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SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE FIELD OF SERMON STUDIES

Robert H. Ellison

Multidisciplinary endeavours with the word 'studies' in their names have brought like-minded scholars together for over sixty years. Those specialising in certain parts of the world, for example, can join the North American Conference on British Studies (founded in 1950), the British Association for American Studies (1955), the African Studies Association (1957), or a host of other groups. Similarly, organisations for scholars interested in specific time periods include the Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies (1983), the Society for Renaissance Studies (1967) and the European Network for Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies. Finally, students of politics, gender and other aspects of society are served by the Political Studies Association (1950), the Society for Cinema & Media Studies (originally the Society of Cinematologists, 1959), the National Women's Studies Association (1977) and the Cultural Studies Association (2003).[1]

This is a long list, but it is by no means comprehensive. The omission that I wish to focus on in this article is 'sermon studies'. There is, I think, sufficient scholarly activity to sustain such a field: in recent years, a number of books have been issued by major academic presses,[2] and articles on preaching have been published in journals ranging from *Church History* to *European Judaism* to the *British Journal for the History of Science*.[3] There are also organisations for specialised corners of the field, such as the Academy of Homiletics for 'teachers and doctoral graduate students of homiletics' and the International Medieval Sermon Studies Society for those focusing on the preaching of the Middle Ages.[4] I am not aware, however, of organisations with broader scopes; even the American Academy of Religion, with some 130 'Program Groups' focusing on everything from 'Animals and Religion' to 'Queer Studies' and 'Sport and Play', is not currently sponsoring a group devoted to the pulpit.[5] The broader concept, then, of a field of 'sermon studies', which would embrace those engaged in all aspects of the study and practice of preaching, has not yet taken hold.

That is, however, beginning to change. One of the major catalysts for that change was the 2012 publication of *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon 1689–1901* (for which I was a consultant editor). The Preface, for example, begins with a concise statement of the current state of affairs:

> The emergence of a discrete field of Sermon Studies has occurred over the last two decades. That is not to say that there were not distinguished studies of sermons and preaching before this, but a new interdisciplinary endeavour of historians, literary and linguistics scholars, theologians and rhetoricians has developed in response to recognition of the importance of religion in this period [. . .] That transformation has renewed the interest in sermons as literary, political, religious and controversial performances.[6]

The thirty-one articles that follow are an excellent illustration of this renewed interest. Written by scholars in a range of disciplines, affiliated with institutions in North America, the United Kingdom, Australia and Finland, they examine topics ranging from Victorian funeral sermons to preaching on the mission field to science and religion in the pulpit.[7]

The collection, however, makes no claim to being the final word on this '"golden age" of sermons'.[8] One of the editors explicitly states that it 'represents a beginning, not an end' and suggests 'new areas' of inquiry 'which have not been covered in the book'.[9] These could include the economics of the sermon trade, the Jewish and Islamic rhetorical traditions, and the important contributions made by women and men without formal ministerial credentials.[10]

There are also some very fundamental issues that need to be addressed. Scholars studying other categories of texts enjoy the benefit of well-established definitions and a fairly good sense of the primary texts they have to work with. There is, for example, at least a rough consensus about what an 'epic poem' is or how many novels Hemingway published. The parameters are, of course, not permanently fixed; new authors and works continue to be discovered, and the consensus among theorists seems to be that genres are dynamic, not static, and that scholarship has been transformed from 'a descriptive to an explanatory activity'.[11] Those changes notwithstanding, those who wish to identify new genres or otherwise expand the boundaries of their fields at least have a solid foundation upon which to build their work.

