Prodigal Son". Unfolding this understanding he emphasized the crucial role of God's outer, authoritative word over the inner words: "One could view one's [sic!] service as a kind of drama . . . that we come there as the Prodigal Sons that are bestowed with grace again and again and listen to this word about the free grace."

Although various systematically theological analyses of the relationship between outer and inner words have been performed they tend to be ideologically oriented. As a consequence, their descriptions of what preaching ought to be, from a theological perspective, often ignore the empirical evidence that listeners of preaching rarely, if ever, rely exclusively or unilaterally on either outer or inner words.³⁸

In our interpretation, Martin Luther's critique of the movement labeled the Spiritualists³⁹ and their emphasis on the inner convincing word, on the one hand, and the Roman Catholic Church's emphasis on outer, institutional means, on the other, seemed to recognize the importance of the tension between the two. Luther described the dialectical tension between inner and outer words and means of grace⁴⁰ in ways that appear comparable both to the way contemporary listeners interact with preaching and to the way in which Bakhtin describes the dynamic tension between outer, authoritative and inner, convincing words in the process of human development and cognition.

If we interpret Gaarden's empirical findings in light of traditional understandings of the relationship between language and experience, they appear to contradict several linguistic, philosophical, and theological understandings. Within the theological field, Gerhard Ebeling claims that experience is constitutive of language, whereas George Lindbeck argues that language has primacy over experience.⁴¹

On the one hand, Gerhard Ebeling interprets language as an outer articulation of an existential event. Ebeling interprets the work of Martin Luther in an existentialist/expressivist way that gives him reasons to claim that "the authority to use the language of faith is a matter of experience. Language arises only from experience."⁴² On the other hand, cultural-linguistic interpretations, as described by George Lindbeck, regard experience and meaning making as derivative from grammar and language. Lindbeck claims that "Instead of deriving external features of religious language from inner experience, it is inner experiences which are viewed as derivative."⁴³

When we interpret the empirical findings of people who listen to preaching we cannot confirm the claims of any of the camps claiming that either language is derived from experience or that experience is derived from language, as if there was a one-way influence from one to the other. Instead, it seems to us that it is in the clash between an outer, authoritarian discourse and inner, convincing experiences that meaning is born and develops.

This empirically based interpretation can be supported by the works of Bakhtin and his colleague Voloshinov, who criticize both "individualistic subjectivism" whose proponents see language as a product of subjective experience and "abstract objectivism"⁴⁴ which regards

³⁸ A recent exception to this tendency has been conducted by the German theologian Alexander Deeg in *Das äußere Wort und seine liturgische Gestalt. Überlegungen zu einer evangelischen Fundamentalliturgik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011). In this *magnus opus* Deeg bypasses traditional inductive and deductive approaches to theological practices by engaging an 'abductive' method for analyzing the *outer word* in relation to its liturgical embeddedness in a Protestant tradition.

³⁹ Represented by Andreas Karlsstadt (1486–1541); cf. Martin Luther, *Wider die himmlischen Propheten, von den Bildern und Sakrament* (Google eBook: Ulhart, 1525).

⁴⁰ For a more detailed analysis of the relationship between the outer and inner word in the works of Martin Luther, see Alexander Deeg, *Das äußere Wort*, 74–76.

⁴¹ Ebeling's and Lindbeck's theological positions draw upon the linguistic studies of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Ferdinand de Saussure, cf. Vitor Westhelle, "Communication and the Transgression of Language in Martin Luther," in *Lutheran Quarterly* (2003), 13–16.

⁴² Ebeling quoted in Westhelle, "Communication," 13.

⁴³ Lindbeck quoted in Westhelle, "Communication," 13.

⁴⁴ Valentin Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Harvard University Press, 1986), 48.

subjective experience as derived from objective norms of linguistic grammar. Rather than give primacy to subjective, spontaneous, or objective, authoritative language, Bakhtin suggests that *situated communication* is what constitutes meaning making, not language *per se*. In order to understand human communication we must thus analyze the situated conditions under which utterances emerge, because all utterances are embedded in concretely embodied interactions.

Contemplative interaction: the empirical perspective

The clash between the disturbing outer words of the sermon and the inner conviction does not only generate new meaning, it sometimes also seems to have the capacity to generate a state of being, which leads us to the third category of the churchgoers' interaction during the preaching event: the *contemplative* response to the sermon discourse.⁴⁵ The concept of contemplation, which can be traced back to the Desert Fathers in the third century, has been practiced and defined differently in the monastic tradition.⁴⁶ Despite the different interpretations, understandings of contemplation as a modus of perception do have common features. It can be described as a state of being without words; instead of describing the contemplative person as having a dialogue with God, thinking of God, or creating images of God, she can be said to dwell in God. Through prayer and meditation people in the monastic tradition try to center themselves by being in the presence of God, quietly, without words or thoughts.

The contemporary German theologian, Ingolf U. Dalferth, operates with the concept of 'contemplative thinking,' which he describes as a kind of philosophizing. This philosophizing appears to transform the self during contemplation. It does not change the object of philosophizing, but it does change the subject who is doing the philosophizing.⁴⁷ The empirical findings indicate that churchgoers can experience something similar to this contemplative state of being while listening to a sermon. Some of the interviews clearly bore witness to this interaction, and traces of such interaction could also be identified in other interviews.

The word *dialogue* can seem misleading here, as contemplation is defined as non-verbal perception. Nevertheless, we use the concept, because the contemplative perception described by the churchgoers was caused by (Greek: δῖα) words (Greek: λογος). The contemplative interaction emerged not so much at a cognitive level as a response to the specific sermon, but emerged rather from the sermon's situatedness in the entire event of worship. The fact that the sermon was embedded in a liturgical service supported by church music, hymns, prayers, rituals, and especially the Eucharist, and surrounded by a congregation attending the service in a specific room at a specific time obviously played a crucial role for this category.

The churchgoers were influenced by the preacher's words, which stimulated mental activity, but this led to a form of transcendence, which meant that the churchgoers could barely

⁴⁵ The category of contemplation was not used directly by any of the informants. The category has been selected due to our interpretation since the informants emphasize on experiences of non-cognitive modes of transcendence. Comparable non-cognitive ways of responding to worship services has been described by ritual theorists with emphasis on physical embodiedness and situatedness. See Catherine Bell: *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), Bent Flemming Nielsen: "Ritualization, the Body and the Church: Reflections on Protestant Mindset and Ritual Process" In: Religion, *Ritual, Theatre*, Nielsen, Holm & Vedel (eds.) (Frankfurt: Peter Lang Verlag, 2009).

⁴⁶ Mursell, Gordon Editor: *The Story of Christian Spirituality. Two thousand years from East to West*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) 204-205, 212, 339; Lawrence, C.H., *Medieval Monasticism* (Singapore: Longman, 2001) 1-5 & Williams, Rowan, *Silence and Honey Cakes. The wisdom of the desert* (Oxford: Medio Media, 2004)

⁴⁷ Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Die Wirklichkeit des Möglichen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 56.

clarify what had happened in their minds. They could account for their thoughts before their minds took off, but after this point they used words like: dreaming, meditating, transcending, being in another state of consciousness, or just being somewhere else. A chain of associative or critical thoughts often preceded this contemplative modus. Like this churchgoer, a 46-year-old male inmate and former teacher:

I was thinking there is something that bothers my ears. It may well be that the text is presented in that way, but that is not how it should be understood . . . it is this way, and then a clear picture came to my mind, and then I was sent off . . . I moved into the meditative modus, where xxx [the preacher] she just talks, and then I'm somewhere else.

This churchgoer and the above quoted 63-year-old man working as a journalist used the same words: being somewhere else.”⁴⁸

I: If I have to be honest, I'm often dreaming, I'm . . . just looking out the window, I hear the words, and sometimes I close my eyes, . . . I hear all the words, but I am far away. I'm trying to recall what had been said, but I can't remember it [laughs].

M: When you close your eyes, where are you then? . . . Can you explain how it is experienced?

I: It is not of this world [pause]. It is definitely not. I've never really thought about where I was then, but uh . . . in another consciousness.

It was difficult for the churchgoers to describe this modus of being somewhere else; it was easier for them to explain what it had done to them. The following words are traces of the contemplative modus found in the interviews: being *peaceful*, being *relaxed*, and finding *inner silence* or to become *calm*. Some of the churchgoers said that they attended service to relax, to find peace, or that they appreciated the silence. A service is not silent, though, but full of words in text readings, hymns, prayers, and the sermon, so the silence referred to here is clearly a reference to the churchgoer's own state of being.

In some cases, the churchgoers' contemplative modus could be described as an interaction generated in the effort to construct meaning, a product of critical dialogue. The churchgoers' contemplative state of being was merely their experience of a peaceful mode of being present; in any case, this contemplative state of being was activated by the foreign words embedded in the liturgical service. What seemed to happen was a shift from one state of being to another, caused by an interruption of the everyday mode.

A 55-year-old male minister explicitly said that he was aware of this contemplative modus and considered it a way of receiving the sermon. He was asked about his intentions with the sermon and answered:

One of the most important things is – which is actually very difficult to define – but it is about creating a space where people can be. . . . I love when people during my sermon suddenly close their eyes, and I'm completely sure they are not listening to me anymore; but now a kind of a space is established, where they can walk by themselves.

⁴⁸ The initiating 'I' indicate the informant, and the initiating 'M' the interviewer.

He continued to explain that he thought this happened because his way of communicating allowed the churchgoers to do so. Interestingly, the churchgoers who most clearly expressed having experienced a contemplative state of being had not participated in the service held by this 55-year-old minister; they participated in other services, conducted by other ministers who were not aware of or at least not talking about the contemplative modus. Therefore, it seems that this form of contemplative interaction is not controlled or dependent upon the preachers; it occurs independently of the preacher's intentions, just like the semantic meaning production of the churchgoers. Hence, the contemplative modus seems to be more depending on the liturgical and physical room of the service in the church, than the intentions of the preacher – but still the churchgoers experiencing the contemplative modus where talking of their perception of the preacher. It seems like the churchgoers needed to trust the preacher and feel safe before giving up control and surrendering to the contemplation.

Contemplative interaction: the theoretical perspective

As the analyses of the contemplative interaction have shown, the interviewed churchgoers experienced interaction and presence in several ways in addition to the words of the preacher. At the same time, there was something about the preaching event that 'sent [them] off' to a place 'not of this world' and return with a new sense of calm and inner peace. These descriptions point to a paradoxical relationship between words and bodies in the event of listening to preaching. There seems to be a subtle interaction between words and bodies, a sense of silence through sounds of voices, and an experience of transcendent presence activated by the liturgical situatedness.

