

Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen

Dialogical Preaching

Bakhtin, Otherness and Homiletics

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Introduction

This book explores the genre of preaching in light of the theories of dialogicity and carnivalization developed by the Russian philosopher, literary critic, and communication theoretician, Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895–1975). The concepts of otherness and difference play a central role in human communication as well as in theological descriptions of the relationship between God and humans. Accordingly one of my central aims is to explore ways in which various ‘others’, different from the designated preacher, influence contemporary preaching practices and in that sense can be seen as co-authors of homiletic meaning.

In order to study the complex genre of preaching, the exploration is developed within the following tension fields that are distinct yet intertwined: 1) Theory versus practice; 2) dialogue versus monologue; 3) carnivalesque interactions and role-reversals between voices, bodies, and texts; and 4) the ‘Wholly Other’ versus ‘Other-wise’ listeners. In the following I will briefly address what is at stake within these different fields.

Theories of Practice

The academic discipline of homiletics shares the challenges of other disciplines of practical theology. These challenges emerge not only from the overlapping boundaries between theology, sociology, literary criticism, communications theory, and philosophy but first and foremost from the tension field between theory and practice. The latter tension is crucial to keep in mind, granted that one of the primary tasks of practical theology is to analyze acts and practices that are transformed by the very theoretical attempt to account for them.¹

In spite of the radical differences between homiletical theory and practice, one of my intentions is to explore whether a new homiletic approach, based on a practice-theoretical methodology and theories of dialogue and carnivalization developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, can enable homileticians to manage in

1 See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 80–83; Sherry B. Ortner, ‘Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26.1 (1984): 126–166; Daniel Franklin Pilario, *Back to the Rough Grounds of Praxis: Exploring Theological Method with Pierre Bourdieu*. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005); Theodore R. Schatzki et al., *Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

these tension fields without either ignoring their differences or dividing theory and practice into mutually exclusive fields.² Accordingly, it is not my primary intention to provide practical guidelines for dialogical preaching. Having learned from competent, yet problematic approaches to analysis of written sermons³ I will try to surpass traditional approaches of either building homiletic theories upon *presumptions* of how listeners might respond to preaching or set up rhetorical rules for preaching based on *generalization* from empirical studies.⁴ As an alternative approach, therefore, some of the primary aims in this book are to explore:

- 1) How preachers expose their preaching to interaction with various ‘others’ of preaching;
- 2) How homileticians might incorporate this ‘other-wisely’ ‘co-authored’ impact on preaching into homiletical theories.

Dialogicity

In accordance with certain classic homiletic reflections I understand preaching as an act of dialogue. However, comparative analyses of the notion of dialogue according to Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘New Homiletics’,⁵ ‘Other-Wise Homiletics’,⁶ and others reveal that the concept of dialogue is used in very different, if not incompatible, ways.

The word dialogue has two basic connotations, both of which are relevant to the use of the word in homiletic contexts. In everyday use dialogue is often understood in contrast to monologue. In confirmation of this use some etymologists have argued that there are relevant connotations between *dia-* and *duo-/di-* (meaning two) in the sense that the term dialogue emphasizes two discourses instead of one. Yet, the Greek *dia* + *logos* indicates another sense, namely ‘through words.’⁷ Both senses of the word play a significant role

2 See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).

3 As discussed in reference to Johnny Karlsson’s Bakhtin-inspired sermon analyses in chp.3.

4 As David Buttrick does in an informative and inspiring, albeit problematic, way in his *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 211 ff.

5 The ‘New Homiletics’ paradigm dominated American homiletics from approximately 1969 until the early 1990’s. In my analysis it is primarily represented by Fred Craddock and David Buttrick.

6 ‘Other-wise preaching’ is a term coined by the American homiletician John S. McClure in his *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001). Based on his reflections I will be using the terms other-wise preaching and other-wise homilectics as a prism for analyzing the many faceted contemporary homiletic movements that emphasize listeners as co-authors of preaching. The notion, ‘other-wise’ is inspired by the French philosopher, Emmanuel Lévinas’ (1906–2005) description of otherness.

7 Per Linell, *Approaching Dialogue: Talk, interaction and contexts in dialogical perspectives* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2001), 13.

in my use of the term. Based on Bakhtin I interpret it as a decisive characteristic of dialogue that it is a 'two-sided action', confirming the first definition. However, in the present interpretation of dialogical preaching, the two-sided action often appears to surpass and even subvert the verbal aspect of the interaction. It is therefore the latter 'through words' connotation that will be challenged in the following exploration of preaching as a carnivalesque dialogue.

Bakhtin's communication theories are characterized by a continuous emphasis on dialogue. According to his interpretation, all discourses are dialogical in the sense that addressees explicitly or implicitly play an active part as co-authors. The determining difference between monological and dialogical discourses lies in whether the words of the other are used merely as scaffolding, which does not constitute the discourse in itself, or if they are allowed to influence the 'architectural' whole.⁸ Bakhtin's claim that discourse production always happens in dialogue with the 'already-said' and the 'not-yet-said' echoes many preachers' acknowledgement of their congregation's implicit influence on their preaching. The not-yet-spoken voices imagined in the preparation process, however, may have more or less in common with the reactions of the actual congregation during preaching.

