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Reforming preaching: refugees in European sermons from the perspectives of space, body and politics

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Preaching has been a means of moral and political communication. In this article we address the question how preaching addresses societal issues, focusing upon the case of what has been called the 'European refugee crisis'. Relating to the conference theme, the perspectives of *space*, *body*, and *politics* are used as a structuring framework. Material was collected from six different European countries within a collaborative research framework. We conclude that most sermons (1) advocate an open and hospitable attitude towards refugees in a contested European space, (2) refer to refugees as abstract metaphors for general religious or political truths, and (3) are largely religiously motivated and move between public and religious discourses and relate to both of them. However, the article also points out exceptions to these general patterns and discusses whether the refugee is primarily portrayed as victim or agent. We close by offering a tentative typology of how refugees are referred to in our material.

Introduction

Over the centuries, Christian preaching has been a means of moral and political communication. According to sociologist Thomas Luckmann, "church sermons [with varying effectiveness at different times] helped to shape the worldview of all social strata". Sermons, "were instrumental in creating a basically unified moral order across all variations of mentality and of discourse that were characteristic of different social strata and regions of the Western world" (Luckmann 2003, 388–389). This public function of preaching has been evident in the Protestant branch of Christianity since the time of the Reformation, when Martin Luther preached in Wittenberg during the violent spring of 1522. Luther returned from the Wartburg, where he had been in hiding, to preach his famous *Invocavit sermons* against violence, in an attempt to unite Christians and provide moral and religious guidance (Leroux 1998).

Periods of violence and conflict have often motivated preachers to speak out publicly. Lamentably, examples abound of preachers who have been silent about violence, thus implicitly accepting it, or who have even used the pulpit to call for violent action: the call for the First Crusade in 1095, the acceptance of antisemitism in the German Church during the Second World War and the defense of racism in South African and American churches. Against these voices, however, we are reminded of the politically charged preaching of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu (Pieterse 1995; Lischer 1995; Van Ekris 2018). Despite the fact that churchgoers have become a minority in many

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European countries, preaching has not lost its moral and political functions (Keller 2017). In recent years, especially since September 2015, European sermons have addressed attitudes towards refugees and migration. This period has often been referred to as the "European refugee crisis", although this terminology is contested. It can suggest that it is primarily a crisis for Europe, while we must first and foremost see this as a crisis for the refugees themselves, which does, however, have implications for European countries. When speaking of a "refugee crisis", it should be noted that terms such as "refugees", "asylum seekers" and "migrants" are sometimes used interchangeably. We use the term "refugees" to refer to "persons who leave their country of origin on account of persecution and seek for international protection" (Moldovan 2016, 682).[1]

The practical-theological background for this article concerns the question of how societal issues are dealt with in religious communication. Sermons preached during the "European refugee crisis" provide a valuable source for reflecting upon this broader question. Consequently, the research question for this article is as follows: How does preaching reflect public discourse and interact with societal issues, as exemplified by the "European refugee crisis"? We approach this research question from the three perspectives provided at the IAPT conference: "space", "body" and "politics". These concepts provide us with three specific sub-questions that guide our analysis of the empirical material (see below).

Space, body, politics: theoretical perspectives and analytical questions

Preaching can be seen as "local discourse" since preachers become part of a local community with its own troubles and opportunities (Tubbs Tisdale 1997). At the same time, preaching has the potential to make the local community aware of all kinds of boundaries, locating the listeners between the haves and the have-nots, between the elite and the marginalized, and between natives and migrants. Furthermore, preaching takes place in a public setting. According to Albrecht Grözinger, this aspect of Öffentlichkeit entails that "in a plural society this space is a shared space" (Grözinger 2008, 324). Preaching is just one instance of public speech among other forms of discourse, such as politics or the media. Consequently, in homiletical theory the pulpit is placed at the crossroads of the local, the global and the plural. The preacher both shares everyday space with the local congregation and participates as a European citizen in discourse on the contested European space. The concept of "space", therefore, provides our first analytical question for studying sermons in order to understand how the refugee crisis is referred to and how refugees are portrayed in European sermons: How is the encounter between refugee and European citizen constructed in preaching that takes place within a contested European space?