Sermon scholars, in contrast, are building an entire field of study virtually from scratch.[12] We do not have, for example, what I have elsewhere called 'a clear sense of the canon'.[13] As the editors of the *Handbook* have noted, the genre needs to be defined – 'what constituted a sermon?' is a question 'more complex than might be assumed' – and quantified, so that we can have 'an accurate assessment of printed sermon numbers'.[14]

That figure is likely to be quite large. *Pulpit Publications, 1660–1782*, a six-volume catalogue compiled by John Gordon Spaulding, lists some 34,000 works published in Britain and the colonies; if the time-frame is extended to 1901, that number could climb as high as 80,000.[15] The American canon is similarly vast: on 18 June 2014, a WorldCat search with 'Sermons, American' as the subject phrase returned a total of 72,213 records, including approximately 48,000 books; 10,000 internet resources; 1,200 'archival' items; and 10,000 audio recordings. Those figures almost certainly include a fair number of duplicate titles, but even if those were to be eliminated, the number of unique titles remaining would likely still be in the tens of thousands.

Researchers, then, often face the rather daunting challenge of sifting through these works to find the ones most relevant to a given project. Projects such as Google Books, the Hathi Trust Digital Library and the Internet Archive have made access to primary texts easier than ever,[16] often saving researchers the time and expense of travelling to far-flung libraries and archives. Managing these texts, however, remains inefficient at best and problematic at worst. These sites' advanced-search functions, the online catalogues of individual libraries, and even WorldCat do not list the titles of individual sermons within a collection, so users must take the extra step of pulling up an image, visiting the stacks, or using interlibrary loan to obtain the works they need.

There are a number of sites that do index individual sermons, but they have significant limitations as well. Many focus on the work of just one preacher,[17] limiting their usefulness in larger projects. Others have broader scopes but fall short in other respects. The Christian Classics Ethereal Library, for example, includes works by only thirty-four preachers from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries.[18] Beyond the obvious 'greats' – Calvin, Donne, Wesley, Whitefield, and others – the selection seems a bit uneven. Henry Edward Manning is the only Victorian Anglo-Catholic included, and the American pulpit is represented by Horace Bushnell and C. G. Finney, but not by Henry Ward Beecher, Phillips Brooks, Increase Mather or D. L. Moody. The Classic Sermon

Index casts a much wider net, covering nearly 50,000 sermons from all periods of Christian history, but its idiosyncratic subject terms and subscription-only business model may be off-putting to some scholars.[19] There remains, then, a pressing need for a comprehensive, scholarly catalogue, one which 'would follow standard cataloguing rules and be accessible to all scholars, professional or "lay".[20]

One of the scholars who did the most to help build the essential infra-structure for sermon studies was the late Bob Tennant, whose academic affiliations included honorary research posts in Glasgow and Durham. In projects including a posthumous article published elsewhere in this issue, he surveyed the state of eighteenth-century sermon studies,[21] offered a 'preliminary generic *description*' of a 'sermon',[22] traced the pub-lication of 'single sermons' in England from 1676–98,[23] showed how one might construct and analyse a 'variorum edition' of a collection of sermons,[24] described a plan to construct a new catalogue based upon Spaulding's *Pulpit Publications*,[25] and outlined a method of generating what he called 'Unique Standard Titles' (USTs) for published sermons. These texts often pose considerable challenges to catalteguers and bibli-ographers: the same sermon could be republished under a different title; multiple sermons could be published with the same title; and some, such as those designated 'Sermon IX' in a collection, would not carry a title at all. A system of USTs would, in Tennant's view, be a boon to scholar-ship, helping to transform 'an undifferentiated mass' of texts into a much more manageable corpus.[26]

Tennant also charted innovative new directions for the field, combin-ing historical and literary study with approaches we usually see employed outside of the liberal arts. He proposed and applied a method of analys-ing the use of personal pronouns in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sermons,[27] undertook statistical analyses of how often preachers invoked various scripture texts and employed certain words and concepts,[28] and showed how research questions can be phrased using the language and techniques of formal logic and Bayesian probability theory.[29]

Tennant passed away in the spring of 2014, so his catalogue and other projects will, alas, remain unfinished. His legacy, however, will be felt for years to come. A long-standing adage holds that Boy Scouts should leave campsites and picnic areas better than they found them, and this can certainly be said of his contributions to sermon studies.