Carnavalesque

When the concept of 'carnavalesque' is applied to the dialogue of preaching, this accentuates the hypothesis that the complex genre of preaching cannot be understood in light of communication theories alone. Consequently, the determining influence of extra-verbal aspects of preaching such as embodiment, tonality, rhythm, time, and place become emphasized. The Bakhtinian authorship examines how certain literary genres, including preaching, are 'carnivalized'—that is, how they 1) re-enact the ritualized reversals of public roles and hierarchies, breaking the traditional lines between actors and audience, and 2) transpose the embodied interaction between the 'grotesque bodies' in the carnival square to literary texts.

One of the benefits of analyzing the Bakhtinian theories of carnivalization for homiletics is that they make apparent ways in which incarnated acts continue to live on in literary genres. As a result, they address the potentially fruitful tension between embodied acts and reflexive texts. One of the crucial questions to be explored in the present homiletic approach to Bakhtinian carnivalization, however, is whether the carnivalesque text becomes a

8 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984 [1963]), 187.

substitution for or 'heir' of all oral genres⁹ so that intersubjective, corporate acts of carnivalization, and, in the field of homiletics, corporate worship, become superfluous. Or, whether carnivalization of literature carries the potential of leading to new events of carnival.

Double Otherness

One of the classic theological discussions of otherness was inaugurated by the Dialectical Theologians in the 1920's, who in their rejection of the Liberal Theological focus on human experience and culture, claimed that God is the 'ganz Andere'. As such all attempts of creating points of contact with contemporary culture and human experience were regarded as mere 'child's play'¹⁰ compared to proclaiming the foreign Word of the Wholly Other. Inherent in this claim was also an understanding of inter-human differences as insignificant compared to the qualitative difference between God and humans.

If we approach preaching from an empirical perspective, we get a quite different impression of the listeners' experience of preaching than from that described by the Dialectical Theologians. Empirical surveys of people listening to sermons¹¹ portray the peculiar intersubjective interaction taking place in the act of listening to preaching. The creative agency of listeners indicates that they are far from passive receivers of the preacher's message and that their different perspectives and situations play a significant role for their approach to the sermon. These insights have prompted contemporary homileticians to incorporate serious attention toward inter-human difference and otherness into their preaching practices and homiletical theories.

The recent approach to preaching as 'other-oriented' dialogue, as represented by the 'other-wise homiletics', provides a practical theological counterpart to the classical discussion of the divine otherness which, on one hand, can prove fatal, yet if handled carefully might be theologically fruitful. Drawing upon the analyses of the 'qualitative difference' between God and humans performed by Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), Karl Barth (1886–1968), and Eberhard Jüngel (b. 1934), the driving question that then emerges is whether the recent homiletical emphasis on inter-human differences and otherness functions as a reinforcement or subordination of the divine-human difference.

9 As claimed by Svend Bjerg, cf. chap. 5.

10 Karl Barth, *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1925), 158.

11 John S. McClure et al., *Listening to Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004).

Architecture of the Book

The book consists of nine chapters that explore the contemporary field of homiletics and the genre of preaching in light of Bakhtinian theories of dialogicity and carnivalization. As should be evident from the architecture of this book, my aim is neither to develop a thorough analysis of the Bakhtinian authorship nor to map out any single practice of preaching comprehensively. Rather, the focus is on the tension field between theory and practice, between the Bakhtinian oeuvre and contemporary preaching practices, in order to explore how they might critically correct and illuminate each other.

Chapter 1—Practice-Theoretical Methodology—describes the Bakhtinian based approach to the homiletical field and genre. The method is based on Bakhtin's methodological reflections on a dialogical approach to the human sciences¹² informed by the multidisciplinary 'Turn to Practice'.¹³ In this chapter the differences between theories and practices of preaching are recognized yet without categorizing them as mutually exclusive. Rather than regarding the differences as an obstruction for dialogue and interaction, they are, based on Bakhtin, approached as a precondition.

Chapter 2—Bakhtinian Dialogism—unfolds the Bakhtinian theories and neologisms that play a central role in the book. These theories have been selected in consideration of the challenges that characterize the critique by contemporary homiletics of the preceding New Homiletics' paradigm. The theories presented are communication as a 'two-sided action'; dialogicity in three senses; otherness as constitutive of communication; carnivalization as role exchange and subversion of traditional authorities; listeners as co-authors; and the Bakhtinian neologisms: chronotope, heteroglossia, and polyphony.

Chapter 3—Dialogical Preaching: From 'New Homiletics' to 'Other-wise Homiletics'—provides a thematically focused analysis of the New Homiletics paradigm, represented by Fred Craddock (b. 1928) and David Buttrick (b. 1927). Particular focus is on those aspects of the New Homiletics that have been critically rejected by more recent homiletics, particularly inductive preaching as a practical implementation of the theological notion of 'priesthood of all believers' and shared experiences as a precondition for dialogical interaction.

