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Introduction to A New History of the Sermon : The Nineteenth Century

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INTRODUCTION

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In the introduction to *The Victorian Pulpit: Spoken and Written Sermons in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Selinsgrove, PA, 1998), I wrote that scholarship on Victorian preaching had been largely personality-driven, telling much about great preachers' lives while revealing comparatively little about the form, style, or content of their sermons. My book was intended to redirect that focus, to be one step in the process of moving from biography to rhetorical analysis.[1]

That process began in 1925, when Herbert A. Wichelns critiqued the biographical approach in an essay entitled "The Literary Criticism of Oratory". He asserted that focusing on "the man behind the work" often causes critics to think of a speaker "as something other than a speaker".[2] The neglect of the rhetorical dimension inevitably leaves their work incomplete; such critics can therefore make "but an indirect contribution" to our understanding of the people whom they study.[3]

Wichelns goes on to argue to that a more "literary" approach, one that "combines the sketch of mind and character with some discussion of style",[4] may also be unsatisfactory. If it is not done well, "the critic fails to fuse his comment on the individual with his comment on the artist; and as a result, we get some statements about the man, and some statements about the

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[1] Robert H. Ellison, *The Victorian Pulpit: Spoken and Written Sermons in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Selinsgrove, PA, 1998), pp. 12–13.

[2] Herbert A. Wichelns, "The Literary Criticism of Oratory," in *Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twentieth-Century Perspective*, ed. Bernard L. Brock and Robert L. Scott (Detroit, 1980), pp. 42, 43.

[3] Ibid., p. 43.

[4] Ibid., p. 43.

orator, but neither casts light on the other”.[5] The best strategy, then, is to concentrate on the work and “ignore the man”.[6] Personality may not be entirely neglected, but it will be relevant only to the extent that it helped to shape the speeches; the vast majority of the critic’s attention will be devoted to examining such matters as “audience”, “arrangement”, “manner of delivery”, and “the effect of the discourse on its immediate hearers” as recorded in “the testimony of witnesses” and “the record of events”.[7]

With these statements, Wichelns inaugurated a new discipline: he is almost universally regarded as the father of “rhetorical criticism”, the branch of communication studies concerned with “the analysis and appreciation of the orator’s method of imparting his ideas to his hearers”.[8] The field has expanded considerably in recent years, and its current state was aptly summarized in a 2006 issue of *Rhetoric Review*. Richard Leo Enos noted how far we have come, writing that “twentieth-century contributions to rhetorical criticism extend well beyond the field of communication studies to such kindred disciplines as English, linguistics, and religion”.[9] In another essay later in the issue, however, Jennifer DeWinter reminded us how far we can still go: despite the recent advances, “almost all of the journals and books” are still “written by and for speech communication scholars”.[10]

Several recent studies of 19th-century preaching are welcome exceptions to DeWinter’s general rule. In 2004 and 2006, for example, Victor J. Lams, Emeritus Professor of English at

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[5] Ibid., p. 43.

[6] Ibid., p. 42.

[7] Ibid., pp. 69–70.

[8] Ibid., p. 67.

[9] Richard Leo Enos, "Introduction: The Inclusiveness of Rhetorical Criticism," *Rhetoric Review* 25.4 (2006), 357.

[10] Jennifer DeWinter, "A Bibliographic Synthesis of Rhetorical Criticism," *Rhetoric Review* 25.4 (2006), 388.

California State University, Chico, published *Newman's Anglican Georgic* and *Newman's Visionary Georgic.* The titles suggest that Newman's *Parochial Sermons* belong to a genre that began with Virgil in the 1st century B.C. and includes such works as Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* and Wordsworth's *Prelude*, poems about the structure of the cosmos and the evolution of a Romantic poet's mind.[11] Although I do not find this argument entirely convincing, Lams does make other useful observations about the structure of Newman's work. He argues that each volume of the sermons is not a collection of materials assembled more or less at random, but rather a carefully crafted work with a "rhetorically coherent sequential structure".[12] The global design is often rather explicit; Newman himself linked the sermons in Volume 2 to various saints' days and those in Volumes 5 and 6 to the seasons of the Christian year. Lams also suggests some organizational schemes of his own. He posits, for example, that the book of Hebrews is the "scriptural analogue" to Volume 3[13] and that it, like the other volumes in the series, can be broken down into four "clusters", which could be labeled disobedience and schism, religious error versus the love of Christ, restoring order in the church, and the importance of prayer.[14] While most studies of Newman's prose focus on "local rhetorical effects", Lams suggests that we would do well to also give attention to his "global literary purpose and design".[15]

Rhetorical critics of the 19th-century American pulpit include David B. Chesebrough, who has contributed studies of Phillips Brooks, Charles G. Finney, and Theodore Parker to the

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[11] Victor J. Lams, *Newman's Anglican Georgic* (New York, 2004), pp. 6–10; Victor J. Lams, *Newman's Visionary Georgic* (New York, 2006), pp. ix–xiv.