Next, the concept of "body" emphasizes that practical theology is about real, concrete people. Current homiletics takes an interest in everyday life (Klessmann 1996), in the human body in the face of evil (Smith 1992) and in the language that is used to refer to gender, race and social status (McClure 1997). Nevertheless, concreteness in preaching may be paradoxically balanced by the use of imaginative and metaphorical language. According to empirical studies in homiletics, metaphors open up different meanings for listeners (McClure et al. 2004; Pleizier 2010; Gaarden and Lorensen 2013). However, metaphors can also turn concreteness into abstractness. As Clader points out, "the power of metaphor lies in the very ambiguity that can open hearts—and also confuse or wound them" (Clader 2008, 195). Consequently, the concrete body can also disappear behind imaginative language and the use of metaphors. The concept of "body" thus adds another analytical question for specifying how preachers speak about the refugee crisis in their sermons: How do sermons portray refugees as embodied human beings?

Finally, the concept of "politics" provides a third analytical lens for investigating how sermons reflect public discourse and how they interact with societal issues. In a recent collection of essays on preaching and politics, Reiner Anselm makes the case that the political dimension in preaching is not only necessary from the perspective of Christian religion, but also indispensable from the perspective of democracy. Preaching, he argues, should not only be direct-

1 Here, we follow Article 1 A (2) of the 1951 Geneva Convention. "Migrants", on the other hand, is a broader category, including "persons who leave their country voluntarily in search of a better life, but without a well-founded fear of persecution" (Moldovan 2016, 682). Hence, in this article the term "refugees" is a subset of "migrants", while we do not further distinguish between "refugees" and "asylum-seekers".

ed towards the individual, but must also attempt to articulate a political position in order to create connections between individual expressions (Anselm 2017, 16–17). In the same volume, Jan Hermelink claims that Protestant preaching is political due to its very form: the sermon itself is a reflection of the use of power. He adds that this is not only a formal homiletical insight; it should also be illustrated in the material content of sermons (Hermelink 2017). Hermelink's statement helps frame our analysis of the political in preaching both for "formal" and "material" homiletics. While the use of arguments in the sermon (rhetoric) is an example of the former (the form of the sermon and the power of discourse), the "refugee crisis" itself is an example of the latter. The presence of refugees at European borders and in European societies after September 2015 became a "societal issue" in many European countries. The third analytical question therefore asks how preachers interact with public discourse on the "refugee crisis": What kinds of arguments are used in sermons when public values are encouraged or contested from the pulpit?

Method: a cross-case analysis

The empirical material for this article is part of a larger collaborative research project on "Preaching in Times of the European Refugee Crisis" (see Deeg 2017; Ringaard Lorensen et al. 2017). Researchers in six European countries collected sermon manuscripts and provided the initial analyses.[2] The results of these studies were presented at the IAPT conference in Oslo, in April 2017. Panelists focused on the relationship between preaching and issues such as migration, political tensions and the presence of refugees and migrants. The individual contributions differed with respect to the research design, partly because of the national contexts and cultural emphases. Nevertheless, the common methodological denominator in the project was the commitment to studying sermon manuscripts using qualitative research methods. The material was collected in the period between September 2015 and Easter Sunday 2016. In this article, we analyze the case descriptions generously provided by our colleagues. We bring their insights into conversation through a cross-case analysis using the three lenses of "space", "body" and "politics". The three sub-questions discussed above guide the analysis, following an abductive methodology (Kaufman 2017, 82–84). The final section presents a tentative homiletical grid that provides an initial answer to the question of how preachers in Europe have portrayed refugees in their sermons.

Space: the refugee and European citizen in a contested European space

How is the encounter between refugee and European citizen constructed in preaching that takes place within a contested European space? While the former has left his or her place of origin, and finds him or herself in a *liminal non-space* (see Settler's chapter in this volume), the latter might have different attitudes towards the possible sharing of his or her space.

An invitation to hospitality is the most salient pattern that can be identified in the sermons ranging across national borders. From the analysis of the Norwegian sermons, it appears that all sermons that related, whether explicitly or implicitly, to the refugee issue were clearly in favor of a more liberal refugee politics, and that all preachers call for an open and hospitable attitude towards refugees. In a Dutch sermon, one preacher posed the dilemma of what we have to fear most: a different culture that supposedly invaded our culture or a lack of hospitality? In this example, preaching can be understood as "local politics" since it engages with the local challenge to create a safe space for refugees in so-called "asylum-seeker-centers".