And the work has indeed gone on. Since the *Handbook* was published, contributors have organised a conference on the role of preaching in

Australian history[30] and published an article on Irish Charter School sermons.[31] Projects on a variety of topics are currently in preparation as well.[32] Colleagues with whom I have collaborated on other projects tell me they have recently published or are currently working on studies of the sermon in American literature,[33] William Enfield[34] and Richard Whately.[35]

A significant development took place in the autumn of 2014, with the founding of the Center for Sermon Studies at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia. Its mission is to promote interest in preaching in Appalachia and around the world by bringing scholars, practitioners and others together to discuss ideas, share research and otherwise explore mutual areas of interest. Its work is not bound by time, place or theological tradition. Rather, it is interested in the work of the three Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) in all geographic regions and all historical periods.

The Appalachian region's long and rich history of Christian expression, coupled with the Huntington area's diversity of other religious traditions, makes Marshall an ideal institution to sponsor such a Center. Housing it at a state-supported institution makes an important rhetorical statement as well, indicating that the study of the sermon has a place in the academy as a whole, and need not be confined to seminaries, divinity schools and church-related colleges.

One of the major projects sponsored by the Center is an online catalogue meant to fill the gaps left by the other tools discussed earlier in this article. This project was conceived a number of years ago as the 'British Pulpit Online', which would include 'all the bibliographical data – and perhaps even page scans' for sermons published during the period covered by the *Oxford Handbook*.[36] The nature of the project has changed somewhat: the geographical and chronological boundaries have been removed, and it has a new name, the Sermon Studies Catalog (SSC), to reflect its broader scope. Including page-scans would duplicate work that has already been done elsewhere, so the Catalog will contain bibliographical information only, with links to existing e-texts in the Internet Archive and other sites.

This bibliographical information will be more robust than that offered by any other finding aid. Each record will have fields for not only author and title, but also scripture text, the sermon's audience and occasion, the date and place it was preached, and up to six subject headings, which can be used to record such information as the country, century and denomination in which the preacher worked, along with the topic or

topics addressed in the sermon. The author, title and subject fields will all use Library of Congress authorised headings (e.g. 'Sermons, English – 19th century' or 'Faith – Sermons'), so scholars who are familiar with WorldCat and other standard catalogues will be able to conduct meaningful searches of the SSC as well.

The utility of the SSC will be further increased by the fact that it will not be a stand-alone site.[37] Rather, after the records have been checked by a member of staff, they will be uploaded into Marshall's system, where they can be retrieved via searches of just the SSC, the library catalogue or the 'Summon' feature, a 'unified index' from ProQuest that 'provides instant access to all of Marshall Libraries' materials in every possible format'.[38]

Another major project of the Center is a journal entitled *Sermon Studies*. As mentioned earlier, articles on preaching are being published in venues from a range of disciplines, with *Homiletic* and *Medieval Sermon Studies* focusing on practitioners and scholars in one specific realm. There is, however, no 'flagship' journal publishing work on a range of preaching traditions and informed by a variety of disciplinary perspectives. *Sermon Studies* is intended to meet that need.

Sermon Studies will be an online-only, open-access journal, with no costs assessed to either authors or subscribers.[39] It will use a 'hybrid' publication model, making articles available immediately upon final acceptance and later aggregating them into quarterly, annual or semi-annual issues, with the issue numbers and pagination used in traditional print journals.[40] When it is launched, ideally sometime in the year 2016, *Sermon Studies* will join a long list of some 300 peer-reviewed, open-access journals powered by Digital Commons software and sponsored by institutions around the world.[41]

The second chapter of the *Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon* ends with the assertion that 'Sermons mattered then and, for scholars examining the history of Britain in the modern era, sermons matter now'.[42] I would suggest that this is true not just of the period 1689–1901, or of preaching throughout the whole of British history, but of sermons throughout the world. American presidents regularly – even ritually – begin the speeches they give before Congress each January with the phrase 'the state of our union is strong'. The same can be said, I think, for sermon studies. Judging from the past work and future directions I have outlined in this article, this rapidly emerging subfield looks to have a very bright future indeed.

