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## Unveiling the Character Gallery of Sermons: A Social Network Analysis of 11,955 Danish Sermons

ANNE AGERSNAP

KIRSTINE HELBOE JOHANSEN

ROSS DEANS KRISTENSEN-MCLACHLAN

*Aarhus University*

### Abstract

In this article we examine the character gallery in a digitized corpus of 11,955 Danish sermons from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark written between 2011 and 2016. We study these sermons as a collective text production in which the characters represented illustrate aspects of Christian tradition and cultural history. We depart from the following questions: which characters populate Danish sermons, and what representations of biblical texts and history are displayed from the interrelations of these characters? In line with Bakhtinian thought we approach the sermonic character gallery as a polyphony of voices, and informed by the Deleuzian idea of the rhizome, we understand this character gallery as a network in which characters through their connections to other characters form clusters of thematic narratives. We represent this network through a social network analysis using computational tools, and closely analyse which characters are connected in the network's sub-groups, and how. We find that biblical figures especially enhance stories of Jesus as saviour, teacher, or caretaker, while political figures tend to be dissociated from biblical figures and representing narratives of historical atrocities. In addition to these figures a large group of anonymized characters prevails.

*Keywords: sermons; character gallery; rhizomes; network analysis; digital humanities*

A key feature of Christian sermons is pastors' ability to mediate and negotiate between the context of biblical texts and the historical context of congregated listeners (Pleizier 2017; Jensen 1996). However, we have surprisingly little knowledge of how this negotiation unfolds in practice in sermons as a vast collective text production. In this article we remedy

this by arguing that the agents pastors inscribe in sermons provide unique and thus far unexplored knowledge of how pastors collectively navigate between biblical and cultural contexts in sermons. We take this first step by conducting an exploratory and computationally driven social network analysis of the character gallery in 11,955 sermons from 2011 to 2016 written by pastors in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (ELCD). We start from this question:

*Which characters populate Danish sermons, and what representations of biblical texts and history are displayed from the interrelations of these characters?*

Our approach draws inspiration from the current state of homiletics in the Nordic countries. It also represents a radical new path for studying sermons. In our study of the character gallery in the sermon corpus we emphasize the dialogical potential of sermons as proposed by the theologian Marlene Ringgard Lorensen (2013). Meanwhile, we shift the perspective from including a listener-oriented dialogue between preacher and congregants to including the unique dialogue between sermons, the Bible, and the surrounding culture, using the Deleuzian theory of *rhizomes*. We thus attend to sermons as a vast production of theological texts, providing historical documentations of Christianity and culture instead of attending to sermons' communicative function in church. To this end we follow theologian Clifton Guthrie's call for quantitative measures to study sermon content (Guthrie 2007).

### **The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark**

Sermons depend on the church context and the prescriptions in force for preaching. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark is a majority church with a large membership (73.2 per cent of the entire population of Denmark as of 1 January 2022). However, membership is in stable decline, due primarily to demographic changes (down from 79.8 per cent of the entire population in January 2012). Despite its large membership, regular church attendance is low, with approximately 11 per cent of the population attending church at least once a month (Andersen et al. 2019). Although membership levels are declining in general, it is still common to engage in church ceremonies for important life events. For example, 81 per cent of all those who died received a church funeral in 2021.<sup>1</sup>

The ELCD is affiliated to the state of Denmark through the constitution, and there is no national synod. The church is organized in ten dioceses

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<sup>1</sup> These statistics can be found at <<https://www.folkekirken.dk/om-folkekirken/folkekirken-i-tal>> and <<https://www.km.dk/folkekirken/kirkestatistik/>> accessed 2 May 2022.

supervised by ten bishops, and each diocese consists of deaneries and local parishes, in which the local congregational councils influence the local church's life.<sup>2</sup> As of 2016 the church had 2,169 parishes led by one or more pastor. ELCD pastors have a university theological degree and after their theological studies undergo the ELCD's practical pastoral training course to be ordained.<sup>3</sup> In 1948 the ELCD was the first church to ordain female pastors, and slightly more pastors today are women – 55 per cent in 2014 (Henriksen 2014) – than men.

ELCD services follow a liturgical order approved by the bishops and authorized by the Queen of Denmark in 1992. However, the liturgical order describes several variations between which local parishes can choose. Yet the service must contain two or three bible readings: one from the Old Testament and/or epistles and one from the gospels. These readings are determined by two lectionaries – one for even and one for uneven liturgical years. The liturgical calendar has 69 holidays applicable for each Sunday in the calendar and Christian feasts, and pastors must always preach on the gospel pericope of the given holiday. Most services take place on Sundays before noon. Given that there are 2,169 parishes, it follows that approximately the same number of sermons are delivered every week. However, the church does not keep statistics for the precise number of sermons delivered in ELCD parishes, which also include sermons for feasts and special services (for example, at nursing homes) in addition to the weekly Sunday services.

The study in this article is based on analyses of a sermon corpus of 11,955 ELCD sermons mainly from 2011 to 2016, written by 95 pastors.<sup>4</sup> Assuming that 2,169 sermons are delivered every week – with the previously mentioned reservations in mind – the corpus comprises roughly two per cent of all the sermons delivered in a year. The corpus was opportunistically sampled directly from pastors, meaning it is not a representative sample, forming instead a case of sermons in the ELCD from the stated period. However, despite inherent imbalances, the corpus still exhibits relevant variations in terms of metadata (date, holiday, parish size, and diocese, as well as gender, age, and place of education). There is a slight overrepresentation of sermons by men in the data (M: 57 per cent; F: 43 per cent). The pastors were born between 1950 and 1988, and most of the sermons were written by pastors

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2 For further information about the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark, see Nielsen and Kühle (2011) or Christoffersen (2010).

3 Parish statistics can be found at <<https://www.folkekirken.dk/om-folkekirken/organisation/sogn>>, accessed 3 December 2021.

