

# Preaching as Repetition – in Times of Transition

Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen

---

## Abstract

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

---

## Introduction

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

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

---

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

transformative effect on the way they listened to preaching and related to God. The empirical study indicated that the situation of the refugees reminded the members of the state-like Lutheran church of the vulnerable pilgrimage<sup>2</sup> that is at the core of Christianity. This motif is obvious for migrants trying to find a home away from home, but often forgotten by those of us who live in a rather stable, homogenous society which can be seen as one of the world's most secularized countries,<sup>3</sup> yet describes itself as Christian<sup>4</sup>.

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

## 1. The Kierkegaardian Category of Repetition

In this article, the category of repetition is primarily oriented towards analysis of the empirical study of refugees' encounter with the church in Denmark rather than philosophical<sup>6</sup> reflections on the notion. The practice of preaching with which the congregation of the Apostles' Church interacts, however, is analyzed in light of their pastor, Niels Nymann Eriksen's theoretical reflections on the category of repetition as developed in his dissertation, *Kierkegaard's Category of Repetition: A Reconstruction*. Although Eriksen rarely quotes Kierkegaard in his preaching, the following analyses of the empirical material will show that his understanding of preaching as the word of God echoes his Kierkegaard-inspired understanding of repetition. Before we embark upon an analysis of the empirical material, however, a brief description of the Kierkegaardian analysis of repetition, in dialogue with Eriksen's interpretation, will be introduced.

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

---

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

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

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Kierkegaard (note 7), *Gjentagelsen*, SKS 4, 66.

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

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

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

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

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

---

<sup>9</sup> Idem (note 7), *Repetition*, 133.

<sup>10</sup> *Niels Nymann Eriksen, Kierkegaard's Category of Repetition: A Reconstruction*, Berlin/New York 2000, 42.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 111–112.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

<sup>14</sup> *Eriksen* (note 10), 167.

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

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

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

Within a homiletical context, Charles Campbell has collaborated with New Testament scholar Stanley Saunders on the study of biblical texts in places that differ from traditional academic settings. Campbell and Saunders have approached the world in front of the text, not only in their research, but as part of their teaching of homiletics and exegesis by letting divinity students study the Bible in collaboration with inmates in the local prisons<sup>19</sup> and homeless people on the streets. In their joint book, *The Word on the Street: Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context*, Campbell and Saunders describe how the methodological choice of exposing one’s studies to the practice of ‘dislocated exegesis’ does not differ from traditional exegesis in the choice of texts and methodological approach. Yet, it becomes as new because of the perspective from which the texts are approached. They describe, in summary, the impact of engaging with the world in front of the text as follows: “where we learn shapes what we learn, and where we read shapes how we read.”<sup>20</sup>

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

---

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

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

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

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

<sup>20</sup> *Campbell/Saunders* (note 17), 89.

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

The empirical study at the center of this article was conducted in a congregation which belongs to the majority church of Denmark, namely, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (ELCD) in 2014. The ELCD congregation is called the Apostles' Church<sup>21</sup> and is situated in the center of Copenhagen. Approximately one-third of the congregation at the Apostles' Church consists of refugees from Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan, and two-thirds are ethnic Danes. Most of the refugees have either recently converted to Christianity from Islam or are in the process of conversion. The Danish members of the congregation, for the most part, have grown up in the ELCD like the majority of their fellow Danish citizens.

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

### 4. Historical Background of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Martin Schwarz-Lausten*, *Reformationen i Danmark*, Copenhagen 1997.

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

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

<sup>26</sup> [www.danskekirkeksraad.dk/nyheder/nyhed/?tx\\_ttnews%5Bpointer%5D=2&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=29&tx\\_ttnews%5Bttnews%5D=203&cHash=07a5a711d712de6dad5f8f4ba2ac4010](http://www.danskekirkeksraad.dk/nyheder/nyhed/?tx_ttnews%5Bpointer%5D=2&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=29&tx_ttnews%5Bttnews%5D=203&cHash=07a5a711d712de6dad5f8f4ba2ac4010).



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

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

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

## 5. Repetition in the Preaching at the Apostles' Church

During our interviews, almost all of the refugees emphasized the integrity between faith and life of the pastors of the Apostles' Church. They said that this integrity and care for the congregation were essential to their sense of belonging to the Church. The pastors<sup>28</sup> of the Apostles' Church were not described as charismatic figures to be imitated but as understanding people of faith who listened. The descriptions of the pastoral care and social work performed by the pastors and volunteers in the church were confirmed through our observation, in which we noted the array of social work the pastors and volunteers of the church conducted with the refugees – from personal counseling and pastoral care to helping with issues of housing, healthcare, education, and summer camps.

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Eriksen* (note 10), 111–112.

Although the preaching practiced in the Apostles' Church emphasizes the need to repeat the Word of God in meditation and prayer; the ultimate purpose of preaching does not appear to be individual reflection. Similar to the interviewed Iranian woman's description of her need to repeat the Gospel in company with others, as described in the following, the pastors emphasize on the link between preaching and community. This connection testifies to a different significant theological source in the preaching of Eriksen than the individual-oriented Kierkegaard<sup>33</sup> – namely, the German Lutheran theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

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

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

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

---

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

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

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 14–15.

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

<sup>36</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 15.21.

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

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

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

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

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

---

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Kurdish man in the Apostles' Church, June 2014.

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

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

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Kurdish man in the Apostles Church, June 2014.

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Kurdish man in the Apostles' Church, June 2014.

<sup>43</sup> *Kierkegaard* (note 7), 132.

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Kurdish man in the Apostles' Church, June 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Iranian woman in the Apostles' Church, June 2014.

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

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

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

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

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

---

<sup>47</sup> MRL, field notes from Easter Sunday, 2014.

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



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

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

## **9. Receiving anew what tends to be taken for granted**

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

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

---

<sup>49</sup> Paul's Letter to the Galatians 2:20. English Standard Version.

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

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

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

## Conclusion

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

---

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

[mrl@teol.ku.dk](mailto:mrl@teol.ku.dk)

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Field notes from conversation with Iranian woman, March 2014.

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