

## Are Congregations Texts?

Adam Hearlson  
Andover Newton Theological School

**Abstract:** *It is a common sentiment among homileticians that preaching requires exegeting both the scriptural text and the congregational context. The relevancy of the preaching message, it is argued, depends in part upon a deep knowledge of the congregational culture. The preacher is therefore encouraged to “read” the culture of the congregation and discern how the symbols, practices, and actions of the congregation are used to make meaning so that the preacher might construct a fitting sermon. In this way, the congregation is likened to a text that awaits a reading by a literate observer. In this paper, I examine the limitations of such an analogy arguing that while a semiotic approach to congregations has merit it is often blind to the ways in which power and production influence the creation and reproduction of the congregational culture. Finally, the paper concludes with descriptions from recent homiletical works that offer productive alternatives to the semiotic approach to congregational study.*

In his famous poem, “Correspondences,” Charles Baudelaire writes,

Nature is a temple, where the living Columns  
sometimes breathe confusing speech;  
Man walks within these groves of symbols,  
Each of which regards him as a kindred thing.<sup>1</sup>

For Baudelaire, the world is a text, an obscure and abstruse text to be sure, but a text nonetheless. The tangled symbols of everyday life are awaiting an interpreter, one who can intimately gaze back at nature and make sense of the confused words. Baudelaire asserts that the universe is shot through with semantics and symbols. Specifically, words, the primary symbols of our world, are the very fabric of existence. The world is linguistic to its very core and if we are to ever gain understanding we must read the text that is our world. For Baudelaire and many others, the appropriate analogy for our relationship to reality is that of a reader and a text. Specifically, those sciences that concern themselves with the interpretation of practices, actions, and cultures have latched onto the assumption that the universe is essentially semantic. The metaphysical conviction that the world is primarily verbiage funds strategies of interpretation that approach culture, actions and rituals as if they are texts waiting to be read. In this paper, I want to examine the methodological consequences of such a view for the field of homiletics.

Within the field of homiletics, the important question—who are my hearers?—is linked to an important methodological question—by what means do I understand my hearers? Within the last thirty years, a common answer to the former ontological question has been that the hearers are in some part both a product and producer of the culture in which they reside. Thus, to understand their hearers, preachers ought to study the culture that is constituting and being constituted by the congregation. But what exactly is culture? Clifford Geertz, one of the United States’ most influential anthropologists, asserts that culture has always been a text waiting to be read by the literate observer. He writes, “The concept of culture, I espouse...is essentially a

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “Correspondences,” *Le Fleur de Mal*. Trans. James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 19.

semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is the explication I am after, construing social expressions that are on their surface enigmatical.”<sup>2</sup>

For Geertz, all actions, rituals, and practices, all objects, artifacts, and relics, whether linguistic or not, are part of the web of significance that constitutes reality. An interpreter can gain access to this reality by observing and “reading” the publicly available signs and symbols that represent local human experience. For Geertz, understanding culture is always an act of interpretation. The culture is a text, so to speak, where symbols are available to be “read.” Yet, like a book, the symbols are not the end. The story that is made up of symbols that are contained within the book is the end. No one regards *Anna Karenina* to be a wonderful compilation of words, rather it is a transcendent piece of literature precisely because the words provide an avenue toward some greater story. Or as Northrop Frye puts it,<sup>3</sup> “You wouldn’t go to Macbeth to learn about the history of Scotland— you go to it to learn what a man feels like after he’s gained a kingdom and lost his soul.”<sup>4</sup> This difference is crucial. Symbols are not the sole focus of study; instead they are assessed for both the way they make meaning and the type of meaning they make. Symbols are vehicles for meaning and story, they are not the end in and of themselves.<sup>5</sup> Geertz’s symbolic anthropology is primarily concerned with how symbols shape the worldview, values and ethos of the social actors.<sup>6</sup>

According to a semiotic approach to culture the Eucharist feast is as much a text as one of Baudelaire’s poems. Reading these texts requires organizing and making meaning from the network of significance made up of signs, symbols and actions. If you want to understand a culture, whether it is the foreign practice of Balinese cockfighting, or the idiosyncratic behavior of your local church, you must learn to read the signs that constitute the text of culture. Specifically, Geertz argues that the reader needs to map the structures of signification and render the enigmatic accessible by relating the text of the outside world to the world of her own experience.