Coming from a very word-oriented church tradition like the Lutheran, the bodily reactions to the 'Word' of preaching tend to puzzle both listeners and preachers. Listeners, like the 63-year-old male journalist quoted above, admit apologetically that they often do not remember much of the sermon they have just heard. Others, like the listeners whose interaction is categorized as critical and associative, talk about their own reflections in relation to the sermon, but several also describe a bodily reaction that surpasses the cognitive level.

When we analyze this form of contemplative interaction using Bakhtinian theories of dialogue and polyphony, the interaction between words and bodies, liturgical situatedness and transcendence is not necessarily paradoxical. On the contrary, cognition and perception, epistemology and aesthetics presuppose each other, as described by Bakhtin in "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity."⁴⁹ This text is part of a larger collection titled *Art and Answerability*, which emphasizes how ethical reflection and behavior are connected to one's physical context and situatedness. As summarized in an analysis of the relationship between aesthetics and theology in the authorship, "aesthetics has for Bakhtin the task of tempting ethics away from "morality" and toward an ontology of the uniquely situated body."⁵⁰

If the interaction between words of preaching and corporeal experiences of transcendent contemplation is analyzed along the lines of Bakhtinian descriptions of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, it is important to notice the role of others on the individual listeners' descriptions of contemplative modes of being. The above interview with the 46-year-old male inmate and former teacher described how he often "moved into the meditative modus, where xxx [the preacher] she just talks, and then I'm somewhere else." This utterance could suggest that the preacher's role is minimal. At other times in the interview, however, this, as well as the other

⁴⁹ Bakhtin in: *Art and Answerability*.

⁵⁰ Graham Pechey, "Philosophy and Theology in 'Aesthetic Activity'," in *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith*, eds. Susan M. Felch & Paul J. Contino (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 52.

contemplatively oriented informants, emphasize on the importance of the relationship with the preacher.

In order to avoid either manipulating the empirical evidence so it fits with the Bakhtinian theories or vice versa we have to recognize that the informants' descriptions of contemplative experiences leading to inner peace do not have much resonance in the Bakhtinian universe which is mostly populated by polyphonic choirs in continual dialogue and grotesque bodies celebrating communal events of carnival. Yet, if we are correct in our interpretation that the informants' repeated emphasis on the relationship with the preacher suggests that it requires a certain trust in the preacher and the preaching situation in order for the churchgoer to get 'sent off' and experience the special kind of inner peace which the informants describe as the result of the contemplative interaction then Bakhtinian reflections can still be of use.

In a series of phenomenological descriptions of acts of dancing and singing Bakhtin portrays a comparative kind of trusting interaction that facilitates a passive activity that is fruitful in ways different than more subjective meaning-oriented activities. As described in his "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity":

In dancing, I become "bodied" in being to the highest degree, I come to participate in the being of others . . . the other dances in me. . . . Whence the cultic significance of dancing in the "religions of being". Dancing represents the ultimate limit of my passive self-activity, but the latter occurs everywhere in life. I am passively active whenever my action is not conditioned by the purely meaning-directed activity of my I-for-myself.⁵¹

Dance has the potential of establishing a delicate balance between activity and passivity, between taking initiatives and allowing oneself to be led, among the involved participants. This passively active mode of presence requires a different kind of activity than the individual's cognitive process of meaning making which played a significant role for the associative and critically engaged interactions described above, yet the relationship with the preaching other still plays a central role.

Homiletical implications: the role of the co-authoring preacher

If the preacher's role is merely to break in as co-authors on the churchgoers' own sermonic discourses, preachers and homileticians may wonder what kind of preaching functions in this setting. If the listeners only remember and relate to fragments of the sermon, why should preachers work on presenting whole, unified sermons?⁵²

Although the present empirical research indicates that churchgoers in practice function as the primary authors of their own sermonic discourses, they do not characterize themselves as omniscient – or omnipotent – authors. As described above, the interviewed churchgoers appreciated and requested the preacher to interrupt their chain of thoughts and add something that they would not have thought of themselves.

Furthermore, the kind of dialogue they described as taking place during preaching was not always connected with a consensus between preacher and listeners. None of the listeners described the infamous existential decision of acceptance or rejection in relation to preaching. Instead they described that when the preacher speaks with integrity and from the heart they will engage in a dialogue, whether they agree or not.

The empirical findings suggest that the role of the preacher is neither that of a model to be

⁵¹ Bakhtin, "Author and Hero", 137.

⁵² Question raised by the American homiletician, Charles Campbell, in response to Marianne Gaarden's presentation of her empirical studies at Societas Homiletica's biannual meeting in Wittenberg, August 2012.

imitated nor a neutral agent handing over an abstract, universal message or choice. Instead the preacher appears to function as an “agent of interruption”⁵³ who enters into and disturbs the inner dialogue of the listener⁵⁴ These conceptions of the preacher as dialogue partner and agent of interruption can seem to point in different directions, yet in the empirical studies as well as in the Bakhtinian descriptions they seem to presuppose each other, as described above in relation to the interaction between outer, authoritative and inner, convincing discourses.

Based on the present empirical studies and in light of the Bakhtinian theories presented here, we suggest that preachers can benefit from exploring their roles as theological reflectors and agents of interruption⁵⁵ and from letting their discourses be penetrated by their co-authoring addressees.

The third room of preaching

Initially we asked how churchgoers listen to a sermon when participating in a service. The question is interesting with regard to the theological notion that faith comes from hearing. As mentioned, the indirect passive construction of this sentence is open to interpretation concerning masked agency. Inspired by the work of Bakhtin, we suggest that the empirically documented practice of preaching, described in three different kinds of dialogical interaction, can benefit from being seen as a polyphonic event. If we combine this understanding of preaching with the theological conviction that faith comes from hearing, then the masked agency behind faith can be described as this polyphonic event.

The polyphony of voices is not limited to the liturgical room of worship or the sermon; it is activated and nurtured in this context. Following the interviews, the polyphonic event created a third room between the preacher and the listeners, where new understandings, meanings, and perspectives were produced. This event could open the door to another place not of this world, as some of the churchgoers said, a contemplative state of being, which gave several of the listeners peace, inner calm and silence. According to these descriptions, the polyphonic room is not a room that the preacher can master or occupy, but she is called upon to engage in it, as one voice among others.

⁵³ Charles L. Campbell & Johan H. Cilliers, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), 154–162.

⁵⁴ Since the listeners of preaching express a desire/willingness to be disturbed in their own inner dialogue one might question whether disturbance is the most appropriate word here. Yet, the fact that people describe a deliberate disposition to be disturbed has significant theological precedents. The notion of preaching as interruption can thus be interpreted in light of Dialectical Theology’s descriptions of God as the ‘Wholly Other’ who breaks in on human ways of thinking. Cf. Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief II* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1989), 449 (Commentary to Romans 12, 1).

⁵⁵ Campbell & Cilliers, *Preaching Fools*, 154–162.

Craig A. Evans. *Jesus and His World: The Archaeological Evidence*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012. 192 pages. \$25.

Jesus and His World: The Archaeological Evidence is an insightful investigation of contemporary archaeology and its relevance for understanding New Testament descriptions of Jesus, his teaching and activities, and the world in which he lived. Evans sets the stage for our investigation by highlighting the importance of verisimilitude, meaning “the resemblance or likeness of the way that things really were,” as a tool for assessing the reliability and historicity of ancient literary sources, including biblical narratives (1). Challenging biblical minimalism and its insistence upon archaeological evidence to verify the literary sources, Evans proposes that we give greater attention to the extent to which narratives such as the New Testament Gospels match the way that things really were during the specified period. The Gospels and their characterization of Jesus are historically reliable, therefore, because of their high degree of verisimilitude. They describe real people, places, events, political systems, religious practices, beliefs and customs. Paul and other historical figures, including Papias, Polycarp, Clement, Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch also testify to having known people who knew Jesus, were acquainted with his family members and the original disciples, or who were familiar with his movement. Archaeological discoveries clarify and corroborate these sources, deepening our understanding of Jesus and his world.

Having set the stage for our investigation, each of the remaining chapters explores a topic of interest in the life of Jesus in dialogue with contemporary archaeology and other historical sources. Chapter one responds to questions about Jesus’ Jewish upbringing in Nazareth and to inferences that Jesus may have been a Jewish Cynic. The evidence reveals that Nazareth was a Jewish village of about 400 people with a local synagogue and no pagan temples or schools. Located just a few kilometers from a major city, Sepphoris, Nazareth may have been a regional supplier of pottery. The literary evidence also refutes the idea that Jesus became a Cynic as an adult, revealing essentially no parallels between Jesus’ teaching and practices and those of the Cynics. Evans notes, for example, that the characteristic markers of the true Cynic were his cloak, purse, and staff. In the Gospels, Jesus instructs his disciple to take no purse, no money, no staff and no more than one cloak.

In response to questions about the existence of synagogue buildings during the time of Jesus, chapter two provides textual as well as archaeological evidence from numerous sites suggesting that such buildings indeed existed during Jesus’ lifetime. Chapter three grapples with the question of literacy between Jesus and his disciples. Evans’ careful examination of written documents, inscriptions, and archaeological findings throughout Palestine and the Mediterranean support his contention that Jesus was literate. He read Hebrew Scripture, interpreted it in Aramaic, and was familiar with interpretive practices of the time. Though Jesus may not have received scribal training, Evans stands by his conclusions noting, “I find an illiterate Jesus harder to explain than a literate one” (88).

Chapter 4 investigates Jesus’ relationship with the “powerbrokers” of his time. Inscriptions, tombs, ossuaries, and excavated buildings and houses support the textual evidence regarding the tension that existed between Jesus and the religious and political leaders of his time. In Chapter 5, Evans explores Jewish burial traditions in ancient Palestine and provides significant support for the idea that Jesus, though executed as a criminal, would have received a burial. He suggests that Roman officials would have respected Jewish burial traditions during

peacetime, particularly on the eve of Passover, and would not have wanted to “provoke the Jewish population and incite Jewish nationalism” (130). The Gospel narratives, given their high degree of verisimilitude, also provide support for Jesus’ burial on the day of his execution, as would have been consistent with Jewish law.

Evans concludes his writing with two appendixes. In the first he refutes the 2007 claim that builders had stumbled upon Jesus’ tomb while constructing town houses in East Talpiot, located between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The second appendix ponders questions about Jesus’ physical appearance and ethnic identity.

