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Mary Magdalene conveys huge historical and ecclesial ramifications beyond its figurative nuances.

B The Sermon as Public Discourse. Perspectives from Western Europe (Theo J. Pleizier)

1 Introduction

In one of her co-edited volumes, Birgit Weyel demonstrated the value of recalling the historical development of the field of pastoral care and counseling.³⁴ This is not so much a general interest in the history of Christianity, but rather points to the fact that ecclesial practices such as pastoral care are shaped through time. Practices are not only contextual, but they also develop over time. Continuities and discontinuities are part of the story that can be told of ecclesial practices. The story of preaching can be told in a similar fashion. Weyel's history of preaching starts with Augustin and Cicero, which shows her continuing interest in the rhetoric of preaching and in the sermon's public nature.³⁵

The story of the sermon in Western Europe, however, is simultaneously exciting and ambiguous. This essay reflects on this story against the background of the marginalized church of the 21st Century.

2 A Story of the Sermon

The sermon originated in the Synagogue, and so the lively voice of God's Word, read, explained, and received, was developed through the centuries into a powerful medium to construct and maintain Christian faith. Great names have entered the history of preaching, shaping the Christian sermon as a major rhetorical device of religious speech. Each century has had famous preachers; and these were predominantly male voices until, in the 20th Century, ordained female voices entered the scene. As lively speech, (*viva vox*) the sermon is also a volatile phenomenon. Once words have been spoken, they are gone. Hopefully, they leave a few traces in the minds and hearts of individual listeners as brief

³⁴ Kristin Merle/Birgit Weyel, *Seelsorge: Quellen von Schleiermacher bis zur Gegenwart*, Tübingen 2009.

³⁵ Birgit Weyel, *Predigt. Textauslegung / Homiletik / Predigtgeschichte / Öffentlichkeit*, in: Wilhelm Gräß/Birgit Weyel (Eds.), *Handbuch Praktische Theologie*, Gütersloh 2007, 629–634.

“illuminative moments.”³⁶ The story of preaching, however, is more substantial than the story of words that disappear in the air almost immediately after they have been uttered. Massive collections of sermons have survived the ages. Sermons from Chrysostom, Augustin, Martin Luther, Friedrich Schleiermacher, for example, can still be read, digested, and researched. These collections of sermons keep telling the story of Christian preaching.

Postcolonial theory has opened our eyes to the Western bias of this story of preaching. We are starting to understand the role that preaching has played in shaping the intellectual consciousness of Europe and how it has been entangled in power structures. In postcolonial language, we need to consider the role of empire in the voices that shaped the Christian religion through preaching.³⁷ Empire exposes preaching’s ambiguous relationship to politics and public culture. Preaching shaped the intellectual and moral consciousness,³⁸ but at certain points in European history, it also contributed to a resistance against powers, such as ecclesial power structures that tried to bind human consciousness, like in the days of Martin Luther, or political power structures, such as in the days of Martin Niemöller. Black and female voices should be added to this: Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Dorothee Sölle. They resisted power using the vulnerability of words; words that to a large extent were not even their own because preaching has always taken its cue from the Scriptures. Sermons do not primarily reflect the ingenious minds of humans, but good preaching emerges from the Scriptures and exposes the truth of the Christian faith. This makes the sermons of Augustin and Tutu, of Schleiermacher and Sölle, of Spurgeon and Martin Luther King so compelling that they live on until today.

Some preachers, however, have been deleted from history, despite their compelling messages. One of them is Mary Magdalene, as Sunggu Yang has demonstrated in his article on Mary Magdalene as a witness of the resurrection. Drawing from feminist and postcolonial sources, he argues that Mary Magdalene’s voice was hidden among the dominant voices of her time. Her witness seemed to have no listeners at all, as if her witness had been deleted. Yet, she testified from the Living One. Her apostolic right to witness thus constitutes a promise of resurrection – a resurrection of deleted and marginalized voices. Sunggu Yang’s reinstatement of Mary Magdalene as a female preacher creates a deepened awareness of the vulnerability of preaching as discourse among the many discourses. The dominant voices in the history of preaching may have hidden the fundamental features of the sermon, that it is vulnerable and weak dis-

³⁶ Theo Pleizier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons. A Grounded Theory Study in Empirical Theology and Homiletics*, Delft 2010, 255–257.