Geertz’s most devoted and able acolyte in the field of homiletics has been Lenora Tubbs Tisdale. In her book, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*, Tisdale argues that preachers are called to preach both faithful *and* fitting sermons. Preaching is a practice that helps construct local theologies that are relevant for the unique context of the congregation. Preaching as local

---

<sup>2</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” *The Interpretations of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3.

<sup>3</sup> A particularly important influence on Geertz.

<sup>4</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), 64. As quoted by Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight,” *The Interpretation of Culture*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 450.

<sup>5</sup> Some semioticians come dangerously close to focusing solely on the symbols and thereby ignoring the meaning that may lie behind the words. Geertz does not seem interested in cataloguing or providing a taxonomy of symbols, like Milton Singer, “Signs of Self: An Exploration of Semiotic Anthropology,” *American Anthropologist* 82, no. 3 (Sept. 1980): 485–507.

<sup>6</sup> Sherry Ortner, “Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no. 1 (Jan., 1984): 129. Ortner goes on to explain that Geertz’s work has always leaned more toward describing the ethos of a culture rather than the worldview of the culture. Geertz seems more concerned with the distinctive flavor of the culture than the cognitive systems that the culture uses. Geertz has chosen the most elusive form of culture to study: ethos. Ortner surmises that this may provide a reason for his popularity: Geertz is one of the few thinkers who have built a method for observing and discussing otherness.

theology therefore must take serious account of the context of the congregation. As Tisdale puts it, “In preaching as local theology, exegesis of the congregation and its subcultures is not peripheral to proclamation, but central to its concerns.”<sup>7</sup> For Tisdale, the preacher must become a part-time ethnographer (a “participant/observer” in her words) who studies the congregation in order to produce and preach a faithful and fitting word. As the part-time ethnographer, the preacher gathers and meaningfully arranges the local cultural detritus into a coherent corpus that accurately portrays the congregational ethos and worldview. This meaningful arrangement of the complex codes, symbols and actions is what Geertz calls “thick description.” The point of this description, for Geertz and Tisdale, is not purely academic, rather symbolic analysis of culture is designed to gain access to the conceptual world of the subjects so that “we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them.”<sup>8</sup>

Within the field of homiletics, the semiotic assumptions of Tisdale and Geertz are widespread.<sup>9</sup> Preachers are exhorted to “exegete” the scriptural texts *and* the congregational culture. Preachers are advised to study their culture by reading the practices and symbols that constitute congregational worldviews and ethoi. And yet, I am unconvinced that this approach to congregations is as helpful as the field has assumed. This paper is designed to slow the spreading assumption that understanding our congregations requires “reading” the “text” of local congregational culture. This paper is a reminder that metaphors need an internal antagonism and that an examination of how congregations are unlike texts can be as important as papers about the many ways in which the congregation are like texts.

Let me be clear, the depiction of congregations as texts is not a fundamentally flawed comparison. The description of congregations as texts can be quite useful in trying to discern the regular patterns of a large group of people. The synchronic assessment of a group of people as a whole has methodological merit. Thick description at its heart is an attempt to grasp the dynamics of culture as a whole all at once. In this way, thick description is akin to a map. It shows a territory all at once. The map brackets time and history out of the picture so that we can see everything all at once. The problem arises when we assume that a map of reality is a total depiction of the landscape. The map is not a replacement for reality. To be fair, I don’t think that Geertz or Tisdale intend thick description to replace reality. Yet, their ideas in the hands of less professional observers their ideas have begun to lose their sophistication and complexity. The metaphor of the congregation as text is in danger of losing its internal antagonism, where the ways that congregations are unlike texts escape critical examination. The goal here is to remind us of the problems that come with assuming that congregations are texts and discuss some recent alternatives that might amend the semiotic approach to congregational study. To this end, I will first discuss three problems that come with the semiotic approach to interpreting culture and then

---

<sup>7</sup> Lenora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 48.