I can imagine using this book in courses such as: Preaching the Synoptic Gospels, Preaching and the Life of Jesus, Introduction to the New Testament, or a course on biblical archaeology. It might also prove a valuable resource for professors who teach preaching or biblical studies as well as for pastors and church educators who may want to add depth to their Bible studies. Evans carefully examines the archaeological and textual data for each of the questions that he explores and augments his discussions with photographs and summary charts, making the book accessible to a broad range of readers. He accomplishes his purpose of presenting the archaeological evidence in a manner that piques the interest of everyday readers.

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L. Juliana M. Claassens. *Mourner Mother Midwife: Reimagining God's Delivering Presence in the Old Testament*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012. 126 pages. \$25.

How do we retain God as deliverer without necessarily retaining the imagery and language of the Liberator-Warrior-God? In *Mourner Mother Midwife: Reimagining God's Delivering Presence*, L. Juliana M. Claassens leads the reader through possibilities for attending to this question, while retaining a biblical and theological account of God's presence in everyday suffering. Claassens problematizes the image of God as warrior, who delivers through destruction and violence. She argues that as we associate "Deliver God" (4) acutely with power and violence, we are shaping language and metaphors that could be, and have often proven to be, detrimental for the world of empire in which we live. Claassens acknowledges that the liberating-warrior is a dominant biblical image, while unearthing counter biblical images. As the book adeptly offers practical theological insight on the biblical text, it targets Biblicists as well as practitioners and teachers of pastoral care and worship.

In search of retaining a metaphor that is viable and meaningful to many, God as a delivering presence, Claassens recovers biblical imagery of God as Mourner, Mother, and Midwife. The book moves along a spectrum of personal and communal deliverance. The constructive moves of the final chapter demonstrate the significance of reimagining God's presence in relation to transformative teaching, pastoral care, and worship.

In chapter two, Claassens introduces God as mourner; she juxtaposes the weeping of the prophet as God in Jer 8:21–9:1 with the summoning of the weeping women (the keeners) that immediately follows in Jer 9:17-20. Both God and the women are shedding tears over the traumatic terror and bruising of exile suffered by the people of God. Both the text and Jewish tradition signify the ability to imagine powerfully God's tears as solidarity with human suffering, according to Claassens. She then traces the presence and potential of wailing being therapeutic, leading the community in lament, being prophetic, and bearing witness to loss as an inception of healing. Here, Claassens arrives at a Divine Wailing Woman, who mourns with the community.

In chapter three, Claassens presents God as Mother from the constructions of God in Deutero-Isaiah. Here, she makes the greatest turn in her argument against empire theology, while illuminating the Divine confrontation and response to empire and survivors of its destruction. Claassens' specific interest is the juxtaposition of male and female imagery of God and images of violent delivery as well as nurturing and compassionate delivery, which occur in four primary ways: 1) Liberator-Warrior/Mother in Labor (Isa 42); 2) God as Mother/Father/Potter (Isaiah 45); 3) God as Husband/Mother (Isa 49); and 4) God as Mother/Midwife (Isa 66) (60). She argues that a single metaphor fails to capture the fullness of God as deliverer and sovereign, while the presence of multiple metaphors demonstrates a theological refusal of constricting God to idolic constructions. The compassion, love, and birthing new life of Mother, meets survivors of destruction and exile, and "recodes" power as love; this is in opposition to the violent and destructive power of empire (62-64).

As the final metaphor, Claassens presents God as a delivering Midwife, in chapter four. She describes Pss 22 and 71 (with reference to Isa 66) as instances of transition from lament, suffering, and despair to trust, hope, and rebirth. The image hinges on the intimacy and trust that exists between a birthing mother and midwife at the intersections of life and death in childbirth. Similarly, God is present as deliverer when the believer is in despair. Just as the midwife does not offer a magic cure nor does God, and the believer converts despair and pleas into internal persuasion to struggle through delivery with the assistance of God. Both God and the believer

have agency in the struggle of deliverance. This imagery “reverses death and denotes an unflinching commitment to life” on the part of God and believers (68). God as Midwife calls for the community and individuals to become midwives within the struggle of confronting larger oppressive forces that cause individual pain and suffering.

Claassens biblical interpretation and demonstration of the contemporary veracity of these images in practice, leaves the reader with concrete inferences for their implementation in liturgy, preaching, and pastoral care. She advocates for directly engaging biblical texts of suffering, violence, and destruction alongside of these counter narratives, in order to attest to both the egregiousness of suffering and violence and to a God who is present and not absent from everyday struggles. While the book does not overcome gendered stereotypes in its imagery of God, it does broaden the spectrum of expansive language and imagery used for God while attending to theo-ethical implications of such language. This work is a valuable classroom and congregational resource for individuals seeking to explore expansive language and imagery in new ways as gendered and power constructions problematically co-exist with the everyday struggle to thrive in our world today.

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Marc Zvi Brettler, Peter Enns, and Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. *The Bible and the Believer: How to Read the Bible Critically and Religiously*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012. 210 pages. \$27.95.

Is there a way to read Scripture with intellectual integrity without sacrificing one's deeply held religious convictions? This is the question that drives Marc Zvi Brettler, a Jew, Daniel J. Harrington, a Roman Catholic, and Peter Enns, a Protestant, each of whom are eminent biblical scholars who undertake a three-way dialogue as to the ways in which biblical criticism can both challenge and enhance one's religious engagement with the Bible. They focus primarily on the Hebrew Bible/Tanakh/Old Testament, though Harrington and Enns naturally extend their scope to some New Testament texts as well. Each writer takes a turn offering their perspective, to which the other two give thoughtful and reflective responses.

As a Protestant, I expected to learn the most from the tradition most different from my own—Judaism. This proved true, but I found myself equally drawn into the other two authors' essays as well. All three are equally committed to biblical scholarship, have the ability to explain succinctly the history of their tradition's relationship with Scripture, objectively note the points of tension with biblical criticism within their religion, share enlightening nuggets of insight, and give examples of how texts are critically engaged from their perspective. Just as important, each writer includes a summary of his own personal religious journey and struggle with biblical criticism. Thus the book is not simply an academic exercise, but authentically engages in the vital question of personal meaning.

The book is intended for a college-educated audience, but not necessarily seminary-trained. This would be an ideal book for a clergy-led study group of laypersons, a Christian-Jewish dialogue group, a college-level course on Introduction to the Bible, or an inter-seminary seminar of Christian and Jewish students. In homiletics, the book would be useful in a course on exegesis for proclamation, especially one that is team taught by a preaching professor and a biblical scholar. Harrington's section on actualization, bringing the significance of the biblical text into the present, is especially relevant for preachers. The glossary of terms is a helpful tool for navigating the terminology used throughout the book. Also, each chapter ends with a list of resources for further reading on that particular perspective.

There are a few notes of critique. Brettler's section on the Jewish perspective deals with endnotes in a confusing way, listing all references at the end of each paragraph. This makes it difficult to track quickly the source of the quote in the text. The reader will also note that all three perspectives are written by men. Aside from the annoying fact that all pronouns referring to God are masculine rather than gender-neutral, it would have been refreshing to hear a voice from, say, a feminist or post-colonial scholar who could point out that struggles with biblical criticism are often intertwined with issues of gender, race, culture, economics, and power differentials. This book, then, should be seen as a starting point, rather than as the finale, one model rather than *the* model.

These critiques, however, do not detract from the usefulness of the book and the contribution it makes to ecumenical dialogue. The subject of anti-Semitism is dealt with forthrightly, and one detects neither Pollyanna-ish arm-linking nor hesitancy in pointing out the differences and tensions between each perspective. The book also makes an important contribution to the ongoing struggle between literalist and critical readings of Scripture. Those students who may circle the wagons when they feel the authority and reliability of the Bible

threatened by scientific and historical studies would do well to consider Brettler's Jewish perspective, which places much more emphasis on how the Bible is read and interpreted *in community*. Also, Enns does a remarkable job of guiding the defensive literalist reader along a path to a more critical reading that is not only non-threatening, but offers an affirmation of one's faith in the text, albeit from a different standpoint.

Not only will readers understand other traditions better through this book, they will come to a greater understanding and appreciation of their own. When it comes to biblical criticism, this reviewer re-echoes Brettler's quote of Benjamin D. Sommer: "It can add to Torah, but it can't subtract, and so – Go, learn" (39).

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Walter Brueggemann. *Truth Speaks to Power: The Countercultural Nature of Scripture*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013. 176 pages. \$17.

Walter Brueggemann latest book, *Truth Speaks to Power*, emerges from his lecture at Kenyon College on biblical faith and public policy, posing the question, “How does truth speak to power?” While Brueggemann does not offer concrete suggestions for how the Bible informs public policy, he does offer a narrative context for how truth interacts with power in the Old Testament.

Brueggemann defines power as “a network of influence and leverage” (2), seen in political regimes and monopolies of wealth, though these two are usually synonymous. Those in powerful positions often justify their roles with truth claims, but truth has a way of eluding and challenging power. Brueggemann writes: “truth, unlike establishment power that is visible, is characteristically elusive and contested because the claims made for truth are variously endorsements of or subversions of established power” (3-4).

Brueggemann lifts up truth and power within the biblical narrative, focusing on Moses, Solomon, Elisha, and Josiah. Truth in these narratives represents the justice of God, sometimes working in spite of current power arrangements, though sometimes working with or over against current power regimes. Brueggemann makes clear he is not setting up a typology—truth against power vs. truth transforming power, etc., reminiscent of H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*. Rather, he is attempting to listen to the subtleties of the truth narrative and how in different biblical stories it speaks to power.

Opening the way for a critical reading of power in the Scriptures, Brueggemann makes references to the “masters of suspicion”—a phrase attributed to Paul Ricoeur and referring to Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche. Brueggemann here points to the more recent “master of suspicion” Michele Foucault, and with these theorists Brueggemann does not take for granted “divine right” understandings of power. That is, those in powerful positions are not necessarily divinely appointed. In fact, because power often accumulates through totalizing regimes, violence and deception, we should view power with suspicion. Biblical accounts of kings and rulers provide examples of persons coming to power through violence. At the same time, because it is the Bible, the scriptures Christians hold to be sacred, Christians also read here words of truth. It is with an eye towards discerning the narrative of truth that we carefully examine biblical accounts of power.