4 The corpus is hosted at Aarhus University and stems from a collaborative project. The project partners are data owner Kirstine Helboe Johansen (Dept of Theology), Anne Agersnap (Centre for Grundtvig Studies), Uffe Schjødt (Dept of the Study of Religion), Ross Kristensen-MacLachlan (Center for Humanities Computing Aarhus), and Kristoffer Laigaard Nielbo (Center for Humanities Computing Aarhus).

born in the 1960s (45 per cent) and 1970s (25 per cent). Geographical dispersion is indicated based on the diocese to which the pastors belong. Since Danish dioceses encompass both large cities and small villages – except for the Diocese of Copenhagen, whose boundary corresponds to the capital’s boundary – the corpus does not account for the sermons’ rural contra-urban areas. Approximately 96 per cent of the sermons in the corpus were written between 2011 and 2016, while a limited number were written on either side of this period. There is also a small number of sermons for which we have no date (approximately 0.02 per cent of the entire corpus).<sup>5</sup> Although the corpus is not a representative sample of sermons in the ELCD and has some inherent imbalances, it provides a comprehensive and important case sample for investigating pastors’ documentations and practices of biblical, historical, and cultural narratives.

### **The empirical turn in homiletics: the Nordic context**

Taking inspiration from North America and Germany, the discipline of homiletics has recently undergone an empirical turn. This implies a focus on how sermons and preaching unfold today in practice instead of normative standards for preaching. The empirical approach has especially entailed a listener-oriented perspective that attends to how churchgoers hear and perceive sermons. From surveys to qualitative interviews the body of empirical work has evolved since the 1970s until today (Rietvald 2013). With inspiration from the North American *Other-wise Homiletics*, qualitative studies and the listener-oriented focus have also become influential in preaching studies in the Nordic countries (Lorensen and Johansen 2020). Influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin, Danish theologian Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen has investigated the dialogical potential of sermons (Lorensen 2013); a similar approach is found in the works of theologian Marianne Gaarden, who has studied sermons as dialogical phenomena between preacher and congregants with listeners as active co-authors (Gaarden 2014). Likewise, in Norway, Hilde Fylling has investigated churchgoers’ expectations for sermons, and which aspects they find most compelling (Fylling 2015), and most recently, Linn Sæbø Rystad has demonstrated the complexities involved in preaching specifically for children (Rystad 2021).

Although this listener-oriented focus is paramount in the empirical turn, American theologian Clifton Guthrie argued in 2007 that quantitative approaches from other disciplines could provide an even wider scope for

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed presentation of the sermon corpus (sampling, annotation, and archiving procedures) and corpus statistics see Agersnap et al. (2020).

understanding the practice of preaching. He especially emphasized that the analysis of sermon content was an underexplored aspect of quantitative research in homiletics, which otherwise tended to favour self-reporting surveys of preachers and congregants (Guthrie 2007). An example of the latter in a Nordic context is Svein Thorbjønsen's and Magne Supphellen's survey of Norwegian preachers' self-reported use of social-ethical topics in their sermons (Thorbjørnsen and Supphellen 2018). The focus on social-ethical issues also prevails in comparative studies of sermon texts in the Nordic countries – however, without using quantitative measures. These examples include Egil Morland's study of sermons during World War Two in Norway (Morland 2014), as well as comparative studies of sermons written during the 2015 refugee crisis (Lorensen et al. 2017; Angel and Johnson 2019). In contrast with these textual studies, Swedish linguist Hans Malmström has applied quantitative and computational resources to study around 150 written sermons from English-speaking denominations with a particular listener-oriented focus (Malmström 2014; 2015a; 2015b). However, the quantitative and computational approach to sermons is still very rare in the Nordic countries. The empirical turn in the Nordic countries has until now been largely characterized by qualitative interviews or text studies with a distinct focus on the communicative context in church. However, a less well-studied aspect of sermons is their uniquely collective dimension. Within the computational turn in literary studies Franco Moretti has enhanced literary works of the same epoch as a collective text production, arguing:

(...) a field this large cannot be understood by stitching together separate bits of knowledge about individual cases, because it isn't the sum of individual cases: it's a collective system, that should be grasped as such, as a whole (Moretti 2007, 3–4).

Similar to Moretti's perspective on literature, we depart from an understanding of sermons as a collective system: pastors formulate a weekly sermon, usually in the form of a written text, through which they interpret a prescribed gospel pericope from a shared historical and cultural horizon.<sup>6</sup> We therefore maintain the dialogical perspective from the listener-oriented focus and the social and historical focus from the Nordic qualitative text studies, while adopting computational tools and quantitative measures to study this dialogue in sermons as a collective text production.

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<sup>6</sup> For a further developed understanding of sermons as a collective text system see Agersnap (2021).

### **Sermons: a polyphony of voices**

The recent homiletical interest in the role of the listener was acknowledged and developed in the idea of the roundtable pulpit originally promoted by American theologian John McClure (McClure 1995), in which pastors are encouraged to invite congregants to a roundtable on the biblical text as part of their preaching preparation. Empirical research has shown that listeners do not necessarily limit their understanding to what the preacher expressly says or means. Rather, they creatively co-create and further develop the meaning of a given sermon, depending on their own context and reflection, as shown by Gaarden and Lorensen in the Nordic context (Gaarden and Lorensen 2013; Gaarden 2014).

Based on such empirical insights, homiletical interest has increasingly shifted to creating sermons open to a variety of individual interpretations. It is possible to create such sermons through direct interactions with potential listeners (and thereby co-authors), following the tradition of the roundtable pulpit (Lorensen 2013, 55). However, this also requires a re-evaluation of what a sermon is, and what the pastor ought to achieve when preaching. Inspired by Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, Lorensen strongly distances herself from the sermon as a transmission that attempts to convey a meaning from the preacher to the listeners as passive recipients. Lorensen instead follows Bakhtin in understanding language as dialogical. From this Bakhtinian perspective language and communication is – or should be – dialogical and deeply oriented towards the other as itself a subject. Lorensen thus introduces the Bakhtinian concept of polyphony to suggest how an author can renounce monological privileges and instead seek to establish polyphonic interactions between autonomous characters in the text (Lorensen 2013, 66). For the communication taking place this means

...the addressee does not just hear one voice, that of the author, but many voices, voices belonging to ‘personalities’ with whom the reader, via the act of reading, is drawn into a dialogue. In this polyphonic encounter the border between discourse and reality is transcended (Lorensen 2013, 66).

This ideal of open dialogue – a polyphony of voices that invites the recipients of the novel or sermon to participate as active interpreters and co-creators – was developed by Lorensen and has recently gained empirical support (Lorensen 2016; Lorensen and Buch-Hansen 2018). However, in this article we will focus on the characters who *embody* the polyphony of voices rather than the recipients or the co-creative listening process.