<sup>8</sup> Geertz, “Thick Description,” 24; also quoted by Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*, 59.

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, the work of Clifford Geertz entered the field of homiletics through a back door opened by James Hopewell and his book, *Congregations: Stories and Structures*. While some homileticians, like James Nieman, Lenora Tubbs Tisdale, Charles Campbell, and John McClure, examine the Geertzian semiotics in their work, others are quite content to use Hopewell’s appropriation of Geertz’s semiotic ideas. See: James F. Hopewell, *Congregations: Stories and Structures* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987); Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); John S. McClure, *The Four Codes of Preaching* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991); James R. Nieman, *Knowing the Context: Frames, Tools, and Signs for Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008); Charles Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

conclude with a discussion of some recent alternative options to a semiotic approach to congregations within the field of homiletics.

### **Problem #1: How Whole?**

The first problem with the textual conception of congregational cultures is that it assumes that congregations are monolithic wholes. According to Geertz and Tisdale, the minister reads the congregation by examining the parts in order to make sense of the whole. The observer attends to the microscopic public texts and fashions these small signs into a coherent narrative. The ontological assumption at the center of this method is that cultures function uniformly and monolithically. Unique idiosyncratic texts of a small sample of people are assumed constitutive of the congregation as a whole. In this way, semiotic ethnography is synechdotal, the symbols stand in for the whole world. But congregations are not single coherent texts. In reality, they are full of contradiction and competing discourses. Signs, symbols and actions can as easily be the locus of distinction and struggle that divide congregations, as they can be touchstones around which congregational identity is formed.

In his famous essay, “Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight,” Geertz remarks in a footnote that there is little gender differentiation between men and women in Bali, yet the cockfight is one of the few places where women are excluded.<sup>10</sup> Given the total absence of women in the world of the cockfight some caution would be expected when drawing conclusions about the Balinese “culture.” Geertz claims to read the texts that are present in the culture but consistently assumes that these texts are the product of the whole of the culture. The truth of the matter is that Geertz’s conclusions about the cockfight as a “status blood bath”<sup>11</sup> might be an appropriate description of those who engage in the cockfight, but what about the other half of the Balinese population? Are they equally obsessed with their status?

Geertz and Tisdale would be the first to admit that cultures are not homogenous. And yet, the approach to congregations as text tacitly advocates rearranging multivalent and conflicted cultures into coherent and ordered pictures. The methodological assumption is that a congregation (or if we use anthropological language the “native”) presents itself without distortion.

But congregations are very distorted and conflicted places. In his article, “Putting Hierarchy in its Place,” Arjun Appadurai argues that ethnography over the past half century has subscribed to the idea that “natives” are simple, ahistorical, and unsullied people far from the metropolitan western world. Appadurai explains that ethnographers exempt themselves from seeing themselves as “natives” of their own place because they are “too enamored of the complexities of our history, the diversities of our societies, and the ambiguities of our collective conscience. When we find authenticity close to home we are more likely to label it *folk* than native...”<sup>12</sup> Whether we regard foreign cultures as “native” or “folk,” the consequence is the same—incarceration. “Natives” do not *belong* to a particular place; rather they are *confined* to a particular place. Appadurai writes, “They [the “natives”] are confined by what they know, feel, and believe. They are prisoners of their ‘mode of thought.’ This is, of course an old and deep theme in the history of anthropological thought...”<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Geertz, “Deep Play,” *Interpretations of Culture*, 417–418.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 436.

