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Carnivalized Preaching Homiletic

in dialogue with Bakhtin and Other-Wise homiletics

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– in dialogue with Bakhtin and Other-Wise homiletics

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Abstract: *In spite of the radical differences between international scholars of homiletics there seems to be a common quest for more pragmatic "other"-oriented preaching practices and homiletical reflections. "Other-wise" preaching carries the potential for embodying these explorations as it analyzes how the presence and words of others can influence preaching. Other-wise preaching has been developed as a philosophical ethic of preaching[1] and as a practical model of preaching[2]. What other-wise preaching is missing are two elements that constitute the middle ground between philosophy and practice namely a) a model of communication and b) a theology of communication. A model of communication which can compliment other-wise preaching has been developed by MM Bakhtin[3]. This article[4] will draw the contours of a Bakhtinian based "communication theology" in order to illuminate the "carnivalized"[5] genre of preaching in a way that reconsiders the traditional roles of preaching so that the congregation is seen as co-authors and God as the "loophole addressee"[6] of preaching.*

Preaching as a dialogical monologue

The genre of preaching can be described as a dialogue between the foreign words of God, as the "Wholly Other," and diverse human others. Throughout the history of preaching the emphasis has been on different agents in the homiletic dialogue, changing between scripture, preacher, listener and the Word of God. The thesis of this article is that preaching is a particular genre of communication in which a number of conflicting discourses meet. The history of homiletics and preaching shows a tendency to exclude the disturbing "other" in order to preach the gospel purely. The preacher has traditionally been seen as the primary agent of preaching, and his/her role has been to "cross the bridge"[7] and transfer meaning from the universe of a foreign text to a passively receiving congregation. Rather than trying to eliminate some of the disturbing discourses between the radically different agents involved in preaching, the genre of preaching can instead be seen as constituted by the tension filled clash

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[1] John S. McClure, *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001).

[2] John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

[3] Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975), Russian literary scholar, dialogue philosopher, communication theorist, Dostoevsky-interpreter.

[4] The present article is developed on the basis of papers presented and discussed at the Academy of Homiletics' annual meetings in Washington DC (2009) and Atlanta (2010). I am gratefully indebted to all the responses I have had in relation to these meetings.

[5] "Carnivalized" is a Bakhtinian neologism referring to the historical folk festival in which all kinds of people gather at public thresholds turning traditional hierarchies and values upside down. Carnivalization means that the ambivalent language, symbols, rituals and laughter of carnival is being transposed into literary genres maintaining the dynamic other-oriented interaction and role change. I am thankful to Charles L. Campbell for encouraging me to explore the potential of carnivalization for preaching.

[6] Bakhtinian neologism for the "third person" presupposed either in the metaphysical distant or in a remote historical époque is seen as the constitutive element of the dialogue which "does not stop at immediate understanding but presses on further and further (indefinitely)" cf. Bakhtin, Speech Genres and Other Late Essays *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays,* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

[7] Edward Farley, "Preaching the Gospel and Preaching the Bible" in *Theology Today*, vol. 51, 1, 90-103.

between the centripetal and centrifugal forces and persons that meet in the act of preaching. Of primary importance is the dialogical encounter between the Wholly Other and diverse others as listeners.

"Other-wise" preaching is an idea coined by John McClure in his *Other-wise Preaching a Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics*[8]. Based on his reflections I will be using the term "other-wise preaching" as a prism for analyzing the many faceted homiletical movements that emphasize listeners as co-authors of preaching. The term other-wise is inspired by the French philosopher, Emmanuel Lévinas' (1906–2005) description of the other-wise, as expounded in: *Totality and Infinity*.[9] Since McClure has provided the most comprehensive description of the movement and outlined a philosophical framework as well as a homiletical practice for it, I will primarily refer to his works, but it should be kept in mind that his reflections are based on and in dialogue with a plurality of voices and practices.[10]

Within recent homiletical scholarship there is a growing consensus about perceiving preaching as dialogical.[11] This understanding, however, can be problematized both from a genre theoretical and an empiric perspective. The fact that the public performance of preaching is monological rather than dialogical, that it is usually based on the interpretation of an ancient text rather than on the reflections of people conversing with each other, distinguishes it significantly from traditional everyday dialogue. As elaborated in the following, the notion of dialogue is being used in so many ways that it tends to become senseless.[12] A preliminary working definition for dialogue, however, is that it is interactive communication, that is, communication in which both sides are participating and are influenced by the words of the other.

Empirical surveys of people listening to sermons[13] portray the particular kind of interaction taking place in the act of listening to preaching:

> It was illuminating, and sometimes unnerving, to see what laity are doing with sermon[s], cutting and pasting bits and pieces of language into personal and communal religious narratives […] In large part, the preachers' words were removed from the ground (paradigm, life world, premises) on which the preacher stood and inserted wholesale onto a very different ground, in each case controlled by unique life conditions […] more often than not, listeners were painting the preacher's words and sentences into a very different horizon of meaning altogether.[14]

The active, creative *agency* of listeners of preaching confirms that they are far from passive receivers of the preacher's message. Yet to what extent the words of the preacher influence the listeners' own new "sermon" and whether the preacher enters into the listeners' new construction dialogically is yet in need of investigation. The recent turn toward studying listeners of preaching, rather than manuscripts of preachers, has emphasized ways in which sermons are *used* by people in the pews and consequently reveal the need for developing

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[8] St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001.

[9] Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.

[10] McClure, *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics*, 97-152. See also: Allen, Ronald J., *Preaching and the Other: studies of postmodern insights* (St. Louis: Chalice Press 2009).

[11] Jonny Karlsson, *Predikans samtal*, [The Sermon's Dialogue] Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997); McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet*.

[12] Further below three senses of dialogicity in the Bakhtinian understanding will be elaborated.

[13] *Listening to Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies* by R.J. Allen, D.P. Andrews, L.S. Bond, D.P. Moseley, G.L. Jr. Ramsey, J.S. McClure (ed.) (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004)

[14] John S. McClure, "What I Now Think I Think vis-à-vis Homiletic Theory," unpublished paper presented at the Academy of Homiletics, Boston 2008. Downloaded on Dec. 10th 2010 from www.homiletics.org, 97.

pragmatic approaches to homiletical communication. To this end the communication theories developed by Mikhail M. Bakhtin can prove a valuable source.

