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“Four Case Studies in Teaching Sermons at a Public University”
Robert H. Ellison, Marshall University

I imagine many of us have had the experience of being specialists in graduate school and switching to generalists in our first jobs and beyond. That has certainly been the case with me. My Ph.D. is in Victorian literature, but in my first job I taught mostly composition and world literature, with only occasional forays into more specialized upper-level classes. Similarly, in my 8 years at Marshall, I have taught only about half-a-dozen classes entirely in my field, and another half-dozen sections of British-literature surveys with “units” on the Victorian period. I use 19th-century texts in other classes when I can—I always assign *Oliver Twist* in my introductory course for English majors, for example—but I’m not sure I would primarily identify myself as a Victorianist these days.

This is even more true when it comes to sermon studies, my other—and currently my primary—area of expertise. As far as I can recall, I did not begin using sermons in class until I came to Marshall, which is somewhat ironic, as it is a public institution and the place where I started was East Texas Baptist University, clearly a school with an explicitly Christian identity and mission. I was somewhat hesitant to start, and I actually turned down several invitations from my chair to teach a sermons course because I wasn’t sure whether it would generate sufficient enrollment, and, in the event it did, whether I could keep my students interested in the genre for an entire term.

After 4-5 years at Marshall, I finally decided to bring sermons into the classroom. Since the spring of 2014, I have used them in four courses, with the time spent on them ranging from a single class period to an entire semester. I will discuss the texts I selected and the approaches I took to them, share some responses from the students, and conclude with some remarks about what these experiences taught me about the challenges and opportunities that come with teaching religious rhetoric in a secular environment.

Using Sermons in English Classes

The four courses can be divided into two groups: English classes that included sermons in surveys of nonfiction genres and themes, and interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary courses with a religious-studies focus. The two in the first category are “The Victorian Spoken Word,” a graduate seminar on speeches by Arnold, Carlyle, Huxley, Mill, and others, and “Good Essays,” a general-education class I created to go along with courses such as “Good Stories,” “Good Poems,” “Good Films,” and others already being offered by my department.

The classes were on opposite ends of the curricular spectrum, but my approach was much the same: examining how preachers communicated different interpretations of the same scripture texts. In the graduate course, I chose sermons by John Henry Newman and C.H. Spurgeon, about whom I had written before, and by Catherine Booth, whom I included in part because she was a member of a different denomination and in part because the class was a bit light on women speakers (the only others on the reading list were Josephine Butler and Victoria herself, both of whom we read in our study of political oratory).

The subject of all three sermons is Matthew 21:28-32, Jesus’ story about a man who asked his two sons to work in his vineyard. One son refused at first but eventually went, while the other agreed to work but did not actually go. The “chief priests and the elders of the people” who were listening to him agreed that it was the first son who “did the will of his father,” and Jesus uses the story as an opportunity to warn them that because their spiritual condition is more akin to that of

the second son, “the tax collectors and the prostitutes” will enter “the kingdom of God” before they will.

Spurgeon’s [sermon](#) is addressed to “the whole mass of the unconverted,” whom he divides into the same categories mentioned in the story: “*those who are avowedly disobedient to God*” and thus correspond to the first son, and “*the deceptively submissive*,” who are represented by the second (emphasis in the original). Their sins, Spurgeon says, may be different, but “the same gospel [can] be preached” to both: just as the first son “changed his mind...and went” to work, they need to repent, “Believe in the Son of God and live.”

[Newman](#) deals with the same verses, but with a rather different style and tone. He addresses his hearers as “my brethren” rather than “the unconverted,” and the difference “between promising and performing” as “weakness” and “self-deception” rather than “sin.” The remedies he proposes are “self-examination” and cultivating “the habit of constant dependence upon the Unseen God.” Newman closes on a note of encouragement and hope: Jesus, he says, “came to show us what human nature might become, if carried on to its perfection... Henceforth, we dare aspire to enter into the heaven of heavens, and to live for ever in God’s presence, because the first-fruits of our race is already there in the Person of His Only-begotten Son.”

In her [sermon](#), Booth takes yet a third approach. The published version of Spurgeon’s text reproduces Jesus’ entire story (verses 28-32). Newman’s, in contrast, omits Jesus’ warning to the priests and concludes with verse 30, in which the second son “said, I go, Sir; and went not.” Booth’s has even less, quoting only verse 28, “Son, go work to-day in my vineyard” (148). She begins with her “conclusion,” asserting that God never gives “His grace to any individual soul, without holding that soul responsible for communicating that light and grace to others” (148). For the remainder of the sermon, she strives to “get this thought thoroughly into [her hearer’s] minds,” urging them first to pray and then to act, to write letters, visit homes, and do whatever else is in their power as they “seek for souls” (150, 51). If they will work, their labor will not be in vain: “You go and put your hand to the plough,” she promises, “and [God] will give you strength to push it along” (160).