The narrative of power reads sometimes like an ironic display of hubris, as in the case of Solomon’s glory (1 Kgs 1-12). In the story of King Solomon, Brueggemann points to a subtle undertone of irony, despite the dominant story line for Solomon’s reign being one of wisdom and success measured in his building of the temple and amassing great wealth. This ironic tone can be seen in the terse descriptions of violence preceding Solomon’s rise to power, or the depictions of Solomon’s Pharaoh-like behavior of taxing the people, using cheap labor and keeping one thousand wives, reducing persons to commodities. Challenging the narrative of power seen in Solomon’s “glory,” Brueggemann points to a New Testament saying from Jesus: “do not worry about what you will wear . . . even Solomon was not clothed like one of these” (Luke 12:22, 27). This saying of Jesus follows just after a parable of the “fool” who stored up a barn-full of grain, only to die during the night. Brueggemann suggests that the narrative of truth presents this ironic juxtaposition to unveil the anxious rush to accumulate as an ultimately deadly pursuit.

Brueggemann offers the example of King Josiah as a moment where the power regime answered to truth in humility. When learning of the contents of the scroll of the law newly

discovered, King Josiah rends his garments and seeks out the prophetess Hulda for instruction. Following this encounter, Josiah enacts a host of reforms that conform to the Deuteronomic standards of caring for the poor and needy. That is, loving one's neighbor became an economic policy. Thus, the narratives of power and truth can sometimes overlap, but this connection is made only when the powerful work for the benefit of the poorest and the "least" among society.

Brueggemann equips readers to approach the Bible with eyes of faith, looking for the narrative of truth, while raising our suspicion towards totalizing power regimes. This book helps us to look critically beyond the narrative of the power regime to hear what truth is saying and doing in the text. Preachers, biblical scholars, theologians, and ethicists would do well to read Brueggemann's book as a model for how to engage scripture in the pursuit of justice.

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Johanna Sumiala. *Media and Ritual: Death, Community and Everyday Life*. London and New York: Routledge, 2013. 141 pages. \$35.95.

Johanna Sumiala demonstrates the powerful connections between ritual, media, and death in this work, *Media and Ritual*. She introduces the reader to the interpretation of media and culture through media anthropology. Using this discipline, Sumiala discusses the role of ritual in the construction of community mediated through various forms of media. The book is divided into two primary sections. The first section reviews key concepts in ritual theory, setting up the rest of the book. In this section she introduces ritual as “cultural practice carried out in relation to, via and through the media” (9). By approaching the interfacing of ritual and media in this manner, Sumiala offers an expansive analysis of the power of media in creating and carrying symbolic meaning which in turn constructs and/or reinforces community. The second section unpacks the function of mediatized ritual, focusing the discussion on rituals occurring immediately after a death.

This text introduces a plethora of concepts in order to make a significant argument illustrating the power of media in meaning making. Though the content is dense, the interplay of communication theory and ritual theory is a fascinating discussion drawing conclusions around an area of life that clergy deal with on a regular basis, death. Sumiala uses stories of death, ranging from the death of world celebrities (Princess Diana, Michael Jackson, and Whitney Houston), the death of world leaders (Muammar Gaddafi and Osama Bin Laden), and tragic deaths gaining national or global attention (police murders, bus accident, school shootings) to examine the rituals in media that shape the mourning practices of a virtual as well as actual community. In this discussion, she examines the power and use of images to create a desired reaction. She ascribes to media the role of power broker in defining as well as utilizing symbols that communicate goodness or the lack thereof.

Several of Sumiala’s points connect with the preacher’s task. Most striking is the section on “Confession” and “Witness” (69-73). Here she makes the case for media being the entity that calls for and identifies the confession revealing “the truth” of a particular situation (70). The function of media witnessing is to tell the story from the vantage point of one who was there. The media representative (news anchor) constructs a reality that is projected from the scene, ascribing guilt, innocence, suspicion, and meaning to the event and persons involved. She points to “factual entertainment programming,” that is, the world of television talk shows, as well as the explosion of reality shows as major contributors to the production of confession and witnessing. In addition, the many contexts of social media also contribute to confession and witness as media sources such as Facebook and YouTube allow a more varied input into the stream of meaning making. Interestingly, this does not dilute the syndicated media’s power but rather, reinscribes its message.

Another point of connection relates directly to the media’s role in mourning rituals. According to Sumiala, media exercises the power to “frame the meaning of different ritual activities, (managing) public factors and key emotions related to these rituals” (100). This discussion grounds the power of the media in connecting the public with a constructed understanding of the sacred. The media makers are the key players in this experience. As I took in her argument, I began to see the news anchors and correspondence as carrying pastoral authority in the realm of national or global community. It is their constant presence while waiting for further breaking news that draws the media watcher into the community of grief and

response. They become not only the ones who share the news. They are the ones who interpret the symbols and rituals surrounding the death.

Sumiala makes the reader aware of the rooted influence media holds in ritual life. She demonstrates how this influence is formative as mediatized rituals create shared experience that in-turn creates communities. What I find most striking in this discussion of ritual performance is the evidence of this power. Those who seek to communicate the gospel thereby cultivating faith-based clusters focused on missional living need to do more than use media in their methods. We must also become more cognizant of what media does, especially as it creates sacred space through mediatized ritual. If, as Sumiala espouses, media is rudimentary to creating meaning, her text is a helpful guide to understanding this principle of the post-modern era.

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Monica R. Miller. *Religion and Hip Hop* (Routledge Research in Religion, Media, and Culture). New York: Routledge, 2013. 208 pages. \$125.

In *Religion and Hip Hop*, Monica R. Miller has taken a bold step in analyzing engagements with popular culture within the academic study of religion. Her wide-reaching interdisciplinary approach draws upon critical theories of religion and cultural studies, as well as race, gender, and sexuality studies to expand the emerging discourse on the intersections of religion and hip-hop culture. Miller argues that this discourse has not given sufficient attention to issues of theory and method in the study of religion, leaving the category of “religion” largely un-interrogated. For Miller, constructions of “religion” as an academic category of analysis are inadequate to describe the complexities of the everyday experiences and cultural practices of black urban youth in America.

Miller’s opening chapters explore the construction within public discourse of black youth and hip-hop culture as “deviant.” Subsequently, she investigates the ways that those rendered deviant make use of religious languages and images in their own self-representations. Chapter one focuses particular attention on the public outrage following radio host Don Imus’ reference to Rutgers’ women basketball players as “nappy-headed hoes.” Miller argues that defenses of these women as respectable black collegiate athletes, coupled with moralizing denunciations of representations of women in hip-hop, work to “other” those who do not conform to normative constructions of black womanhood. Miller suggests, “the cultural imperialism of black elites failed to embrace its least of these” (44). Moreover, she asks the provocative question, “Can there be emancipation through claiming the ‘nappy-headed ho?’” (43). Chapter two turns to the *written* publications of three prominent hip-hop artists. Miller analyzes their uses of religious “stylings,” exposing how such “uses” serve not so much as confessional claims, but rather, “as a means by which to authorize particular social interests” (69).

Chapters 3 and 4 focus more specifically on issues of theory and method in Religious Studies and their implications for engagements with popular culture. In “And the Word Became Flesh: Hip-Hip Culture and the (In)coherence of Religion,” she traces dominant trends within scholarship on hip-hop and religion. She argues that within these approaches, certain preconceived notions of “religion” are imposed upon hip-hop as an object of analysis. Particularly problematic for Miller are approaches that position religion as a “sanitizing construct” vis-à-vis “deviant” cultural productions or, more ironically, appropriations of hip-hop as a tool of evangelism and thus hegemonic “moral maintenance.” Perhaps Miller is at her most theoretically lucid when she insists there is “no point in searching for the religious dimensions of hip-hop as if religion is a self-evident essence” (10). Rather, Miller argues for an engagement with hip-hop that interrogates the very category of religion. This approach recognizes that “what exactly gets to ‘count’ as religious is never fully agreed upon” (121).

The closing chapters shift to an engagement with empirical studies of youth and religion. Miller’s central critique of such studies is their positioning of institutionalized forms of religion in the role of “buffering transgression” among at-risk or otherwise deviant youth. While contesting taken-for-granted notions of the moral efficacy of institutional religious practices, Miller asks, “Do cultural practices outside of formal faith institutions merit similar buffering weight?” (133). As such, the final chapter turns to the documentary film *RIZE* to analyze “krumping” as a popular practice of black youth beyond the parameters of traditional religious institutions. For Miller, such practices do not necessarily point to quests for either private

religious experience or forms of transcendence, but rather constitute a more worldly “faith in the flesh.” Rather than arguing for the religious significance of krump dancing as a “quest for meaning” Miller’s approach focuses instead on the ways these black youth use their bodies as “the site and mode of human possibility” (151).

With *Religion and Hip Hop*, Monica Miller has provided a significant contribution to scholarship on the intersections of religion and popular culture. Throughout the book, she interrogates the category, uses and effects of “religion” as it appears within the cultural productions of hip-hop. At times her reliance on the work of theorists such as Russell McCutheon leads to exaggerations of perceived dichotomies within the academic study of religion and overstatements of distinctions between institutional religion and those cultural practices seemingly beyond its hegemonic influence. Yet, Miller is at her best when she presses for more critical reflection on the innovative uses of religion in the everyday lives of black youth and its interplay with more traditional religious institutions and discourses. *Religion and Hip Hop* is an important book, which charts a new course in the study of the intersections between two significant cultural spheres. This dynamic book should be required reading for every student and scholar of religion and popular culture.

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Antony W. Alumkal. *Asian American Evangelical Churches: Race, Ethnicity, and Assimilation in the Second Generation*. New York: LFB Scholarly Pub., 2003. 218 pages. \$58.

The key aim of this sociological-religious book is to “expand the scholarly knowledge of the religious life among the post-1965 wave of Asian Americans, particularly those of the American born/raised second generation, and of how religion—specifically, American evangelical Christianity—interacts with issues of ethnic and racial identity” (173). For this academic purpose and with race-based religious sociological methodology, Alumkal provides an ethnographic observation on two Asian American churches in the New York City area, namely, the Chinese Community Church, an independent Chinese evangelical church, and the Korean Presbyterian Church, a PC (USA) church.

In Chapter Two, Alumkal starts the main body of his writing with a critical observation that the second generation Asian American Christians’ beliefs, faith practices, and theology, stay close to the counterparts of American evangelicalism. Thus, it is inevitable that the second generation shares fundamental traits of American evangelicalism, such as the belief in the absolute inerrancy of the Bible, the dualistic worldview of the select Christian minority (evangelicals) versus the secular world, acceptance of the male-dominant church leadership, the significance of the “born-again” experience, etc. Alumkal gives five reasons that suggest why the second generation has become evangelicals, including the (mis-)understanding of American evangelicalism as traditional Christian orthodoxy. Alumkal anticipates that the second generation’s evangelical propensity will continue.

