

### **Speaking to God and the World – Ritual and Social Dynamics of Religious Speech**

**Veranstalter:** Ruth Conrad, Chair for Practical Theology (Homiletics/Liturgy and Church Leadership), Faculty of Theology, Humboldt University Berlin; Roland Hardenberg, Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology / Frobenius-Institute, Goethe University Frankfurt am Main; Max Stille, NETZ Partnership for Development and Justice, Wetzlar

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**Bericht von:** Karoline Ritter, Lehrstuhl für Praktische Theologie, Universität Greifswald

The international video conference addressed the role of religious speech within ritual and social dynamics. It thereby focused on the interdependencies of religious speech with its social determinants. The program not only provides a picture of how manifold the scientific perspectives on the historic and present phenomenon of religious speech were; it also shows that religious speech is of interest to historical, anthropological and theological approaches. The conference was divided into three panels, each of which dealt with fundamental theoretical as well as methodological questions concerning research on sermons from various religious and cultural backgrounds. Two project presentations gave young scholars the opportunity to give insight into their research.

In their introduction, the organizers explained why they had decided to make religious speech a topic for a conference. Coming from different academic disciplines, namely cultural anthropology and theology, they agreed on the important role of religious speech throughout times and cultures and decided to gather researchers in order to promote interdisciplinary scientific discourse on ritual and social dynamics of religious speech. Each panel was framed by a plenary introductory and a concluding session.

The first panel set the focus on religious speech in its relation to social dynamics. OLAF BLASCHKE (Münster) gave insight into his historic research on political and social dimensions of sermons from 1800 to 1950. The social changes that are reflected within sermons are of specific interest. Sermons were

both subject and object of political conflicts for example during the German „Kulturkampf“. Thus, he advocated sermons to be a mirror of political and social tendencies but also raised fundamental methodological questions concerning the research on sermons and their representative status.

CAS WEPENER (Stellenbosch) shared his results of an analysis of Christmas sermons in the years of 2009–2019 of Thabo Makgoba, a South African Anglican archbishop. He is considered to play a role in South Africa's path as a young democracy. Wepener's analysis of Makgoba's sermons showed a crescendo in naming social realities und an affirming critique against the South African leadership. He used the ritual theory classic Victor Turner to interpret Makgoba's „Theology of Hope“ and his sermons' content. In his view, they produce momentary public liminality that encourages listeners to be agents of change and inspires social imagination for a new *communitas*.

ABDULKADER TAYOB (Cape Town) used an example of a *Khutbah* in Cape Town on 5 February 2021 to discuss the influence of Covid-19 on a religious discourse. In his example, the situation of the ongoing pandemic provoked a reflection on traditions of the Friday sermon. While rituals are often seen as rather stiff representations of a tradition, Tayob argued for an understanding of rituals as balancing and negotiating stability and creativity.

The first panel closed with observations and a discussion led by MAX STILLE (Wetzlar). He pointed out three topics that he observed to be crucial to the given speeches. First, the consideration of political and social efficacy of sermons and rituals. Within this reflection, Stille noticed, lie different and fundamentally important understandings of the terms „social“ and „political“. Secondly, Stille emphasized the link between the religious interpretation and the social impact sermons have. Thirdly, he stressed the importance of the communicative situation and historical context in which the sermons and rituals took place. He pointed out that the reception history and the question of how these discourses were taken up by recipients need to be taken into account as well.

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In their project presentation of the CRC 1070 „Resource Cultures“, GULNIZA TAALAIBEKOVA, DEEPAK KUMAR OHJA AND SOPHIA SCHÄFER (all Frankfurt am Main) explained their approach and heuristic perspective on religious resources before they went into more detail. A common conception of resources is dominated by an economic understanding. This project, however, tries to introduce an understanding of social practices as a resource in different socio-cultural and religious settings.

Taalaibekovas's study is about imams, Friday sermons and especially new medialized forms of speeches on Instagram and YouTube in contemporary Islam in Kyrgyzstan. Ohja's research report portrayed different Hindu-religious institutions in Puri (India) gaining attention through online and offline speech events after a major cyclone. Schäfer's interest lies in the competition of religious authorities in rural Odisha (India) and how it changes the local culture of the Christian community.

TAHERA QUTBUDDIN's (Chicago) keynote was based on an understanding of sermons as a literary genre. She focused on early Arabic oration on the 7th and 8th century AD to show its influence on contemporary Muslim sermons and speeches. She started out by enhancing the predominance of oral culture and how a strict parting line between orality and literacy doesn't apply to early Islamic tradition.<sup>1</sup> Qutbuddin rather wanted to emphasize the synergy of orality and mnemonics as well metaphors and imagery therein when it comes to oration as religious orientation. She also showed that boundaries between religion and other spheres of life, especially politics, were fluid in the early period and how this is important for the understanding of the ritual aspects of today's Friday sermon.