<sup>12</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Putting Hierarchy in Its Place,” *Cultural Anthropology* 3, no. 1 (February 1, 1988): 37.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 38

Appadurai goes on to conclude that the idea that “natives” are confined by their spatial and intellectual limitations is based upon the idea that cultures are “wholes.”<sup>14</sup> Ethnographers are always prone to falling into the trap of believing that they are observing a pristine and untouched “culture” when in fact they are viewing a culture recently affected by a whole host of outside interactions. Anthropologists naively assume that cultures are fundamentally incarcerated and therefore unaffected by surrounding cultures. Appadurai thus concludes that the idea of a “native” or “folk” culture, as understood by anthropology, is a figment of an anthropological imagination.<sup>15</sup> Anthropology has operated under the assumption that certain images and ideas are quintessential to the creation and preservation of a culture. Over time these ideas and images become “metonymic prisons” for particular cultures. Whole worlds are closed off from the influence of diffusionism, globalization, and historical transcultural interactions.<sup>16</sup>

When attempting to read a congregation or exegete a community the observer is always in danger of devising new “metonymic prisons” for the congregational culture. Preachers are tempted to assume that the congregation has only a single common narrative or has only one common folk dance. Yet, in reality, there are many dances and narratives that are operative in the congregation. In truth, congregations are full of many competing and diverse texts, because a congregation consists of many congregations. Congregations are as fractured as they are cohesive, they are as diverse as they are whole.

The totalizing tendency of semiotic approaches to culture stems in part from a method that reads the microscopic and public texts of culture as though they are indicative of the whole of culture. This is central to both Geertz and Tisdale’s method. Ethnography is synecdochal: the symbols stand in for the whole world.<sup>17</sup> Cultural critic James Clifford argues that this ethnographic methodology privileges the position of the ethnographer as one who makes sense of the wild and varied discursive acts that take place in a culture on any given day. The ethnographer takes the texts and makes them “the corpus.” This “corpus” is a fictive creation of the ethnographer designed to make sense of the competing and complex system of symbols and actors who employ those symbols.

In his provocative essay, “On Ethnographic Authority,” Clifford argues that the ethnographer is not simply interpreting the discourse of actors in a culture; in actuality, the ethnographer is making sense of her own field notes, her own memories *and* the discourse of the actors.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the research experience is turned into its own textual corpus at a location far away from the initial discursive occasion of production. For Clifford this has important consequences, he writes, “The data thus reformulated need no longer be understood as the communication of specific persons....A textualized ritual or event is no longer closely linked to the production of that event by the specific actors. Instead these texts become evidences of an

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>16</sup> Homiletician Eunjoo Mary Kim makes a similar argument in her book, *Preaching in an Age of Globalization*. See: Eunjoo Mary Kim, *Preaching in an Age of Globalization* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 6–10.

<sup>17</sup> In this regard, Geertz departs from his philosophical muse, Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur does not posit a strict relationship between the part and whole when talking about the relationships of text and world. He only argues that there is a necessary relationship between these two parts. Geertz on the other hand seems to argue that by gathering the texts of a culture we can create a corpus that allows the ethnographer to create a thick description of the culture.

<sup>18</sup> Put another way, Geertz reads rules into the society where really there are only the regularities of the observer’s experience.

englobing context, a ‘cultural’ reality.”<sup>19</sup> As actors in the text are removed from their initial productive actions, a fictive, more generalized (and more absolute) author of the production is substituted.

In the case of Geertz’s account of the cockfight, the various actors with whom Geertz interacted, are lumped into one group, “The Balinese.” Clifford writes, “By representing...the Balinese as whole subjects, sources of meaningful intention, the ethnographer transforms the research situation’s ambiguities and diversities of meaning into an integrated portrait.”<sup>20</sup> What has dropped out of sight in Geertz’s depiction of “the Balinese” is the actuality of competing symbols, actors, and cultures. In an attempt to find a common text, distinction is too often ignored and cultures are represented as cohesive wholes.

### **Problem #2: Product or Production?**

The second critique of a semiotic approach to congregations is related to the first. The textual approach to congregations treats congregations as a product of its actors without ever discussing the role of the congregations in production. Put another way, congregations are not written by the actors, they are always in the process of being written.

In his essay, “The Seduction of Anthropology,” William Roseberry puts it this way, “Here we confront the major inadequacy of the text as a metaphor for culture. A text is written; it is not writing. To see cultures as an ensemble of texts or an art form is to remove the culture from the process of its creation.”<sup>21</sup> By conceptualizing culture as a text, Tisdale and Geertz have removed the cultural products from their historical production; a production that is consistently underwritten by asymmetrical power relations and histories of domination and subjugation.