I did similar comparisons in the “Good Essays” class. I scheduled less time for sermons— one 50-minute class rather than a one-night-a week session that ran for 2.5 hours—so I assigned two texts rather than three. At the time I taught the class, I had recently begun a project—which is still ongoing—on Jewish and Christian preaching in Victorian England, and I wanted to bring some interfaith dialogue into the classroom as well.

The preachers I chose were E.B. Pusey, who was both a Christian theologian and a Hebrew scholar, and Hermann Adler, a London rabbi who would go on to be elected Chief Rabbi of the British Empire. The scripture in question was Daniel 9:24-27, in which Daniel speaks about the “seventy sevens” that would elapse “from the time the word goes out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One.”

Their explications of these verses are somewhat complicated; for the sake of time, I will attempt to just summarize them here. [Pusey](#), as we might expect, views them as a messianic prophecy. He asserts that the “seventy sevens,” or 490 years, began in 457 BC, when the Persian king Artaxerxes gave Ezra the priest permission to go to Jerusalem, giving him silver and gold to furnish the temple and “freewill offerings” with which to purchase animals for sacrifice (see Ezra 7:11-20). The timeline therefore ended in AD 33, the year of Jesus’ crucifixion, making him the “Anointed One” mentioned in verse 25 (171-77).

[Adler](#), of course, argues that the prophecy has nothing at all to do with Jesus. He says there is a consensus among Jewish scholars that Cyrus, not Jesus, “is the anointed prince here spoken

of” (116), a status which is illustrated in the interpretation he presents. In Adler’s view, the timeline actually began with the “destruction of Jerusalem” in 586 BCE. The first division of “seven sevens,” or 49 years, thus concluded in 537, when Cyrus announced that “the Lord...hath charged me to build Him a house in Jerusalem” (115, 116). From there, the next “sixty-two sevens” refers to the 430 years the Jews lived under “the Persian, Macedonian, Egyptian, and Syrian monarchies” (117), and the prophecy was ultimately fulfilled “in the renewed dedication of the Temple by Judas Maccabeus, and the re-establishment shortly afterwards of the independence of Israel” (114).

In these class sessions, as with all my work in sermon studies, my focus was on rhetoric rather than theology or doctrine. I have religious convictions, but my purpose in assigning these readings was not to promote or defend them to my students. Rather, I wanted them to engage with—whether for the first time or the Nth—a category of prose that is often understudied in literature classes, and to consider not the preachers’ truth claims, but rather how they made their cases, and to assess the strengths and weaknesses of their respective arguments.

Our discussions, then, were not what one might find in, say, a religion class at my previous institution. As would be fitting for English classes, they were instead short courses in literary criticism. I began with genre theory, touching on how sermons compare to other forms of prose, and to posit, as a working definition, that a sermon is a speech dealing with the interpretation and application of a religious text. We then saw how the sermons, as I suggested a moment ago without actually using the term, are all examples of reader-response at work, having a common starting point in Matthew or Daniel but arriving at different—and, in the case of Pusey and Adler, even mutually exclusive—destinations.

Biographical and historical criticism came into play as well. Toward the end of class, I suggested that the differences in the three sermons on Matthew could be at least partially attributed to the denominations of the respective preachers. Spurgeon, a Baptist, was an evangelistic preacher in an evangelistic denomination, and his “Sermon to Open Neglecters and Nominal Followers of Religion” was delivered in the Agricultural Hall in Islington, rather than in the Metropolitan Tabernacle, which was undergoing repairs at the time. Given these circumstances, it is certainly understandable that the sermon more closely resembles one by a visiting evangelist or revival preacher than something a pastor would deliver to members of his own congregation.

Newman, on the other hand, was an Anglican, a tradition in which people, often infants, are brought into the church by baptism, rather than being converted by a sermon. We do not know for certain, but it is likely that he delivered “Promising without Doing” in Oxford’s University Church of St. Mary the Virgin, where he was serving as vicar at the time. His background and audience could thus very well help to account for “my brethren,” “our Christian course,” and other inclusive language suggesting that he viewed his hearers as members of the faith who needed to be encouraged rather than “outsiders” who needed to be brought into the fold.

Finally, Booth’s denomination was the Salvation Army; she was, in fact, married to William Booth, who founded the movement in 1865. Her sermon, entitled “The World’s Need,” is well suited to a collection called *Aggressive Christianity*, defined in the introduction as “a cardinal doctrine of the Salvation Army” which involves spreading the gospel “‘till it subdues the whole world to Jesus, its rightful king” (Booth 11). As I suggested to the students, their three positions could be summarized as “you need to be saved” (Spurgeon), “you need to live a life that shows you are saved” (Newman), and “you need to help save others” (Booth).