The second day's panel put the seemingly contradictory terms of popularity and normativity in religious speech into focus. JAN HERMELINK (Göttingen) gave his lecture on religious staging of political values in the official sermons of protestant bishops on the national holiday of „German unity“ on October 3rd. He showed how socio-political values such as thankfulness and solidarity as well

as this day's relevance are invoked and affirmed in the sermons that he analyzed. They do so, he argues, by using popular formats of speech such as commemoration address. At the same time, the sermons produce normative effects by using what Hermelink defined as religious-political double-coding of language and images.

JULIAN MILLIE (Melbourne) drew from his research experience about genres of Islamic listening and ritual speech in Indonesia. He wanted to challenge the rather normative idea of listening experiences as engaged reflexive practice and move the focus away from the discursive dimension of the speaking event. Instead, he pleaded to pay more attention to embodied behavior in collective religious practice and ritual. Finally, Millie showed that the easy division between unintentional and intentional listening, passive and active participation doesn't apply when embodied practice is taken into account in research on preaching.

MAREN FREUDENBERG (Bochum) does research on Joel Osteen, who is a neo-Pentecostal preacher in the Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas. He is one of the most popular figures of the so-called Prosperity Gospel, which has its own unique history gathering traditions and patterns of 19th century evangelicalism, American individualism and pragmatism. The main virtues and values advocate claiming one's dues from God through positive thinking and positive confession. Freudenberg illustrated Osteen's performative and rhetorical approach in his sermons as a combination of popularity with normativity to construct personal health and individual wealth as the ultimate goals of human existence.

ROLAND HARDENBERG (Frankfurt am Main) then shared his observations on the preceding lectures of the second panel and differentiated the researchers' perspectives depending on whether they focused on the preacher/orator or the audience. The plenary then discussed constructive and normative ideas of the audience that are implied in

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<sup>1</sup> By that Qutbuddin suggested a reconsideration of Walter J. Ong's understanding of orality and literacy; see: Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 3rd ed., London 2013.

the sermons' objective to be popular. Furthermore, a discussion emerged on whether it is methodologically acceptable to draw conclusions on the socio-historical context, the audience and the communication situation from the orator's sermons and performance.

In their project presentation, HANSJÖRG DILGER, OMAR KASMANI, DOMINIK MATTES (all Berlin) gave insight into their research findings from an ongoing collaborative research project of the CRC 1171 „Affective Societies“ at Freie Universität Berlin. They raised questions concerning the dynamics of migrant belonging across distinct communities with regard to its bodily, translocal, transtemporal and moral dimensions. Drawing from particular case studies of migrant congregations in Berlin, one from a West-African neo-Pentecostal church and another from a German-Turkish Sufi circle, they came to an understanding of religion as a reformatory power to establish what they call „a sense of belonging“.

NAOMI HAYNES (Edinburgh) reflected on the connections between theology and anthropology. Her keynote was based on an ethnographic case study that explored Christian nationalism in a unique postcolonial context in Zambia. Not only did Haynes give insight into writings of Christian nationalist theologians that are part of the Zambian self-declaration as a Christian nation. She also stressed the interlink of political/anthropological and religious perception in these theological ideas. Shifting between the case study and an epistemological level, Haynes emphasized the challenges of „discernment“ for an anthropologist. Aiming to enhance the affinity of theology and anthropology, Haynes then allocated normative judgment in theological methodology as well as in anthropological instrumentality.

The last panel proceeded under the motto of the interconnectedness of rituals and religious speech. PAUL POST (Tilburg) examined a poem that was used as part of a ritual in a memorial service after an air disaster in the Netherlands. Starting from this poem, he explored the ambivalences and ambiguities of rituals and also offered criticism on ritual trend tendencies such as casualization (Martin Stringer) and the pedagogic aim to explain

rituals. Instead, Post pleaded for an affirmation of what he calls the incantation dimension of rituals and the understanding of rituals as an open hermeneutic space.

UTA BALBIER (London) illustrated the alliance of religion and consumer culture in the US American 1950s that was crucial to Billy Graham's popularity and success. She introduced Graham's altar call at Madison Square Garden as an example of a ritual and thereby explained the significant interplay between Graham's religious preaching and his performance and rhetoric of a product seller in order to promote the confession to Christ. Balbier thus argued that modern consumer culture had a significant impact on religious identities and practices. Graham's revival meetings in particular reflect socio-economic aspiration and commitment to the American Way of Life in addition to its religious meaning.

