

Preaching and Place: A Mosaic of a German Perspective

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Abstract: *The question of preaching and place is currently the subject of intense debate in Germany. Due to a significant decrease in church membership, the question arises as to what place preaching has in today's society and how it can continue to be carried out in the future, both in word and deed. Related to this is the question of the aspirations of preaching and homiletics, and how they envision their place in society. This paper deals with the question of whose place preaching is and which voices are heard in this place. It argues that German homiletics must critically examine itself in terms of racism and make room for other voices. The paper concludes with a call for preaching and homiletics in the German context from a more humble place.*

Introduction

The following thoughts and remarks on preaching and place are specific to the German Protestant context. Like a mosaic, this paper highlights different perspectives on the topic from various angles. The intention of the paper is to open up a discussion, not to provide an exhaustive treatment of the outlined perspectives.

First, under "Preaching – My Place (in Society)," I situate myself as the author of this paper. In "Preaching and Its Changing Place in Society," the question of preaching's place in society will be emphasized due to a significant decrease in church membership. "Preaching—Which Place Do We Seek in Society?" addresses the question of which place preaching seeks in society and the hesitancy toward political preaching in the German context. In "Preaching—Whose Place?," I explore which voices are heard in German homiletics and preaching and which are left out. The final section, "Preaching from a Humbler Place," argues that German homiletics must engage in critical self-examination, address the issue of racism, and allow itself to be questioned.

Preaching – My Place (in Society)

In order to reveal the perspective from which I approach the topic, it is appropriate to provide some social context about myself as an author: I am a White German woman who was born and raised in Germany. I am a heterosexual, cisgender person belonging to the middle class. Apart from my gender, these elements contribute to my status as a privileged member of German society.

During my studies in Germany, all my professors were White and most were male. The majority of the content of my studies consisted of engaging with texts by White European or Euro-American theologians whose work significantly impacted my theological thinking. However, the lack of engagement with non-White theologies and voices also shaped my theological understanding and worldview, contributing to a narrowing of my perspective. During my studies, I had the opportunity to spend a year at Duke Divinity School in the United States. Although Duke University is an elite, predominantly White educational institution, my time there greatly broadened my perspective by exposing me to different voices and theologies.

It was only during my time in the U.S. that I became truly aware of my identity as a White person, showing that I belong to the dominant social group in the contexts in which I mostly move and that this influences my identity.

Preaching and Its Changing Place in Society

The two biggest churches in Germany are the Roman Catholic Church and the EKD, which translates to "German Protestant Church." The EKD is organized into 20 regional churches, some of which are Lutheran and others Reformed or United, but all are organized under the EKD.¹ These two churches have long played an important role in German society because, unlike many other countries, Germany does not have a strict separation of church and state. While Germany is a secular state, it is not a laicist state like France. Instead, there is a cooperation model. For instance, the state collects church tax and allows religious education in state schools. In return, churches take on state tasks, such as running kindergartens, hospitals, and retirement homes.²

Nonetheless, the German church landscape and the role of the church in society are undergoing rapid changes. While 22% of people were unaffiliated in the 1990s, the number of unaffiliated people surpassed the combined number of Catholic and Protestant church members for the first time by the end of 2024.³ It is predicted that the number of Protestant church members will be half of what it was in 2017 by 2060.⁴ This rapid decline in church membership poses major challenges for German churches. Since churches have largely been financed by church taxes collected from church members, the decline in membership means significantly fewer financial resources. Human resources are also becoming scarce as fewer people are studying theology or entering the ministry while baby boomers retire.

In light of these developments, the question arises as to what role the church, and thus also preaching, still plays in society. These changes are challenging churches and prompting them to address fundamental theological and organizational questions. These questions concern the core understanding of ecclesiology and the fundamental tasks of the church. They also include decisions about which forms of proclamation to prioritize and how to continue proclamation, in word and deed, successfully in the future. Should churches withdraw from areas such as hospitals and prisons, or should they focus on widespread proclamation on Sunday mornings? Which tasks must be performed by ministers, and which can be performed by laypeople?

¹ EKD, Übersichtskarte der evangelischen Landeskirchen, <https://www.ekd.de/evangelische-kirche-in-deutschland-14272.htm> (Accessed 02/14/2026).