To a certain extent, the connection between Pusey’s and Adler’s lives and sermons is fairly obvious and straightforward, as they were respected members of their respective religious traditions and delivered sermons in keeping with those traditions. There was, however, additional

context to which I wanted to call the students' attention. Pusey's discourse came from *Daniel the Prophet*, an 1868 series of lectures written to counter arguments that Daniel lived after the events he discusses and the book should thus be regarded as history, not as prophecy. His discussion of the "seventy sevens" can thus be viewed not only as something consistent with much of the "conventional wisdom" of Christian hermeneutics then and now, but also as part of a project written in response to specific circumstances of the time (a rhetorical "exigence," to use the term that Lloyd Bitzer introduced in a seminal article published in 1968).

Adler's sermon could be considered an "occasional" discourse as well. It appears in a volume entitled *A Course of Sermons on the Biblical Passages Adduced by Christian Theologians in Support of the Dogmas of their Faith*. The theologians he has in mind are not the Church Fathers or other authorities from days gone by, but rather missionaries affiliated with such groups as the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews, which, in his view, were spending "immense sums...year after year...in turning bad Jews into worse Christians" (2). Judaism, he says, "is not a proselytizing faith," but he is willing to go on "defence" if attacked (iii, 1). His sermon on Daniel is not a response to Pusey specifically (although it did come out the year after *Daniel the Prophet* was published), but it does have the goal of helping to preserve the faith by offering "the true explanations" of passages which he believed had been improperly employed by Christian preachers (iv).

Using Sermons in Religious-Studies Classes

That is a brief overview of how I used sermons in two literature classes. As I mentioned earlier, I also used them in two courses that could be classified under religious studies rather than English: a sophomore-level class called "God Talk" I team taught with a colleague in religious studies, and a senior-level seminar in the Honors College. The main difference between the two was a matter of time rather than design: we had two weeks for the "unit" on sermons in "God Talk" and the entire semester in the Honors seminar, which allowed me to make additional writing projects and give each student an entire class period in which to lead a discussion about preachers and sermons of their choice.

Rather than going into details of those assignments, I'd like to focus on what the classes had in common. In both cases, I changed from comparing two or three sermons preached on a common text to trying to capture a wide range of approaches to preaching. To that end, the assignments included readings in the history of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic preaching, along with numerous examples of the sermons themselves, in both text and video form. The title of the Honors seminar was "Sermon: Text and Performance," suggesting that we'd give more or less equal weight to both aspects of the preaching process, and my co-instructor agreed to emphasize delivery in the "God Talk" class as well.

Works I used in one or both classes included the [Sermon on the Mount](#) as presented in a 1993 film featuring Bruce Marchiano as Jesus and the classic ["Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,"](#) for which students were to watch and write about one of the many dramatizations available online. For Islam, I used [Muhammad's last sermon](#), narrated by Yusuf Islam (formerly known as Cat Stevens), and ["Mocking Others and Arrogance"](#) by Nouman Ali Khan, the founder of an Arabic studies institute in Irving, Texas, who was recommended to me by a Muslim colleague. For Judaism, I used selections from a website called ["Torah from Terror,"](#) which featured texts of sermons preached by rabbis across the country in response to the 9/11 attacks.

I also wanted students to go beyond the Abrahamic faiths and work with speeches that might not fit the traditional definitions of a "sermon." To accomplish this, I had them watch a

[video](#) of the [Sunday Assembly](#), whose website describes it as “the world’s fastest growing secular” movement,” with “over 70...chapters in 8 different countries where people sing songs, hear inspiring talks, and create community together” (“Community”; “Our Story”). The event, which took place in San Diego on January 18, 2014, had all the elements of a traditional church service: opening announcements, group singing (featuring “Hakuna Matata” rather than worship choruses or hymns), a time for the children, and a message (which outlined a humanist approach to morality rather than an exposition of a sacred text) (“Sunday Assembly”).

We then went even further, to something known as the [Godless Revival](#), a group that broke away from the Sunday Assembly on the grounds that it wasn’t sufficiently unbelieving (“Atheist Church Split”). Unlike the Assembly, the Revival rejects any similarity to a church: its events are “shows,” not “services,” and the people in attendance are an “audience,” not a “congregation.” To use its own words, it is “America’s first atheist variety show” and “a party with a brain” (“The Godless Revival NYC”). The [talk](#) we discussed, given in a bar by Revival cofounder Don Kennedy Albert, pushed back against stereotypes about atheists, contending that they are not “militant,” “fundamentalist,” and “intolerant,” as religious people often believe them to be.