In contrast with novels and other literary texts, sermons are not fictional, and the characters included are always known in principle beforehand. This pertains to both biblical and non-biblical characters. Although the pastor is responsible for inviting voices into the sermon and constructing their roles, the characters themselves evoke other stories and contexts in which they occur, along with previous encounters between these characters and the listeners. From a cognitive-linguistic perspective we can say that these characters act as *reference points* (Langacker 2009, 83–85). These reference points may provide access to richly textured background knowledge, meaning that the mere mention of certain characters can result in a wide range of connotations for certain listeners (Semino 1997, 119–159). The characters are therefore not floating signifiers to which the pastors assign meaning; they already bear meaning, and it is as such that they enter sermons.

### **Rhizomatic networks**

To uncover not only who the characters in the sermons are, but also how they are interrelated and connected, we deploy the Deleuzian concept of rhizomes (Deleuze and Guattari 1980). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari distinguish between *the tree* and *the rhizome* as systems of thinking. Arborescent thinking is linear and vertical: the tree can only grow in one predefined direction, and all its many branches develop from the same stem. This arborescent mode thus represents coherence and unity across time and space. In contrast, a rhizome is an open system that establishes connections between elements in all directions and has no clear beginning or endpoint. A prototypical rhizomatic structure is an animal burrow, with underground tunnels that connect chambers in several different and often unpredictable ways. Unlike the tree that grows in a linear predefined direction, the rhizome is changeable and develops horizontally because of momentary interactions between elements. From a Deleuzian perspective human activity can also be understood rhizomatically: environments and encounters affect human beings in unforeseeable ways to produce new emotions, thoughts, and concepts (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 1–58).

We argue that sermons can also be understood rhizomatically. They are affected by given contextual factors such as the time of the year or the specific congregation. Moreover, the characters included in the sermons are connected with a range of external contexts, whether biblical, political, the media, or the arts (to name only a few examples). In other words sermons facilitate interrelations between characters with a wide range of different

cultural connotations. In this sense sermons – specifically understood as a collective text production in line with Moretti – are an ongoing process of production and re-production, establishing and dissolving interactions between different spheres of culture through the characters pastors choose to include or exclude.

## Methods

We study sermon characters as a character gallery. To this end we develop a pipeline for extracting and identifying characters in the corpus and representing and interpreting the relations between them in a rhizomatic network. This involves the combination of computational tools with manual analyses.<sup>7</sup> We use a computational method known as *Named Entity Recognition* (NER) (Jurafsky and Martin 2009)<sup>8</sup> to automatically extract all references to specific individuals in the corpus. The NER identifies 12,357 unique personal entities in the corpus. However, in some cases the software incorrectly tags certain linguistic features as referring to people, which we naturally need to eliminate. Furthermore, we wish to focus on the most common characters, and we therefore only include entities that occur ten or more times across the corpus. Many of the extracted entities also refer to the same characters appearing with different spellings, misspellings, and possessive forms. We therefore collapse these variations into one unique character.<sup>9</sup> After this entire process of cleaning we end up with a substantially reduced dataset of 600 unique characters. We then manually code the extracted entities by labelling them with metadata regarding their originating contexts, such as whether characters originated from biblical sources. We code each character as one of four types. *B* characters are characters from biblical sources; *N* characters are non-biblical but specific characters (for example, *C. S. Lewis*); *P* characters are non-specific characters with generic proper names (for example, *Anders*); and *R* characters are named according to a social role (for example, *Enken (the widow)* or *Kongen (the King)*).

7 Parts of this analysis have been presented as methodological examples of largescale textual analysis of Scandinavian languages in Agersnap and Johansen (2021).

8 Additional details about computational methodology and the relevant code can be found in the online repository for this article, located here: <<https://github.com/centre-for-humanities-computing/sermon-networks.dk>>

9 For example, we collapsed the extracted entities *Hitler*, *Hitler's*, and *Adolf Hitler* into one character under the name *Adolf Hitler*. If a character name contains (*/*), this indicates that a character can appear in the sermons under two names.



**Table 1.** Coding manual

Category	Code	Definition
Type	B	Biblical character
	B_a	Ambiguous biblical character
	N	Non-biblical character
	P	Proper nouns
	R	Social role
Gender	1	Male character
	2	Female character
	0	Character unidentifiable as male or female
Time	OT	Old testament character
	NT	New testament character
	ONT	Character or name in the old and new testament
	CON	Character who was alive in 2011-2016
Nationality	PAST	Character who was not alive from 2011-2016
	DK	Danish character
Domain	NOR	Icelandic, Finnish, Swedish, Norwegian, Faroese or Greenlandic character
	EUR	European character
	NAM	US or Canadian character
	GLO	Non-European and non-North American character
	POL	Politician
	LIT	Fictional writer
	MUS	Musician
	ART	Artist within the visual arts
	THE	Theologian
	ACT	Actor
	ROY	Royal character
	REA	Character from reality show
	TV	TV personality (show host, anchor etc.)
	RAD	Radio personality (show host, anchor etc.)
	SOC	Social media personality (bloggers, youtubers etc.)
	SPO	Athlete
	BUS	Personality associated with business communities
	ACA	Academic
	DEB	Public voices or debaters
	FIC	Fictional character ex. from literature, movies, tv shows etc.
	LEG	Legendary or mythological character
	OUT	Unidentifiable character

*B\_a* characters and *N\_a* characters are entities that probably refer to biblical characters or specific non-biblical characters due to their high frequency scores, but that are also common Danish names – like *Maria* (*Mary*). All character types are gender coded, *B* characters and *N* characters are time coded, and *N* characters are further nationality and domain coded. Domain coding provides information about the cultural domain in which *N* characters originate. This approach gives us a comprehensive insight into the characters populating the corpus.

We employ *network analysis* to study the relational patterns between characters throughout the collection.<sup>10</sup> In recent years this method has been applied with great success across a range of topics in the humanities, including the structure of dramatic texts (Stiller et al. 2003; Fischer et al. 2017) and sixteenth-century protestant letter writing in England (Ahnert and Ahnert 2015). In network analysis, each unique entity in a sermon is considered a *node* in a network. Each of these nodes is joined to other nodes that appear in the same sermon by an *edge*. Thus, for sermon *pr1000\_76* in Table 2 below the nodes are *Eva*, *Adam*, and *Jesus/Jesus Kristus*.