Dwight Conquergood, ethnographer and professor of performance theory, suggests that the totalizing tendencies of the textual approach to culture stem from an ethnocentric ethnographic method that cannot account for the presence of difference. Conquergood puts it this way, “Instead of listening, absorbing, and standing in solidarity with the protest performances of the people... the ethnographer, in Geertz’s scene, stands above and behind the people and, uninvited, peers over their shoulders to read their texts, like an overseer or a spy.”<sup>22</sup> Geertz’s method contains an intrinsic imbalance of power that privileges the vantage of the ethnographer’s intrusive gaze. This intrusive gaze requires silent acquiescence by the observed and the ignored.<sup>23</sup> Geertz never problematizes the ethnographer’s access to (or choice of) the text that she observes; rather Geertz assumes that the products or “texts” of culture are on public display for anyone who would take the time to see them. But in actuality, what is on display in public is the message of the dominant power structure. The observer is never fully privy to the “subjugated knowledge” of those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Conquergood argues that a methodology that uses a text-based metaphor will necessarily ignore those texts that come from non-dominant regions of the culture because, “they are illegible; they exist, by and large, as active bodies of meaning, outside of books, eluding the forces of inscription that would make

---

<sup>19</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Harvard University Press, 1988), 39.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 24

<sup>22</sup> Dwight Conquergood, “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research,” *The Drama Review* 46 (2002): 150.

<sup>23</sup> Conquergood tips his own methodological hand when he writes, “The strain and tension of this scene are not mediated by talk or interaction; both the researcher and the researched face the page as silent readers instead of turning to face one another and, perhaps, open a conversation.” Ibid.

them legible, and thereby legitimate.”<sup>24</sup> Put simply, it is hard to account for distinction when the presence of distinction is often invisible.

At its heart, the semiotic approach to culture is primarily a synchronic approach to culture in that it brackets out the role of time and production from its method. Such synchronic commitments often prevent the observer from engaging in the equally important diachronic assessment of the histories that produced the culture. A synchronic approach to culture abolishes time from the analysis of the congregation, seeing the vast historically conditioned culture as a single continuous landscape. A diachronic approach to culture assumes that things are not always as they have been and that a historical account of the culture is as important for understanding the culture as the current web of symbols within the culture.

Semiotic exegesis approaches the congregation as if it is suspended in time but rarely leads to discussions about the ways in which past disjunctions and competing narratives disrupted production within the culture and thus altered the web of symbols. Disjunction and the failed reproduction of the system lead to change, and change cannot be measured without time—without some sense of history or continuity. The lack of a diachronic component in congregational study prevents the observer from accounting for those instances of difference and disjunction that have shaped (and are shaping) the congregation. With a method that oscillates between the synchronic snapshot and diachronic landscape the ethnographer would be better equipped to assess the wider cultural context but also recognize the new instances of production that are initiating change into the culture.

### **Problem #3: Who’s Watching Who?**

The final critique of a textual conception of congregations is less about what the approach proposes and more about what it fails to propose, namely, a methodological check on the authority of the observer. When approaching the congregation the observer is cast as the interpreter of the “foreign” and “opaque” practices of the society, thereby assuming an authority as the hermeneut for an audience. The practices of a people are filtered through the experience of the observer who then organizes an account of the culture *as it is*. The unwritten behaviors, beliefs, actions and rituals are gathered and organized into an accessible and coherent description of the congregation. Vincent Crapanzano likens the ethnographer to Hermes, the messenger, who

given methodologies for uncovering the masked, the latent, the unconscious, may even obtain his message through stealth. He presents languages, cultures, and societies in all their opacity, their foreignness, their meaninglessness; then like the magician, the hermeneut, Hermes himself clarifies the opaque, renders the foreign familiar, and gives meaning to the meaningless. He decodes the message. He interprets.<sup>25</sup>

Like Hermes, the ethnographer roams invisibly. It is impossible to fix the observer’s vantage point. And this invisible vantage hides possible objections to the ethnography. The ethnographer creates a self-portrait as disinterested and objective, promising like Hermes, not to lie, but never attempting to tell the whole truth either. The ethnographer reserves the right to leave out information deemed not immediately pertinent, or reserves the right to translate the