³⁷ Sarah Travis, *Decolonizing preaching: The pulpit as postcolonial space*, Eugene 2014.

³⁸ Thomas Luckmann, *Moralizing Sermons, Then and Now*, in: Richard K. Fenn (Ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion*, Oxford 2003, 388–403.

course. Sermons represent a different kind of power. Every age has to discover this strange, hidden power of preaching. Power in weakness, as the apostle Paul says. Power in weakness, as the story of Mary Magdalene tells us.

The current Western European situation of preaching may need just that: a reassessment of the vulnerable and volatile voice of the sermon. The feminist and postcolonial reading of Mary Magdalene points to three aspects of the sermon as it continues to live on in the secular and modern cultures of Western Europe. I consider (1) the hidden voice of the sermon, (2) the sermon threatened by deletion, and (3) the sermon against the sermon, or: resurrections of the sermon. It may be unexpected and unwanted, but it is as real as the apostolic voices of those who have been lost in history, just like Mary Magdalene's voice.

3 The Hidden Voice of the Sermon

Every Sunday, in the Netherlands alone, thousands of sermons are preached. In the Netherlands two major websites stream worship services for more than three thousand churches.³⁹ The number of sermons preached worldwide every Sunday is extraordinary. Not only is the number of sermons dazzling, but public availability is also a striking feature of today's preaching.

According to Birgit Weyel, the public nature of worship (its *Öffentlichkeit*) is among one of the four basic criteria for Christian worship, next to its relationship to everyday life, the openness of its language and its plausibility.⁴⁰

While applied to liturgy, these criteria equally fit the sermon. The plausibility of preaching, for instance, cannot be assumed through statements like 'God loves everyone', but should be connected with experience. Hence, everyday life, language and plausibility are intrinsically connected. *Öffentlichkeit*, or the public nature of worship, however, is a fundamental given. Weyel argues for this in her contribution on preaching in the *Handbuch Praktische Theologie* (2007). The fundamentally public nature of preaching is unlimited. Weyel argues for this based on the principle that the gospel is directed to the entire world. She offers three other aspects of the public nature of preaching. First, true persuasion is only possible when preaching is oriented towards *participation*. Next, preaching should be relevant for all kinds of different groups in society. In other words, the

³⁹ Theo Pleizier/Henk de Roest, Enhanced Streaming and the Rediscovery of Phone Calls. Experiences of Pastors During the First COVID-19 Lockdown in The Netherlands, in: Thomas Schlag/Ilona Nord (Eds.), *Kirchen Online in Zeiten von Corona. Die CONTOC-Studie: Empirische Einsichten, Interpretationen und Perspektiven*, Springer VS (in press).

⁴⁰ Birgit Weyel, Öffentlichkeit als praktisch-theologisches Kriterium für einen situationsgerechten Gottesdienst, in: Hans-Hermann Tiemann (Ed.), *Situationsgerecht Gottesdienst feiern. Zur Verbesserung liturgischen Handelns*, Bielefeld 2009, 216–221.

public nature of preaching should be *representative*, meaning gospel message preaching must entail individual feelings and attitudes to bring them into a communal interpretative perspective. Thirdly, Weyel mentions the *public* aspect (“publizistische Öffentlichkeit”). The preaching of Christian faith should be embedded in a cultural stream of consciousness: of stories, images, metaphors of contemporary culture.⁴¹

With the final aspect of the public nature of preaching, Weyel hints upon something which she addresses more fully in an essay on the public nature of preaching at the reinstatement of the “Frauenkirche” in Dresden following its reconstruction after laying in ruins for decades. She takes the presence of important public figures at the opening of the church as an indicator for the public nature of worship and preaching. What does this mean for modernity? Hence, she asks the question how ecclesial communication, including preaching, should be shaped, because the task to be public (“Öffentlichkeitsauftrag”) should not be theologically postulated, but practically perceived.⁴² For this, buildings – such as the renewed “Frauenkirche” in Dresden – are important. They are symbolic entrances to the divine.