**Table 2.** Example of nodes in individual sermons

Sermon ID	Entity
pr10000_76	Eva, Adam, Jesus/Jesus Kristus
pr10001_76	Esajas, Gud, H.C. Andersen/Andersen
pr10002_76	Hyrderne, Jesus/Jesus Kristus, Melchior, Augustus/Kejser Augustus, Herren, Balthazar, August, Esajas, Artaban, Maria, Josef
pr10003_76	Storm P/Storm, Jesus/Jesus Kristus, Peter den, Gunnar, Adam, Thomas, Martin A. Hansen, Satan, Khalid, Ivan
pr10004_76	Jan Lindhardt, Benny Andersen, Jesus/Jesus Kristus
pr10005_76	N.F.S. Grundtvig, Jesus/Jesus Kristus, Søren Kierkegaard, Augustin, Holger
pr10006_76	Martin Luther, Palle, Anders Stjernholm, Freud
pr10007_76	Martin Luther, Kain, Jesus/Jesus Kristus
pr10008_76	Faderen/Fader, Kain, Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther, Abel
pr10009_76	Martin Luther, Johannes, Kristus, Jesus/Jesus Kristus

<sup>10</sup> For a book-length introduction to network analysis see Easley and Kleinberg (2010).

These nodes can be joined to form an *edge list*, showing every possible combination of the pairs as follows:

Eva	-- --	Adam
Eva	-- --	Jesus/Jesus Kristus
Adam	-- --	Jesus/Jesus Kristus

We automate the process of creating an edge list using a short computer program.<sup>11</sup> Across all the sermons, the top five pairings between characters can be seen below in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Example of an edgelist

Character A	Type	Character B	Edges
Jesus/Jesus Kristus	undirected	Johannes	1938
Jesus/Jesus Kristus	undirected	Paulus/Saulus	1794
Jesus/Jesus Kristus	undirected	Kristus	1495
Jesus/Jesus Kristus	undirected	Maria	1343
Jesus/Jesus Kristus	undirected	Peter/Simon Peter	1283

The first and third columns show the names of the individual nodes. The fourth column shows the number of times these entities appear together in a sermon, and the second column indicates that this relationship is *undirected*.<sup>12</sup> The full edge list shows not only a long list of binary relations but can be conceptualized as a complex network of overlapping edges and nodes. The number of connections each node has is known as a *degree*, which indicates how well connected a character is in the network.

As Mathieu Jacomy (2021, 56) highlights, these networks of joined up nodes can be studied *visually* by inspecting a visualization of the constructed graph or *statistically* using various metrics. We adopt the statistical approach, using a community detection algorithm to study the network's internal structure (Blondel et al. 2008). Put simply, this involves partitioning the network into smaller sub-units or communities, which are understood as

<sup>11</sup> Most of the network analysis was performed using the open-source software *Gephi* (Bastian et al. 2009). Additional information on the process can be found online: <<https://gephi.org/>>

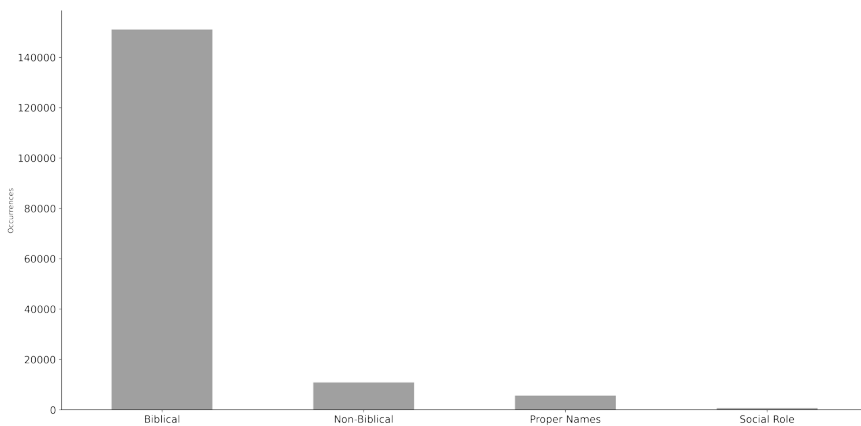
<sup>12</sup> All edges between nodes in this analysis are *undirected*. An example of a *directed* edge is a situation in which we could say that Jesus was talking *to* Paul. This directionality is not a feature of our current data.

clusters of highly interconnected nodes. Characters are assigned a modularity class label (MC) that indicates to which sub-group they belong and the other characters to whom they are most strongly connected. The modularity class parameter thus serves as a bottom-up grouping of characters that we initially categorized in a top-down manner. For the purposes of our current data this means the algorithm shows specific communities of characters in the sermons, based on their patterns of co-occurrence. We experiment and fine-tune the parameters to return the most coherent groupings from a human perspective, which results in ten distinct modularity classes.<sup>13</sup> In the next section we present some of the main characteristics of each modularity class in the network, identifying certain clear patterns and tendencies in the sub-groupings.

### The social worlds of sermons

Our methodological pipeline provided us with insights into how sermons' social worlds are structured – both in terms of the distribution of character types and the connections between character types. In Figures 1 and 2 below we see two representations of biblical (B/B\_a) characters, non-biblical (N/N\_a) characters, proper names (P characters), and social roles (R characters) in our data.

**Figure 1.** Total number of biblical characters, non-biblical characters, proper nouns and social roles in the corpus. The items refer to labels in the coding manual (table 1).



<sup>13</sup> See the full network data, sorted according to modularity classes in the Github repository under 'output'.

**Figure 2.** Number of unique of biblical characters, non-biblical characters, proper nouns and social roles in the corpus. The items refer to labels in the coding manual (table 1).