In Chapter Three, Alumkal points out an intriguing sociological-religious phenomenon among the second generation, namely, a “Christian-first” self-identity. He observes that most second generation, evangelical individuals consider their Christian identity to be more significant and fundamental than their racial or ethnic identity. He asks whether this *pan-racial* Christian-first self-identity has helped the second generation cope with or even overcome their racial minority identity when they interact with American society, in general, which still sees the former as the minority group.

Chapter Four discusses how the second generation evangelicals maintain their traditional cultural or ethnic identity and how they distance themselves from it. Both phenomena happen simultaneously. The second generation, though fully absorbed in American culture, language, and evangelicalism, still wants to keep their Asian racial identity and their Asian ethnic church community. At the same time, however, they realize that they are not fully Asians (neither fully Americans), but “Asian-Americans,” a third kind of self-identity. This is why the second generation tends to establish a distinctive worship community under the roof of the first generation’s church.

Chapter Five investigates the correlation between the second generation’s evangelical faith and their economic orientation and values. Alumkal finds that the second generation’s evangelical faith does not play a significant role in their choice of careers. Still, he observes that the second generation’s evangelical faith prompts them to do their best at the workplace in order to become good “stewards” of God on earth.

In Chapter Six, the gender role/status irony that the second generation evangelicals embody and live through is discussed. In general, they are expected to live with an egalitarian

ideal regarding gender roles and status because of their good secular education at secondary and post-secondary institutions, yet they do not. Alumkal observes that their acceptance and practice of typical evangelical patriarchy or gender hierarchy has resulted in gender role/status irony. The second generation evangelical women seem to either take this situation as the “price of admission” to their favored evangelical community, or do not to concern themselves with this issue at all, as long as their spiritual satisfaction is fulfilled.

The book is unique in many ways, especially in two critical areas. Firstly, the main research target is the second generation Asian-American evangelical Christians. Their presence has recently increased, both in quality and in quantity in the American religious landscape, yet there are fairly few serious academic works on their religiosity. Secondly, the book is unique in opening a three-fold academic interrogation into the second generation Asian-American’s faith formulation. That is, an Asian-racial based, religious, and American sociological approach. In particular, as the author also points out at the outset, he takes the matter of “race” significantly into his research, a quintessential factor that many other sociologists of religion have ignored when they approached the non-Western or Asian immigrant population in North America.

As a whole, this book is a great resource for the study of the critical correlation between religion, race, and society. In particular, this book might be good for practical theologians who have an interest in faith formation and indigenous theological development in the immigrant context. Above all, the book, even though it investigates only two congregations (thus, invoking the problem of generalization), can be greatly appreciated in expanding the socio-religious understanding of the Asian American community.

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Martyn Percy. *The Ecclesial Canopy: Faith, Hope, Charity*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012. 224 pages. \$39.95.

The series to which this work by Principal Martyn Percy of Ripon College Cuddesdon belongs is called “Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology.” Percy’s book, *The Ecclesial Canopy*, fits well with that series’ title, as its sprawling ecclesial vision is indeed exploratory. Percy seeks in this third part of his trilogy on ecclesiology to offer a theological understanding of the church enriched by a key metaphor drawn from the early work of the sociologist of religion Peter Berger—the sacred canopy.

His book fits well in part because the metaphor of the sacred canopy seeks to relate the symbols of shared human life to the structure of the cosmos itself. Within Berger’s work, human beings construct meaning through common cultural labor and in the process render the whole universe meaningful. The sacred canopy refers to that stage of meaning construction whereby the whole universe, now meaningful itself, acts back on the subjectivity of human beings. Percy’s brave exploration is to see how such a powerful view of religion in culture might aid the task of thinking about the church under the conditions of late modernity. Can the church, or any ecclesial vision, suffice to render meaningful the connection between a rickety established entity (the Church of England in particular) and what Percy calls the “twin towers of secularism and commercialism”? How might that act back upon us who are hardly of a single mind, but now participants in a pluralistic world?

Most contemporary theologians are fleeing such efforts. Postliberals in North America are content to let the sacred canopy collapse, circle the ecclesial wagons, and retain identity through countercultural purity. Radical orthodoxy in the UK makes an analogous move by rejecting modernity and trying to reenchant a kind of premodern view of faith: a reheated Augustinian Neoplatonism in a postmodern mode. Percy seeks to offer his ecclesiology as a kind of threadbare way forward for late modern pluralists. It is a vision with certain practical-theological attractions.

This is revealed in part by his conversation partners. In a series of insightful chapters Percy treats the relationship of church to matters as divergent as the market place, consumer religion, sacred space, social Christianity, and the need for a public theology of sin, pluralism, and the many intractable dilemmas of church life. What Percy aims for is an ecclesial canopy marked by “capaciousness,” a term which he uses with some frequency. Yet what Percy’s argument *does* is to *make room* for practical theological reflection in shared public life. Its “canopy” is, despite its threadbare quality, a gossamer beauty to behold.

The book is not perfect. The chapters read sometimes like occasional pieces. They are thus also a little uneven. The chapters on consumer religion, a public theology of sin, and the relationship of church and culture make up for any defects. They will reward careful reading. At its weakest points, the perspective Percy offers reads a little like nostalgic Anglicanism. At such points in particular I would have wished for greater theological clarity—that is, if the gospel involves the church, as Percy claims, well then what *is* the gospel? Or is the gospel ultimately *reduced* to Percy’s cherished church? The question is important because of the ecclesial canopy itself. The underside of Percy’s use of Berger’s metaphor shows through here. It may just be that the church itself is insufficient to bear the cosmos-wide promises of God. The final eschatological vision of Revelation 21 envisions a holy city with no temple; perhaps church even at its best is not meant to bear such cosmic freight as Percy would seem to suggest.

Yet this question does not diminish my admiration for Percy's engaging practical theological vision. We can, and should, explore the relationship of church and world in such ordinary yet risky and vulnerable ways. The author puts it well, "authentic ministry sits in the gap between created and redeemed sociality. It holds the world before God. Like the church, it is the social-sacramental skin for the community. It is not an enclave for the redeemed, but rather a resource for all those seeking meaning and truth in a world that longs for hope" (34). For preachers who are looking for ways of naming God's presence through the riddled cosmic canopy of the church, Percy is therefore an excellent guide. For theologians who have not given up on connecting church and culture in way that is both sacramental and ordinary, Percy is even more; he is a friend.

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Pablo J. Rivera Madera. *Preaching to Hispanic Immigrants: Practical Advice for Effectiveness*. Bloomington, IN: Trafford Publishing, 2011. 101 pages. \$12.19.

As the Hispanic population of America continues to grow, preachers of all ethnicities may find themselves speaking to congregations that are changing. Regardless of where pastors and preachers find themselves throughout the country, statistics suggest that they will soon be interacting with more Hispanic immigrants. In *Preaching to Hispanic Immigrants: Practical Advice for Effectiveness*, Pablo Madera offers an introductory work for Non-Hispanics who want to preach faithfully to Hispanic immigrants in their congregation. Based on a survey of a diverse group of Hispanic preachers, Madera provides practical advice for preachers looking to speak to this growing population.

In the first chapter of this text, Madera describes both the sociological reality of the increase in Hispanic immigrants in the United States as well as some of the major issues facing this population. Madera is primarily concerned about the rampant poverty that is found in Hispanic immigrant communities as well as their feelings of marginalization in a culture that is not their own. After firmly stating the centrality of religion for recreating identities, stabilizing families and adapting to neighborhoods within the Hispanic community, Madera moves toward describing preaching in these communities (13). Leaning heavily on the work of Justo Gonzalez and Pablo Jimenez in *Pulpito* and David Kenneth Davis' *Preaching and Culture in Latino Congregations*, Madera describes preaching in Hispanic congregations as participative, personal, and acutely aware of context (15).

Madera uses the second half of Chapter One to give an overview of different models of preaching. He utilizes the categories for sermons that William E. Hull provides in his book, *Strategy Preaching*, namely biblical, rhetorical, and relational (20). This section would be of particular use to those unfamiliar with homiletic method as he provides a brief but robust introduction to some important homiletic works from each of those categories, including William H. Willimon's *Conversations with Barth on Preaching*, H. Grady Davis' *Design for Preaching*, and Justo Gonzalez' *Preaching as a Social Act: Theology and Practice*. Madera then poses his research question: Which of these methods is "the most effective paradigm of preaching in the Hispanic environment"? (32).

Chapters Two and Three describe the research methodology that Madera used in order to test his question and the results of his inquiry. He begins with the hypotheses that the biblical model of preaching and a style that encourages audience participation are most prevalent in Hispanic congregations. To test these hypotheses, Madera designed and distributed a questionnaire to thirty-six lay and ordained ministers with preaching experience in Hispanic churches (38). The results of this survey indicate that his hypotheses were correct. The survey also concludes that 75% of these preachers prefer to preach in Spanish and that "the message of salvation is the primary goal of Hispanic preachers in the proclamation of the word" (50).

In the final chapter, Madera recognizes the limitations of his work and outlines some potential areas for further research. He noted the lack of a central organization to gather information about Hispanic congregations and the lack of research on Hispanic preaching models and styles in the Hispanic environment as the primary limitations for his work. And while I agree that there is room for more research in this area, I might also add that future research may seek to narrow the definitions of style and model that Madera used in order to create even more fruitful information for Non-Hispanic preachers. Naming "biblical" as the most effective model may not be helpful to experienced preachers, as many already strive to create sermons that are biblical.

Rather these preachers would like to know how they should engage the Bible in order to reach Hispanic immigrants. Furthermore, instead of simply saying that Hispanic pastors preach with a style that involves “participation by the congregation,” it would be useful to know what type of participation (i.e. signifying “Amen” from the congregation, questions and answers, or some other form of participation). One of the most useful sections of the text actually comes at the end when Madera quoted directly from the preachers surveyed. For example, one respondent states that, “It is important for Non-Hispanic preachers to accommodate their message in order to be congruent with the needs of the Hispanic community. It is not possible to preach to Hispanics with a “white theology” (75). More exploration of these suggestions could have provided some more depth to the practical wisdom of this text. As a non-Hispanic preacher, this book introduced me to preaching to Hispanic immigrants. I envision more constructive work in the future, as research on Hispanic preaching continues to grow. In the meantime this book offers accessible and immediate advice for Non-Hispanic preachers who find themselves with changing congregations.