When analyzing the act of preaching in light of Bakhtin's communication theories, it is recognizable as a fundamentally dialogical genre.[15] Bakhtin's claim that discourse production always happens in dialogue with the "already-said" (of texts, tradition, past dialogues) and the "not-yet-said" (listeners' verbal and embodied reactions), echoes many preachers' acknowledgement of their congregations' implicit influence on their preaching. The not-yet-spoken voices imagined in the preparation process, however, may have more or less in common with the not-yet-spoken actual voices and reactions of the actual congregation during preaching. Other-wise homileticians question the preacher's ability to identify imaginatively with listeners or to assume that a common understanding can be reached in a "fusion of horizons."[16] Instead they invite dialogue partners into conversations about the preaching text in the recognition that the interlocutors' differences from the preacher can function as challenging potentialities for preaching rather than manifestations of a lack of theological knowledge in need of being corrected.

What I hope to show in what follows is that one of the potentials of developing other-wise preaching in collaboration with Bakhtinian communication theories is that the dialogical interaction and power plays between the different parties become more visible, enabling preachers to enter into a continued dialogue in a more methodologically competent way. The Bakhtinian influence also carries the potential to foster a homiletical methodology which can handle the multiplicity of voices and texts, written, spoken and yet unspoken, which tend to join in the dialogue of preaching. It can enable preachers to handle the polyphony of voices in a way that guards the particularities, yet to arrange them in a way that lets their expressions come out in a harmonious tune.

The need for a new pragmatic theology of communication

Having rejected the traditional transfer-model of communication, other-wise homileticians are searching for an alternative model of communication.[17] The development from an ideological, abstract philosophy towards a more pragmatic, embodied approach to homiletics can, as a case study, be traced in the development of McClure's homiletical authorship. This case study is chosen not only because it illustrates how preaching has evolved into new practices that challenge the traditional perception of the genre, as one-way communication, but also because it makes explicit some of the implicit assumptions inherent in the genre and practice of preaching, namely the decentering influence of words of "others," co-authorship, and polyphony.

In *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies* McClure categorizes theological uses of language under different codes of preaching.[18] This work exemplified a homiletic prioritizing of code over use, in continuation of Saussure's insistence on the dominance of "langue" (the language system) over "parole" (human utterance). The premise of McClure's *Four Codes of Preaching* was that preaching is restricted by prior codes in the form of homiletic culture, traditional styles and language systems which determine preachers'

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[15] Or, as described in the following with Bakhtin's terms, preaching is a "complex speech genre."

[16] McClure, *Roundtable Pulpit*, 43.

[17] John S. McClure, "What I Now Think I Think vis-à-vis Homiletic Theory," 98-99. Another alternative approach to communication has been developed by the German System theorist, Niklas Luhmann, as described in the practical theological works by Bent Flemming Nielsen: Genopførelser Ritual, kommunikation og kirke (Copenhagen: Anis, 2004) and Inger Lundager, Religiøs og teologisk kommunikation. Luhmann om religion, samfund og massemedier (Copenhagen: Anis, 2009).

[18] Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1991/2003.

"use" of theological language as well as the listeners reception hereof. In the later judgment of McClure, the hypothesis that paradigms of language and culture create reality has more or less explicitly dominated homiletics for the past 30 years or more: "In the latter half of the twentieth century, this hypothesis achieved its greatest power through the work of structural linguists and cultural anthropologists and by the influence of linguistic philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Derrida."[19]

The homiletical rejection of structural linguistics can be traced in McClure's *The Roundtable Pulpit,* in which he totally reversed the early homiletic predominance of the coded langue system over human utterances. Instead of deciphering the codes and rhetorical styles of homiletics, *The Roundtable Pulpit* accentuated the conditions that produced the styles and the anticipated ethical and theological effects of communicative utterances. *The Roundtable Pulpit's* exploration of preachers taking the role of homiletic hosts, inviting members and strangers of the congregation in as partners of preaching demonstrated the development of preaching away from the study of theological ideas and texts toward the field of embodied, lived theology, that is, in the midst of the congregation. Another emphasis on the importance of other-oriented "dislocation" of biblical interpretation and preaching from its traditional place in the preacher's office to public thresholds such as homeless shelters, emergency rooms etc. has been practiced and theoretically reflected upon by Charles L. Campbell and Stanley P. Saunders.[20]

Rather than approaching homiletics as a method of shaping consistent theological codes, the practice of roundtable preaching embarked on exploring how to develop a homiletic practice that corresponded with the way participants in worship weave together impressions, words, and experiences into frameworks of faith-experience or, in other words how to *"invent a language adequate to their having come into proximity with one another and the transcendent at this time and place."*[21]

McClure has emphasized the need for, and envisioned the contours of a new pragmatic model of communication for preaching but not yet developed one:

> What I think I see, therefore, is a glimmer of a new theology of communication that is no longer dominated by language and culture at all. Increasingly, I think that we will see that languages, traditions, doctrines, homiletic constructions, religious cultures, and so on are not incommensurate, mutually exclusive grids […] we have the option to listen to multiple languages in order to gain some access to the conditions of life endured by others along with the ways that they are using language to help them find their way to God, and act that involves discerning God's word. We listen, therefore, in order to expand, grow, increase our own world, language, and our discernment of God, and in order to co-create a new world of discernment and hope with others.[22]

Based on Bakhtinian dialogism, what follows is a proposal for how homileticians and preachers can approach the mixed genre of preaching so that it becomes a carnivalized genre which allows other-wise embodied voices, vocative texts, and incarnated truths to interact in a way that maintains and develops the polyphonic truth of the gospel.

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[19] John S. McClure, "What I Now Think I Think vis-à-vis Homiletic Theory," 92.
[20] Stanley P. Saunders and Charles L. Campbell, *The Word on the Street: Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 2000), 86-94.
[21] McClure, "What I Now Think I Think vis-à-vis Homiletic Theory," 94.
[22] John S. McClure, "What I Now Think I Think vis-à-vis Homiletic Theory," 98-99.

Bakhtin's dialogical alternative to the transfer-model of communication

Bakhtin radically rejects the telegraphic model of communication proposed by linguistic structuralism[23] in which the speaker is regarded as creating the message autonomously, and the listener's role is merely to decode the message. He criticizes the ways that this traditional perception presupposes that thought is something that arises independently of communication, that language emerges merely from an individual's need to express herself, to objectify herself so that the listener is basically superfluous in the act of communication:

> Language is regarded from the speaker's standpoint as if there were only one speaker who does not have any necessary relation to other participants in speech communication. If the role of the other is taken into account at all, it is the role of the listener, who understands the speaker only passively.[24]

In the traditional structuralist philosophy of language, communication needs only a speaker – merely one speaker – and an object to talk about. Bakhtin, on the other hand, insists that language is basically dialogical rather than monological and that the listener or conversation partner plays a constitutive role in the speaker's development and shaping of his or her utterance. In this sense the "addressee" is regarded as co-author of all utterances, either polemically or in the attempt to attain understanding and agreement. In this sense, according to Bakhtin *the listener becomes the speaker.*"[25] Critiquing Saussurean linguistics, Bakhtin describes his alternative as "metalinguistic" because his analysis, rather than limiting itself to decontextualized words in a static system of language or a "text" cut off from its dialogical universe, attempts to describe the "sphere of dialogic interaction itself, that is, in that sphere where discourse lives an authentic life."[25]

Bakhtin is primarily known for his literary neologisms such as carnivalization, polyphony, heteroglossia,[26] etc. What is often ignored is the fact that his literary analyses are closely connected with his theories about communication in use or what Bakhtin calls "speech genres."[27] Bakhtin criticises traditional linguistics for the static division between rule-ordered "language" and arbitrary "parole" because it ignores the interaction between the two and dismisses the scientific study of contextual utterances.