Notes

1 'Affiliates', North American Conference on British Studies, *http://www.nacbs.org/affiliates*; About Us', British Association for American Studies, *http://www.baas.ac.uk/about-us/*; 'About us', African Studies Association, *http://www.africanstudies.org/about-asa*; 'Welcome to the Byzantine Society', Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies, *http://www. byzantium.ac.uk/home*; 'Society for Renaissance Studies', *http://www.rensoc.org.uk/*; 'European Network for Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies', *http://www.eam-europe. be/*; 'About Us', Political Studies Association, *http://www.psa.ac.uk/psa/about-us*; 'Organizational History', Society for Cinema & Media Studies, *http://www.cmstudies. org/?page=org_history*; 'About', National Women's Studies Association, *http://www.nwsa. org/content.asp?pl=19&contentid=19*; 'About CSA', Cultural Studies Association, *http://www. culturalstudiesassociation.org/*. All sites accessed 11 June 2014.

2 See, for example, C. Bruzelius, *Preaching, Building, and Burying: Friars and the Medieval City* (New Haven, 2014); S. Eastman, *Preaching Spanish Nationalism Across the Hispanic Atlantic 1759–1823* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2012); K. L. Jansen and M. Rubin (eds), *Charisma and Religious Authority: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Preaching, 1200–1500* (Turnhout, Belgium, 2010); P. McCullough and H. Adlington (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Early Modern Sermon* (Oxford, 2011); and M. Neuman, *Jeremiah's Scribes: Creating Sermon Literature in Puritan New England* (Philadelphia, PA, 2013).

3 N. Key, 'The "Boast of Antiquity": Pulpit Politics Across the Atlantic Archipelago during the Revolution of 1688', *Church History*, 83/3 (2014), 618–49; M. Saperstein, 'John Rayner as Preacher: The Sermon in Response to Historical Events', *European Judaism*, 45/1 (2012), 50–7; T. Ciaran, 'Preaching at the British Association for the Advancement of Science: Sermons, Secularization, and the Rhetoric of Conflict in the 1870s', *British Journal for the History of Science*, 45/1 (2012), 75–95.

4 'About the Academy of Homiletics', *http://www.homiletics.org/about*; 'The IMSSS', International Medieval Sermon Studies Society, *http://imsss.net/*. Both sites accessed 12 June 2014.

5 'Program Unit Groups', American Academy of Religion, *https://www.aarweb.org/node/261*, accessed 18 June 2014.

6 K. A. Francis and W. Gibson, 'Preface', in K. A. Francis and W. Gibson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon 1689–1901* (Oxford, 2012), p. xiii.

7 Most of the essays were written by historians or literary scholars. There are also contributions from an abbot, a librarian, independent scholars, and people working in theology, religion, and communication studies.

8 Francis and Gibson, 'Preface', in Francis and Gibson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon 1689–1901*, p. xiii.

9 K. A. Francis, 'Sermon Studies: Major Issues and Future Directions', in Francis and Gibson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon 1689–1901*, p. 618.

10 Ibid., pp. 618, 624–7.

11 A. Bawarshi, 'The Genre Function', *College English*, 62/3 (2000), 335. A current and accessible account of the current state of genre theory is J. Frow, *Genre* (London, 2014).

12 See R. Ellison, 'How Do You Build a Discipline from the Ground Up?' (keynote address, 21st Annual West Virginia Undergraduate Literary Conference, 2 March 2013); available online at *http://mds.marshall.edu/english_faculty/18/*.

13 Ibid., 5.

[14] W. Gibson, 'The British Sermon 1689–1901: Quantities, Performance, and Culture', in Francis and Gibson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon 1689–1901*, pp. 5, 6.

[15] Ibid., p. 8.

[16] The URLs for these sites are *http://books.google.com/*, *http://www.hathitrust.org/* and *https://archive.org/*. On 18 June 2014, I searched all three for works with 'sermon' or 'sermons' in the title. I got approximately 6,900 'full view' works from Google Books, 13,000 'full text' works from Hathi Trust and 53,000 titles from the Internet Archive.