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David C. Norrington. *To Preach or Not to Preach? The Church's Urgent Question*. Omaha, NE: Ecclesia, 2013. 214 pages. \$15.95.

"I've preached my last sermon"; with tears in his eyes, a long-time preacher told me he was giving up on preaching. Recently, he and his peers were convinced that preaching was an ineffective means of ministering. And though he loved her, preaching had become a mistress whom he was forced to leave.

David Norrington feels similarly. Norrington, an author and religious leader in England, argues that it is time for us all to give up on preaching. The weekly sermon, he warns, is "unbiblical" and "injurious to the life of the Christian community" (xi). Norrington builds this claim upon two bedrocks. First, regular preaching within Christian gatherings was not common until the third century (and therefore is "unbiblical"). Second, preaching harms rather than helps spiritual growth (and is thus "injurious").

Norrington admits there are speeches and teachings given in sermon-like form in the Old Testament. There is no evidence, however, of a regular sermon given at the temple or other shrines (21). This conclusion may be true. It does not, however, lead to the conclusion that weekly preaching is unwarranted. Further, it has no connection to his supposition that regular preaching is destructive. Norrington is too quick to dismiss the role that preaching played in the ministries of people like Moses (e.g., consider the "sermon" of Deuteronomy) and Isaiah (much of Jesus' preaching grew out of Isaiah's preaching).

Norrington grants that sermons played a consistent part of synagogue activities. But these speeches were presented by a number of different individuals, including "lay people," and involved interruptions and "a good deal of discussion" (23). Therefore, he posits, they have little in common with the sermons of today. No doubt, some synagogue preaching differed from contemporary homiletics. But if the synagogue sermons of Paul (Acts 13) and Jesus (Luke 4) are any indication, preaching still played a prominent role in those gatherings.

Finally, Norrington surveys early Christianity. He acknowledges that Jesus "made extensive use of . . . the sermon as a platform for announcing the arrival of the kingdom of God" (22). But, Norrington argues, Jesus preferred conversation over preaching because "one-way communication was inadequate" (25). While it is true that Jesus utilized various means in addition to preaching for maturing believers, preaching was still utilized.

Norrington dismisses the sermons in Acts and the epistles because they were speeches addressed "to non-Christians, specific problems in the life of the church, farewell addresses and greetings to previously unknown brethren" and that there was nothing "to indicate regular sermons in the context of Christian gatherings" (33). These reasons seem hardly adequate to disparage New Testament sermons. Ideally, sermons today also address "specific problems in the life of the church" and may target various listeners, including non-Christians.

Regular sermons in Christian gatherings became the norm by the third century. Norrington suggests this arose not as a strategic means for discipleship but as something that coincided with the unhealthy advent of church buildings and an unbiblical focus on clergy (44–72). Despite the growth of preaching, spiritual growth happened through other means: small groups, mentoring, one-another ministries, and the development of spiritual gifts (80–100). Sermons actually hindered spiritual formation in the following ways: 1) they failed to foster fellowship (114); 2) they created an unhealthy dependence upon the preacher (121); 3) they could not address the various needs within a large group (123); and 4) they acted as a "deskilling agent" in that they utilized passive listening rather than active engagement (124).

Norrington fails to make a compelling case that regular preaching is "unbiblical." Works like John Stott's *Between Two Worlds* (1982) and *A History of Preaching* (2004) by O. C.

Edwards Jr. demonstrate that preaching played a substantial role in biblical times. He also fails to demonstrate convincingly that preaching is “injurious” to spiritual growth. There are biblical and contemporary examples of vital growth occurring as the result of preaching.

Norrington succeeds on two fronts. First, he reminds us of the limitations of preaching. Preaching is generally one-way communication. It can struggle to address the many different spiritual states present in a large audience. And it often represents the perspective of one (flawed) person. Works like *The Six Deadly Sins of Preaching* (2012) by Lucy Lind Hogan and Robert Reid reveal how preachers may address these limitations.

Second, Norrington points to a need for preaching to be part of a larger strategy for spiritual formation. *Move* (2011), by Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, reveals that preaching plays a notable part in early stages of faith formation. But other activities such as small group conversations, ministry opportunities, and personal spiritual practices aid later faith formation. While readers may not wish to abandon preaching as Norrington urges, they may wish to consider what additional tools are in place to aid the growth of those to whom they do preach.

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Phil Snider. *Preaching After God: Derrida, Caputo, and the Language of Postmodern Homiletics*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012. 227 pages. \$26.

In *Preaching After God: Derrida, Caputo, and the Language of Postmodern Homiletics*, Phil Snider offers a well-written and highly accessible account of a particular strand of postmodern thought vis-à-vis homiletics. The book is aimed primarily at pastors, especially liberal Protestant pastors of the “Tillichian” stripe. The book is motivated by what Snider identifies as a “homiletical crisis,” wherein theology has been supplanted by anthropology and Christian proclamation has devolved into “grand ethical exhortations” (11). Snider’s thesis is that “the postmodern return of religion” presents a viable way around the anthropological aporia structured by liberal Protestant preaching. Rather than leading the contemporary preacher into a mirrored labyrinth or toward a nihilistic theology, Snider is right to identify a “deeply affirmative” mode of thought in certain strands of Jacques Derrida’s oeuvre.

The book is divided into two parts. In Part I, Snider articulates the pastoral, theological, and philosophical aspects of the “modern homiletical crisis,” arguing that deconstruction might come to be viewed as a homiletical resource, rather than an approach inciting fear or vitriol. In Part II, which is the highlight of the book, Snider presents six sermons with accompanying commentary that reveal the true motivation behind the book. Through his preaching one finds a pastor seeking a means of drawing the gospel of Jesus Christ into conversation with the lived realities of his congregants. His sermons are timely, passionate, funny, and empathic.

In spite of its benefits, the book suffers from several glaring problems. First, Snider leaves the reader curious as to why one must embrace postmodern philosophy to deliver preaching from the “modern homiletical crisis” when alternative paths to salvation already exist. I contend that Christian theologians like Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Barth offer such an approach, which Derrida himself acknowledges. Second, even as Snider attempts to deconstruct the binary logic of Western metaphysics, he ends up re-inscribing certain dualities in his own work. For instance, Snider sets up a false choice between God’s agency and human agency. Many mainline and evangelical preachers will reject the choice between “grand ethical exhortation,” or “superstitious” speech. Scripture itself militates against such bifurcation. Third, Snider’s engagement with the guild of homiletics is peculiar. One gets the sense that he is equivocating when he (proudly) employs the label “liberal Protestant homiletics.” However, it is unclear what Snider means precisely by this move since he frequently cites theologians and homileticians who do not share his theological presuppositions. Fourth, Snider’s engagement with the major philosophical minds of the nineteenth and twentieth century is almost always filtered through a secondary source. A telling example is found when Snider cites a story told by Žižek about a man who believed he was a chicken. It appears that Snider may not have read this account from Žižek himself, but from Rollins.¹ My primary concern with the book is that I would like to have seen more direct engagement with Derrida unfiltered by Caputo. Moreover, since deconstruction is such a central aspect of Snider’s book, it would have been helpful to witness how deconstruction not only aids but threatens aspects of language, speech, and ultimately preaching.

¹ Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 35 where he uses the word *hen*, and Peter Rollins, *Insurrection: To Believe is Human, To Doubt Divine* (New York: Howard Books, 2011), 45, who uses the word *chicken*. Snider cites Žižek’s text, but his use of the word *chicken* suggests that Snider is reliant on the story from Rollins.

In spite of these critiques, Snider's intention is to be commended. His search for a mode of Christian proclamation for "those who believe in God some of the time, or none of the time, or all of the time" (170) is a good one. The path he takes in search of this homiletic makes me wonder, however, whether Snider views his own liberal Protestant theology as beyond deconstruction. One could make the case that such a strand of theological thinking has hardened into a predetermining ideology of sorts and Snider's efforts to deconstruct homiletics, while portending to be a quest for the wholly other, ends up merely a return to the same. And this sameness is precisely what the biblical witness deconstructs—it is not Derridean deconstruction but the foolishness of the cross that destroys (read: deconstructs) the wisdom of the wise and it is God who frustrates the intelligence of the intelligent (1 Cor 1:19).

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Medi Ann Volpe. *Rethinking Christian Identity: Doctrine and Discipleship*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. 263 pages. \$94.95.

In this contribution to Blackwell's *Challenges in Contemporary Theology* series, Medi Volpe raises critical issues regarding contemporary theories of Christian identity. In doing this, her aim is both scholarly and personal. Volpe's daughter Anna has Down Syndrome, and this has led Volpe to seek an understanding of Christian identity that is "faithful to classical descriptions of faith and practice, and uses the language historically used in the church, but that stretches to include those whose ability to practice or express the faith is limited – however severely" (2). The book fits within the realm of technical academic theology for which this series is known and assumes a familiarity with postliberal and Anglican ecclesiologies. Nevertheless, Volpe raises questions that should have broader appeal to pastors, practical theologians, and others concerned that the focus on practice in contemporary accounts of Christian identity may have excluded members of actual congregations who might find such practice impossible.

In the first three chapters of the book, Volpe evaluates three accounts of Christian identity: those of postliberal theology (initiated by George Lindbeck and modified by Kathryn Tanner), Rowan Williams, and John Milbank. While she discerns inadequacies in each of these accounts, she finds a positive quality in each that she wishes to retain: the language of *habitus* and rule-governed practice in postliberalism, Rowan Williams' call to recover the language of "soul" as the mysterious locus of the *imago Dei*, and John Milbank's account of "active reception" in which Christian identity is tied to receiving the image of Christ and acting in accordance with that image in turn. All three suffer, however, from deficiencies. Postliberal accounts (and Tanner's in particular) assume and require a particularly abled subject to participate fully in the life of the church whose focus is on practice, but they do not pursue the question of how such a subject is formed. Rowan Williams points toward the language of soul, but does not develop it himself. And finally, John Milbank underestimates the effect of sin that prevents us from fully receiving or mirroring the image of Christ. Volpe suggests that these three elements—formation, the soul, and sin—must be part of a complete account of Christian identity.