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>25</sup> Vincent Crapanzano, “Hermes Dilemma: The Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic Description,” eds. James Clifford & George E. Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography: A School of American Research Advanced Seminar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 51.

actions and realities of other people into the language of a chosen audience. For Crapanzo, the powerful conclusions of ethnographers are made possible only by hiding the invisible and contradictory truths through exclusion and rhetoric. Ethnographic accounts of cultures are always partial, provisional, and incomplete because all knowledge is partial, provisional and incomplete.

Congregational observation carries with it the temptation to separate out the observer's own subjectivity and allow others to believe that their world is being interpreted by a non-existent and silent observer. The textual approach to congregational study rarely admits that the observer assumes a unique place of authority when describing the congregation. I am not saying that the observers have no authority or that they ought to divest themselves of their own authority. Further, I am not suggesting that gaining authority is inherently a problem; rather, I am advocating for a method of ethnography that pays as much attention to the watcher as the watched. I am advocating for displaying epistemic humility alongside conclusions built upon thorough research and hard won insight. As it is, the methods of Tisdale and Geertz assume an authority but neither provides a rationale as to why the observer should warrant such authority or what the limits of such authority ought to be. Missing from these analytical methods is a backward critique of the observer's own subjective ideas of normativity, which may hinder the reading of the culture.

### **New Directions in Homiletics**

While the influence of semiotics is still widespread, its prominence is in jeopardy as homileticians have begun to rethink the value of the semiotic approach to culture and provide alternative interpretive paradigms. New conceptions of congregations have, in turn, dictated new methods of congregational study. Curiously, those who were among the first to be intrigued by a Geertzian ethnographic method are among the most astute proponents of alternative visions of the congregation.

For instance, John McClure, who leaned on Geertz in his early work *The Four Codes of Preaching*,<sup>26</sup> recognizes that while the semiotic approach to culture is helpful in understanding the *represented* theology and culture within congregations, it does not help us understand the micro changes that are always and at once altering the shape of the congregation.<sup>27</sup> McClure writes, "Ultimately, semiotic approaches do not take preaching and embed it within the living dialogical process in which theological meaning is being created and shaped by the ongoing conversations and verbal interactions that make up church (and cultural) life."<sup>28</sup> As an alternative to the semiotic method of congregational study, McClure turns to post-semiotic philosophies of communication that argue that utterances, not signs, are the fundamental unit of communication. The utterance is alive and moving, it is an address that has an address. It is has an aim, a direction and recognizes the presence of the other. The utterance is not static, but exists in the uncontrolled territory between speaking subjects. The methodological demands of the congregational observer thus shift from trying to observe and arrange the visible public signs of the culture, to observing the event of theological communication in the moments when it is

---

<sup>26</sup> It should be noted that McClure's semiotic vision for preaching was influenced primarily by the French linguist Roland Barthes. McClure makes use of Geertz in this early work but is less devoted to the whole of the Geertzian paradigm than some other homileticians. See: John McClure, *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

<sup>27</sup> John McClure, "Preaching and Theology," *Quarterly Review* 24, No. 3 (Fall, 2004): 257.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*



birthed by two (or more) subjects in dialogue. Moreover, the shift from a semiotic framework to a post-semiotic framework is accompanied by a shift of the role of the preacher from ethnographer or participant/observer to what McClure calls a “mashup theologian.” Like a DJ whose own “voice” is made up of the samples, beats and hooks of other musicians and whose art relies not in the creation of a brand new tune, but the production of the right tune for the right time, the preacher uses the utterances (that which is “in the crate,” so to speak) of the congregation, to produce new theological meaning. McClure writes, “Mashup theologians, therefore, will be pragmatic to a fault... they embrace the logic of textuality and file-sharing, arguing that all words, traditions, and styles of speech are borrowed, plagiarized, and exchanged in an attempt to communicate—that is, to discover and share a religious worldview.”<sup>29</sup> McClure, alters the dominate metaphor of semiotics by arguing that congregations are not products, not “texts,” but producers. Life is a studio and humans are always producing new hooks, beats, and tunes, and it is the job of the preacher to retrieve these creative utterances and fashion new theological meaning in spite of how seemingly incommensurate these utterances might sound.<sup>30</sup>

