

Experiment with Freedom Every Day: Regarding the Virtual Dimension of Homiletics

Ilona Nord

Juniorprofessorin für Praktische Theologie, Universität Hamburg

Abstract: *The primary ways in which Homiletics has traditionally developed have been through oratory and literary sciences. Today, however, communication is being influenced more and more by computer-mediated communications. Literary science has begun to move further into various means of electronic communication using signs and symbols, and it is for this reason that homiletics should also be discussed in the context of communication sciences. The phenomenon of virtual reality provides a foundation for this discussion, and it can be included in the discourse in many fruitful ways. Virtual realities open up the interpretation of actual realities to a variety of new possibilities, and cultivate a keener perception of the imperfect parts of our lives. In this way they show that reality is comprised of much more than only that which appears to be real. Homiletics can benefit from this in several different regards: 1) by generating open-ended worldviews, 2) by opening homiletics more to the future and 3) by activating the body for experimenting with freedom every day.¹*

About Virtual Realities and the Sense of Possibility in the Perception of the World

The term “Virtual Reality” is not easily included in theological discussions. Virtual reality is regarded by some as an illusory world, and by others as a world of escape. One could sum up a pejorative response to virtual reality by saying, “It is all just virtual! There is no actual, real life.” PCs and smartphones are present in almost every part of our society, providing near-seamless access to the internet. For some people this evokes a need for something the philosopher Wolfgang Iser referred to as “Real Reality.” According to Iser, “Physicalness, durability, constancy, resistance, and dependability have developed a new worth. There is a need for a reality which electronics cannot replicate. Not even the media can escape this need, and ‘Reality TV’ is the paradoxical proof.”²

It is not possible to satisfy this need electronically. In order to develop an understanding of and to experience what reality is, symbols and meanings are required. Thus, people are not given the opportunity to have an unmediated experience with reality. We find this knowledge in many biblical texts, and it is very important because it is a part of the web of descriptions which we use to interpret God’s revelations. In the 19th Chapter of 1st Kings, we read the account of Elijah awaiting a revelation from God on Mt. Horeb. A strong wind comes, but God is not in the wind. The wind is followed by an earthquake and a fire, “and after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.” Humankind’s perception is fragmented. This fragmented perception also applies to our ability to receive God’s revelation. Because so many of our encounters today are electronically mediated we need not look beyond everyday communication, be it religious or non-religious, to find a great longing for that which is constant, for that which will always be there for us. In current context, this longing is intensified by the rapid rate of technical advancements in the fields of media and communication. At the same time, it is becoming

¹ Many thanks to Michael McCown who did translations.

² Wolfgang Iser, “Wirklich.” In: Sybille Krämer, ed., *Medien, Computer, Realität* Frankfurt am Main 1998, 169.

clearer and clearer that people do not perceive world as a sum of facts as the basis for their wishes, desires, and business. Instead, their basis is a world which is as they, for various reasons, perceive it to be. Having said this, it is important to remember that in our own perception of reality we always leave room for the shaping of that reality. Literary science identifies this understanding with a certain sense of possibility, which is, in and of itself, a category within anthropology.

Philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels sees a technologically heated relationship between the sense of reality and the sense of possibility as one of the consequences of developments in modern media culture. For Waldenfels and many other interpreters, virtual realities are worlds of possibility. Those who enter into and act in these worlds allow them to become “real virtuality.” In this process, virtual realities take on their own status of realness. The field in which virtual realities are most frequently applied is that of simulation. Three common fields in which simulations are used are education, medicine, and the auto industry. One example of an innovative project using simulation can be found at the Technical University in Darmstadt where scholars are using simulation software to create virtual reconstructions of destroyed synagogues.³ Buildings for which there are either extant photographs or blueprints are being digitally reconstructed through the help of virtual reality technicians. Moreover, you can enter virtual churches guided by an avatar. The churches are lighted and you can look at details of a work of art or obtain information about the history of a building. Depending on the level of detail to which the technicians are able to work, you might enter a world, a virtual reality, which appeals to all the senses and involves the entire person. In these educational situations, virtual realities try to target certain immersion effects by creating an electronic world in which all of the senses will be incorporated.