In the last three chapters, Volpe performs a retrieval of the theology of Gregory of Nyssa to address these three shortcomings. Gregory's account of Christian identity resonates strongly with that of Milbank (who draws heavily from Gregory's writings), yet overcomes Milbank's shortcomings. Gregory understands the soul as ultimately mysterious (152), and yet it is the unity in which reason, memory, the senses, emotion, desire, and the *imago Dei* intersect. The soul acts as a mirror that receives the image of Christ and reflects it into the world (156), but this mirror must be properly oriented and 'clean' for that reflection to occur. The purpose of Christian formation and doctrine is to overcome the sinful appetites for things of this world so that the soul is oriented toward God and, through ascetic practice, to further purify the soul for reflectivity. Volpe links these concepts together under the heading of identity as "discipleship" (228-229).

Volpe presents a compelling case for rethinking contemporary accounts of Christian identity, but questions remain. First, while Volpe is correct that greater attention is needed to the question of formation, it is also true that this issue has been addressed—from the perspective of postliberalism—in homiletic and practical theological literature. One might point toward Charles Campbell's proposal that we narrate Christ's identity or Walter Brueggemann's goal of "rescripting" reality, to name two examples that provide more concrete proposals for preaching and ministry than Volpe's conclusions. Volpe's argument would be stronger for considering such

practical theological writings. Second, Volpe comes to the role of the Holy Spirit late in the work, despite the fact that Rowan Williams (for instance) has described Christian identity as constituted by the Spirit in his essay “Word and Spirit” (in *On Christian Theology*). Finally, the definition of Christian identity as discipleship (and hence as an activity) is developed independently of the limit cases (such as Volpe’s daughter) that prompt her inquiry. It is only near the end of the work that Volpe gestures toward fitting these cases into the account, with the hint that future writings will address these questions.

Nevertheless, Volpe presents a strong argument for the importance of formation, the soul, and an account of sin in Christian identity. One hopes that she will continue to explore these questions in dialogue with practical theological literature in future works.

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Lance B. Pape. *The Scandal of Having Something to Say: Ricoeur and the Possibility of Postliberal Preaching*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013. 173 pages. \$39.95.

I love this book! It is well-researched—and just as importantly, well-explained—and it is the first major contribution to postliberal homiletics since Campbell's ground-breaking book, *Preaching Jesus*. Where Campbell and Pape diverge, however, is in regard to which theorist best empowers preachers to carry forward the theological and narratological thrust of the gospel. Campbell elects Yale theologian Hans Frei; Pape makes a compelling case for the eminent French philosopher Paul Ricoeur.

The Scandal of Having Something to Say, is a highly edited version of Pape's doctoral dissertation at Emory University. Written under the direction of Thomas G. Long, Pape follows in his mentor's footsteps, both in his deep appreciation for Ricoeur's philosophy and, more importantly, in his conviction that the (narrative) arch of Scripture ought to determine the focus, form, and function of sermons. Pape does much to bolster the Longian school of homiletics with this fantastic study. It is a gift to preachers searching for a fresh wind to fan the flames of sermon creation; but even more, it is a gift to those who teach preaching, offering a viable text-to-sermon process buttressed with sound theory and written with cogency and conviction.

Pape begins with an eloquent reflection on the "impossible possibility" of preaching: the *scandal* of trying to participate in God's Word. Arguing for a cruciform homiletic (7), Pape insists that we must embrace the scandal of the cross by radically submitting our words to God's Word. Challenging Barth's declaration that between the radical otherness of God's Word and the human attempts to bear witness to that word there is no "third thing," Pape identifies a *tertium quid* along a promising—albeit perilous—Ricoeurian path. Pape resonates with the spirit of Barth's homiletic, but finds its practice ultimately "unworkable" (10). The gospel is not reducible to its propositional content—the kernel is inextricable from its husk; form and content are apiece. This necessitates a lens through which Scripture is to be read for Christian preaching. Pape begins by carefully unpacking just such a framework in the work of Hans Frei, rightly noting that Frei's Barthian-inspired theory of biblical interpretation has been influential in recent homiletical theory.

Frei's hermeneutical bracketing of the question of truth with regard to narrative details is all well and good when considered in light of the realistic novel; but Pape argues that truth can be held in abeyance only so long. For the contemporary interpreter—and preacher—the truthfulness of the Gospel is inseparable from the narration of biblical events. Pape notes that however fascinating Frei's early hermeneutical proposal that brackets matters of history and fact may be, at day's end, it "will not preach" (35). What is needed is an account for how Scripture refers ostensibly without falling into the philosophical quagmires of fundamentalism or liberalism. The rest of Pape's project is a quest for a hermeneutical and homiletical framework that is both meaningful and true.

Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory provides Pape with a "bridge" between Barth's "strange world of the Bible" and the context of contemporary pew-sitters who are desperate to hear a Word from the Lord. The bulk of Pape's text is a careful treatment of Ricoeur's theory of interpretation, which Pape appropriates for homiletical theory. Pape deftly leads the reader through Ricoeur's "long route" from metaphor theory—as the point of entry into language, and particularly, meaning-making—to narrative theory. The primary homiletical take-aways from Ricoeur's philosophy of language and narrative are the powers it unleashes to "disclose the real" (49)—a feature that Frei's theory fails to deliver—and the capacity of (biblical) narrative to

disclose a “world” *in front of the text* inviting the reader/listener to enter. Without sacrificing philosophical precision, Pape explicates Ricoeur’s work and its significance for preaching. The key to a Barthian, cruciform homiletic that embraces the scandal of preaching is found in Ricoeur’s notion of “letting go.” It is only by divesting herself of her autonomous status (as subject) before the text (as object) that the preacher is able to participate in the Wor(l)d projected in front of the text. Pape concludes his study with an explicit treatment of Ricoeur’s import for homiletical theory, displaying how Ricoeur’s concept of threefold *mimesis* offers a text-to-sermon process that honors a Barthian theology.

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Bruce Ellis Benson. *Liturgy as a Way of Life: Embodying the Arts in Christian Worship*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013. 160 pages. \$18.

In the beginning was the liturgy. This may sound heretical to those who claim the primacy of preached “Word.” If you have ever experienced a highly formalized service that drones on and on, liturgy can seem the opposite of creativity, and the death knell of lively preaching. Bruce Benson, however, seeks to convince us that liturgy (read preaching for liturgy) and life are inseparable. All of creation, as he describes it, is like a jazz movement, composed of patterns and improvisations. Liturgy (preaching, prayer, song) is the jazz of life; it functions like jazz by connecting us to that original movement that calls out for an improvised response. Creation begins with this call and response pattern. God calls forth and creation responds. Rather than focusing on creation as a process *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), Benson suggests that we recognize the importance of the call and response order (44). In other words, God’s call precedes creation’s beauty (36). Creation is not just God’s artwork, but it is an artwork in which creation also participates. Like jazz, God calls forth creation by blending, repeating, and transforming. God creates by improvising. This challenges us to rethink both the purpose and function of art and the shape of the Christian life. Liturgy is art, and art is a way of life.

Benson explains that art is central to who we are as humans (69). This is contrary to the way art is commonly viewed. According to the modern/romantic paradigm of art, thanks to the philosopher Immanuel Kant, artwork is to be “created for no other purpose than to be admired *aesthetically*” (60). Great works of art express emotion, and thus, have nothing to say about truth or beauty (61). Works of art, according to this paradigm, are subjective, and thus, they need a community of experts to declare their value; they can be admired and understood only by a small community of elite (64). In contrast, Benson explains that we need a paradigm for art that better reflects the true nature of human creativity. He proposes an idea of art that reflects the truth of the beauty and the brokenness of the world (124). Beauty enchants us with an enchantment that originates from God (6). For the Christian, then, art does the important work of pointing to God rather than the artist (130). This is crucial for what Benson says about liturgy and the notion of art as a way of life. Liturgical lives are lives that respond and point back to God.

Liturgy, rather than lifeless and boring repetition, is a lived response to the beauty of creation and the active and improvising call from God. Benson explains how this works in the traditional sense of liturgy by making the distinction between intensive and extensive liturgy. Intensive liturgy is that liturgy that teaches, sustains, and feeds us. This is the kind of liturgy normally done within the context of weekly worship (128). Extensive liturgy, on the other hand, is where the true response to God’s call is realized (142). Having been created in the image of God, we are both God’s artwork and God’s artists, responding to God’s call by improvising on ourselves and on the world around us (129). Like jazz, liturgy is a process of improvising that lone individuals cannot do. It must be done within a community: “All of us, as a part of the Christian community, participate in fashioning one another to become beautiful works of art” (15). Like jazz, liturgy is not something that can be done *ex nihilo*, but depends on a tradition and is inherently intertextual (82–83). “Borrowing is what makes it possible” (84). Yet, like jazz, liturgy is also a conversation of entangled speech—sometimes it is harmonious, and sometimes it is not (91–94).

We all know some churches that honor liturgical practices that are aesthetically pleasing, and perhaps specifically cater to those with the cultured authority to evaluate it. For those who see it in such terms, broadening the idea of liturgy to a way of life will be perplexing—if not

altogether threatening. The same may be said for those who view liturgy in terms of dead ritual. For both groups, however, revisiting the meaning of liturgy in the sense that Benson has suggested may be a fresh resource, both for rethinking how and why we do what we do in worship, and for learning to live as communities who respond to God's call by improvising on our own lives, allowing the Word to become flesh.

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Ronald P. Byars. *The Sacraments in Biblical Perspective*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011. 350 pages. \$40.

Preaching not only provides information as to what the biblical text says and means, but it also challenges current individuals, communities, and societies through sermons that call for transformation. With *The Sacraments in Biblical Perspective*, one volume in the commentary series of *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Ronald Byars offers a very valuable resource and reference for those who want to explore deeply and broadly multiple meanings, implications, metaphors, symbols, themes, dimensions, reflections, and interpretations of the sacraments, rooted in biblical texts. He addresses those seeking to engage in faithful sacramental preaching on baptism (23-182) and the Eucharist (183-308) for purposes of transformation.

In this text, Byars' interest in the intersection between the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist and the abundant biblical interpretations/implications in ecumenical contexts is very visible. His understanding of preaching as the living bridge between biblical texts and the congregation's sacramental life is fully engaged with his sustained intellectual, spiritual, and historical exploration. Therefore, one can easily recognize the author's intention to present the readers with examples of scripture and sacraments in life-forming, transformative relationships.

The Sacraments in Biblical Perspective is distinctive in five ways. First, this series provides rich commentary and lectionary resources on the Revised Common Lectionary. It enables users to draw out various sacramental perspectives and themes on baptism and the Eucharist from the beginning to end. It thoroughly focuses on how the lectionary readings can help preachers interpret and reflect on passages, on baptism and the Eucharist, both biblically and theologically, for both the lectionary as well as the non-lectionary preacher throughout the entire year.