The perception of refugees as an intrusion ("fear of the stranger" in the Danish material, "illegal immigrant" in the Hungarian context or "overt and vociferous hostility towards strangers" in the German case) was found in public discourses in the various European contexts. Yet, while the preachers related to such a position, almost all of them clearly dismissed it in their sermons, calling for alternative

2 We are greatly indebted to the colleagues who presented their data at the IAPT panel "Reforming preaching" for providing us with brief case descriptions from the research they carried out in their own contexts. Contributions came from Germany (Jula Well), Hungary (Zoltan Literáty), the Netherlands (Theo Pleizier), Sweden (Pernilla Myrelid, Carina Sundberg), Denmark (Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, Pia Nordin Christensen) and Norway (Sivert Angel, Elisabeth Tveito Johnsen, Linn Sæbø Rystad, Tron Fagermoen, and Tone Stangeland Kaufman).

attitudes and actions. However, one clear exception was a preacher in the Hungarian material, who expressed the opinion that immigration is a threat to society and who saw himself as a prophet transmitting the judgment of God. Furthermore, some of the Danish sermons also pointed out the challenges of welcoming large numbers of refugees and expressed a more hesitant attitude towards a liberal refugee politics. Yet, these are exceptions from the general pattern, such as the German case, in which a sharp contrast was drawn between Christians and racists: Christians are "helpers", who are clearly opposed to "non-helpers". The German sermons, then, conjured up a space extending between three poles: helpers, non-helpers and shelter-seekers. Within that space, a red line separates Christians from xenophobes, with Christians and shelter-seekers placed together on one side.

The Swedish sermons were collected from a network called "The Future Resides with Us". The network consists of congregations with a low membership rate in the Church of Sweden and a high percentage of migrants. These sermons used the metaphor of walls to embody the issue of the European space that is being negotiated between non-European refugees and residents of European countries. The preachers emphasized the danger of excluding people with all sorts of walls, whether physical walls (fence, passports, borders), emotional walls (fear), social walls (barriers between people) or politically constructed walls (coalition, party, faction). All such walls were considered problematic.

In conclusion, the sermons can be placed on a continuum *between hospitality and hostility*. While relating to various attitudes towards the encounters between refugees and European residents in a contested European space, including positions that expressed some degree of hostility, most of the sermons unanimously advocated an open and hospitable attitude towards refugees. Yet, there are a few examples that can be situated closer to the hostility end of the continuum, especially in the Hungarian case and partly in the Danish case, in which the preacher engaged with the feelings of anxiety and perplexity called forth by the presence of refugees in society.

Body: the portrayal of refugees as embodied human beings

In this section we ask the following: How do sermons portray refugees as embodied human beings? One salient finding is that the refugee is turned into a general metaphor rather than a specific person. For instance, one preacher drew a detailed parallel between the sinner who is estranged from God and the refugee who has lost his home and is welcomed as a guest at the table. In doing so, he used the "refugee crisis" metaphorically to explain the Eucharistic celebration. The refugee is turned into a general metaphor that also includes the European worshiper, rather than a specific embodied person with real physical, emotional and material needs. Here, *the otherness of the refugees is reduced*, as the preacher emphasized what helper and helped have in common: they are both sinners in need of the Eucharist.

A further example of portraying the refugees and the refugee crisis in a metaphorical way can be seen in what could be termed *the sentimental mode of preaching*. In the Norwegian case, for instance, sermons linked refugees with other phenomena in a way meant to awaken religious emotion, and this emotion is what the sermons targeted. The pain of others was employed in order to shed light on one's own situation and come to grips with one's own pain. Some of the Danish sermons also mentioned or discussed the refugee situation as an illustration or an example of what was at stake for the listener in the Danish context. For instance, refugees were used as an illustration or eye opener for recognizing "our" blessings and privileges as Danes. Hence, in such sermons the refugees were primarily portrayed as metaphors and even instrumentalized to address ethical and religious concerns for the listener.

Some of the Hungarian sermons engaged in a similar homiletic strategy, despite using the "refugee crisis" to make a different point and preserve the otherness of the refugees. One preacher, for example, induced empathy by recalling Isaiah's image of "people wandering on a road to pursue their vision." Other sermons in this case made use of specific religious imagery when portraying the refugees as in need of being integrated into the people of God (a missiological approach) or as calling forth the judgment of God. The preacher used the refugees metaphorically in order to make a theological or spiritual point.

However, in our material there are also examples of refugees being portrayed as real people with real

bodies. These sermons told specific, realistic stories of refugees. In one of the Dutch sermons, the preacher shared the story of an Iraqi medical doctor who left his country due to the war and because his Christian faith put him in a difficult position. The preacher made it clear that stories like this one should help the congregation identify with refugees. More importantly, these examples demonstrate how the preacher gave voice to resilient people, who, despite their suffering, stand out as icons of humanity and Christian character.