As an alternative to the static division between language as a system and utterances as inferior products, Bakhtin describes how everyday utterances also can be recognized as typical genres, which we learn to master unconsciously. Speech genres differ from langue's grammatical categorizations in that whereas the latter are static and normative, pragmatic speech genres are more flexible and free. Oral speech genres function as carriers of

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[23] Originally developed by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) in *Cours de linguistique générale*. (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 1995).

[24] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Edited by Emerson and Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 67.

[25] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 1984), 202.

[26] Foreign tongues/words; any word that is not my own. On a metalevel: "othering" decentralizing forces in language which revolt against various centralizing attempts of organizing language and communication into hierarchically ordered rules and fixed categorizations.

[27] A more pragmatic interpretation of Bakhtin has been proposed by Michael Holquist: "increasingly a suspicion is beginning to dawn that his work may best (or at least most comprehensively) be thought of as a philosophy of another kind, a philosophy across the boards." In accordance with this interpretation Holquist emphasizes that Bakhtin regarded himself as "less a literary critic than a philosophical anthropologist," Holquist, x, xiv in Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays.*

decentralizing tendencies, which Bakhtin sees as constitutive for language and communication. In accordance with this understanding, Bakhtin categorizes speech genres into "primary" and "secondary" genres.[28] The primary speech genres are found in familiar everyday communication whereas the secondary speech genres manifest themselves as larger more complex kinds of communication from novels and plays to scientific lectures and dissertations. Common to all the speech genres is that they function as utterances in dialogue with other utterances.[29]

Preaching can be seen as a complex speech genre in the Bakhtinian sense. Characteristic of the complex speech genres is that response to the utterance is silent and often delayed:

> An actively responsive understanding of what is heard (a command, for example) can be directly realized in action […] or it can remain, for the time being, a silent responsive understanding […] but this is, so to speak responsive understanding with a delayed reaction […] Sooner or later what is heard and actively understood will find its response in the subsequent speech or behaviour of the listener. (Bakhtin 1986: 69)

Bakhtin's double approach, informed by both pragmatic communication theories and literary analysis, can be valuable to a homiletic methodology where different phenomena of orality and literacy, text and speech, sound and silence, theory and practice tend to clash and sometimes appear incompatible. Furthermore it has the potential of enabling homileticians to explore different ways in which foreign words of literary, fictive and contemporary present "others" interact dialogically with the homiletic utterances and reflections.

Bakhtinian and "other-wise" co-authorship

Bakhtin's communication theory is characterized by the continuous emphasis on dialogue. Dialogue characterizes the authors' composition of discourse, in which addressees unknowingly play an active part as co-authors. The determining difference between monological and dialogical utterances lies in whether the foreign words/heteroglossia (words of others, including texts and conversation partners) are used merely as scaffolding, which does not constitute the building in itself, or if they are allowed to influence the architectural whole.[30] When Bakhtin describes how foreign words can be used as either scaffolding facilitating the ways that the constructor builds his own building, or as fundamental elements erecting a new original building echoing the words of others, the distinction is in accordance with how McClure describes the interactive co-authorship characterizing collaborative preaching practice:

> Collaboration is not the same as consultation. It is not using the insights of others to shore up the preacher's homiletical messages. Collaboration means that others may, indeed, have something to teach the preacher, since there is no way that the preacher can sit where they sit. Another person's reading of the gospel may transform the preacher's interpretation entirely. When preachers have interacted with these

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[28] Not to be confused with Austin and Searle's primary and secondary "speech acts" although they do share a focus on performativity.

[29] Nina Møller Andersen, I en verden af fremmede ord. Bachtin som sprogbrugsteoretiker, 85.

[30] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 1984), 187.

interpretations, they may find themselves in the pulpit on Sunday morning proclaiming a very different Word than they otherwise could have expected.[31]

In accordance with McClure's description of the importance of making room for "other-wise" perspectives on the gospel, rather than the preacher's empathic attempts to merely imagine the positions of others, Bakhtin dismisses the conviction that a fictionalized ideal listener can function in the stead of an embodied conversation partner:

> the ideal listener is essentially a mirror image of the author who replicates him. He cannot introduce anything of his own, anything new, into the ideally understood work or into the ideally complete plan of the author. He is in the same time and space as the author or, rather, like the author he is outside time and space (as in any abstract ideal formulation), and therefore he cannot be an-other or other for the author, he cannot have any surplus that is determined by this otherness.[32]

Common to the Bakhtinian thinking and other-wise preaching practice is the perception that dialogue is not a matter of trying to convince each other of one's own, individual understanding. Insight cannot be transferred, as a package from one who knows to someone who does not know. Understanding happens in interaction where teacher and learner, speaker and listener, preacher and congregation switch roles continuously in order to get at a deepened understanding. The catalyst for dialogical understanding is "the other," the foreign, as this "other," the addressee interacts with the interpreted text or object.

Understanding via prior and passing theories

Bakhtin's understanding of dialogism is rooted in the continual change of roles between speaker and addressee. In his definition of understanding as dialogical Bakhtin is close to Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1900–2002) interpretation theories.[33] However, while Gadamer sees understanding as a fusion of "mine" and the "foreign," Bakhtin does not see it as a fusion, but rather as a dynamic interaction, an unfinalized dialogue between two different horizons.[34] The change of roles and shifting perspectives between speaker and listener sets the scene, not only for a retrospective analysis of past communication but, even more important, for a prospective anticipation of how communication will continue. The forward anticipation is particularly important and difficult in the strange genre of dialogical monologue we call preaching.