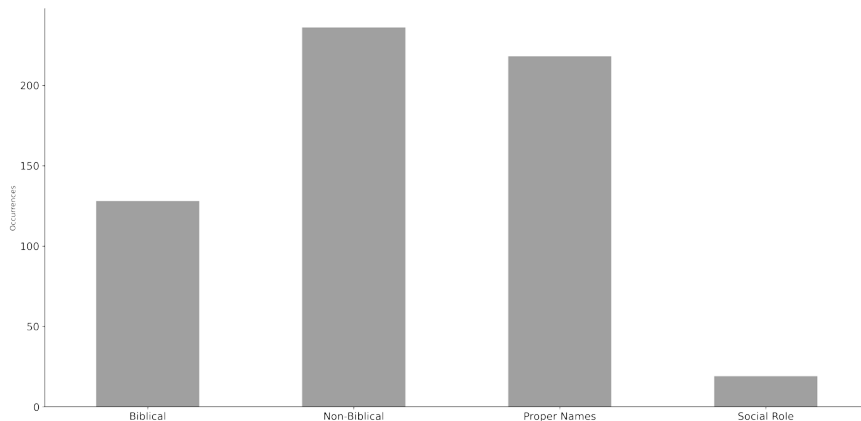
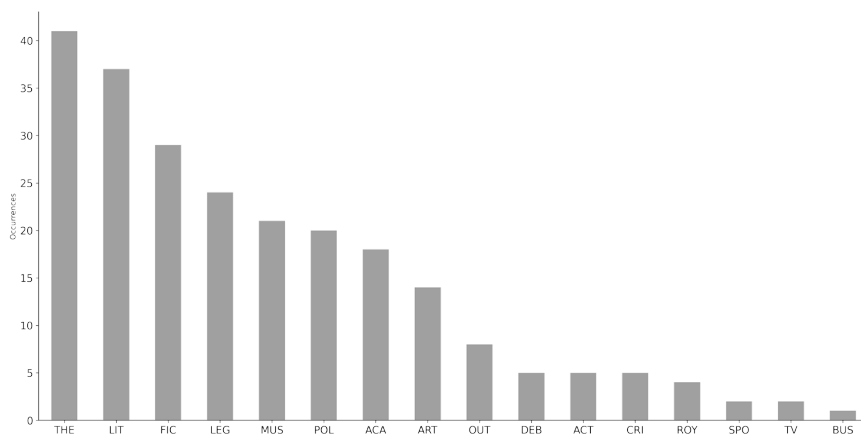


Figure 1 shows that according to raw frequency biblical characters by far outnumber non-biblical characters in the corpus; Figure 2 shows that the group of non-biblical characters contains many more unique characters than the group of biblical characters. Moving closer to the varying class of non-biblical characters as represented in Figure 3 below, we find a distinct majority of theological characters. The character gallery of Danish sermons is thus primarily populated by biblical figures and theologians (THE), who



**Figure 3.** Distribution of cultural domains among non-biblical characters in the sermon corpus. The items refer to labels in the coding manual (table 1).

actively engage or have engaged with the biblical sources. This finding makes sense: pastors themselves are expected to interpret biblical sources in sermons. From the remaining cultural domains, however, we find that pastors focus more on characters from the contexts of literature (LIT), politics (POL), and art (ART) than from more popular cultural platforms such as radio (RAD), television (TV), and social media (SOC).<sup>14</sup> A preference for high culture therefore seems to prevail in the corpus.

Our network data allow us to see how the individual characters are related, which gives more nuanced understanding of the characters' roles in the sermons. The community detection algorithm returned ten distinct classes. Of these, three classes consisted of only two nodes with relatively few edges (MC6, MC8, MC9), which we excluded from our analysis. The remaining classes are summarized and named in Table 4 below.

According to the network analysis the most central characters, both in terms of frequency scores and degree, belong to MC0. We have therefore named this community 'Main characters'. Apart from two characters with low degrees, all the characters in this community are New Testament figures. The modularity class 'Nativity and theology', MC1, consists primarily of biblical figures, followed by theologians. Many of the New Testament characters appear in the nativity narratives. In parallel, the Old Testament characters are mainly prophets or characters known in the Christian tradition for forecasting the birth of Jesus Christ – for example, *Esajas (Isaiah)* and *David/Kong David (David/King David)*. The theologians in this modularity class are mostly past authoritative figures and/or prominent Danish theologians.

In the 'The Fall of man' modularity class, MC2, the most central characters are a coherent group of Genesis characters from the same mythological context related to the story of Adam and Eve. This modularity class is also connected with the time around World War II through the author and concentration camp prisoner *Primo Levi*, the Danish World War II liberation fighter *Erik Hagens*, and the Danish physicist *Niels Bohr*. Modularity class MC3, 'Versatile characters', is the largest, encompassing the majority of unique characters in the data. It is noteworthy that the vast majority of P characters, R characters, and Old Testament figures in the corpus are found in this class. Relative to the size of MC3, only a few characters have large degrees (such as *Moses* and the Danish hymn writer *Hans Anker Jørgensen*). However, this group consists primarily of characters with only a few connections to other characters in the sermons.

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14 Some labels such as RAD, REA, or SOC are not plotted in Figure 3 due to their limited representation in the data.

**Table 4.** Sample of seven modularity classes

Modularity Class	Nodes	Characteristics	Top 10 nodes (degree)
MC0	10	Main characters	Jesus/Jesus Kristus (Jesus/Jesus Christ), Kristus (Christ), Paulus/Saulus (Paul/Saul), Johannes (John), Peter/Simon Peter, Jakob (Jacob), Josef, Maria (Mary), Stéphane Hessel, Adriana
MC1	54	Nativity and theology	Herren (the Lord), Martin Luther, N.F.S. Grundtvig, Søren Kierkegaard, Esajas (Isaiah), Gud (God), David/Kong David (David/King David), Herodes (Herod), Faderen/Fader (the Father/Father), Augustus/Kejser Augustus (Augustus/Augustus the emperor)
MC2	10	The fall of man	Eva (Eve), Kain (Cain), Djævelen (the Devil), Adam, Abel, Erik Hagens, Niels Bohr, Felix, Primo Levi, Randi
MC3	402	Versatile characters	Moses, Hans Anker Jørgensen, Judas, Markus (Mark), Stefanus (Stephanus), Messias (Messiah), Isak, Henrik, Jens, Andreas (Andrew)
MC4	84	Literature and biblical outcasts	H.C. Andersen/Andersen, Christian/Kristian, Martin A. Hansen, Maria Magdalene (Mary Magdalene), Thomas, Niels/Nils, Storm P/Storm, Søren Ulrik Thomsen, Søren, Benny Andersen
MC5	11	Other biblical stories	Matthæus (Matthew), Lukas (Luke), Johannes Døberen (John the Baptist), Simon, Abraham, Martha, Lazarus, Samaritaneren (the Samaritan), Faust, Nemo
MC7	17	Politics	Adolf Hitler, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Anders Breivik, Barack Obama, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mao Zedong, Karl Ove Knausgaard, Stalin, Osama Bin Laden

In MC4 the main character type is N characters, which mostly consist of Scandinavian authors. Other considerable N characters are legendary figures and fictional characters. Taken together, these three types indicate that narrative contexts are an important aspect of MC4. B characters such as *Maria Magdalene (Mary Magdalene)*, *Levi/Levi toldereren (Levi/Levi the publican)*,

and *Tiggeren (the Beggar)* also appear in this group, named 'Literature and biblical outcasts'.