[12] Lams, *Visionary Georgic*, p. ix.

[13] Ibid., p. 41.

[14] Lams, *Anglican Georgic*, pp. 56–67.

[15] Ibid., p. 1.

"Great American Orators" series published under the auspices of Greenwood Press.[16] The series is intended both to "memorialize the nation's greatest" speakers and to offer "a complete analysis of [their] rhetoric".[17] While the "memorial" aspect sometimes becomes almost hagiographic, Chesebrough's treatment of his subjects' rhetorical theory and practice is sound. His discussions of works such as *Lectures on Preaching* (Brooks), *Memoirs* (Finney), and *West Roxbury Sermons* (Parker) address the full spectrum of issues: the definition of a sermon; the structure and tone of the discourses; the use of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos;* reading from manuscript versus preaching extemporaneously; and the preachers' physical characteristics, the power of their voices, and their use of gestures in the pulpit.

An excellent example of a broad rhetorical survey, as opposed to a study of a single preacher, is J.N. Ian Dickson's *Beyond Religious Discourse: Sermons, Preaching and Evangelical Protestants in Nineteenth-Century Irish Society* (Milton Keynes, 2007). Dickson's purpose is to "tell the story" of the sermon – or, more precisely, to discover what stories the sermon can tell us. To that end, he discusses the education of Irish ministers, the rise of the "cult of pulpit personality", the changes brought by the Ulster Revival of 1859, and the extent to which preaching actually affected "individual lives and the wider Irish society of the nineteenth century".[18] The research for this project included constructing a database of some 700 Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Methodist sermons, in both print and manuscript form. The

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[16] The series was launched in 1989 with Craig R. Smith, *Defender of the Union: The Oratory of Daniel Webster*. Over thirty titles have appeared since then, on figures ranging from Douglas MacArthur to Sojourner Truth. In addition to the titles cited above, Chesebrough also wrote Volume 26, *Frederick Douglass: Oratory from Slavery*.

[17] Bernard K. Duffy and Halford R. Ryan, "Series Foreword," in *Theodore Parker: Orator of Superior Ideas*, ed. David B. Chesebrough (Westport, Conn., 1999), pp. ix, xi.

[18] J.N. Ian Dickson, *Beyond Religious Discourse: Sermons, Preaching and Evangelical Protestants in Nineteenth-Century Irish Society* (Milton Keynes, 2007), pp. 1, 187, 213.

information Dickson compiled allowed him to identify not only the recurring “major” and “minor” themes of Irish evangelicalism, but also the biblical books from which sermons were most often drawn, and even how frequently preachers used a given verse as the basis for multiple sermons. Such analyses, which could once be undertaken only by hand, can now be done much more quickly and thoroughly in an age of digital humanities; Dickson’s model of how such a project might look is perhaps the greatest contribution of his book.

If there is a *magnum opus* in recent sermon scholarship – for the 19th century or any other period – it would be O.C. Edwards’ *A History of Preaching* (Nashville, 2004). Like *The Victorian Pulpit*, his approach differs significantly from that of earlier scholars such as Charles Dargan, whose work “reflected a Romantic understanding” of writing as the “product of the genius of an individual”.[19] Rather than writing another biographical encyclopedia, Edwards set out to produce a “homiletical genealogy”,[20] a survey of the sermon’s evolution over two millennia of Christian history. Individual preachers are, of course, included, but as subpoints of his outlines; Edwards’ overarching concern is the larger issues of genre, religious movements, and cultural phenomena that helped to shape the nature of sacred speech.

This collection is intended to be similar to what Dickson and Edwards have done. While some of the essays do focus on one or two major figures, the aim of the volume as a whole is to move away from Thomas Carlyle’s notion that history is “the Biography of Great Men”[21] and to examine the theories, theological issues, and cultural developments that defined the 19th-century Anglo-American pulpit.

The sixteen essays are divided into three categories: Theory and Theology, Sermon and Society in the British Empire, and Sermon and Society in the United States. “Theory and

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[19] O.C. Edwards, Jr., *A History of Preaching* (Nashville, 2004), p. xx.

[20] Ibid., p. xxi.

[21] Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (London, 1840), p. 12.