The importance of this forward expectance has been described by neo-pragmatist Donald Davidson[35] who argues that successful communication is not a matter of whether a discourse correctly represents an idea or object that lies behind it. Instead the success of a communication act lies in its future effects: "communication is successful when the words one utters to others has the effect upon them that one intended."[36]

Within a pragmatic model of communication, "linguistic ability" cannot be restricted to a question of whether the communication partners share the same linguistic grammar and

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[31] McClure, *Roundtable Pulpit*, 23.
[32] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 165.
[33] Gadamer: *Wahrheit und Metode* (Tübingen, Mohr/Siebeck 1960).
[34] Nina Møller Andersen, I en verden af fremmede ord. Bachtin som sprogbrugsteoretiker (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 2002), 129.
[35] Described by the post-semiotic communication theoretician, Steven Yarbrough, who bases his theories on M.M. Bakhtin, the founders of pragmatism and Donald Davidson in *After Rhetoric: The Study of Discourse Beyond Language and Culture* (Carbondale, Southern Illinois Press, 1999).
[36] Yarbrough, *After Rhetoric,* 172.

rules. The success criteria for communication requires that "the speaker needs to know [...] how the speaker will interpret him, while what the interpreter needs to know is how the speaker expects her to interpret him."[37] Linguistic ability, when viewed from perspective of Davidson, requires that the interlocutors are able to distinguish between, on one hand, "prior theories" of communication, or our prior expectancy as to how the addressee will interpret our utterance and, on the other, our "passing theories" which designate our revisions of the communication based on the other's actual reaction. In order for communication to succeed we do not have to share prior theories but we must come to share passing theories, which requires a continuously dynamic interaction between the interlocutors:

> The prior theory, then, does not correspond to linguistic competence, but neither does the passing theory. Because the passing theory is good only for "a particular utterance on a particular occasion" […] "language" cannot be governed by learned conventions. Moreover, the passing theory may or may not be useful as a prior theory on later occasions; it all depends upon the character of later occasions, and those, being always highly particular, will almost always call forth prior theories adjusted to those interpretive responses we anticipate.[38]

When linguistic ability is described as a matter of handling the dynamic development of prior and passing theories it resembles Bourdieu's[39] praxis theoretical reflections regarding what it takes to develop "Le Sens Pratique" or a "feel for the game." In distinction from Saussure's comparison of communication with the game of chess, feel for the game is not primarily a matter of decoding universal rules and grammar. Rather, it is cultivated through embodied practice in a specific field, at a particular time.

Linguistic ability as "feel for the game"

In order to show the difference between Saussure's description of linguistic ability and the pragmatic, dialogical model developed by Bakhtin and interpreted in light of Davidson's prior and passing theories another game analogy might be illustrative. In the game of soccer the feel for the game does not depend on whether the players share the same language, culture or grammar. Good game playing depends instead on the right "timing": When FC Barcelona player, Lionel Messi, passes the ball to Samuel Eto'o, Messi does not aim at the position in which Eto'o is placed when he kicks, but where he expects him to be, after some seconds of sprint. Furthermore, Messi, who first passed the ball, does not stand still in order to enjoy his long shot, instead he moves in the direction that makes him a suitable receiver for Eto'o who now changes from being the one receiving the ball to passing it along.[40]

The soccer analogy should not be pushed too far but at a basic level it illustrates the feel for the game that is required both of soccer players and preachers. The players might have a "prior theory," an ideal game plan of how they will move along if the opponent team plays as expected and the game unfolds as hoped for. More often than not however, the game does not

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[37] Yarbrough, *After Rhetoric,* 172.

[38] Yarborough, *After Rhetoric*, 174.

[39] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 82. See also D. F. Pilario, *Back to the Rough Grounds of Praxis: Exploring Theological Method with Pierre Bourdieu* (Leuven: University Press, 2005). I am inspired by discussions with the Danish theologian Bent Flemming Nielsen about Bourdieu-based theological practice theories.

[40] The illustration is based on Bent Flemming Nielsen's elucidation of Bourdieu's feel of the game in his article "Kroppen i liturgien" [The body in the liturgy] in an anthology about body and theology, edited by Johanne Stubbe Teglbjærg, under publication from the Department of Systematic Theology, Copenhagen University.

unfold as expected. In this situation the "timing" and the ability to develop "passing theories" different from the "prior theories" is what constitutes a successful game.

The demand of continual interactive adjustments between interlocutors in order for communication to succeed is a challenging task in the traditionally monological act of preaching. The tradition of articulated response during the sermon, as known from many African American churches,[41] gives the preacher hints of the congregation's passing theories or adjustments for interpreting the sermon. The congregation's gestures, facial expression etc. can also be very telling, but they can also rather easily be ignored in favour of a manuscript closer at hand.

Preachers might have a more or less adequate pre-understanding of how the congregation is prepared to interpret the sermon, but when they do not get any verbal input on which to develop a passing theory that corresponds with the way the actual congregation is interpreting the sermon, successful dialogical preaching seems an almost impossible ideal. The collaborative preaching practice however, as described by McClure, further informed by Bakhtin's communication theories, carries the potential of transcending the traditional monological models of preaching in favour of a more pragmatic model that requires preacher to explicitly develop understanding (prior theories) and pre-understandings (passing theories) in collaboration with actual interpreters and co-authors rather than merely assuming them.

Preacher as guest and host for a polyphony of voices

The interactive, other-wise oriented preaching practice calls for new images for the preacher, distinct from the traditional herald-images which correspond with models of communication as a one-way transfer of meaning from active preachers to passive listeners. The continual exchange of roles, which is crucial to the interactive dialogicity as described by Bakhtin challenges the traditional static images of preaching. Yet when tracing the images for preachers which are emerging from reflections on other-wise preaching another striking correspondence between other-wise preaching and the works of Bakhtin emerges.

In the recent book, *Slow of Speech and Unclean Lips*, based on a panel discussion at the Academy of Homiletics, McClure proposes a dynamic double role for the preacher: guest and host. There are numerous descriptions of the importance of the guest-host relationship in the New Testament and the implications are manifold and theologically significant. Yet in the search for a new image for preachers exploring the pragmatic other-wise practice informed by Bakhtin, the crucial characteristic lies in the relationship's potential of role reversal.[42]

The story of the disciple on the Road to Emmaus functions as an illuminating prism for how this dynamic relationship can function in preaching. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus other-wise oriented preachers act as hosts when they invite strangers in to a dialogue about the gospel. The host-role is changed when the stranger interprets the scriptures differently than the host had expected. At this surprising encounter; "the preacher, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus become guests. As we host charismatic (gift-bearing) guests who "open scriptures" in striking new ways (Luke 24:32), we find ourselves suddenly guests, hosted by others."[43]

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[41] James Henry Harris provides a penetrating interpretation of the dialogical preaching practice of the African American Church in light of Bakhtin's dialogism in *The Word Made Plain: The Power and Promise of Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress 2004), ix, 60. Harris' interpretation of Bakhtin will be developed further below.