We have named MC5 'Other biblical stories', which is a small group mainly comprised of B characters. The biblical characters are figures who are primarily related to each other during the Trinity season in the Danish lectionaries. MC7 is the only modularity class that does not include any biblical figures. Instead, it contains 14 N characters, including political figures (POL: 7), theologians (THE: 2), and terrorists coded as criminals (CRI: 2). The remaining N characters are the Norwegian author *Karl Ove Knausgaard*, the psychoanalyst *Freud*, and the former chair of the Danish Atheist Society, *Anders Stjernholm*. We call this cluster of characters 'Politics': although they may not be coded POL, most are politically motivated or engaged in some way.

The network analysis shows that the characters we assigned top-down to domains seem to be reconfigured into new domains bottom-up, and thereby with each connotation providing support for the other. These reconfigurations follow a Deleuzian logic that previously known phenomena can create new understandings based on their connections with other phenomena. From our subsequent manual analysis reported in the following we find that biblical, literary, and political figures especially are reconfigured in distinct domains in interesting ways, while a majority of characters is assigned to one rather indistinct group.

## **Narrative and thematic dynamics in sermons**

### *Biblical narrative worlds*

Biblical figures do not appear as a coherent group in the network analysis – rather, they participate in different modularity classes. Their roles vary, depending on the other characters with whom they appear. However, we find that biblical characters stand out as both the most frequently mentioned and the most central character type in the corpus, because they tend to form the nodes of the largest degrees in the network. This is particularly true of the 'Main characters' group, in which the characters do not denote specific biblical contexts but are well connected with many other characters in the corpus and are therefore highly likely to occur with them. In contrast, the 'Nativity and theology', 'Literature and biblical outcasts', and 'Other biblical stories' groups represent biblical narrative worlds from the gospels in which *Jesus*, who in the network belongs to 'Main characters', is the protagonist.



In 'Nativity and theology' the biblical character gallery represents the prophecies and the nativity story. Interestingly, all representations of God – *Gud*, *Herren*, and *Fader* – are assigned to this class instead of being part of 'Main characters' with the New Testament protagonists. In company with other nativity characters and Old Testament prophets this indicates that God is endowed with agency in the corpus, mostly in the context of the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. This finding confirms the directly active role of God as the initiative agent in the nativity story. Overall, this modularity class comprises a distinct encounter between the Old Testament, New Testament, and authoritative theologians. The 'Nativity and theology' class thus emphasizes the nativity story as Christianity's foundational story. It is in this story that the distinctly Christian tradition (New Testament) is connected with the traditions from which it springs (Old Testament) through the action of God. This surfaces through the characters in this modularity class, supported by interpretative agents who through time have authorized this story as foundational (authoritative theologians).

In contrast with 'Nativity and theology', the 'Literature and biblical outcasts' and 'Other biblical stories' groups represent narratives from Jesus's adult life. In the first of these we find a small group of characters personifying social outcasts for whom Jesus cares in the gospels: *Maria Magdalene*, *Levi*, *Tolderne*, and *Tiggeren*. Accompanying these characters we find a large group of authors who are known for writing about and enhancing what is aberrant, odd, or complex. For example, *Benny Andersen* writes existential and humorous poetry about peculiarities in everyday life; *Astrid Lindgren* writes about children who differ from the norm (Pippi Longstocking), or who are vulnerable and self-sacrificing (The Brothers Lionheart); *H. C. Andersen* writes about the boy Kaj, who was tempted and corrupted but saved by Gerda (The Snow Queen); and *Fyodor Dostoevsky* writes about morality, doubt, and sacrifice (The Brothers Karamazov and Crime and Punishment).<sup>15</sup> This modularity class thus points to biblical narratives that are told through and supported by literary narratives.

In contrast, the 'Other biblical stories' group is primarily defined by biblical characters. These stories represent biblical narratives that comprise gospel sources for sermons written in the Danish church calendar's Trinity

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<sup>15</sup> Many of the characters from these stories can be observed in the full network data available in the Github repository.

season:<sup>16</sup> the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), the story of Martha’s and Mary’s encounter with Jesus (Luke 10:38–42), the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in the arms of Abraham (Luke 16:19–31), and the story of the death and resurrection of Lazarus, in which Martha and Mary also feature (John 11:19–45). The liturgical texts in this period are known for representing many of Jesus’s teachings about living a Christian life, and several are from the gospel of Luke, who also appears in this modularity class.

The ‘Nativity and theology’, ‘The Fall of man’, ‘Literature and biblical outcasts’, and ‘Other biblical stories’ modularity classes all enhance distinct kinds of biblical narratives. They show the different roles biblical characters are given in the sermons, while the narratives each in their own way encompass small narrative worlds that revolve around Jesus as the prophesied saviour (‘Nativity and theology’), the compassionate (‘Literature and biblical outcasts’), or the teacher (‘Other biblical stories’). Although Jesus belongs to the ‘Main characters’ group, he is still the central agent in all these stories. This indicates that ‘Main characters’ constitutes a narrative centre of the network, comprised of the most central agents in sermons who may play essential roles in the contexts of the other biblical clusters in the network.

In contrast with the other biblical modularity classes, the ‘Fall of man’ group represents a distinct Old Testament narrative context – and it is the only Old Testament narrative that is so distinctly demarcated and highlighted in the network. Since the Old Testament characters accompany some characters associated with the time around World War II (*Erik Hagens*, *Primo Levi*, and *Niels Bohr*), ‘The Fall of man’ seems to establish a narrative about evil and corruption told through Old Testament sources and few, but recent, twentieth-century historical sources.