The most important sector of business for the application of virtual reality is the entertainment industry. Computer games are played on personal computers, mobile phones, and smart phones. The sphere of influence on the individual is greatly expanded through these media. For example, the smartphone enables us to communicate globally at any time. Aside from that, it is a medium used for music listening, as well as functioning as a camera for photographs and videos, and even as a gaming device. Communication with and in virtual realities, therefore, is opening up more and more possibilities for communication, which are, in turn, constantly appealing to people’s sense of the possibility of new forms of shared reality.

In this context, then, people begin to perceive reality as mixed reality; virtual reality and what is traditionally called reality, since they are now so closely related, are no longer perceived as opposing one another. Virtual reality is so perfectly networked into conventional life that it alters our basic perception of true reality. One example of this is the GPS function on our mobile phones. As I have written elsewhere, the geographic placement system which we call geotagging, transforms what in reality would be “a row of aggregate concrete-colored houses, into a colorful collection of little push-pins full of all kinds of information. For example, there is a two-and-a-half bedroom apartment free on the second floor of house number 73. No deposit required! The tapas bar at number 70 has received horrible reviews. Wikipedia says that a famous comedian spent his childhood in that very same house. Living on the other side of the street is a Facebook user with whom I share six friends.”⁴

³ Synagogen Internet Archiv, <http://www.synagogen.info> (July 3, 2010).

⁴ Ilona Nord and Lennart C. Wegner, *Von der Orientierung in einer Stadt, von iPhones und realer Virtualität*. Festschrift für Wolfgang Grünberg. Hamburg 2010, 154.

Webdesigners aim to create perfect simulations of reality because the quality of their electronic world is measured by how well their virtual realities correspond and interact with reality which is traditionally not mediated by Computer Communication. Of course these simulations are not always begun as perfect simulations. For many users it is much more important to be able to shape their virtual realities. This is evident in the various levels of immersion from which the user can choose. Richard Bartle recognizes four different “Levels of Immersion.” They are:

- **Player:** The game character acts as a means to move about in a game world.
- **Avatar:** The character represents the player in the game world.
- **Character:** Game players identify themselves with the character and speak about the character in the first-person
- **Player:** The player feels as if he or she is actually in the game world, the virtual reality.

The first-person shooter genre of computer games is a basic example of games viewed from the perspective of the game’s character, games that are played in the first-person perspective. The game designers use immersion to make the virtual world as real as possible for the game’s player.

Levels of immersion can be purposefully selected and applied. There are, therefore, two conclusions to be grasped: Virtual realities strengthen the sense of possibilities in the midst of very ordinary perspectives of the world around us. The ever-present possibilities to enter into a virtual reality are breaking down the perceptions of what is real and what has traditionally been regarded as real. Such possibilities make it abundantly clear that people do not base their wishes, wants, and actions on a view that the world is a sum of facts. In reality, people base their wishes, wants, and actions on a perception, which is based on their own opinions, that the world is as they perceive it to be.⁵ Every perception of the world is preceded by a construction process in which people grapple with that which they see as unalterable reality and that which they believe to be within their sphere of influence. This indicates the human being’s way of interacting with the world, that we are constantly in the process of restructuring the world around us.⁶

Regarding the Virtual Dimension of Homiletics

The central focus of homiletics is the communication of the gospel. The study of Computer-Mediated Communication teaches that there is a spectrum of multimedia tools available for that use. If you begin from the standpoint of the sermon as a religious speech, then the first question that must be asked is: Of what use is the application of the virtual reality model in a speech-style sermon?

When considered from the perspective of sermon structure, strengthening the sense of possibilities in religious speech can encourage listeners to develop a heightened sense of the relationship between the present and the future. This topic was dealt with in a sociological study of a current German television broadcast called “Wort zum Sonntag,” “The Word for Sunday,” which has been aired weekly since 1954. The preachers who have spoken on this show have spoken predominantly about the past. This study demonstrates how this has thereby propagated a

⁵ Richard Bartle, *Designing Virtual Worlds*. Indianapolis, Indiana, 2003.