Like McClure, Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen has also recognized the benefits of post-semiotic communication theory. Lorensen uses the work of Russian communication theorist Mikhail Bakhtin to argue that preaching is always “co-authored” by the speaker and the listener.<sup>31</sup> The world of the congregation necessarily intrudes upon the carefully crafted words of the preacher. The congregation is not a passive receptacle for preaching ideas but is always in dialogue with the preacher. This reality is supported by empirical research conducted by Lorensen’s co-researcher, Marianne Gaarden. Gaarden conducted qualitative interviews with 29 churchgoers and five ministers from five congregations about the experience of listening to a sermon. Gaarden found that congregants weren’t passive listeners but were active in “creating their own meaning in a dialogic interaction with the sermonic discourse....”<sup>32</sup> Given this reality, Gaarden and Lorensen are less concerned with investigating how to invite churchgoers into the preacher’s mind and more interested in researching “how and to what extent churchgoers allow preachers, among others, to have dialogical input on their inner reflections, or implicit sermonic discourses during the polyphonic event of preaching.”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, given the reality that churchgoers are the primary authors of the sermon and therefore controlling the terms of the sermon, the function of the preacher changes from simply a dialogue partner to an “‘agent of interruption,’ who enters into and disturbs the inner dialogue of the preacher.”<sup>34</sup> In Gaarden and Lorensen’s schema, there is no static congregation that can serve as text to be read, not even the sermon is a text, it is an utterance and therefore prone to change in the process of its reception. Moreover, the congregation is atomized as each individual engages in his/her own dialogue with the preacher, and while these dialogues might sound similar they cannot be assumed to be the same. To the extent that these dialogues are similar it is because utterances have emerged in a common situated context. What exactly constitutes the context is outside the scope of Lorensen and Gaarden’s work. The value of Lorensen and Gaarden’s research is the way in which it

---

<sup>29</sup> John McClure, *Mashup Religion: Pop Music and Theological Invention* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011), 102.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>31</sup> Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, “Carnivalized Preaching- in Dialogue with Bakhtin and Other-wise Homiletics,” *Homiletic* 36, no. 1 (2011): 26–44.

<sup>32</sup> Marianne Gaarden & Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, “Listeners as Authors in Preaching – Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives,” *Homiletic* 38, no. 1 (2013): 29.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 33.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 45.

complicates the task of the preacher who looks to observe the congregation. Lorensen and Gaarden provide a vision of the congregation that resists the prying eyes of the ethnographer with a field notebook. After all, it is difficult (maybe impossible?) to observe the inner dialogue of a person in a specific moment.<sup>35</sup>

Charles Campbell is another homiletician whose work was once friendly with a Geertzian semiotic vision, but who is now exploring alternatives to the vision of a congregation as a text. In the book, *Preaching Fools*, Campbell, with his colleague Johan Cilliers, describes the preacher as a fool who stand between cultures looking for the unexpected and foolish ways in which God's new creation is entering the old age. The preacher is called to discern "the ironic, cruciform fragments of God's new creation within the shattered fragments of the old age..."<sup>36</sup> Additionally, the preacher participates in the in-breaking of the kingdom by assuming the posture of a fool who chooses to occupy the liminal spaces of the world in order to break down the reified boundaries of oppressive power structures. Campbell and Cilliers recognize that structures of power seem to be built of iron, and yet, the fool is capable of melting these iron structures by instigating liminality, altering perspectives, and calling for discernment.<sup>37</sup> The very presence of the fool character in so many cultures, betrays the Geertzian assumption that a common set of symbols could be gathered to discuss a single text. The fool exists in between the competing worldviews of a single culture. The fool is not beholden to any one culture but lives intertextually. Moreover, the power of the fool resides in the ability to be versed in both the symbols of the powerful and the weak. The fool, in a liminal position, recognizes that a culture is full of competing worldviews that are not immediately compatible. The fool is the one who points out the antagonistic symbols within culture in order to subvert the powerful who assume a single semiotic landscape and empower the weak whose own signs and practices are ignored by the powerful.