### *Politics and morality*

‘Politics’ stands out as the only sub-group in which we find primarily *N* characters and no biblical figures. Most of the characters in this modularity class are political figures connoting two general contexts: *Adolf Hitler* – the most central node in this cluster – *Mussolini*, *Stalin*, and *Mao Zedong* connote the time of World War II, whereas *Barack Obama*, *Nelson Mandela*, and *Saddam* connote affairs in recent global politics. This finding shows that political issues in the corpus do not point to a Danish context, which are

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<sup>16</sup> The ELCD’s liturgical year is ordered according to different seasons such as Advent, Lent, and Easter. Trinity follows immediately after Pentecost and lasts from the first Sunday after Pentecost until the last Sunday in the church’s year (at the end of November).

further supported by the fact that characters labelled POL are rarely Danish figures. 'Politics' is thus noteworthy for including very few Danish figures, although the POL label is the fourth most common character type among N characters in the corpus.

Another group of characters in this modularity class is terrorists whose attacks have been ideologically framed, such as *Anders Breivik* or *Osama Bin Laden*.<sup>17</sup> Combined with the dictatorial leaders, politics in this modularity class thus connotes violence, strife, and distress. The terrorist motif also emphasizes a societal agenda that has been prominent in a global context since the 9/11 attacks in New York and that remained prominent in the 2011–2016 period. Moreover, the motif resonates with the political figures representing contemporary global politics.

A remaining group in this modularity class seems to be distinctly associated with the two political contexts. Archbishop *Desmond Tutu* and *Nelson Mandela* share a context as activists for human rights in South Africa. These two characters mark a contrast to the politically motivated terrorists and dictators. Underlying the political domain in the sermons, an ethical theme about good and evil thus seems to unfold. The other theologian in the modularity class is *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, who belonged to a resistance movement against Hitler's dictatorship. The author *Karl Ove Knausgaard* has explored Hitler's life and psyche in his writing in an attempt to understand the dictator and his disposition for violent action (Knausgaard 2013). Similarly, Knausgaard pondered the personality of Anders Breivik after the Norway massacres in 2011 (Knausgaard 2014).

It is interesting that the chair of the Danish Atheist Society (DAS) in 2016, *Anders Stjernholm*, also appears in this group. Stjernholm was not publicly known until March 2016, when DAS began a campaign encouraging people to renounce their membership of the ELCD. This agenda seems problematized in the corpus given the other characters in this modularity class. With Knausgaard and Breivik he adheres to a group of characters who gained public attention between 2011 and 2016. This observation suggests that this modularity class provides a context in which problematic issues in the eyes of ELCD pastors are framed. Taken together, the figures in 'Politics' form a distinct domain in the sermons in which mainly political contexts are reconfigured into raising this-worldly narratives about good and

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17 Initially, we labelled the entity *Omar* as a P character (see the full network data), but due to the other characters in this modularity class we infer from the network analysis that he is probably the terrorist Omar El-Hussein who attacked the synagogue and 'Krudttønden' cultural centre in Copenhagen and killed two people in 2015.

evil – narratives that are represented without distinct anchoring in biblical sources. The moral dimension, which becomes part of the political domain, is not unique to ‘Politics’. In the ‘Literature and biblical outcasts’ and ‘Other biblical stories’ modularity classes the motifs of care and otherness, as well as the focus on Jesus’s teachings, also appear to be represented within a moral frame – about what is right and wrong. However, the closest class to ‘Politics’ is ‘The Fall of man’. Here, a narrative about evil is told through biblical sources, supplemented by a few World War II figures. The history of World War II and stories of evil are thus contexts associated with the biblical sources (‘The Fall of man’) in some cases and in other cases with this-worldly events in recent history (‘Politics’). World War II therefore seems an important historical period in the sermons. It is of course noteworthy that the majority of the sermons are from pastors born into the generation immediately following the war, when its immediate aftermath and effects were still being felt across Europe.

#### *The anonymized mass*

The small clusters of biblical figures and the group of political figures in particular act as consensus groups: pastors seem to agree that the characters in these groups are substantial parts of specific and important narratives. In contrast, the ‘Versatile characters’ modularity class stands out as a large group of several nodes with low degrees and frequencies in the corpus. This characteristic reduces the distinctiveness of the character gallery within this group. Their main similarity appears to be that they are secluded from the consensus groups; they are peripheral characters in the corpus. This group therefore stands in stark contrast with ‘Main characters’, as the ‘Versatile characters’ are the least likely to take part in the established narrative worlds in the network. The peripheral role of these characters also pertains to the character types, which consist primarily of P characters and R characters. Since we cannot infer specific identities from their names, these characters become anonymous figures in the network, lacking distinct and consistent roles in the corpus. Their anonymity seems to group them together and define this modularity class.

More than half the Old Testament characters in the data appear in this group. In ‘Nativity and theology’ the Old Testament characters represent narratives used to forecast and legitimize Jesus Christ as saviour, whereas the most central Old Testament characters in the corpus occur in ‘The Fall of man’. In contrast with these more distinct clusters, the many Old Testament

characters in 'Versatile characters' are part of a group that tends towards the periphery and anonymity. This indicates that apart from a few remarkable Old Testament characters, these characters generally play a minor role in the sermons compared with the New Testament characters. This seems evident in the sense that pastors are supposed to base their sermons on a gospel pericope. Nonetheless, it is interesting that Old Testament characters do not form more distinct sub-groups or connect with the New Testament groups described previously, given that there are also Old Testament pericopes in the lectionaries that are prescribed to be read aloud in the first part of the church liturgy in the ELCD.

Many contemporary *N* characters also belong in the 'Versatile characters' class. Accordingly, contemporary characters rarely seem to gain distinct or central roles in the corpus. This suggests there is no consensus among pastors about which aspects of contemporary culture or time to incorporate in sermons – apart from when contemporary antagonists such as in the 'Politics' group are concerned. In that modularity class some new and contemporary characters are placed within a clearly delimited group connected with good and evil. In contrast, 'Versatile characters' may represent an underlying and ongoing negotiation among pastors about which 'new' elements to integrate into sermons. The *N* characters in this group are likely to be the most floating characters in the corpus. Some are prospects that might obtain a place in a consensus group in future sermons – and others might disappear altogether and will be replaced by other prospects.

### **The rhizome revisited**

In *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari write: 'A rhizome doesn't begin and doesn't end, but is always in the middle, between things, inter-being, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, exclusively alliance' (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 57). In our study we analysed the sermon corpus as a network based on a rhizomatic logic. However, our analyses have reposed the question of whether sermon characters illustrate rhizomatic alliance or arborescent filiation – whether sermons are production or reproduction.