⁶ Ilona Nord, “Die virtuelle Dimension der Seelsorge,” *Wege zum Menschen* 61, Volume 4 (Juli/August 2009): 354 ff. and Wilfried Engemann, “Zum Geleit,” in Ilona Nord, ed., *Realitäten des Glaubens. Zur virtuellen Dimension christlicher Religiosität* Berlin/New York, 2008, XI.

culture of remembrance.⁷ One can assume that this same perspective has dominated pulpits all over Germany. Virtuality, on the other hand, could help to build into sermon structure elements of openness to the future.

A second aspect is the critical perception of a homily's relationship to reality. In other words, sermons project or imagine possible world views. If virtual realities are viewed as "not real," then "virtual reality" is yet a term with a connotation of deficits in creation. However, should virtual realities be viewed as realms of possibility where people can try out different roles and experiment with different projects, then this connotation of deficit is lost. At this point I would like to shine a light upon the close relationship between virtual reality-based arguments and those of their contemporary homiletical drafts.

Based upon his background in practical-theology, Albrecht Grözinger says that mankind had to be imagined into God's reality. According to Grözinger, therefore, a sermon's task is to imagine mankind into God's horizon of possibility.⁸ It is interesting, at this point, to note that Grözinger holds an explicitly religious understanding of reality. He says, "The reality of God is only recognizable through faith. It is NOT the same as empirically recognizable reality. Instead/Indeed, it grants an abundance of being."⁹ Rather than speaking of that which is "real," Grözinger speaks of that which is "concrete," and uses this to contradict a perspective which confuses true reality with contemporary sociological perceptions of reality:

A sermon is not concrete when it is only dealing with sociological material or listing experiences people have had. A sermon will, indeed, always do these things! Where a sermon *is* concrete is at those junctures where the threads of life, which frequently become so hopelessly entangled, are able to be untangled and attached to a future which comes only from God.¹⁰

The sermon of forgiveness should stir the listener to begin to tell one's life's story and, while doing so, to weave in the evidence of God's grace.¹¹ A sermon of forgiveness should surely be implemented in the telling of a life's story, and each of us must develop our own story individually. This means that Grözinger also sees the necessity for the construction of reality by each individual. Of particular focus in this conversation is Grözinger's concept of "impression", in which the aesthetic application of a sermon's language is more precisely honed. According to Grözinger, "impression, then, can be understood as this: The sense of something comes to me and moves, stirs, or touches me in my own world of feeling and perception."¹² If the language of impression is translated within the context of descriptions of virtual realities with regard to the qualities of their mood, then that language, in communicatively constructed spaces, becomes "atmosphere." The design of atmospheres is a central aspect of the growing field of virtual reality, which treats them as effects of immersion.¹³

A third aspect is the overall pragmatic effect of the sermon. Wilfried Engemann and Thomas Klie construct their homiletics from a semiotic perspective.¹² Engemann emphasizes deliberation on the effects of a sermon. This deliberation leads him, in turn, to an expansion of the scope of the sermon. The sermon offers the recipients an opportunity to restructure their

⁷ See Ruth Ayass, *Das Wort zum Sonntag. Fallstudie einer kirchlichen Sendereihe*. Stuttgart, 1997.

⁸ See Albrecht Grözinger, *Praktische Theologie als Kunst der Wahrnehmung*. Gütersloh 1995, 98.

⁹ Ibid. Translation M. McC.

¹⁰ Ibid. Translation M. McC.

¹¹ See Albrecht Grözinger, "Die Predigt der Gnade und die Conditio Postmoderna," in Wilfried Engemann, ed., *Theologie der Predigt* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2001), 211-224.

¹² Grözinger, 2001: 222.

¹³ See Ilona Nord 2008, 182-189.

situation in life. Engemann speaks of a creator-centric sermon. This causes people to become active in creation around them. By helping the listeners to realize that they, too, are a part of God's creation, the self-image of the listener is changed. This idea seems to indicate the important relationship between the function of virtual realities and the experience of the sermon. A sermon which aims to make reality analogous with the occurrence of creation must, according to Engemann, become a jumping-off point for new stories. It is this which makes the sermon pragmatic. According to Engemann, "if a sermon which aims to open up spaces for life and action can be agreed with only because the statements in it are true, then that sermon has missed its mark."¹⁴ The goal is not an empirically verifiable "reality" but a semiotic construct that will provoke further thought and action. When the idea of virtual realities is incorporated in relation to Engemann's work, we can see that a sermon is much more likely to hit the mark when it motivates the opening of spaces for life and action. This, as we will discuss below, also strengthens the virtual body acting within these spaces. Only where this opening of space is cultivated and developed will people step into their own sphere of influence and develop a free structure for their lives.