Second, Byars designs textual comments to help preachers and congregations develop a deep and broad sacramental vision out of which to interpret genuine Christian sacramental identity beyond the barriers of one's own denominational, theological, and biblical understandings of the sacraments. This text is primarily helpful to anyone interested in an overview of Reformed sacramental theology and biblical interpretations, acknowledging human decision-making as a result of divine action. However, the sacramental comments on the biblical texts inclusively and ecumenically introduce baptism and the Eucharist beyond the boundaries of the theology and interpretation particular denomination of particular denominations.

Third, this study provides the readers with various biblical implications, imaginations, associations, and connections on baptism and Eucharist from both Testaments, even though they "may not immediately appear to have anything to do with the sacraments" (18). It encourages the preacher to pay attention to other biblical texts that may have informed or influenced the passage, or to be sensitive to other passages that may simply come to mind amid the process of preaching preparation.

Fourth, the author criticizes modern/postmodern church worship and preaching in the twenty-first century world (1-19), observing the general ignorance and indifference toward the sacraments in contemporary services of baptism and the Eucharist, as well as the current lack of sacramental faith, which is the foundation of Christian experience in relation to the mystery of

God's presence and grace. At the same time, he prophetically emphasizes its recovery and restoration in terms of its mystery, relationship, and symbol.

Fifth, Byars intends this commentary resource to be much more than simple notes on imaginative exegetical interpretations of the biblical readings and implications, especially as it relates to baptism and the Eucharist. It is also designed to help preachers and congregations, as well as Christian leaders, understand the history, theology, appropriate baptismal /Eucharistic hymns and liturgies, Creed, and arguments, as related to the sacraments, such as the validity of infant baptism, qualifications of catechumens (169-177), and the celebration of the Eucharist at a funeral (305-307).

Numerous scholarly volumes deal with diverse theological perspectives and practices, grounded and centered in various denominations and Christian traditions. Such resources related to exhaustive historical exploration and Ecumenical studies of baptism and Eucharist can be easily found. But, Byars' text provides the reader with a well-investigated resource that one can easily navigate on how biblical texts relate to baptism and the Eucharist and what they mean, scrutinizing various links that illumine the meanings/implications of baptism and the Eucharist. Thus, this book is a significant resource for sacramental preaching, well worth engaging.

Finally, though Byars has compiled for the reader abundant information, associations, and images on baptism and Eucharist, it is the responsibility of the reader to challenge and experience sacramental transformations through the means of human communication. Byars' commentary reflects Karl Barth's notion that to understand preaching we must understand sacrament.

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Ruth C. Duck and Maren C. Tirabassi, eds. *Touch Holiness: Resources for Worship, Revised and Updated*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2012. 292 pages. \$22.

Prayer is a bold and faithful act. Liturgies written for public prayer display heightened courage as the writer attempts to offer the words that will speak the hearts of unknown persons to an even greater mystery we call “God.” This updated version of *Touch Holiness* is a profound, pastoral resource for preachers and worship designers. It contains worship resources useful to congregations that follow a more traditional worship ordo as well as those that utilize contemporary and emergent worship genres.

This book contains liturgical texts designated for the Sundays and seasonal observances of the Christian Year, along with liturgies written for thematic worship. Both of these sections offer the following: Calls to Worship, Invocations, Prayers of Confession, Assurances of Grace, Unison Prayers/Collects, Offertory resources, Responsive Readings, Commissions, and Benedictions. It provides diverse resources for the weekly work of creating worship. It also contains new rituals addressing natural disaster, acts of violence, rituals for life transitions, prayers for the sacraments of Holy Communion and Baptism, and fresh lyrics for service music.

The aim of this updated version is two-fold. First, the editors revised half of the entries in the first edition so to incorporate more current language without changing the original intent of the writing. Secondly, they include additional material that addresses the needs of a Church in decline, an increasingly erosive consumerism, and a sea of humanity searching for meaning.

The editors’ format continues to include material from over sixty practitioners in worship from across denominational lines and contexts for worship. With the guidance of Duck and Tirabassi, these poets, preachers, lyricists and prophets offer the means for re-traditioning Christian rituals into vibrant worship.

For the preacher, this text is an excellent resource for worship planning and sermon preparation. Over three hundred of the entries reference scripture used in the Revised Common Lectionary. The non-scripturally identified texts carry seasonal and theological themes. These themes offer a myriad of possibilities for constructing worship that embodies consistent threads of theological meaning. Just reading through some of the entries can wake up the preacher’s imagination with rich illustrative language. The intentions of the prayers focus words of gratitude as well as urgent petitions toward human need within and beyond the worshipping community. These liturgies address a cacophony of global and social concerns. They also acknowledge the explosion of social media and technological dependence. If you are the one who puts the service together, you will find multiple ways to incorporate prayerful acts of praise, invocation, petition, confession, and intercession. If these prayers do not fit your context, you will likely be inspired to find your own words for leading your congregation. Though varied in purpose and content, the careful designs of these liturgies demonstrate well-constructed liturgies.

Among the newer rituals you will find an evening service for Epiphany. This service points the congregation beyond the day of Christmas, reframing the Christmas festival that so often ends abruptly on Christmas night. Another useful addition includes prayers focused on issues of sexual conduct. Given this text is a required reading for most clergy in most judicatories, these liturgies can help the participants find a spiritual focus for such sensitive discussions. The liturgies for Pentecost and the weeks following capture the narrative of the Holy Spirit’s infusion of the body of believers who become the Church. These entries move the

congregation from celebration of the Spirit's power to embodying new disciplines producing new fruit.

An important aspect of this resource is the manner in which gender language is carefully scripted to offer non-sexist and inclusive language and imagery for humanity and for God. References to humans strive to resist patriarchal constructs of power and attribute. References to the divine give life to traditional non-patriarchal names for the Triune God, employing maternal and paternal names, as well as non-anthropomorphic and scriptural names. This poetic language invites the worshipper to engage in more expansive names for God. It is also delivered with artistry that resists giving preferential treatment to one linguistic symbol over another.

The new edition of *Touch Holiness* continues the work Duck and Tirabassi began more than a decade ago. This work honors the scriptural foundation of worship while giving a new voice to the formation and sound of public prayer. As the words from these pages take flight in your worship community, they will lay claim to the power of the gospel and the promise of the reign of God.

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Anscar J. Chupungco. *What, Then, Is Liturgy? Musings and Memoir*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010. 251 pages. \$29.95.

By its title, *What, Then, Is Liturgy? Musings and Memoir*, one might mistakenly categorize this book as merely a memoir of a liturgical scholar. But this book is more than recounting historical events related to liturgy. Indeed, Chupungco (1939–2013) proffers a liturgical theology that is shaped by his understanding of Church history and leadership in liturgical enculturation within the confines of the Roman Catholic tradition.

In and through the five chapters of this book, Chupungco dialogues with several sources including the Patristic Fathers and the theological thoughts of his teachers in the likes of Salvatore Marsili, Adrien Nocent, Cipriano Vagaggini and Balthasar Fischer, laying claim that the reforming effort of the second Vatican Council was timely and appropriate and expressing his concern about the process of reforming “the reform of Vatican II” (xv).

In his first chapter, Chupungco establishes the framework of liturgical concerns by noting the uncertainty and conflicts that still persist within the ecclesial community although fifty years have passed since the liturgy was reformed. In his candid observation, he notes,

The liturgical movement and the council wanted worship to be an agent of human renewal. There are times when, as I step back to view the state of liturgical reform, I become disheartened by what seems to be a misplaced concern for rubrical details that have little consequence on what goes on in the world (9).

Across chapters two to four, Chupungco offers a liturgical theology framed by the liturgical reform of 1963 and is ably reinforced by his strong command of liturgical history. Adopting the scholarly approach, he takes time to explain the theo-liturgical concepts and their developments, never neglecting the contexts that shape such thoughts. Considering the doxological Trinitarian formula that is presently in use, Chupungco briefly mentions Joseph Jungmann’s *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer* (Liturgical Press, 1989) to explain why the original “Glory to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit,” which clearly articulated the relationships involved in salvation history that better served liturgical worship, was changed to equal glorification leading to the loss of this divine interrelationship (101). It is Chupungco’s magisterial understanding of the field that enables this book to take on a significant scholarly task *sans* footnotes! For any emerging liturgical scholar or worship enthusiast, one would be wise to take note and follow up on Chupungco’s almost cursory-like mention of sources to benefit fully from reading this work.

In chapter 5, he focuses on the externals of the liturgy, namely the place of rubrics, symbols, music, sacred images, the use of vernacular language, vestments, and mass media as external acts of the liturgy. In this final chapter, Chupungco once again reminds the readers that the primary focus of the reform was “full, active, and conscious participation of the faithful in liturgical celebrations” (169). It is in this light that he calls for all reforming efforts to align themselves to this task accordingly. I can best illustrate this through Chupungco’s commentary on music. He writes,

The classical liturgical movement successfully called our attention to the fact that texts should be first in our ranking the components of liturgy. I believe that the time has come to treat music in the liturgy not only as a servant but ‘as worship,’ . . . Surely we need to enhance the word and foster active participation through congregational singing, but we should not forget that music is a ritual language that progresses according to the solemnity of the occasion (216–217).

Broaching the subject of ritual language, Chupungco takes pains to examine the use of the vernacular in liturgical celebration. He rises admirably to the defense of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) and successfully argues that while Latin remains preeminent as an ecclesial language, it ought not be mistakenly upheld as being “a wholly other kind of language that is reserved exclusively for religious purposes” (186). Chupungco asserts that Latin liturgical language is a ritual language and not a sacred language. By this differentiation, he notes that the directive of Pope Paul VI reminded all language translators that “their aim is principally to promote active participation in the liturgy, as the council desired. . . . The sacrifice of so noble a heritage should thus be compensated by vernacular texts that are ‘within the grasp of all . . .’” (189–190).

In conclusion, I posit that this advocacy for full, conscious, and active participation of the assembly in liturgical celebration explains Chupungco’s deep seated *raison d’être* of his teaching ministry and his untiring call for liturgical enculturation. So it is fitting that in the year that Chupungco joins S. Anita Stauffer “to sing the divine praises in the company of the heavenly throng” (165) that this book is offered as a suitable road map for those who remain to chart the course of liturgical reformation, keeping in mind “that in all things, God may be glorified” (241).

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