Theology" begins with a pair of essays on preaching in the 19th-century Church of England. I explore how several clergy associated with the Oxford Movement worked in many genres: "plain", "university", and "visitation" sermons; religious lectures; and episcopal charges. Carol Poster, on the other hand, surveys the ministry of just one man: Richard Whately, who began his career as a fellow of Oriel College, Oxford, and ended it as the Anglican archbishop of Dublin. She examines his views not only of pulpit rhetoric, but also of principles of interpretation, the role of the Anglican Church in Ireland, the sermon's place in a broader teaching ministry, and the importance of pastoral care. Whately was more sympathetic to both the Low and Broad Church movements than he was to the Tractarians; taken together, these first two essays provide a glimpse into several dimensions of Anglican faith and practice.

The first section closes with Thomas Olbricht's essay on Higher Criticism, the branch of study concerned with authorship, historical context, and other matters that form the background of the biblical texts. The best known expressions of this school of thought in England were probably George Eliot's translation of David Friedrich Strauss' *Life of Jesus* (1846) and a collection entitled *Essays and Reviews* (1860), which generated enormous controversy and led to two heresy trials.[22] These works were largely addressed to specialists; Olbricht shows how Henry Ward Beecher and Frederic W. Farrar, working at approximately the same time on opposite sides of the Atlantic, expressed Higher Critical ideas in terms their congregations could embrace and understand.

"Sermon and Society in the British Empire" opens with two essays on politics and national identity. Bob Tennant undertakes a rhetorical history of the British missionary movement, tracing how preaching adapted to a variety of historical circumstances. As the age of Byron bloomed, preachers portrayed missionaries as Romantic heroes; as the empire expanded, they adopted the language of "power politics" employed by the secular authorities; as they

[22] See *Essays and Reviews: The 1860 Text and Its Readings*, ed. Victor Shea and William Whitla (Charlottesville, 2000).

preached to the colonized peoples themselves, they shortened and simplified their sermons to make them more accessible to those who had not been raised in a culture of classical rhetoric and Christian faith. Sermons did not, however, merely reflect the "spirit of the age"; they often helped to shape it as well. Tennant argues, in fact, that the sermon, which both helped raise support at home and carry the message of the gospel to foreign lands, was the single greatest force responsible for the expansion of Britain's spiritual empire.

The "triumphalist" rhetoric that Tennant identifies in some missionary preaching is also a feature of several works discussed by John Wolffe in "British Sermons on National Events". Just as preachers speaking to the Church Missionary Society declared that the salvation of the African peoples would be the ultimate testimony to the glories of the empire, some clergy used coronation and jubilee sermons to catalog the many spiritual and temporal blessings God had lavished upon the English people. Such occasions were not, however, purely celebratory: Wolffe shows how the sermons also reminded people that they would be held accountable for how they used the blessings they enjoyed, and warned them that if they proved to be poor stewards, God's judgement would surely come. Whatever the tone, national-event sermons, like the missionary discourses Tennant analyzes, were important means of "articulating and shaping public responses" to events both glad and tragic; because they tended to draw larger-than-average crowds, they also functioned as a leading form of Victorian mass media, "giving individuals a sense of participation in the 'imagined community' of the nation as a whole".

As the Church of England was expanding her presence overseas, the Church of Rome was becoming more prominent in Britain. Jessica Sheetz-Nguyen examines several dimensions of "Catholic Preaching in Victorian England", beginning with declarations about preaching issued at the Council of Trent and the place of English-language sermons in the 19th-century Latin Mass. She then identifies the chief topics of those sermons: "the Eucharist, almsgiving, and the special place of Mary or the Blessed Mother in the teleology of Roman Catholicism". Her final section shows how two of the leading figures in the second half of Victoria's reign worked

to put their beliefs into action. In sermons, lectures, and pastoral letters, Nicholas Wiseman and Henry Edward Manning, the first and second archbishops of Westminster, admonished parents to be sure their children received a Catholic education, called for the establishment of Catholic workhouses for children who had no parents, and argued for higher wages and better working conditions for those who labored at the docks and in the factories.

Protestant preachers' response to these developments is the subject of Miriam Elizabeth Burstein's "Anti-Catholic Sermons in Victorian Britain". Like their Catholic counterparts, Protestant sermons tended to "cluster into recognizable groups: the self-propagation of Catholicism; the spiritual and ecclesiastical histories of Catholicism; the internal failures of modern Protestantism; and, finally, ways of revitalizing Protestantism and beating back the Catholic threat". The best defense, the preachers suggested, was a "life of intensified piety and discipline", supported by "a regular program of Bible reading". People firmly grounded in the scriptures could take their proper place as "mere instruments" in the religious struggle, wielding the Bible itself as "the ultimate weapon … against the Catholic threat".