The Virtual Body

At the interface between body and medium, one can see and experience that the human being is equipped with a virtual body. This can be seen in various actions, be it listening to music, doing research on the world-wide web, or taking part as a character in an online game. The virtual body is the symbol of a human being's ability to extend his or her presence in space. In the ways that men and women experiment with virtual bodies, they solidify the attitudes about different possibilities of living. They decide *for* "this" and *against* "that", and in the execution of these decisions they solidify *that* and *how* they are capable of acting.

Bernhard Waldenfels agrees with the arguments of French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for whom concrete freedom lies in the general capacity to put one's self in another situation. Freedom of conduct does not come from a higher form of action that reaches in from the outside; rather it emerges from overcoming pre-existing structures in order to create new ones from them.¹⁵ In this way, the characteristic of personal freedom in regards to that which is possible is revealed as the human ability to virtualize.

Waldenfels develops this idea and makes it concrete in the presentation of a virtual body. In order to do this, Waldenfels refers to Merleau-Ponty's description of the case of Mr. Schneider, a patient under the medical care of two neurologists, Adhémar Gelb and Kurt Goldstein. Schneider is suffering from a shrapnel injury which he sustained during World War Two. The injury is in the visual cortex and has noticeably limited the ways in which he can interact with people. As long as he is able to maintain a set demeanor, he is able to keep pace with unlimited demands in a situation. However, he has lost the ability to change his demeanor, which would enable him to cope with possibilities in an abstract or categorical way. He is able to orient himself in commonplace ways, spaces, and time, though he is not able to give any distances, times or dates. Mr. Schneider is able to tell what he, himself, has experienced. He is

¹⁴ Wilfried Engemann, "Predigen und Zeichen setzen," in Uta Pohl-Patalong/Frank Muchlinsky, eds., *Predigen im Plural*. Hamburg 2001, p.7. Also, Thomas Klie, *Zeichen und Spiel. Semiotische und spieltheoretische Rekonstruktion der Pastoraltheologie*. Gütersloh, 2003.

¹⁵ Bernhard Waldenfels, "Experimente mit der Wirklichkeit," in Sybille Krämer, ed., *Medien, Computer, Realität*. Frankfurt am Main, 1998, 213-243.

incapable, though, of recalling the experiences of others or elaborating on or relating experiences of anyone else. “He lacks initiative in sexual situations (lit. intercourse) just as he does in conversation. Games and jokes disappear behind a visible earnestness which stays closely connected to that which is necessary and immediate. The losses in the realm of possibility manifest themselves as losses of freedom.”¹⁶ For Merleau-Ponty the patient is imprisoned in the immediate, while the bodies of “normal” people function as centers of activity as a *virtual* space is superimposed upon the physical.

Freedom, tangibly connected to our daily existence, is a concrete part of the human experience. It is not something to be achieved. Indeed, it is something from which people must live.

Conclusion

Generating open-ended worldviews; Opening homiletics for the future; Activating the body for experiments with freedom every day.

The terms *reality* and *connection to reality* are very important in the discussion of homiletics. These terms are linked to questions that must be considered regarding the *reality of the sermon*. One such question to consider would be, “Is a faith-centered reality a special reality, or is it an integral part of an already conceived reality?” Furthermore, there is great debate about how environment and faith, how culture and religion can be thought of in concert. We must also keep in mind the very real consideration of how ministers, in their sermons, can best relate to the worlds of their parishioners. I would like to mention the work of Paul Tillich as a prime example of advances made in this area of theology during the 20th century. Tillich describes a *Method of Correlation* as an unending circle of question and answer. In his works he was already suggesting the model for an open process.¹⁷

Theology’s inclusion of philosophical phenomenology has greatly advanced this concept in practical theology in the German language over the last 30 years. As a result, the *concept* of freedom has been developed into *tangible* freedom. We have explored constraints and dysfunctions of humanity’s sense of possibility. The involvement of homiletics in the phenomenon of virtual reality is built on these traditions and is leading them into further considerations of media science. What this means, exactly, can be more specifically described in an explanation which speaks to the foundation of the self-awareness of a Christian.