Finally, EunJoo Mary Kim has provided a strong critique of the semiotic method as anachronistic to a new globalized world. Kim critiques the homiletical appropriation of semiotics for ignoring the radical difference that permeates our cultures. Difference, Kim adds, that is more conspicuous in our increasingly globalized and urbanized world. The semiotic approach to congregations might have made sense in a more parochial world but it is harder to support when "the majority of Christian churches today have become urbanized and globalized; their members lives as social beings in a multiracial and multicultural society on a global scale; and their churches coexist with different ethnic, denominational, and religious communities in close proximity."<sup>38</sup> Kim makes clear that while local practice still remains, no congregation has remained untouched by the global forces of economics, cultural diversity, information sharing, and climate change. Thus, the context for most congregations is an idiosyncratic amalgamation of local tradition, practice, and language and global sociopolitical, ecological and cultural forces. Kim calls this web of local and global forces, "glocalization," and argues that preaching must become "transcontextual" if it is to speak into this new glocal world.<sup>39</sup> For Kim, a

---

<sup>35</sup> Even if a person were to reflect upon their dialogue after the fact, the reflection would be a second order memory of an internal dialogue and important communicative data would be lost. Similar to the ethnographer who writes thick description from her field notes, so too would the inner dialogue be removed from its original situation and therefore be tamed of its own hurly burly character.

<sup>36</sup> Charles L. Campbell & Johan H. Cilliers, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as Rhetoric of Folly*, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), 172.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 70.

<sup>38</sup> Kim, *Preaching in an Age of Globalization*, 9.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 41.

transcontextual paradigm for preaching needs to stereoscopically attend to both the local context and global forces simultaneously. Like the other post-semiotic proposals above, the specter of “otherness” looms. Kim recognizes that the presence of otherness demands careful hermeneutical strategies and ought to give the preacher pause as she attempts to understand her congregation. Similar to Campbell, Kim encourages the preacher to seek a liminal space of interpretation. Kim writes, “In the liminal space, dynamic interaction happens among the world of the text, the world of the context and the world of the preacher’s own toward a new reality.”<sup>40</sup> It is in the in-between spaces of culture that the vision of otherness becomes so apparent and the metaphor of the congregation as “text” seems most inadequate. A flat synchronic map of the world is not very useful when caught between the shifting landscapes of a globalized world.

\*\*\*

As noted above, I have no intention of sabotaging the textual approach to congregations. Rather, my purpose is to provide a helpful description of the ways in which a textual approach to congregations can lead to obfuscation rather than greater clarity. A textual approach to the study of congregations can be very helpful in understanding some of the pre-established harmonies of the congregational culture. But not everything is pre-established harmony; cultures are formed as much by distinction and struggle as they are by harmony and unity. The synchronic observation without a corresponding diachronic move will lead to objectivist fictions. The unchecked authority of the observer can sponsor as much dissonance as harmony. My hope is that by bringing to light these critiques of a text based approach to congregations we might begin to produce paradigms of congregational interpretation like the ones above that have respect for the ways in which congregations are both whole and fractured, both product and producer, and both subject and object.

Congregations are both like a text and unlike a text. Congregations are like a book, but unlike any book in the library. Congregations are like a book of questions and provisional answers, a book of conversation and dialogue. This book is not simply full of words, but it has pictures as well, some of the pages in this book are illegible, some pages are written in code that is impenetrable to certain readers. This book has some pages torn out and some pages glued back in. Some of these pages sing—simple melodies just lift off the page. Some of the pages are written in an angry scrawl and some pages in a floral script. The book has many authors and it is always in the process of being changed, altered, and rewritten. The point of the observer is not to redact, compile, and harmonize, the point of the observer is to point out that this book exists and that people in the congregation can keep adding to it because, in the end, the book is never finished, and, thanks be to God, the book has room for everyone to add something.

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 69.