² Bundesministerium des Inneren, Religionsverfassungsrecht, <https://www.bmi.bund.de/DE/themen/heimat-integration/gesellschaftlicher-zusammenhalt/staat-und-religion/religionsverfassungsrecht/religionsverfassungsrecht-node.html> (02/14/2026); EKD, Kirche und Staat: "Getrennt und doch partnerschaftlich verbunden," <https://www.ekd.de/dutzmann-vortrag-verhaeltnis-kirche-staat-45442.htm> (Accessed 02/14/2026); Bundestag: Deutsches und europäisches Staatskirchenrecht, <https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/415154/1d79e78517cba693aa287b580281738d/WD-3-491-06-pdf.pdf> (Accessed 02/14/2026).

³ Süddeutsche: Erstmals mehr Konfessionslose als Kirchenmitglieder in Deutschland, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/konfession-deutschland-kirchen-li.3230534> (Accessed 02/14/2026).

⁴ EKD, Entwicklung der Kirchenmitgliederzahlen, <https://www.ekd.de/projektion2060-mitgliederzahlen-45532.htm> (Accessed 02/14/2026).

Another question arises: What should be done with places, such as churches, that have been used for proclamation but will no longer be used for worship services?⁵ The relationship between preaching and its place in society is currently a widely debated topic in Germany, oftentimes accompanied by difficult decisions and feelings of grief and loss.

Preaching – Which Place Do We Seek in Society?

The question arises not only of what place preaching is accorded in society, but also of what place it would like to occupy, according to its self-image.

In the German context, the relationship between the church and the public sphere, and, consequently, between the church and politics, is a recurring topic of discussion.⁶ Closely linked to this topic is the role of preaching and its relationship to social issues.⁷ Does preaching as a form of communication see itself as exerting influence beyond the walls of the church and taking social and political stances?⁸ Or does preaching try to stay out of political—and thus also social—debates?

Germany has historically experienced the perils associated with political preaching, leading to a prevailing reluctance toward such practices. For instance, during the First World War, there was a pervasive enthusiasm for warfare. Many preachers expressed similar sentiments and promoted the war in their sermons.⁹ The indelible mark left on homiletics and the understanding of sermons by the fact that sermons were used to promote the Nazi agenda during the worst chapter in German history, the Nazi era, is profound. Nevertheless, other experiences with political sermons occurred after World War II. They played a significant role in the peace movement and the struggle for German reunification, for example.¹⁰ However, political preaching in Germany has become rather silent in recent decades.¹¹ For a long time now, German homiletics has placed greater focus on the aesthetic dimension of preaching and on "the listener," i.e., the individual, rather than on the social dimension of preaching.¹²

⁵ See the work on the deconsecration of churches. Annemarie Kaschub, *Liturgie der Kirchenschließung*, Eine kirchentheoretische und empirische Studie zu Entwidmungen (Leipzig 2022).

⁶ Kristin Merle, "Politisch predigen? Lust und Last einer gegenwärtigen Suchbewegung," in *Politikum Predigt. Predigen im Kontext gesellschaftlicher Relevanz und politischer Brisanz*, ed. Johann Roth and Ursula Pock (Don Bosco, 2021), 66-71.

⁷ The discussion cannot be pursued further at this point, but the lines can be traced in the following works, for example: Johann Pock, and Ursula Roth, *Politikum Predigt. Predigen im Kontext gesellschaftlicher Relevanz und politischer Brisanz* (München 2021); Sonja Keller, *Parteiische Predigt. Politik, Gesellschaft und Öffentlichkeit als Horizonte der Predigt* (Leipzig 2017); Helmut Schwier, *Ethische und Politische Predigt. Beiträge zu einer homiletischen Herausforderung* (Leipzig 2015); Albrecht Grözinger, *Toleranz und Leidenschaft. Über das Predigen in einer pluralistischen Gesellschaft* (Gütersloh 2004; Andrea Bieler and Hans-Martin Gutmann *Rechtfertigung der Überflüssigen. Die Aufgabe der Predigt heute* (Gütersloh 2008).

⁸ As explained in the previous section, proclamation naturally goes beyond public religious communication in a worship setting. However, the following will focus on this.

⁹ Albrecht Grözinger Vgl., *Homiletik* (Gütersloh 2008), 64f.

¹⁰ Oxen, Kathrin: „Nur noch kurz die Welt retten?“ Die politische Predigt von heute als Herausforderung für die homiletische Aus- und Fortbildung, in: Schwier, Helmut (Hg.): *Ethische und politische Predigt. Beiträge zu einer homiletischen Herausforderung*, Leipzig 2015, 184–195, here 184 f.