[42] McClure: "Preacher as Guest and Host," 119-143 in Robert Stephen Reid (editor): *Slow of Speech and Unclean Lips: Contemporary Images of Preaching Identity* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010).

[43] McClure: "Preacher as Guest and Host," in Slow of Speech, 123, Reid (Ed.).

The dynamic portrayal of the preacher as the host who becomes guest as she invites in and listens to foreign perspectives[44] is not only in accordance with the way Bakhtin describes how dialogical communication and understanding develops. It also shares crucial elements with the "polyphonic author-position" developed by Dostoevsky. What Bakhtin emphasizes as revolutionary in Dostoevsky's authorship is the polyphonic relationship the author has with his heroes in distinction to the traditional monological novel. In opposition to the polyphonic work, the monologic work is a closed, finalized, unequivocal system, governed by one consciousness, the author, who is omniscient and has the final, decisive word.[45] The polyphonic author, as exemplified by Dostoyevsky, relinquishes these monological privileges in favor of a polyphonic interaction between author, "heroes," and readers.[46]

Dostoyevsky's fiction figures are neither expressions of different perspectives of the author's consciousness or typical characters playing certain roles in order for the plot of the novel to develop. Instead they are personalities, free and with their own consciousness. They are regarded as "autonomous and equally signifying consciousnesses"[47] in relation to which the author relates dialogically. The relationship between Dostoyevsky and the novel's figures is thus, according to Bakhtin, not a monological relationship in which these simply articulate the thoughts of the author; rather they live their own lives in accordance with their own personalities' inner logic. This means that the receiver/reader does not just hear one voice, that of the "sender," but many voices, voices belonging to "personalities" with which the reader via the act of reading is drawn into a dialogue. In this polyphonic encounter the border between discourse and reality is transcended. No one has the monopoly of interpretation, neither author nor characters or readers possess the truth because the truth cannot be born and kept within the mind of an individual, instead it is born between people who seek the truth in dialogical interaction.[48]

Seen from the perspective of an "other-wise" approach to preaching, emphasizing the embodied encounter between the dialogue partners, Bakhtin's literary approach to polyphony and heteroglossia can function as an excuse for merely ventriloquizing the different voices of others throughout the medium of one's own voice or writing. Yet in the perspective of several of his interpreters Bakhtin is first and foremost a pragmatic researcher of language in use, who continuously emphasises how the words, voices and dialects of living, particular people are the indispensable essence of all discourse.[49] One of Bakhtin's most foundational interests is to show how these primary utterances of everyday speech are constitutive for the more complex secondary genres, such as preaching, According to Bakhtin, "in order that language becomes an artistic image, it must become speech from speaking lips, conjoined with the image of a speaking person."[50]

Other-wise homiletics and Bakhtinian theories of communication and literature, in my interpretation, supplement each other well for developing a polyphonic pragmatic communication theory for preaching. Otherwise preaching practices provide preachers with ways of entering into dialogues with others about preaching texts, theology and experience so that the relationship between preacher and congregation can become a dynamic interaction rather than a static attempt of transfer. What the Bakhtinian approach can add to these encounters are literary means of transforming the roundtable dialogue into polyphonic preaching so that the genre of preaching, although monological and often manuscript-based

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[44] McClure, *Roundtable Pulpit*, 25-29.
[45] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 293.
[46] Nina Møller Andersen, I en verden af fremmede ord, 41-42.
[47] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 284.
[48] Jonny Karlsson, Predikans samtal [The sermon's dialogue] (Skellefteå, Artos: 2000), 55-56.
[49] Nina Møller Andersen, I en verden af fremmede ord. Bachtin som sprogbrugsteoretiker, 11-12.
[50] Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination*, 336.

in form, functions as a dialogical interaction, not only at the roundtable conversation, but also around the pulpit. How this polyphonic kind of preaching can be developed and how it relates to the truthfulness of preaching as the Word of God will be described in the following.

Theological problems with dialogicity

A significant theological critique of other-wise preaching practices is that the collaborative co-authorship of the congregation threatens to dismiss divine agency. This critique implies an either/or between concrete vs. universal addressees as well as between human versus divine authorship in preaching. Bakhtin's work, however, disputes this critique, arguing that communication always happens in dialogue with immediate as well as distant discourses and dialogue partners. The larger discourse is always loaded with several competing dialogue partners and the concrete word is always a multi-sided action. The determining factor as to whether preaching is dialogical is *how* we engage in these several concurrent dialogues, and whether we engage in them in an open and unfinalizing, or a reductive and finalizing manner.

Contemporary ecclesiastical practice, empirical surveys and communication theories problematize the traditional theological perception that preaching is the word of God to passively receiving listeners. The ministry of preaching has traditionally been regarded as the most important characteristic – the *sine qua non* – of the Protestant churches. Luther characterized preaching as an indispensable means of grace, regarding it central to the church liturgy. In contemporary Lutheran contexts similar to my Danish situation, preachers often find themselves in a dilemma trying to integrate traditional Lutheran ideals with contemporary practical experiences of preaching.[51]

On one hand there is a strong emphasis on the belief that *Preadicatio verbi dei est verbum dei*[52] – the preaching of the Word of God *is* the Word of God. On the other hand the majority of preachers cannot easily make themselves advocates for continuing the category, "Word of God," as a homiletical basis. Dialectical theology's attempt at reviving the category, in the middle of the twentieth century, led homiletics into grave difficulties and has been accused of co-responsibility for the drying out of the church's preaching tradition. The claim that preaching is the Word of God has, in the opinion of many preachers and homileticians, led to too much listener-immune, monological preaching. Yet, although most preachers struggle to identify with a traditional *high homiletics,* the continuing study of Luther within Danish theology contributes to a continued consciousness among preachers about the belief that proclamation demands to be understood somehow as the "Word of God."[53]

How, if possible, can contemporary, "other-wise," dialogical preaching be understood as a word from God? A contemporary homiletical reaction could be either to reject the belief that preaching is the word of God altogether or ignore contemporary communication studies. Instead of rejecting either, the following analyses serve to explore whether a Bakhtinian approach can illuminate the "carnivalized" genre of preaching in a way that reconsiders the

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[51] The following characterization of preaching practice is developed from the perspective of the Lutheran Evangelical Church of Denmark.

[52] As formulated by the reformed theologian Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575) in an often quoted sentence from the second Helvetic Confession from 1566, cf. Hildebrandt & Zimmermann (eds.) Das Zweite Helvetische Bekenntnis (Zürich, Zwingli Verlag, 1966).

[53] Bent Flemming Nielsen, *Genopførelser - Ritual, kommunikation og kirke [Re-enactments - Ritual, communication and church]* (Copenhagen: ANIS, 2004), 155-157. In an American context James F. Kay has in his *Preaching and Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007) examined a similar challenge to contemporary preaching understood as the Word of God.

traditional roles of preaching so that the congregation is seen as co-author and God as the loophole addressee of preaching understood as the word of God.