Narrativity in the German sermons attempted to bridge the apathy gap separating asylum critics from shelter-seekers by recounting flight narratives. The voice of the sermon was entrusted to figures offering profound insights into concrete predicaments. Moreover, the German case foregrounded the Alan Kurdi image, which is a recurring picture in this sermon material and well known from media across the European continent. The photo of the little boy dead on the shore became a universal symbol for the seriousness of the situation, a resonating, self-evident argument for refugee relief. Yet, another picture was also prominent. Alan Kurdi came to embody the crisis of humanity. He lent a name, a face, a body, an identity, a family and a story to the otherwise anonymous shelter-seeker, thus permitting us to feel affinity via identification: that could be my boy. Hence, in this case the refugees were also embodied as specific persons at the realistic and specific end of that particular spectrum.

In sum, the sub-question addressed in this section can be answered by drawing a continuum running from rendering the refugees and "refugee crisis" in a *general,* abstract way to telling *specific*, realistic stories of refugees. The tendency in the sermons was to portray the refugee in an abstract rather than a concrete way, even if there were exceptions to this pattern. Hence, the refugee was often rendered as a general metaphor without body, gender or agency. Moreover, at this general end of the continuum the sermons tended to instrumentalize the refugees and "refugee crisis" for spiritual means, such as evoking religious emotions and actions. Nevertheless, in contrast to this abstract way of preaching, there are examples of preachers telling specific and realistic stories of refugees. In these cases, refugees were portrayed as specific persons with real bodies, and hence with physical, emotional and material needs. This homiletical strategy tended to revive the otherness of the refugee.

Politics: when public values are encouraged or contested in the pulpit

The third lens for analyzing the empirical material poses the following question: What kinds of arguments are used in sermons when public values are encouraged or contested in the pulpit? We thus focus on the rationale of the preacher when stories of refugees are told or when their situation in Europe is referred to in sermons.

One obvious pattern in our material is that the sermons took the public discourse as a point of departure for their sermons and related to it, yet their message was largely justified according to a religious rationale. In the Swedish case, preachers advocated the politics of hospitality by using two different theological strategies. First, creation theology was invoked to create equality between refugees and the Swedes: "We are created by God in all our diversity and multiplicity (…) and therefore should stand by each other." Secondly, Christology was used for empowerment just as Jesus stands in support of those who suffer. In contrast to the Swedish sermons, as well as the vast majority of the other cases, a few Hungarian sermons expressed the opinion that immigration is a threat to society. In doing so, they joined the political rhetoric that systematically uses the term "illegal immigrant" when referring to refugees, while at the same time drawing on Old Testament prophetic texts that deal with God's judgement of the nations. Although the Swedish and Hungarian sermons conveyed opposing values, the relationship between politics and religion was constructed similarly: sermons provide theological rationale for societal values.

Moreover, some of the sermons in the Norwegian case addressed the upcoming election and emphasized the refugee situation as a significant issue to consider when voting for a political party. However, despite voicing this concern, the preachers did not explicitly offer concrete advice about which party to vote for. Moreover, the message was still motivated by Christian anthropology and ethics, thus emphasizing the endless and equal value of each human being. However, some sermons used religious language and arguments even more explicitly to opt for a certain political position, attitude or type of action. They pointed out what it entails to "be a Christian in times like these", as one of the German preachers put it, and attempted to offer moral guidance. In offering an outspoken critique

of what was expressed as a "blatant lack of empathy, leading to an inhuman distance towards those seeking shelter", the German preachers primarily construed "the refugee crisis as a humanitarian crisis". Homiletically, then, the lack of empathy was handled in two ways: in discourses on *moral principles* or *as narration* (for the latter, see the example in the previous section). Discourses on moral principles raise fundamental questions about Christian identity: What did it mean to be a Christian during the "refugee crisis"? The answer given takes recourse to religious law and draws a sharp contrast between Christians and racists. Thus, again the religious arguments serve as moral guidance on how to relate to the political issues raised by the agitators or racists.

Some Dutch preachers offered an alternative discourse that transcends the polarisation in political discourse, such as the xenophobic right versus the liberal left. In this case, there was a difference between public discourse on fear of migrants and a Christian attitude towards fear: true love drives out fear. In the Danish context, most sermons described the fear of the stranger and an uncertain future as characteristic of contemporary Danish society. While some preachers claimed that the situation forces us to "wake up", to take the fear seriously and acknowledge that there are evil forces at work in the world, others dismiss "the fear of the stranger" voiced in contemporary society based on the biblical exhortations to "fear not!" Both of these perspectives resemble the contemporary public and political discourses—although they used biblical texts as part of their arguments. However, a third position can also be identified, which differs significantly from the contemporary public discourses. One preacher simultaneously challenged both the optimistic and the more pessimistic positions by problematizing the tendency to associate peace with silence, wellness and the right to be "left at peace". In contrast, he claimed that peace consists of committing our lives into God's hands. This sermon is an example of how preachers derive new religious meanings from the presence of refugees in society when dealing with political and religious values. In doing so, they not only copy public values or back them up with theological arguments, but also subvert political values with religious insights: public security and biblical peace are not the same. Hence, the sermon offered an alternative discourse that transcended the positions expressed at the time in the public discourse.