Christian faith invites us to recognize that we are children of God, and baptism offers individuals the opportunity to begin the life-long process of identifying themselves as such. This offer can be made into a time and space for sacramental communication. New opportunities to accept a specific role as a child of God are opened up during one’s own baptism, during the baptism of someone else, and even in one’s memories of their own baptism. The point in this is to witness others taking on the role of a child of God, and to share experiences together. It is in this way that individuals can visualize themselves in the world of faith and, in turn, take on the role that God has offered them. These role-play experiences are not simply a means to while away the time, nor are they *only* roles. These roles become an integrated part of one’s identity, and they change an individual’s perception of reality in a particularly religious way. This role-playing is an example of how we can experiment with freedom in our everyday life. Because of this opportunity, freedom is more than just an inner ideal for the children of God. A life centered

¹⁶ Waldenfels 1998, 238.

¹⁷ See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 1, Chicago 1951.

on faith is a life that is centered on God's possibilities. These possibilities are set up to play themselves out through our interaction with others. In light of the partially fractured kingdom of God in which we live, all of our role-playing is fragmental. In other words, everything we do is open to God's perfecting touch.

Just as computer games provide the opportunity for an individual to interact with others while playing a role in a simulated crisis situation during their everyday life, religion also provides opportunities for us to take up certain roles.¹⁸ This possibility has been made available for quite some time through the use of the *Bibliodrama*, and is more recently being provided through the use of the *Bibliolog*¹⁹. The current development of the dramatic interpretation style of preaching displays the application of role-playing as well.²⁰ The media sciences-oriented homiletics that I am presenting also belongs in this context. This approach increases the sense of possibility in the spirit of the listener, and in doing so it focuses on cultural concerns within homiletics. That homiletics and liturgy, word and sacrament can be perceived and understood in a newly interconnected way is, of course, an added bonus. We are now starting to see new areas of research being established in the field of homiletics. Its traditional use of media in both the spoken and written word must be considered in the context of new media sciences. For example, it is necessary to consider how we should judge the current trend toward using more of the newly developed avenues to increase the level of immersion. Which levels of immersion are appropriate for the communication of the Gospel? Which ones are not? Bibliodrama, Bibliolog, and dramatic presentation sermons use role-playing and are intended to raise the intensity of immersion. These considerations will lead to a self-enlightenment of Christian media culture within the field of homiletics.

Since many complex analogies exist between the construction of virtual realities and the world of faith, it is outside the ability of homiletics to maintain the current relationship between Practical Theology and media. It was in these ideas that an understanding of reality within the context of homiletics was formulated. In the world of faith, it is not just that which we can actually see before us that is valid. What is often more important is something which is quite literally virtual, i.e., that which is available to us because there exists the possibility that it exists. If we view faith, sermon, and homiletics from the perspective of media communication, new perspectives are revealed through which we can communicate the suitability of faith for our everyday lives. These are types of laboratories, creative spaces, and play areas, if you will, within which we can experiment with reality. The virtual realm is ready and waiting for us to get involved in communicating the Gospel.

¹⁸ Ilona Nord, "Die virtuelle Dimension der Seelsorge," in *Wege zum Menschen*, Volume 4, 2009, 353-367.

¹⁹ Uta Pohl-Patalong, *Bibliolog*, Stuttgart, 2009.

²⁰ Thomas Klie, *Zeichen und Spiel*, Gütersloh, 2003; Kristian Fechtner, "Performative Homiletik in rhetorischer Perspektive: Eine Ortsbestimmung der zeitgenössischen Predigttheorie," in *Predigt und Rhetorik*, ÖSP 7. Ed. Michael Meyer-Blanck, et.al., München, 2010; Andrea Bieler and Hans-Martin Gutmann, *Embodying Grace*, Minneapolis, 2010.