Because dialogue is used in several different senses throughout Bakhtin's writings, the nuances and complexities of his dialogically oriented, metalinguistic approach are often underestimated. In addition it can seem confusing when he sometimes describes dialogue as a natural state of language and sometimes as a liberating practice that requires methodologically competent skills to master. In order to indicate the different ways Bakhtin makes use of the term dialogue it can be divided into three basic senses:

1) Language theoretical claim: language is per definition dialogical

In contrast to Saussure's description of language as a static system and communication as a means of conveying an independently developed thought from an active speaker to a passive receiver, Bakhtin emphasizes the interactive, dialogical nature of language. According to Bakhtin, at least half of what we say is a response, reflection or anticipation of the words of "others":

> The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word; it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction. Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word.[54]

Because there are no words that are not already inhabited and shaped by former use, a speaker has no choice but to take over the word from another's interpretation and context. Recognizing this dialogical nature of language and communication, Bakhtin's metalinguistic approach offers a way to analyze how this basic dialogicity can be handled. The focus on *how* words of others are *handled* underscores the pragmatic emphasis found in the Bakhtinian approach.

2) Literary analysis: responses can be more or less dialogical

In practice, we can use the dialogical foundation of utterances to stimulate further dialogue and multivoicedness or we can take on a monologizing attitude, pretending (or believing!) that all the different perspectives, past and future claims about a subject can be subsumed under one. One way of monologizing a dialogical discourse is, polemically, to take the other's words hostage in order to prove our own point. Another alternative is, out of empathy, to enter into the words of the other, forgetting our own place and time. Despite the good intentions inherent in an empathic approach, it is not authentic dialogue, in a Bakhtinian sense, if one of the positions is absorbed by the other.

In order to be dialogical the discourse must be two-sided: polyphonic rather than monophonic. Once we are aware of how dependent we are on the words of others we can work consciously to develop a new discourse in either an open, dialogical or a finalizing, monological manner. Yet the dialogical appropriation of foreign words is not a simple quest, as described by Bakhtin:

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[54] M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination,* ed. by Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 280.

Many words stubbornly resist, others remain alien, sound foreign in the mouth of the one who has who appropriated them and who now speaks them; they cannot be assimilated into his context and fall out of it; it is as if they put themselves in quotations marks against the will of the speaker. Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others.[55]

Related to preaching

From the Bakhinian perspective preaching is by nature dialogical in the sense that the presence and expectations of the congregation play a role, positively or negatively, regarding the way a sermon is prepared and performed. The preacher can handle the basically dialogical situation by seeking to encounter the listeners where they are at and invite them to accompany him or her on an inductive trip where they are intended to have their own experience of the word-event of the gospel, drawing their own evangelical conclusions from the trip.[56] Alternatively the preacher can choose to preach a deductive sermon, rejecting or correcting the pop-theology of the congregation. Although the preacher might reject that she is trying to create a common ground for preaching, there is a dialogical aspect in the sense that she tries to predict where the congregation has gone wrong and is in need of correction. A third alternative (out of many) is the collaborative[57] approach in which the preacher, instead of trying to predict the reactions and reflections of the congregation, invites a representative group into common interpretation of the gospel to be preached.

All three examples of preaching approaches, the inductive, the deductive, and the collaborative can be developed in less than dialogical ways. In spite of her openly dialogical intentions the inductive preacher's predictions can be more or less in tune with her congregation and succeed or fail in getting them aboard her evangelical journey. Likewise the dialogical initiatives of the collaborative preacher may result in a monological sermon if he ends up using their stories and reactions merely as a springboard for preaching the sermon already planned in advance.

One homiletician who has a keen insight into the potential of a Bakhtinian approach to homiletics is James Henry Harris. In *The Word made plain: the power and promise of preaching* Harris describes how the Bakhtinian dialogism corresponds well with the practice of preaching, particularly in the Black Church. In Harris' analysis the Bakhtinian approach also proves itself a critically acute way of diagnosing some of the problems inherent in contemporary preaching which hinders dialogicity. Harris proposes that it is a symptom of a lacking connection between preacher and the listener when their different foreign words and context, rather than stimulating dialogical interaction tend to overwhelm each other:

> The voices of the many, when played against each other, can either advance or destroy the voice of the poet as the preacher. It is a difficult and dangerous discourse that has to be dialogical if understanding is to be achieved. Mikhail Bakhtin helps in so many ways because his thoughts intersect with so many other disciplines, especially those that are word-oriented, such as preaching and poetics.[58]

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[55] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination,* 295.

[56] As described by Fred Craddock in his classic *As One Without Authority* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1969).

[57] Rose, Lucy Atkinson, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997); McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet.*

[58] Harris, James Henry: The Word made plain: the power and promise of preaching (Minneapolis: Fortress 2004), 61.

3) Philosophical level: dialogue as truthful existence

Rather than merely developing literary scientific theories, the Bakhtinian authorship portrays an other-oriented way of relating to co-beings, text and life, labeled as "dialogism"[59] that turns on interactive addressivity.[60] According to Bakhtin, dialogue is not merely a pedagogical device for trying to convince someone else of a certain truth claim; instead, he regards dialogue as essential to understanding, truth, and authentic existence: "The very being of man (both external and internal) is the deepest communion. To be means to communicate."[61]

With his continual focus on multivoicedness (polyphony), and the destabilising effect of the foreign words (heteroglossia), Bakhtin's approach can be mistaken for a relativistic postmodern relinquishing of all truth claims. However, the rejection of monological consciousness and discourse does not imply that there cannot be a unified truth. Instead truth is regarded as something which emerges, not in the mind of an individual thinker, but in the interaction of several embodied minds:

> It is quite possible to imagine and postulate a unified truth that requires a plurality of consciousnesses, one that cannot in principle be fitted into the bounds of a single consciousness, one that is, so to speak, by its very nature full of event potential and is born at a point of contact among various consciousnesses.[62]

The notion of truth as emerging in the encounter between a plurality of perspectives rather than possessed as an individual insight corresponds with McClure's description of how the Word of God emerges in the communal process of dialogue.[63] Authentic human life in the Bakhtinian vision is connected to the notion of truth as intersubjective as he describes it in his interpretation of Dostoevsky's polyphonic authorship:

> For Dostoevsky there are no ideas, no thoughts, no positions which belong to no one, which exist "in themselves." Even "truth in itself" he presents in the spirit of Christian ideology, as incarnated in Christ; that is, he presents it as a personality entering into relationships with other personalities.[64]

The dialogical approach is thus not merely a theory about language or literary means. It is a way of relating truthfully to life and other people because truth, like the person, is unfinalizable and continually in the process of becoming.