Based upon the methodological, theoretical and historical analyses of dialogicity in the first three chapters, Chapter 4—Preaching as a Carnival-esque Genre—challenges the traditional understanding of preaching as a

12 Primarily developed in Bakhtin's *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* and the essays 'The Problem of the Text' and 'Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences', in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

13 Ortner, 'Theory in Anthropology.'

dialogue by exploring the genre in light of the Bakhtinian theories of carnivalization. Particular focus is given to the role reversals between actors and spectators, speakers and listeners, bodies and words, as well as the Kierkegaardian mix of genres.

Chapters 5–8 analyze the genre of preaching through contemporary American and Danish homiletic practices and theoretical reflections. The homileticians I examine have been selected in accordance with two main criteria: 1) they play a significant role in developing and redefining the contemporary genre of preaching, and 2) they have acknowledged the potential of a Bakhtinian approach for further homiletic reflection and development. As indicated by the titles of the chapters, each of these homileticians emphasizes different elements of the Bakhtinian complex of theories. Through analyses of the relationship between these homiletic practices and theories I intend to show not only the multifacetedness of the Bakhtinian oeuvre, but also how theories, rather than determining practice, are used contextually and transformed in the use.

Chapter 5—Novelist Approach to Carnavalesque Preaching—and Chapter 6—Heteroglot Approach to Dialogical Preaching—present different approaches to preaching as developed by the Danish systematical theologian Svend Bjerg and the African American homiletician James Henry Harris. Their positions are juxtaposed because they both understand the sermon in light of Bakhtin's genre-theoretical understanding of the novel. However, in spite of their shared emphasis on a novelistic approach to preaching, Harris and Bjerg embody this understanding quite differently in their preaching practices. Whereas Bjerg interprets the Bakhtinian genre theories as validating that speaking subjects of the 'proclamatory' genres have been replaced by the writer of novelistic sermons, Harris interprets orality as one of the defining characteristics of novelistic preaching, claiming that 'the sermon is not a sermon until it is spoken.'¹⁴ The preaching practices of Bjerg and Harris then lead into discussions of the genre of preaching, including intertextual versus 'intercorporeal' dialogue, and implicit versus actual listeners.

Chapter 7—Other-wise Polyphonic Preaching—is based on an approach to preaching as collaborative conversation as represented by the American homiletician John S. McClure's developments of Other-wise Homiletics and 'Roundtable Preaching'. McClure's homiletics give rise to practice-theoretical discussions of different kinds of dialogicity, other-wise co-authorship, the 'Wholly Other' and the 'other-wise listeners', preaching as 'decentring', and the preacher as guest and host for a polyphony of voices.

Chapter 8—Chronotopic, Carnavalesque Preaching—focuses on preaching as a reversal of roles and places of preaching. Based on the American homiletician Charles Campbell's 'dis-located' analyses of street preaching

14 James Henry Harris, *The Word Made Plain: The Power and Promise of Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 52.

versus liturgical situatedness, I explore the significance of the spatio-temporal matrix of preaching as well as the relationship between 'literary' and 'real life' chronotopes in light of Bakhtin.

The final Chapter 9—The Double Otherness of Dialogical Preaching—reflects on the genre of preaching in light of a theological discussion informed by Kierkegaard, Barth and Jüngel of the qualitative difference between God and humans. The central question in this chapter is whether the qualitative difference between God and humans is best understood as a disjunctive or a conjoining difference in the practice of preaching.

The Achilles Heel of Bakhtinian Dialogism

Before embarking upon the homiletic field in dialogue with Bakhtin I would like to articulate one of the critical challenges inherent in this project. What makes the Bakhtinian authorship constructive for the field of homiletic reflections—that is, its interdisciplinary focus—is also its Achilles heel in the sense that it makes it difficult to delimit the focus from other relevant studies, positions and fields. Rather than helping scholars to reduce complexity, the Bakhtinian approach may well further complicate the complexity, since it embraces the 'simultaneity' of disparate forces, voices, and disciplines. Instead of zooming in on one at the exclusion of others, the approach trains its users to 'hear voices everywhere' and see 'loopholes' in what appears to be finite. This is because, as Bakhtin describes it in his proposal for a methodology for the human sciences, '[t]he contexts of dialogue are without limit.'¹⁵

While the porous juxtaposition of several positions and disciplines is an advantage when it comes to describing the interdisciplinary discipline and practice of homiletics, it can turn out to be an Achilles heel when evaluating its usefulness as the foundational method in an academic work. When characterizing his own approach, Bakhtin acknowledges and embraces its boundary breaking character: '[A] positive feature of our study is this: [it moves] in spheres that are liminal, i.e., on the borders of all the aforementioned disciplines, at their junctures and points of intersection.'¹⁶

The biographical circumstances surrounding the Bakhtinian authorship only add to the ambiguities. Basic data about his formal education and publications are often disputed, so, for example, he is often credited with works that were originally published under the names of his close friends,

15 'Towards a Methodology for the Human Sciences', in Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 170.

16 Bakhtin, *Estetika*, 281, qtd. by Mikhail Holquist in *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002 [1990]), 14.