In her writings on the public nature of preaching, Weyel looks for the continuing relevance of preaching in today’s world. Despite the fact that every Sunday thousands of sermons are preached, and even though homiletics continue to reflect upon relevant preaching that connects with contemporary culture and remains a plausible voice, the facts of modernity, especially in Western Europe, are sobering. The sermon is just one voice among many others. Does it make sense to ask the question whether the sermon has to compete with the stream of words on traditional media, where daily talk shows are the shapers of postmodern opinion and morality, or on social media, with its endless streams of messages on Twitter or unending timelines on Facebook pages? Does a weekly sermon have to compete with the infinite number of words produced on one single day? Those are the dominant voices.

The sobering fate of contemporary preaching seems that its voice is in the process of being buried. What once was the clear voice of new life, a witness of resurrection, is gradually being hidden and seems on the brink of deletion from European culture. This was the story of Mary Magdalene; yet, the threat of deletion will not have the final say.

⁴¹ Weyel, Predigt (see note 37), 636.

⁴² Birgit Weyel, Predigt und Öffentlichkeit. Die Weihe der Dresdner Frauenkirche, in: International Journal of Practical Theology 10 (2007), 168–177, 169, URL: <https://doi.org/10.1515/IJPT.2006.013> (10.07.2023).

4 The Threatened Sermon

A postcolonial analysis could point towards two aspects. First, interculturally speaking, the sermon is very much alive in other parts of the world. European Catholic and Protestant voices may become muted in the very societies that have been intellectually shaped by freedom of speech and religious discourse. Yet, there is more than Europe. A postcolonial analysis, however, should not be content with this conclusion. It should develop a self-critical attitude. What happens to preaching in Western Europe, and how can postcolonial thinking help us to understand what happens?

The primary observation is the awareness of the marginalization of churches. This has been going on in Western Europe for decades, and each new survey confirms that the percentage of churchgoers in Western societies keeps declining. This makes the sermon a threatened phenomenon. The sermon is gradually threatened with deletion from societal consciousness, so it seems. The powers of alternative discourse have diminished the audience of the sermon.

The vision of the sermon as public discourse is deeply embedded in Protestant theology, and in some European countries, this may linger longer in cultural awareness. Yet, the social reality shows that, despite the public availability of preaching – both in buildings as well as in the digital world through the wide availability of live streaming – the factual sermon audience will be a small group of the faithful. The weekly sermon will be heard by those who come intentionally for Christian worship. The public dimension of preaching will probably survive longest in special situations, such as Christmas, and the services for special occasions (*Kasualien*), such as weddings and funerals. Sermons are listened to as products that we need at certain moments in life.

The sermon as a product resembles a specific kind of empire-language; the language of the neoliberal market. The sermon has become a product on a market of ideas and should sell itself. Though this is not necessarily problematic, it turns the sermon into a commodity and puts it in the language of efficiency and capitalism. If nobody is interested—if nobody buys the product, it should disappear. We should let the sermon go bankrupt. Once it had an audience of millions, but the time of the sermon is over.

Here, another voice breaks in. The late Lutheran theologian, Marva Dawn, wrote about Christian worship in a book with the telling title: *A Royal Waste of Time*.⁴³ Dawn sketches a vision of worship that runs against our contemporary instincts of doing what we like best and what sells best. She deconstructs the economic metaphors when it comes to Christian worship. There is something radically subversive in going to church, singing songs for an unseen reality and

⁴³ Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal "Waste" of Time. The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World*, Grand Rapids 2000.

listening to a sermon that is believed to be the Word of God: it does not contribute to economic growth. It is literally a waste of time. For Dawn, the threat to Christian worship and preaching is the threat which worship has faced from the beginning, that what leads us away from God, against the beasts and dragons that pretend to satisfy our deepest longings for the one true God.⁴⁴ Economic metaphors are among these beasts and dragons. Though Marva Dawn would not be counted among postcolonial thinkers, her resistance against the threat to sermons sounds like the empire-language that we find among postcolonial contributions.