LINDA GALE JONES (Barcelona) demonstrated the Islamic rain rogation ceremony of Mundhir b. Sa'īd al-Balluti of Cordoba (d. 966) as a communal penitential ritual whose efficacy depends on the reciprocal relationship between the preacher, the caliph, the community and deity on the one hand and on the performative aspects of the preaching event on the other. She enhanced the importance of affect and the arousal of intense collective emotions that are a vital component of the ritual's performativity. As these *khutbahs* also included a ritual humbling of the caliph, the political implications of the preacher's deployment of religious speech were also important for Jones' detailed analysis.

Finally, ANDREAS FELDTKELLER (Berlin) shared his observation of an underlying questioning of religious speech and its difference to ritual and rhetoric. To him the rhetoric of choice in religious speech is characteristic to Islam and Christianity in contrast to for example Buddhism.

The lectures as well as the concluding discussion showed, that sermons as a genre are crucial to Islamic and Christian religious practice. For one thing, they represent a centuries-old religious normative tradition that sometimes is in tension with popularity and modernity. Then again, the case studies showed an unquestionable compatibility with medial tools of their particular socio-

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political and historic surroundings – aiming for popularity. Moreover, the political dynamics of sermons were interesting to many of the participating scholars. The case studies detected synergy potentials with governmental and normative political ideas but also showed examples of reformative political influence of religious speech.

The subject matters of the conference's lectures were remarkably wide-ranging in terms of religious and cultural context and furthermore concerning the time period. Nonetheless, the historical, anthropological and theological studies did have a common denominator in their critical approach to sermons and religious speech as a literary and spoken genre.

#### **Conference overview:**

Ruth Conrad (Berlin), Roland Hardenberg (Frankfurt am Main), Max Stille (Wetzlar): Welcome and Plenary Meeting

*Panel I – Religious Speech and Social Dynamics*

Chair: Amrei Kempendorf (Tübingen)

Olaf Blaschke (Münster): Political and Social Dimensions of Sermons and Religious Speeches 1800–1950

Cas Wepener (Stellenbosch): The Struggle for Hope Continues. The Christmas Sermons of Archbishop Thabo Makgoba, 2009–2019

Abdulkader Tayob (Cape Town): The Friday Sermon (khutbah) as Performance in Cape Mosques – Identity, Ethics and Authority

Max Stille (Wetzlar): Observations and Discussion

Deepak K. Ojha, Gulniza Taalaibekova, Sophia Schäfer (all Frankfurt am Main): Project Presentation: Religious Speech as a Resource: Speakers, Speeches, Social Impact (C04, SFB 1070)

Keynote, Chair: Max Stille (Wetzlar)

Tahera Qutbuddin (Chicago): Arabic Oration in Early Islam. Religion, Ritual, and Rhetoric

*Panel II – Popularity and Normativity in Religious Speech*

Chair: Hanna Miethner (Berlin)

Jan Hermelink (Göttingen): Unity and Justice and Freedom – Religious Validations of Political Norms in the Official Sermons at „Tag der Deutschen Einheit“

Julian Millie (Melbourne): Bringing the Body to Religious Listening. Religious Subjectivity and Unintentional Listening

Maren Freudenberg (Bochum): Joel Osteen's Prosperity Gospel and the Enduring Popularity of America's „Smiling Preacher“

Roland Hardenberg (Frankfurt am Main): Observations and Discussion

Hansjörg Dilger, Omar Kasmani, Dominik Mattes (all Berlin): Project Presentation: Affectively Speaking: Religion and Migrant Belonging in Berlin (C03, SFB 1171)

Keynote, Chair: Ruth Conrad (Berlin)

Naomi Haynes (Edinburgh): From Description to Discernment. Theology, Anthropology, and Christian Nationalism in Zambia

*Panel III – Ritual and Religious Speech*

Chair: Daniel Weidner (Halle/Saale)

Paul Post (Tilburg): „Words against Death“. Religious Speech: Perspectives from Ritual Ambivalences and Trends

Uta Balbier (London): Selling Religion at the Billy Graham New York Crusade of 1957

Linda Gale Jones (Barcelona): Ritual, Affect and Social Dynamics in the Rain Rogation Khutbas of Mundhir b. Sa' id al-Balluti of Cordoba (d. 966)

Andreas Feldtkeller (Berlin): Observations and Discussion

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