¹¹ Merle argues that political preaching has received greater attention again since the so-called refugee crisis. Merle, "Politisch predigen," 65. Nevertheless, discussions about political preaching continue to play a minor role in German homiletics.

¹² Up until now, these two dimensions have been at odds with each other in German-language homiletics. However, a look at African-American preaching traditions shows that the political and aesthetic dimensions of preaching can easily be combined and enrich each other.

I argue that the reluctance to engage in political preaching is related not only to Germany's past and the experienced dangers of political sermons, but also to the privileged position of the church, as well as that of many homileticians and preachers in Germany. This phenomenon can be attributed to the fact that the majority of preachers and homileticians do not face direct challenges related to social marginalization and discrimination. Instead, they predominantly belong to the dominant social group, which ensures that their interests are addressed within the political landscape.¹³

The implications of the church's shifting position in society, precipitated by a substantial decline in membership, on its relationship to political statements in sermons and its potential shift toward a heightened emphasis on the prophetic dimensions of preaching remain to be examined.

The political situation in Germany also challenges Christian preaching: the Alternative for Germany party (AfD), which the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution considers right-wing extremist, is currently the strongest or second-strongest force, depending on the poll.¹⁴ The success of a political party that advocates inhumane positions and is contrary to Christian ethics in many respects calls into question the reluctance of German preachers to bring theological and socio-political issues into conversation.

Preaching – Whose Place and Voice?

Let us turn now to a fourth aspect in need of further understanding: Whose voices are heard in German homiletics and preaching—and whose are missing?

In 2022, Sabrina Müller evaluated homiletic seminar curricula at major German-speaking universities. The results are sobering: Zero percent of the texts read in the seminars were written by people of color, and texts by women were rarely included in homiletic training.¹⁵ Homiletic courses are usually based on texts by White male authors considered "classics" in German-language homiletic discourse.¹⁶ While this study is not representative, its findings highlight an issue that plagues many German-speaking theological faculties.¹⁷ Theological and homiletic training continues to focus largely on ideas proposed by White male scholars. Even today, students in Germany can study theology without engaging with voices from outside the German

¹³ This statement refers solely to the German context. Some traditions do not address political issues for other reasons, such as fear of reprisals. As argued here, a refusal to express political views is not necessarily related to a privileged position or great privileges. I would like to thank J. Sergius Halvorsen for this valuable insight. See Sergius J. Halvorsen, "Preaching the Impossible in the Face of the Unthinkable: Nonviolence, Love, and Thanksgiving in a Coptic Easter Sermon," *Religions* 15, no. 4 (2024), <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/15/4/455>.

¹⁴ Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland: Umfragewerte im Bund: Wie die Bürgerinnen und Bürger wählen würden, <https://www.rnd.de/politik/umfragen-zu-parteien-aktuelle-trends-fuer-spd-union-afd-gruene-und-co-14-02-2026-462SFUR3SNBCLN3ACXRFNANNSE.html> (Accessed 02/14/2026)

¹⁵ Sabrina Müller, "After the Sermon and Beyond the Pulpit. Transformative, Power-Sensitive Homiletics of Polyphony and Hope," *Homiletic* 49, no. 1 (2024): 40 f., <https://homiletic.net/index.php/homiletic/article/view/5623>.

¹⁶ Müller, "After the Sermon," 41. According to Müller's empirical analysis, the most frequently read texts are those by white German men: Engemann, Grözingen, Lange, and Nicol/Deeg. As previously mentioned, this is not a representative study; however, it does indicate a trend.

¹⁷ An informal evaluation conducted by Helmut Schwier and me with students in a seminar reached a similar conclusion. The students evaluated their current seminar plans for the semester based on the diversity of the authors of the texts they were reading. It became apparent here, too, that apart from religious studies, texts by BIPOC are rarely read and that the texts are predominantly written by *white* male authors.

context—voices that offer different perspectives, experiences, and critical questions about the dominant White context's entanglement in racism and colonial heritage.

White perspectives are not named as such but are rather assumed to be theologically normative. Rendering White perspectives invisible presents them as neutral and manifests the hegemony of White theologies and homiletics.¹⁸ In Germany, theologies that address the connection between power and knowledge production, or that are not practiced by White people, continue to be treated in most settings as “special cases” and denied validity beyond their original context. Thus, the group in power decides what constitutes academia and the “correct” form of homiletics.¹⁹ In the German context, this group is White academics, who are often male.²⁰

While the works of White American homileticians, especially those belonging to the so-called “New Homiletic,” are well-received, this is not the case for the work of homileticians of color.²¹ Since language and access to texts are not reasons for the lack of engagement, bias and racism may be assumed as the reasons for this current lack of receptivity. Excluding other voices and establishing White (German) theology as the only valid theology by treating texts differently in seminars and lectures maintains privileges that have applied only to certain groups of people in a theological context across generations.