Eight years after the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy, Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species*. Given the challenges it posed to the received interpretations of the book of Genesis, one might think that the book provided ample fodder for pulpit address. As Keith Francis shows, however, this was not the case. While some preachers did protest against it, others, including such prominent figures as Charles Kingsley and Baden Powell, publicly supported Darwin's views. Many others, moreover, simply did not address the matter, perhaps because they and their congregations had little interest in the issue, or because they felt that such matters should not be discussed in the pulpit. Whatever the explanation, Francis estimates that sermons on science comprised only between 1 and 5 per cent of the total corpus, a statistic he illustrates with a most effective metaphor. Darwinian theory, he writes, may have been a "dangerous dog" lurking in the "neighborhood" of traditional belief, but as far as preaching was concerned, it was a "dog that didn't bark".

While the other essays in this section deal with actual preachers, Tamara Wagner analyzes the representation of sermons in Victorian fiction. She shows how the “figure of the fraudulent clergyman” is used in novels ranging from Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone* to Charlotte Yonge’s *The Clever Woman of the Family*, but she does not stop there. Rather, she suggests that that the term “sermon novel” can encompass both works that contain sermons and books that are essentially sermons themselves. Many of the texts in this category functioned as point-and-counterpoint in an extended doctrinal debate, much like a chess game that is played through the mail. Elizabeth Harris’ *From Oxford to Rome*, for example, spurred John Henry Newman to write *Loss and Gain*, which in turn “set off a cascade of reactions”, culminating, perhaps, in Eliza Lynn Linton’s savagely anti-Tractarian *Under Which Lord.* These works, then, are a kind of counterpart to the portraits Dawn Coleman examines in Chapter Sixteen: instead of showcasing the best and the brightest that Christianity has to offer, they offer glimpses of the acrimony of doctrinal infighting and the declining status of the clergy in a society that grew increasingly secular as the century progressed.

The final section, “Sermon and Society in America”, contains essays on topics ranging from Mormonism to sermons against dueling. Thomas Carmody sees the reaction to the Hamilton-Burr duel of 1804 as the emergence of the American “bully pulpit”, as ministers urged legislators, newspaper editors, parents, and wives to help move society away from the *code duello* that for many years had allowed men to defend their honor through the use of deadly force. Their efforts led to the formation of anti-dueling societies and the passing of anti-dueling laws; later, as they addressed other social ills as well, these ministers also helped to spur what W.J. Rorabaugh, a scholar cited in the essay, called “a host of [other] reforms, including Sunday schools, missions, temperance, abolition and women’s rights”.

The issues Rorabaugh mentioned are virtually identical to those addressed by the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, the subject of Dorothy Lander’s essay. Although alcohol use and abuse was the organization’s primary focus, the issue was often – and perhaps inevitably

– intertwined with other matters such as the slave trade (addiction to liquor was seen as a form of bondage); suffrage (political solutions to the alcohol problems could be achieved only if women were given the right to vote); and women in ministry (could women "preach" on what the Bible said about drinking and other subjects, or were they to be restricted merely to "teaching" roles?). Lander gives ample attention to the many facets of the temperance question, and, much as Carmody does, ends her essay with some thoughts about the enduring significance of her subject. In her view, the WCTU's achievements in breaking down the barriers between teaching and preaching, secular and sacred space, male and female, and rich and poor, can serve as models for women seeking to minister in the 21st-century church.

David Timmerman and Joseph Evans examine preaching by and about African-Americans. Timmerman focuses on preaching in the Reconstruction years, specifically on how "northern white Protestant ministers" addressed the social and legal status of the newly-freed slaves. The ministers were clearly conflicted on the issue: while they thanked God for bringing freedom to the slaves, they were not entirely willing for that freedom to be immediately exercised in the public square. When they argued, for example, that former slaves should not be allowed to vote until they could read and write, these ministers helped to create a kind of limbo for the Freedmen, placing them, in the words of Timmerman's title, "midway between slavery and citizenship".

Joseph Evans' essay explores how similar issues of citizenship and equality have been addressed by three African-American preachers and political activists. Frederick Douglass secured his freedom by teaching himself how to read and write and then used his oratorical skills to argue for the liberation of other slaves; Martin Luther King helped to shape the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s; and Gardner Calvin Taylor continued the work, serving as an advocate for the rights of African-Americans after King was assassinated in 1968. Each pursued his goals by invoking the values of both the Judeo–Christian tradition and American democracy, using the story of David and Goliath and the Declaration of Independence, Christ's metaphor of

“fishers of men” and the U.S. Constitution, to call for the elimination of the state of limbo Timmerman noted in his essay. They were, in other words, practitioners of a rhetorical form known as the “civic sermon”, which Evans defines as a “hybrid of political-religious oratory” that moves “sectarian congregations to embrace civic responsibility” and “persuades secular audiences to become evangelists for democratic values”.