In her work *Decolonizing Preaching*, Sara Travis calls attention to the role of empire. While empire has deep roots in history, the contemporary Western Church finds itself in the ambiguous identification of once being “in partnership with various empires,” Western Christianity is “no longer occupying the center of power, no longer aligned with empire.” This brings about a new situation for the church and thus for preaching:

“An increasingly marginalized church will require an alternative imagination if it is to thrive in this new context, lacking the protection and affirmation of the empire. There is a danger, however, that marginalization and a sense of homelessness may rapidly translate into insecurity. This shifting landscape of ecclesial power is part and parcel of the postcolonial context.”⁴⁵

The postcolonial analysis shows that the church has lost its grip on power. Rather than clinging to power, preaching should move towards the everyday. The loss of power coincides with a neoliberal state of mind: we use church when we need it and when it gives us what we want. Preaching becomes a matter of choice.

The fact that people come to church on certain occasions only brought Birgit Weyel to the suggestion that we need “everyday life homiletics.”⁴⁶ Institutional religious speech can only work if it is embedded in everyday life communication, and this type of communication is relational. This understanding of preaching as religious communication is a very ambiguous understanding, as Weyel explains. Weyel tries to look beyond the threatened sermon and attempts to reconstruct preaching from an institutional type of communication into a form of communication that relies on networks.

⁴⁴ Dawn, *Time* (see note 45), 193.

⁴⁵ Travis, *Decolonizing preaching* (see note 39), 21.

⁴⁶ Birgit Weyel, *Religiöse Kommunikation bei Gelegenheit. Überlegungen zur Alltagshomiletik*, in: *Praktische Theologie* 52 (2017), 25–30, <https://doi.org/10.14315/prth-2017-0106> (10.07.2023).

In networks, the relationships between all peoples count, while hierarchies tend to silence people. The truth of the gospel, however, has its own power. It does not rely on established powers, male empires, neoliberal empires or whatever empire of human making. The feminist reassessment of Mary Magdalene leads into a new understanding of what it means for the apostolic message to continue. Preaching continues to emerge.

5 The Sermon “Against” the Sermon, or Resurrections of the Sermon

Mary Magdalene’s witness ran against the received convictions of Jesus’ followers at the time after Jesus’ death. The “vivid apostolic depiction of Magdalene, apparently goes far beyond the counterparts of [many] biblical texts,” Yang states. In contrast to received history, Magdalene became a prototype of all later women followers of Jesus. Hence, there is a story of apostleship that runs *against* apostleship. Does this also make Magdalene the prototypical witness of the church? In other words, can the sermon that is near to deletion also become the sermon *against* the sermon? What does it look like if the sermon emerges in a different form?

How can the sermon break through the dominant patterns of church? In their work on “networks,” Birgit Weyel and Felix Rolder offer an alternative approach to understanding the theory of church.⁴⁷ Rather than institutional forms, they study the informal exchanges between members of the church. How do these interactions work, how do networks between people in church emerge and what are the topics of those conversations? The logic of networks, as it appears from their study, is very much relational.

“Important are personal exchanges with or without regular participation in ecclesial practices. [...] Those who do not participate in worship services may have personal exchanges with those who do regularly go to church. These exchanges have the potential to be about the meaning of life and it may well be that religious communication in Christian worship gets extended in forms of personal conversations.”⁴⁸

Even for those who have not heard a given sermon, that sermon may emerge in personal conversation; that is, the sermon as it has been processed by the listener in church. Bits and pieces of the sermon may enter into personal conver-

⁴⁷ Felix Rolder/Birgit Weyel, *Vernetzte Kirchengemeinde. Analysen zur Netzwerkerhebung der V. Kirchenmitgliedschaftsuntersuchung der EKD, Leipzig 2019.*

⁴⁸ Rolder/Weyel, *Kirchengemeinde* (see note 49), 72 (transl. TP).

sations. The sermon disappears and reappears in different shapes, in fragments and in allusions.