In Germany, most people who regularly preach in church services are pastors who are at the center of society, not on the margins. As Christians, they have privileges. Due to their education and status, they usually belong to the middle class. In many cases, they are cisgender and White. Because of their social location, most are likely accustomed to reading the Bible from a privileged perspective. When preachers in Germany rely primarily on sermon aids and websites for sermon preparation or engage with exegetical commentaries from the German-speaking context, these materials are most often written by people with a similar social location to that of the pastors. In other words, hegemonic traditions of interpretation are most often perpetuated.

In many German cities, church communities barely reflect the ethnic and linguistic diversity of society. Churches create spaces that are not representative of society as a whole, since Germany has long welcomed immigrants from diverse ethnic backgrounds and nations of origin.

Theological studies, the church, and pulpits in Germany continue to be predominantly White spaces that are part of a White-dominant culture.²²

¹⁸ HyeRan Kim-Cragg, “Invisibility of Whiteness: A Homiletical Interrogation,” *Homiletic* 46, no. 1 (2021): 28 f., <https://homiletic.net/index.php/homiletic/article/view/5140>.

¹⁹ Judith Gruber, “Wider die Entinnerung. Zur postkolonialen Kritik hegemonialer Wissenspolitiken in der Theologie,” In *Postkoloniale Theologien II. Perspektiven aus dem deutschsprachigen Raum*, ed. Andreas Nehring, and Simon Wiesgickl (Stuttgart 2018), 24.

²⁰ Mumford rightly points out that white racism cannot be separated from other forms of oppression, such as sexism, classism, and ableism. Therefore, whiteness must be understood in an intersectional way. Debra J. Mumford, “Unmasking the Homiletical Whiteness of Jerry Falwell Sr. and the Moral Majority,” In *Unmasking White Preaching. Racial Hegemony, Resistance, and Possibilities*, ed. Lis Valle-Ruiz and Andrew Wymer (Lexington, 2022), 29; Kim-Cragg, “Invisibility of Whiteness,” 34.

²¹ Martin Nicol, *Einander ins Bild setzen. Dramaturgische Homiletik* (Göttingen 2005); Daniel J Schmidt, *Der homiletische Entwurf von Gerhard Aho (1923–1987): Studie zur Rekonstruktion eines nordamerikanischen lutherischen Predigtkonzepts* (Leipzig 2014); Inga Kreusch, *Absichtsvoll Predigen. Rhetorik und New Homiletic* (Stuttgart 2024).

²² Nathalie Eleyth, “Rassismus im Semesterplan. Warum Schwarze Theologie an hiesigen Fakultäten wichtiger werden sollte,” *zeitzeichen*. <https://zeitzeichen.net/node/11385> (Accessed 02/14/2026). See also Veccera's

Preaching from a Humbler Place

The self-referential nature of German homiletic discourse, coupled with the widespread exclusion of other voices, suggests an arrogant attitude on the part of German homiletics. However, it is more than arrogance. The lack of diversity in literature studied in homiletic seminars and the disregard for the voices of homiletics of color suggest an underlying racism problem.²³

In Germany, we have not yet developed a sufficient understanding of racism. In the German context, the tendency of White people who consider themselves "good" to deny their own racism is often linked to a reductionist understanding of racism as physical violence belonging to the past of National Socialism and associated only with right-wing extremism.²⁴ The idea that racism does not require malicious intent but rather is an institutionalized system that preserves White supremacy is often overlooked.²⁵ In Germany, racism and its history are often viewed as an American problem rather than something closely linked to European intellectual history and thus as part of Europe's heritage.²⁶ This issue must be addressed in theology and homiletics, as well as in teaching and research. All theological disciplines must consider the interplay of Christianity, colonization, and racism. This also applies to homiletics, especially since preaching played a central role in colonization and has not yet been adequately addressed in German-speaking contexts. While German theology rightly and necessarily reflects on anti-Semitic Christian thinking, it largely ignores the symbiotic relationship between Christianity, colonialism, and imperialism, the racism that accompanies it, and Christianity's complicity in legitimizing colonial worldviews and racist classifications.²⁷