Mirela Saim’s and Brian Jackson’s essays are case studies of the “centripetal pull” that draws institutions from the margins to the center. Saim traces the beginnings of Jewish preaching’s integration into Anglo-American culture to 1773, when a sermon Haym Isaac Carigal preached in Newport, Rhode Island was translated from Spanish into English, and to 1817, when Tobias Goodman preached an English-language sermon in London in memory of Princess Charlotte. Over the next several decades, Jewish homiletics continued to evolve: shaped by the influx of German-trained rabbis who came to America starting in the 1840s, the sermon retained the expository focus of the traditional *derashah* while also reflecting the beliefs and aspirations of a pluralistic and democratic nation. The process culminated on 3 March 1867, when Max Lilienthal preached in the First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati, Ohio. His sermon was truly an amalgam of traditions: it was based on texts from both the Hebrew Bible and contemporary political speech; it followed the structural models of classical oratory; and it called for the congregation to practice “peace, toleration, and friendship”, values that lay at the heart of both Jewish humanism and the emerging idea of an American “civil religion”. It is also, in Saim’s view, one of the most important early examples of interfaith “pulpit exchanges”, which had probably begun earlier in the century and continue to be practiced throughout North America and Europe.

The Latter-Day Saints were not immigrants, but they too underwent the process of adapting to the culture around them. For nearly seventy years – from the beginning of Joseph Smith’s ministry in the 1820s to the end of the 19th century – the Mormons embraced what Jackson calls “the rhetoric of the invisible”, emphasizing the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit

over any kind of human study or preparation. They eventually recognized the importance of formal study; by the 1890s, the church was moving into the homiletic mainstream, establishing its own schools and publishing its own preaching manuals.

Finally, Dawn Coleman takes as her subject the nine volumes of *Annals of the American Pulpit* (1856–69), William Buell Sprague's tribute to "distinguished clergymen in each of the major American denominations from the 1620s through 1855". Sprague's collection of hundreds of letters about ministers from around the country provides, in Coleman's words, "a window onto popular perceptions of effective preaching". These descriptions reveal that listeners saw the best ministers less as theological teachers than as almost supernaturally gifted figures who created intense experiences for their audiences. Ministers garnered high praise for delivering extemporaneous addresses that "electrified" or even terrified their congregations. Sprague's primary goal may have been to produce a kind of biographical encyclopedia, but Coleman demonstrates that the *Annals* is also rhetorical history, a compendium of information and analysis that would be difficult, if not impossible, to find anywhere else.

In short, the range of approaches represented in this volume shows the importance of bringing a "pluralistic hypothesis"[23] to the study of the 19th-century Anglo-American sermon. The phrase comes from William James, whose *Varieties of Religious Experience* was the first book that came to mind as I was drafting this introduction. James demonstrates that religion is not a "one size fits all" phenomenon: people have different "wants", "capacities", psychological profiles, and conversion experiences.[24] In the same way, the genre of the sermon is far from monolithic, encompassing much more than could be addressed here; a volume such as this one

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[23] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature. Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901–1902* (London, 1915), p. 526.

[24] Ibid., pp. 127, 137.

could also include, for example, essays on apocalyptic sermons, preaching on the American frontier, and the pulpit in continental Europe.

There is, then, much more that can still be done. Some, in fact, is already underway: several of the scholars who contributed to this collection are working on other studies of the sermon. Some of these projects involve just one person; others are collaborative efforts. Some will result in the publication of articles and books; others will join a growing body of work in digital humanities.[25] The collaborative and digital work is an encouraging indication that the humanities are increasingly moving toward research teams, co-authorship, and other models and practices that have been employed in the sciences for years. It is my hope that additional projects – both in "traditional" forms of scholarship and in these new horizons – will soon be undertaken as well, so that the history of the 19th-century sermon can continue to be written.

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[25] Brief descriptions of individual projects can be found in the List of Contributors. On the digital front, Keith Francis, Bob Tennant, John Wolffe, and I – along with Bill Gibson of Oxford Brookes University and other scholars – are co-directors of "The British Pulpit Online", a catalogue, portal, and archive of British sermons preached between 1660 and 1901. At first, the materials included will reflect the special interests of the research group; our goal is that all published texts will eventually be accessible from the project's website.