Various assignments tracked the students’ journeys through these sermons, and several students gave me permission to share their work with you today. At the beginning of the process, most of their frames of reference were limited to sermons they’d heard in their own churches; they were, by their own admission, not very familiar with either the history of preaching or other contemporary practices, both inside and outside the Christian tradition. The progress they made is perhaps best summed up in this excerpt from an Honors student’s final reflective essay:

“When I think of a sermon, I think of a loud speech that preaches the gospel while getting people pumped up and excited for Jesus Christ.” At the beginning of the semester, this is how I described my idea of a sermon. At the time, I did not realize how ignorant I was when it came to sermons. I thought that simply attending church since I was an infant was enough to inform me on every aspect of a sermon. Throughout the semester, I realized more and more just how wrong I had been... If one were only looking at aspects of Pentecostal preaching, my definition could be considered a decent definition of a sermon. However, my definition did not cover aspects of other types of preaching. Over the course of the semester, it was interesting to learn about different aspects of preaching and think about how these aspects have changed my overall idea of a sermon.

Other assignments revealed specific ways in which the classes helped students to shape, and even change, their thinking. A student in God Talk wrote about how Don Kennedy Albert spurred her to reexamine her negative opinions about atheists; she and several others also noted that they were now equipped to be more informed and thoughtful members of their own congregations. One said the Honors seminar taught her to “to both read and listen to sermons in a whole new light”; another wrote, “I will now be able to be more critical and understanding of every sermon I hear.”

I was especially pleased to see how some of the students began to emerge as genre theorists in their own right. Responses they wrote to specific assignments showed them working through the categories, considering whether something they read or viewed could be considered a sermon at all, or whether it might more accurately be described as a “speech,” a “philosophical scientific presentation,” or “a presentation on morality.” Specific distinctions they proposed included the notions that “a lecture is informative while a sermon has a spiritual component” and “An exegetical work is primarily concerned with ancient text whereas a homiletic work is in the form of a sermon.”

The latter statement may be a touch circular in its reasoning, but at least it shows a genuine attempt to think through the terms and definitions.

One of the more intriguing and perceptive discussions came from another final reflection, which is worth quoting at length. “Sermons,” this student wrote, “can be viewed as a type of literature, yet should not be viewed exclusively as literature.” She went on to say

As an English major, the many rhetorical strategies and devices, such as ethos, pathos, and logos, were not new to me. I have used these in both high school and college English classes to examine all different types of literature. At the same time, I would also listen to sermons at church, but I never considered viewing sermons in the same manner in which I would examine a piece of writing.

While sermons can be viewed as literature, I have learned that there is still something rather distinct about sermons compared to other writings. In reading the book *Preaching and the Rise of the American Novel*, I began to realize just how powerful the sermon is, and, while it is literature, there is more to it. Something that we discussed often in class is the idea of the sermon on paper versus the delivery of the sermon. The importance of delivery is so evident to me now after what we’ve discussed in class and what I read in the book. We saw in some of the sermons that the sermon’s content could be really insightful, but if it is delivered poorly, it loses its effect. Similarly, a sermon’s content could be flawed, but if it is delivered well, it has an effect on the audience. Therefore, sermons must be analyzed as both written and spoken text in order to truly understand them.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, I said I’d talk about “the challenges and opportunities that come with teaching religious rhetoric in a secular environment.” I actually didn’t run into many challenges. There were some concerns that the classes might be used for indoctrination or proselytizing, but I addressed that implicitly by designing the courses so as not to privilege one tradition over the others and explicitly in my introductions on the first day of class.

As I’ve shown, the responses from the students themselves were generally positive. To be sure, this could be due in part to the “selection effect”: honors students, more or less by definition, are intellectually curious and will engage with most anything that is set before them, and students who signed up for God Talk and my seminar were probably already interested in religious studies in general and sermons in particular. The readings, however, seem to have been well received in the graduate class and Good Essays, where the students did not know up front that those texts would be on the reading list. In a message he sent to me last week, one of the graduate students wrote that the sermons did not “speak to [him] spiritually” because he’s “just flat-out not religious.” That was actually part of their appeal; as he put it, they are “feats of rhetoric and persuasion of a religious era that I’m not often exposed to,” which can “offer some unique insights in communication practices of the Victorian Era.”

I may be preaching to the choir, but I believe my experience has shown that sermons can be profitably deployed throughout the curriculum. I have, in fact, been approved to offer the honors seminar again, and I’m looking forward to leading another group of students through a semester-long study of the sermon in the fall. Thank you very much.

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