Not only does the selection of primarily White (cisgender male) voices point to an underlying problem with racism, but it also leads to a lack of sensitivity to racism among future pastors within their own religious tradition and in society as a whole. However, the results of the 2020 Afro Census, the "largest survey ever conducted among Black, African, and Afro-Diasporic people in Germany," reveal the urgent need to address racism, particularly within the church.²⁸ Of all the institutions, the church was the second-least trusted by the people surveyed. Even the police and security authorities seemed more trustworthy than the church.²⁹

book, in which she examines the whiteness of the church in Germany and the racism that goes with it: Sarah Vecera, *Wie ist Jesus weiß geworden? Mein Traum von einer Kirche ohne Rassismus* (Ostfildern 2022).

²³ As well as one with sexism.

²⁴ Susan Arndt, "Rassismus," In *Wie Rassismus aus Wörtern spricht. (K)Erben des Kolonialismus im Wissensarchiv deutsche Sprache. Ein kritisches Nachschlagewerk* ed. Susan Arndt and Nadja Ofuatey-Alazard (Münster 2011), 37; Astrid Messerschmidt, "Distanzierungsmuster. Vier Praktiken im Umgang mit Rassismus," In *Rassismus bildet. Bildungswissenschaftliche Beiträge zur Normalisierung und Subjektivierung in der Migrationsgesellschaft*, ed. Anne Broden, and Paul Mecheril, 41–55.

²⁵ Noah Sow, "Rassismus," In *Wie Rassismus aus Wörtern spricht. (K)Erben des Kolonialismus im Wissensarchiv deutsche Sprache. Ein kritisches Nachschlagewerk* ed. Susan Arndt and Nadja Ofuatey-Alazard (Münster 2011, 37); Arndt, "Rassismus," 37.

²⁶ Birgit Rommelspacher, "Rassismen," 48–50.

²⁷ Andrea Bieler, HyeRan Kim-Cragg, "Addressing Whiteness in the Church. Challenging the Power Differential and Moving Towards Intercultural Congregations", In *Interkulturelle Kirche. Strategien zur Verwirklichung der Wohngemeinschaft Gottes. Zweite Studientagung der EKD zur migrationssensiblen Kirchenentwicklung* (Frankfurt 2020), 29.

²⁸ Afrozensus 2020, Der Report, <https://afrozensus.de/reports/2020/> (Accessed 02/14/2026).

²⁹ Afrozensus 2020, <https://afrozensus.de/reports/2020/Afrozensus-2020-Einzelseiten.pdf>, 254. I owe this reference to Nathalie Eleyth's article. "Rassismus im Semesterplan."

Furthermore, German homiletics, with its Eurocentric/White orientation, deprives itself of the potential to learn from other preaching traditions. Of course, care must be taken to ensure that elements are not simply adopted in a manner that constitutes cultural appropriation. At the same time, questioning the hegemonic claim of White homiletics means rejecting the idea that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color can learn from White traditions but White people cannot learn from preaching traditions of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

German homiletics must abandon its self-centeredness and critically examine its own racism (as well as other forms of discrimination such as gender discrimination, classism, etc.) and work to decolonize the field. It is time to listen to and learn from other traditions. It is time for us to take a step back and make space for the voices we have silenced until now. It is time for German theology and homiletics to preach from a humbler place.

Conclusion

It has been argued above that the question of preaching and place is a central one in the German context due to the decrease in church membership. The question arises as to what role the church, and thus also preaching, still plays in society, and what role preaching wants to seek in the future. It was argued that there are good historical reasons for a reluctance toward political preaching in the German context. At the same time, the question was raised as to the extent to which this reluctance in the German context is related to the privilege enjoyed by most preachers and homileticians. The aforementioned privilege was also considered in terms of which voices are given a space in German homiletics and which remain unheard. In “Preaching from a Humbler Place,” it was argued that German homiletics needs to engage in self-critical reflection on racism and work on a decolonization of homiletics to develop in a way that respects and learns from other homiletical and preaching traditions.

For Further Reading

Bieler, Andrea, Kim-Cragg, HyeRan. „Addressing Whiteness in the Church. Challenging the Power Differential and Moving Towards Intercultural Congregations.“ in: *Interkulturelle Kirche. Strategien zur Verwirklichung der Wohngemeinschaft Gottes. Zweite Studientagung der EKD zur migrationssensiblen Kirchenentwicklung*. Frankfurt 2020, 25–30.

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