A pattern in our material is that the sermons moved *between public and religious discourses* and related to both of them. Despite differing from political speeches, the sermons we have studied engaged with public discourse, yet they were largely religiously motivated and justified by biblical texts, Christian ethics or theology.

Refugees between victims and agents

In his IAPT keynote lecture, Frederico Settler addressed the issue of victimization in migration discourse by drawing on the work of Sarah Ahmed. Is the figure of the victim a fantasy product of benevolence? The sermons in the project partly confirm this hypothesis. Did the sermons render refugees in a way that moved beyond an understanding of the refugee as victim? Did they construe them as real persons with real bodies and, thus, as agents? Although most of the sermons expressed an attitude of hospitality and thus framed the refugees as victims, the language of the sermons was more complex than that. There was a tendency in the material to make concrete references to refugee stories, which strengthened the agency of the refugee, for example when sermons narrated stories of resilience and hope and told about refugees as concrete examples of faith. The latter reference seems to be more connected with sermons that focused on religious discourse, while the figure of the victim dominated in sermons that explicitly interacted with values in public discourse. In the next section, we take this analysis to the next level and attempt to bring the various perspectives together into one tentative model.

A tentative model of the portrayal of refugees in European preaching

How does preaching reflect public discourse and interact with societal issues, as exemplified by the "European refugee crisis"? In the analysis, the three perspectives of "space", "body" and "politics" led to three insights: (1) in terms of space, sermons placed the refugees in the contested European space between hostility (outside space) and hospitality (inside space), with the majority of the sermons conveying a hospitable attitude, but a few sermons entertaining a more hostile attitude towards refugees; (2) in terms of body, sermons to a large degree

referred to refugees as abstract metaphors for general religious or political truths, yet there were also exceptions, where refugees were portrayed as concrete human beings who need help or who exemplify certain virtues; (3) in terms of politics, sermons strongly engaged with political positions, for instance by backing up political positions with religious arguments, or they constructed religious meanings without explicitly mentioning political discourse.

These findings can be brought together in a tentative model that offers four different homiletic modes in which refugees appear in European sermons. The model consists of two dimensions related to our twofold research question: "reflecting public discourse" and "interacting with the 'European refugee crisis'". Accordingly, the four squares that make up the model provide different homiletic modes that suggest how societal issues appear in sermons and how preachers interact with public discourse. In *politicized preaching*, refugees are primarily used for political means. In such sermons, refugees are characterized in a more general way and are dealt with within the framework of the political discussion on migration. In *spiritualized preaching*, refugees are used for spiritual means. They are also in this mode portrayed in an abstract way and used to illuminate certain religious or spiritual truths. *Empathetic preaching* evokes empathy for refugees. Their stories are told in concrete ways aiming at evoking empathy for their situations of distress. In *iconic preaching*, the agency of refugees is foregrounded and the preacher portrays the refugees as icons, as examples to be followed by the listeners. While the first two modes instrumentalize the refugees for political or spiritual means, the third and fourth mode illuminate the distinction between victimization and agency, as discussed above.

	"Refugee crisis" in general language	Refugees in concrete stories
Preaching as public discourse	1. Politicized preaching	3. Empathetic preaching
Preaching as religious discourse	2. Spiritualized preaching	4. Iconic preaching

When preachers interact with real-life stories that appear in the news and that have become part of public discourse, preaching becomes messier and more real. Preachers not only understand the "refugee crisis" and the stories of refugees within a religious framework, they also engage with public discourse by creating a Christian understanding of hospitality based on a theological or religious rationale. Hence, the "refugee crisis" is approached from different angles in sermons than in the media or in public discourse. While attending to societal issues such as the "refugee crisis" affects preaching, sermons also affect refugees: they are instrumentalized for political or spiritual means, they are portrayed as victims or they serve as icons, as examples of Christian virtues as if they were saints. Changes in society are reflected in preaching, and preaching, in turn, contributes specific perspectives to public discourse. Preaching reforms and is reformed in times that are felt as urgent and intense. The 2015 European "refugee crisis" exemplifies this pattern.

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