Three examples of the sermon *against* the sermon rely on this logic of networks, rather than on the traditional Western European ecclesial institutional feature of church membership.

First, the sermon in so-called “emerging churches.” The traditional sermon is in a large—often ancient—church building on a Sunday morning in a congregation that has been around for centuries, finding itself in an environment in which its members are becoming a smaller minority. The sermon *against* the sermon, however, is located elsewhere. For instance, in a neighborhood in Groningen, Dutch locals, who live in the same part of the city, meet every Sunday over lunch. Some are Christians, some have a Christian background but have lost touch with the church, and even more do not have the slightest idea how church works or what church is. Yet, they meet on the day of the Resurrection. They have lunch. They talk. A small team prepares the meal as well as an informal, light version of worship. Someone prays, a candle is lit. A passage from Scripture is read, one or two videoclips of songs are projected and listened to. A few thoughts from the passage from Scripture are shared, as if it were a six-minute sermon. At this place a new form of preaching emerges, but no one would ever call it “preaching.”

Next, in various settings chaplains organize worship services: in hospitals or other healthcare settings, in penitentiary institutions and in the military. Soldiers in the armed forces, serving on a navy vessel or in a squadron of fighter jets, often spend a few weeks in training camps or even several months deployed on missions abroad. Chaplains join them to provide spiritual care. When abroad, they offer brief worship services with brief talks. They talk about existential issues that concern the soldiers, away from their loved ones, serving as a unit yet in search of being this individual human being, contributing to peace in politically tense and often dangerous situations. Chaplains serve groups of soldiers with a wide range of spiritualities. The chaplains turn everyday space, such as a temporary living room, into a sacred space when they arrange seats and put a candle on the table. Their short speeches are inspired by sacred texts, such as the Scriptures, but their language is never too explicitly religious. They talk with a high level of self-disclosure; their communicative style is personal. They preach, but neither the soldier nor the chaplain calls it “preaching.”⁴⁹

Finally, there is preaching in the virtual realm. Preaching in the digital age takes on many faces. Digitality not only means the streaming of regular worship,

⁴⁹ Theo Pleizier, Impact of Religious Speech. Theological and Anthropological Considerations, in: Baktygul Tulebaeva/Deepak Ojha (Eds.), Dynamics of Speaking and Doing Religion, Ressourcenkulturen 18, Tübingen 2022, 28–31.

whereby the preacher's face is presented through cameras in various ways,⁵⁰ but also a variety of forms of preaching. The COVID-19 pandemic released a lot of creative potential that was already present in many new initiatives, such as podcast projects. In the Netherlands a popular podcast *First this (Eerst dit)* started before the pandemic and gained quite a few more subscriptions during the pandemic. The 7-minute audio-recording finds its way to those travelling to work, exercising, taking a walk or just lying in bed. It provides meditative music, a prayer, a short reading and a brief devotional talk. These talks are often delivered by ordained theologians who regularly preach on Sundays or serve congregations. Their Sunday morning sermons sometimes last almost 30 minutes, while their podcast contribution is often not longer than 3 minutes. If you were to ask them when they preach, they would probably refer to their Sunday sermon that is listened to by a hundred or perhaps a few hundred listeners, while their everyday audience of podcast subscribers reaches the thousands. Thus, this is another new form of the sermon "against" the sermon.

6 Perspective

The story of the Western sermon mirrors as a counterpoint to the story of Mary Magdalene: from dominating public discourse for centuries, it has become a marginalized phenomenon. In the case of Mary Magdalene, it all begins with Easter. Perhaps the Easter story provides the best perspective to help recover the vision of preaching. Despite the threat of deletion, preaching continues to emerge in new forms and in unexpected places. The sermon is not in need of resurrection. That preaching continues is, as such, a witness of the resurrection: the Word that is alive and the Word that continues to bring back to life.

⁵⁰ Sunggu A. Yang, *The Word Digitalized: A Techno-Theological Reflection on Online Preaching and Its Types*, in: *Homiletic* 46 (2021), 75–90.