[17] See, for example, The Spurgeon Archive (*http://www.spurgeon.org/spsrmns.htm*), The National Institute for Newman Studies (*http://www.newmanreader.org/guides/*), the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University (*http://edwards.yale.edu/research/sermon-index* and *http://edwards.yale.edu/research/sermon-index/canonical*), and the Wesley Center Online (*http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/*). All sites accessed 19 June 2014.

[18] 'Sermons by Author', Christian Classics Ethereal Library, *http://www.ccel.org/index/subject/sermons*, accessed 19 June 2014.

[19] The Index (*https://classicsermonindex.com/*) does not specify its cataloguing methods or provide a 'Help' feature, leaving users to figure out the system on their own. A search for sermons by John Henry Newman that I conducted on 19 June 2014 returned texts with subjects such as 'responsibility for sin', 'life, greatness of', and 'obedience without love'. Because these are not phrases that a researcher would immediately think to use, nor are they terms authorised by the Library of Congress, a 'Subject' search of the Index is likely to be of little value in rigorous academic work.

[20] Francis, 'Sermon Studies: Major Issues and Future Directions', in Francis and Gibson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon 1689–1901*, p. 622.

[21] B. Tennant, 'Enlightenment Sermon Studies: A Multidisciplinary Activity', *Religion in the Age of Enlightenment*, 2 (2010), 323–7.

[22] Tennant posits that a 'sermon' is 'a text delivered by a priest to a worshipful assembly as part of a sequence during a liturgical performance' ('Defining, Quantifying, and Criticizing the Eighteenth-Century Sermon'; unpublished manuscript). Constructing a rigorous and workable 'critical definition' of the genre is, Tennant notes, a rather more complicated task.

[23] B. Tennant, 'John Tillotson and the Voice of Anglicanism', in K. Duncan (ed.), *Religion in the Age of Reason: A Transatlantic Study of the Long Eighteenth Century* (New York, 2009), pp. 99–103.

[24] B. Tennant, *Conscience, Consciousness and Ethics in Joseph Butler's Philosophy and Ministry* (Woodbridge, 2011), pp. 47–75. The works in question are the 1726 and 1729 editions of Butler's *Fifteen Sermons*.

[25] See the 'Addendum' to 'Sermons as Evidence: "Holdings Questions" and "Corpus Questions"', in this issue of the *Journal of Religious History, Literature and Culture*.

[26] B. Tennant, 'Naming Sermons', unpublished manuscript, 21 January 2007.

[27] B. Tennant, 'The Sermons of the Eighteenth-Century Evangelicals', in Francis and Gibson, *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon 1689–1901*, pp. 116–18, 123–6; B. Tennant, *Corporate Holiness: Pulpit Preaching and the Church of England Missionary Societies, 1760–1870* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 14–15, 200, 207; Tennant, 'Enlightenment Sermon Studies', 334–41.

[28] B. Tennant, 'Hard Labour: Institutional Benevolence and the Development of National Education', in Francis and Gibson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon 1689–1901*, p. 368; Tennant, 'John Tillotson and the Voice of Anglicanism', pp. 116–19; Tennant, *Corporate Holiness*, pp. 293–5; Tennant, *Conscience, Consciousness and Ethics*, pp. 219–21.

In the latter study, Tennant tabulated the 'average page-hits per sermon, by decade' of terms such as 'ethics', 'benevolence', 'charity', 'property' and 'law'.

29 See Tennant's article 'Sermons as Evidence: "Holdings Questions" and "Corpus Questions"' in this issue of the *Journal of Religious History, Literature and Culture*.

30 'Preaching Australia: Religion, Public Conversation and the Sermon in Australian History', St Mark's National Theological Centre, *http://www.stmarks.edu.au/preaching-australia*, accessed 17 June 2014. The organisers are currently seeking a publisher for a collection of essays arising from the conference.

31 C. Haydon, '"[A]lmost the only Histories we can boast": The Charter-School Sermons and their Perceptions and Uses of Irish History', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 28 (2013), 78–94.