The biblical figures who dominate the 'Nativity and theology', 'The Fall of man', and 'Other biblical stories' modularity classes seem to cluster according to principles of familiarity with difference, as the characters either come from the same biblical narratives or from narratives from the same period of the liturgical year. The 'Main characters' group does not point to

specific narratives but unites characters with roles of narrative or authoritative weight in the New Testament. In general, the co-occurrences of the biblical characters therefore follow an arborescent rather than a rhizomatic mode. They form what we might call ‘trees of consensus’. We therefore find that pastors broadly agree that these characters and their narratives are particularly important to reproduce. They seem to be kept stable and predominantly within a biblical universe. Due to the high frequency of their appearance and the tightly knit clusters they form, our study indicates stability and repetition as the main characteristics in pastors’ engagement with these topics. We therefore hypothesise that we will be likely to find the same overall pattern in periods before or after the timeline of the sermon corpus.

In ‘Literature and biblical outcast’ we find a group of biblical characters who share narrative themes but accompany characters from completely different contexts. In our interpretations we have focused on the literary context, although this modularity class could be further examined in terms of the legendary (LEG) and aesthetic (MUS and ART) contexts. The formation of this modularity class is rhizomatic in the sense that the biblical characters are unfolded in dialogue with other cultural contexts, indicating that stories about biblical outcasts especially are told through sources other than just biblical ones. The various sub-domains thus configure in a new setting in sermons, and the stories are facilitated anew.

The ‘Politics’ modularity class is particularly noteworthy, because it has no biblical characters. However, since this modularity class is primarily anchored in the World War II motif, with Hitler as the most frequent and most connected character, it appears to be reproductive of narratives of evil and strife especially connected with a specific historical period. The World War II context seems to have become a rooted narrative, thus following an arborescent logic. Meanwhile, this cluster also encompasses characters who are new on the public stage, provided they are somehow attached to the rooted narrative. In this sense we have characterized this grouping as a distinct ethical domain which might be understood as a kind of ‘tree rhizome’: its context is rooted, while it can encompass new elements representative of the period covered by the sermons. These new characters may not be awarded a continuous role in future sermons and could be replaced by new characters that configure narratives about evil and ethics in the given period.

A significant number of the ‘new’ characters in the corpus can be found in the largest modularity class, ‘Versatile characters’. Here we find characters of all types and domains from our manual labelling: *B* characters, *N* characters, *R* characters, and especially *P* characters. In this sense characters clearly

operate on rhizomatic terms. They compose the widest sub-network, and their connections seem contingent and momentary, with the majority of the characters appearing infrequently and with a small number of connections. It is therefore difficult to infer any common features or significant relationships between these characters, other than the fact that they are peripheral. However, this does not mean that they should be considered obsolete. On the contrary, 'Versatile characters' includes characters that have not (yet) obtained consensus among pastors with respect to their roles in the sermons, and it thereby reveals a field of potential movement and renewal. Rhizomatically, it remains to be seen which routes are blind alleys or serve only momentary purposes, and which lead to stable incorporation in future networks. In this class of characters we have found the creative test lab of the sermons.

### Conclusion

Many individual characters are featured in the character gallery of Danish sermons – a feature that Marlene Lorensen argued was of importance for displaying polyphonic voices in sermons. However, labelling characters top-down reveals that some clear categories are dominant among the characters, and that the 'voices' tend to come from biblical sources and theological authorities. From a general perspective this indicates that pastors are influenced by their theological training and are loyal to the liturgical order that prescribes biblical readings for pastors to expound. Meanwhile, the computational bottom-up grouping from the network analysis displays nuances in the role of characters and the dynamics of which they are part in sermons. While the study is not based on a strictly representative sample of ELCD sermons, the sermon corpus provides a comprehensive case sample for observing tendencies in the construction of sermon galleries and posing hypotheses that paves the way for new research questions.

According to the analysis the characters in the sermon corpus have two main functions: they enhance and illuminate the story of Jesus; or they expound ethical or existential issues. These main functions unfold in a mixture of arborescent and rhizomatic modes. The New Testament characters, as well as selected Old Testament characters and *N* characters, appear to consolidate several thematic trees. In supplement to these a myriad of versatile characters offers and tests new hermeneutical and illustrative potentials in rhizomatic movements. We thus find that pastors are stable and reproductive, as well as experimenting, in their sermons: the pastors appear to be focused on both passing on what seems collectively defined as the main stories and on telling

these stories in contemporary ways – though perhaps more the former than the latter. The analyses therefore also demonstrate how preaching unfolds a collective dialogue of pastors between the Bible and history. The study is very exploratory, but the type of data and the analytical approach allow new ways of exploring and investigating dialogical dimensions in sermons as opposed to the dialogue between preacher and congregants, which until now has been the dominant perspective of the empirical turn in homiletics. The many sermon documents raise awareness of sermons as historical theological documents that are intertextually linked.

In the character study we have seen that distinct biblical narratives receive the most attention in sermons. Although there is a national selection of biblical pericopes for each of the 69 official church holidays, the analyses show that there is a particularly marked agreement among pastors in focusing on the gospel passages for Christmas and the Trinity season, because these passages are part of delimited clusters in the network. We therefore observe an underlying yet collective consensus among pastors concerning which narratives are particularly important to enhance, and thereby which parts of tradition are particularly important to preserve. Again, this consensus may be due to pastoral training and ecclesial background, but it may also be due to different audiences in church at different times of the year, calling for accentuations of certain biblical sources compared to others. However, the World War II motif in the sermons demonstrates that pastors not only preserve and reproduce a religious tradition but also incorporate a historical event that is not directly associated with biblical narratives and themes in the sermons. This demonstrates a complex dynamic in sermons of reproducing religious tradition, as well as reproducing a changing narrative anchored in both history and society. Following this line of thought, we might interpret the ‘Versatile characters’ as disparate characters who do not (yet) have links attaching them to general themes or narratives.

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ANNE AGERSNAP holds a PhD in the Study of Religion and is a research assistant at the Centre for Grundtvig Studies at Aarhus University, Denmark. Email: anag@cas.au.dk

KIRSTINE HELBOE JOHANSEN is associate professor in Practical Theology at Aarhus University, Denmark. Email: kp@cas.au.dk

ROSS DEANS KRISTENSEN-MCLACHLAN is assistant professor in Cognitive Science and Humanities Computing at the Centre for Humanities Computing Aarhus at Aarhus University, Denmark. Email: rdkm@cas.au.dk



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