Preaching as a carnivalized genre

In the following I will explore how a Bakhtinian approach to preaching, based on the above described dialogicity, but focusing on his descriptions of carnivalization and the "loophole addressee," encourages us to reconsider how preaching can be understood as a word from God. Looking from the outside, (e.g. an exegetical perspective) the genre of preaching appears as a strange mixed genre, which seems to break all rules for proper text

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59 Michael Holquist: *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*, Routledge, [1990] 2002.
60 Beata Agrell, *Romanen som forskningsresa – forskningsresan som roman* (Göteborg: Daidalos, 2003), 123.
61 Mikhail M. Bakhtin: *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 287-288.
62 Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 81.
63 McClure, *Roundtable Pulpit*, 24.
64 Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 31-32.

interpretation. Contemporary preaching practice is often being criticized, from different positions, for being either too text-oriented, dwelling in the past or too concerned with contemporary culture ignoring the particularities of the biblical text.

Although preaching is far from the primary focus of Bakhtin's theories he does describe early Christian narrative, including the genre of preaching, as deeply permeated by elements of "carnivalization."[65] For Bakhtin, the term carnivalization describes how certain discourses, literature and genres are influenced by elements characterizing the medieval carnival, originally connected to the "Feast of Fools"[66] but today primarily known as Mardi Gras.[67] In a way similar to incarnation, carnival designates both a historical phenomenon and a mode of interacting, embodied in concrete events: "Carnival is the place for working out a new mode of interrelationship between individuals [. . .] People who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers enter into free and familiar contact on the carnival square."[68]

Along with the dialogical novel carnival shares the ability to manifest otherness. Carnival makes familiar relations strange and familiarizes the foreign. For Bakhtin, carnival and the polyphone novel display the diversity and foreignness of literary characters and people respectively. Another shared carnivalistic feature is *embodiment*. Both carnival and the dialogical novel indicate how social roles are culturally created rather than naturally given.[69]

The Bakhtinian emphasis on embodied interaction or interconnectedness characterizes both his description of novelness as a literary feature developed by Dostoevsky, and the "grotesque body" as displayed in his book on Rabelais.[70] The carnivalized body is, like a literary character, continuously in the process of becoming, not only as an individual, but in interaction with other bodies which it is being born out of or giving life to. The "grotesque body" is thus: "a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed: it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body."[71] The body, as described by Bakhtin interpreter Michael Holquist, is "intercorporeal" in ways that resemble how the novel is intertextual:[72]

> In dialogism, the novel is the great book of life, because it celebrates the grotesque body of the world. Dialogism figures a close relation between bodies and novels because they both militate against monadism, the illusion of closed-off bodies or

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[65] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 135.

[66] Homiletical reflections inspired by the "foolishness" of the Gospel and fruitful for the descriptions of preaching as a carnivalized genre are Charles L. Campbell: *The Word before the Powers. An Ethic of Preaching.* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), Campbell: *Principalities, Powers, and Fools: Does preaching make an ethical difference?* Johan Cilliers: *The Clown before the Powers: A South African Response to Charles Campbell's comic vision on preaching.* Both in *Homiletic*, vol 33, no. 2, 2008. L. Susan Bond: *"Apocalyptic Vocation: The Foolish Church in the World"* in Preaching as a theological task E. Farley and T.G. Long (eds.) (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

[67] In *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), Bakhtin problematizes the comparison of the medieval carnival with contemporary Mardi Gras because the latter tends to be a mere masquerade and a spectacle whereas the original carnival was characterized by a mixing of participants and spectators.

[68] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 123.

[69] Holquist, Michael, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*, Second Edition. Routledge, [1990] 2002, p. 89-90.

[70] For an insightful theological interpretation of the body in the Bakhtinian authorship, see: Sigurdson, Ola, "The Christian Body as a Grotesque Body," in *Embodiment in Cognition and Culture*. (Krois, Rosengren, Steidele and Westerkamp (eds.). Amsterdam. John Benjamins, 2007, s. 243-258.

[71] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World, 317.*

[72] Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*, 90.

isolated psyches in bourgeois individualism, and the concept of a pristine, closed-off, static identity and truth wherever it may be found.[73]

Carnivalization of literature indicates that discourses are not merely disembodied words. The carnivalized genres, in Bakhtin's interpretation, display how words are much more than signs on a page or concepts in the mind. Carnivalized words "smell," they have "loopholes," they fight and they sound in polyphonic voices. Although mixing elements of utter seriousness and laughter, carnivalization of a genre, in Bakhtin's universe, is not meant as a caricature. Rather it carries the greatest potential for creating transformative new meaning: "The carnival sense of the world possesses a mighty life-creating and transforming power, an indestructible vitality […] In our opinion the problem of carnivalized literature is one of the very important problems in historical poetics, and in particular of the poetics of genre."[74]

When Bakhtin describes generic features characteristic of the carnivalized genres they resemble the genre of preaching in numerous ways. The first characteristic of the carnivalistic is that the starting point for shaping reality based on ancient truths is the present, often the very day, such as "this Sunday morning." Differing from the traditional epic and tragic genres the subject to be illustrated is, in the carnivalized genres;

> presented not in the absolute past of myth and legend but on the place of the present day, in a zone of immediate and even crudely familiar contact with living contemporaries; they act and speak in a zone of familiar contact with the open-ended present. […] consequently, a radical change takes place in that time-and-value zone where the artistic image is constructed.[75]

The second major characteristic of the carnivalized genres is that, rather than relying on legend, they deliberately draw on contemporary experience and free invention. The third is a "deliberate multi-style and hetero-voiced nature" in which the authors reject the single-styled unity characterizing more traditional genres. Instead authors make use of a "multi-toned narration" and a "mixing of high and low." In addition these authors make use of inserted genres, such as letters, found manuscripts, retold dialogues, and reinterpreted citations. Some combine prosaic and poetic speech and many present themselves through alternating "authorial masks" which enable the carnivalized genres to sound of "double-voiced words."[76]

Approaching preaching as a mixed carnivalized genre does not mean that anything goes.[77] Rather the intention is to become analytically conscious and methodologically competent in handling the strange hybrid genre driven by a polyphonic relationship to the foreign words of the divine and human others in the present, past and future. The genre of carnivalization is worth pursuing in a homiletical context both because it embraces the above mentioned reversal of hierarchies, roles, time and place which are essential to the proclamation of the gospel, and because the mixed genre of preaching, instead of being lamented as a lack of literary competence, can be understood and improved as a particular genre of its own.[78]