32 I am informed that the following publications are forthcoming: J. Caudle, 'A Revolution in Political Broadcasting: The Sermon in the Hanoverian Revolution, 1714–1716', *Journal of Religious History, Literature and Culture*, Special Issue (2016); C. Haydon, 'The Considerable Doubts of Francis Stone (1738–1813)', *Studies in Church History*; W. Gibson, 'John Trusler and the Culture of Sermons in Late Eighteenth Century England', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*; P. Pritchard, 'Speaking Well of the Dead : Characterisation and Typology in Eighteenth-Century English Funeral Sermons', in *Narrative Concepts in Eighteenth-Century Literature*.

33 D. Coleman, *Preaching and the Rise of the American Novel* (Columbus, OH, 2013). Coleman is currently working on several other sermon-related projects, including a critical intro-duction to nineteenth-century Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing's six-volume *Works* for *Melville's Marginalia Online*, a digital project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

34 C. Poster, 'A Good Dissenter Speaking Well: William Enfield's Educational and Elocutionary Philosophies in Religious Context', in *Advances in the History of Rhetoric*, forthcoming.

35 C. Poster, 'Rhetoric, Education, and Economics as Practical Theology: Archbishop Richard Whately's Irish Policies', in M. D. Button and J. A. Sheetz-Nguyen (eds), *Victorians and the Case for Charity: Essays on Responses to English Poverty by the State, the Church and the Literati* (Jefferson, NC, 2014), pp. 77–93; C. Poster (ed.), *Richard Whately*, Gale Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism Series (Columbia, SC, forthcoming).

36 Francis and Gibson, 'Preface', in Francis and Gibson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon 1689–1901*, p. xv.

37 In this respect, the SSC most closely resembles tools such as the Hekman Library Sermon Index, which allows users to search the holdings of Calvin College and 'find sermon cita-tions based on the scripture passage, the author, a title keyword, or the subject' (*http://www.calvin.edu/library/database/hlsi/*, accessed 19 June 2014). The SSC will, however, return results not just from the host library, but also books scanned from libraries around the world and made freely available online.

38 'The Summon® Service', ProQuest, *http://www.proquest.com/products-services/The-Summon-Service.html*, accessed 19 June 2014; 'Faculty Resources Provided by Marshall University Libraries', *http://libguides.marshall.edu/content.php?pid=53757&sid=393936*, accessed 13 August 2014.

39 Open access seems to be an emerging 'best practice' in scholarly publishing, and is in fact required by governmental agencies and other funding bodies on both sides of the Atlantic ('Research Funder Policies and Related Legislation', Scholarly Publishing @ MIT Libraries, *http://libraries.mit.edu/scholarly/publishing/research-funders/*, accessed 19 June 2014). In 2012, the American Historical Association cautioned against shifting the costs of open publication from subscribers to contributors ('Statement on Scholarly Journal Publishing',

American Historical Association, *http://blog.historians.org/2012/09/aha-statement-on-scholarly-journal-publishing/*, accessed 19 June 2014). Major publishers, however, have adopted precisely this practice, charging author fees that can exceed 1,000 euros, British pounds or US dollars per article (*http://www.brill.com/brill-open-0*; *http://www.brill.com/resources/authors/publishing-journals-brill/brill-open-access-journals*; *http://journals.cambridge.org/images/fileUpload/images/hybridjournals1213.xls*; *http://www.oxfordjournals.org/oxfordopen/charges.html*, all accessed 19 June 2014).

40 Other publishers are using this hybrid model as well. See, for example, a brief description of Cambridge's 'First View' system at *http://journals.cambridge.org/action/help?pageId=1768*, accessed 3 October 2014.

41 'Peer-Reviewed Journals Published with Digital Commons', Digital Commons, *http://digitalcommons.bepress.com/online-journals-peer/*, accessed 19 June 2014. Other popular open-access products include Drupal (*https://drupal.org/project/ejournal*), DPubS (*http://dpubs.org/index.html*), and Open Journal Systems (*http://pkp.sfu.ca/ojs*). A list of additional providers is maintained by the Open Access Directory, *http://oad.simmons.edu/oadwiki/Free_and_open-source_journal_management_software*.

42 K. A. Francis, 'Sermons: Themes and Developments', in Francis and Gibson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon 1689–1901*, p. 43.