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[73] Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*, 90.
[74] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 107.
[75] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 108.
[76] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 108.
[77] Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination, 366.*
[78] For more on the role of scripture in carnivalized, other-wise preaching, see: Lorensen, Marlene Ringgaard: "In Search of Preaching – does Scripture make a Difference? A Dialogue between 'Other-wise Homiletics,' Bakhtin and the Pauline Letters" in *Preaching: Does It Make a Difference? in* Lindhardt & Henning (eds.) Societas Homiletica, Studia Homiletica 7 2008. (Frederiksberg: Aros Forlag, 2010)

God as the superaddressee

Reflecting homiletically on the communication studies developed by Bakhtin, God can be understood as author of preaching, not when God is the one-way monological sender to passive listeners but rather when God functions as the superaddressee of preaching. From the Bakhtinian perspective dialogical communication is constituted by the change of roles in which the addressee to some extent becomes the co-author of the discourse. This does not imply, however, that, the addresses at hand dictate the content of the discourse thereby excluding a wider audience or a potential divine meta-communicator. Just as communication can never be a one-way transfer, it cannot be limited to two positions in the Bakhtinian understanding. In fact, dialogue should rather be described as a trio-logue: *"The word is a drama in which three characters participate (it is not a duet, but a trio)."*[79]

Speakers model their utterances, not only in accordance with their object and the immediate addressees, whose understanding the author seeks and transcends, but on a more or less conscious, fundamental trust that there is a third participant, a higher superaddressee:

> whose absolutely just responsive understanding is presumed, either in some metaphysical distance or in distant historical time (the loophole addressee). In various ages and with various understandings of the world, this superaddressee and his ideally true responsive understanding assume various ideological expressions (God, absolute truth, the court of dispassionate human conscience, the people, the court of history, science and so forth).[80]

Since the Bakhtinian analysis is aimed at literary and linguistic fields, he does not claim that the superaddressee is a metaphysical, divine being yet he emphasises that in a given, religious understanding of the world, it makes sense to express it as such. In addition many Bakhtin scholars interpret the superaddressee as a significant God concept in the authorship of Bakhtin[81]: "Each dialogue takes place as if against the background of the responsive understanding of an invisibly present third party who stands above all the participants in the dialogue."[82]

The third person of the dialogue, which in fact is a trio-logue, is the foundational meta-listener to whom all utterances are aimed. The presence of this "third person" or superaddressee is, in Bakhtin's interpretation as foundational as is the physically present conversation partner. In continuation of this perspective the most horrific situation imaginable is that in which a person has lost the belief that there is such a super addressee. Hell is thus, in Bakhtin's interpretation "the absolute absence of a third person,"[83] a situation he describes by referring to fascist torture chambers where no one, besides the torturing other, seems to hear the screams of the victims.[84]

The Word with a loop hole

The primary role of the superaddressee is that of trust in the communicative interaction. Trust that, in spite of the feeble words of the speaker, the listener will understand the

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[79] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, 122.
[80] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, 126.
[81] Michael Holquist, "Introduction to Bakhtin" in: *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, xviii.
[82] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, 126.
[83] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, 126.
[84] To what extent the understanding of hell as the absence of a 3rd person stands in opposition to Jean Paul Sartre's "Hell is other people" is an important discussion but it exceeds the boundaries of the present article.

utterance – or in fact, hopefully understand something more, because the listener's different perspective, and shared trust in the presence of the superaddressee, opens up a new understanding particularly relevant for the latter's present position and outlook. Yet, if we try to approach the matter analytically, one of the ways the dialogical influence of the superaddressee can be interpreted as manifesting itself is from the presence of words with a "loophole." The term loophole is connected to Bakhtin's general interest in dialogicity and the reversal of traditional hierarchies. He describes the loophole of human consciousness as well as of the word in connection with confessional self-definition:

> A loophole is the retention for oneself of the possibility for altering the ultimate, final meaning of one's own words. If a word retains such a loophole this must inevitably be reflected in its structure. This potential other meaning, that is, the loophole left open, accompanies the word like a shadow. Judged by its meaning alone, the word with a loophole should be an ultimate word and does present itself as such. But in fact it is only the penultimate word and places after itself only a conditional, not a final period.[85]

The word with a loophole appears in many different kinds of discourses. Bakhtin describes how the confessional self-definition with a loophole is the most widespread form in the authorship of Dostoevsky. In the confessional discourse, the critical self-description, analyzed on the surface, is an ultimate, final judgment on oneself and one's actions. Yet, the finalizing self-critique can only be expressed in the hope that another will reverse the finalizing, reductive self-definition and turn it into acceptance and blessing. Likewise the authoritative, monological human word spoken from the pulpit can, if preaching is developed as a carnivalized genre, present itself as a word with a loophole, awaiting a gracious divine transformation.

As described by Bakhtin scholar Jan Lundquist, the word with a loophole functions as an undercurrent accompanying the monological and authoritative word. It challenges the monological word which seeks the "definitive signification" of what is right and wrong – and thereby attempts to maintain the hierarchy of power. The word with a loophole challenges this monologue of power because it opens up the possibility of change. The loophole-word is thus the dialogical word in which two meanings meet. The word with a loophole pretends that it *is* the power and thereby it toys *with* the power. As such the loophole is like a figure of carnival. On its face it bears the hierarchical masque of authority and on the back of its head the liberating masque of laughter.[86]

Conclusion

When reflecting on how preaching can enter into a dialogue with both ancient canonical texts, and contemporary listeners the clash of centralizing and decentralizing forces can seem to make a cacophony of foreign voices threatening to drown the preacher's theology, let alone the word of God. If preaching, in spite of its monological appearance, is to function as a dialogical encounter, one of the most important tasks for the preacher, from a Bakhtinian perspective, is to avoid conflating the voices of the listener, preacher and scripture into one and instead let the polyphony of voices interact in a way that let them transform and enrich each other mutually.

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[85] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* 233.
[86] The imagery and expressions of the loophole word, as a figure of carnival, is indebted to Jan Lundquist, "Omkring smuthuller - et forord" in *Smuthuller – Perspektiver i dansk Bakhtin-forskning,* Nina Møller Andersen & Jan Lundquist (eds.), (Copenhagen, Forlaget Politisk Revy, 2003), 7-8.

I see great potential in "other-wise" homiletical approaches to preaching and I find that Bakhtin can further enhance this homiletical movement by providing it with a pragmatic model of communication as well as the beginnings of a polyphonic theology of communication. If the carnivalized genre of preaching is developed in collaboration with otherwise homileticians Bakhtin can help us to understand how the multitude of voices and the interaction between familiar and foreign words can nudge preaching in the direction of an unfinalizable dialogue between the other-wise and the Wholly Other.