Book Note


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Two authors, Sabrina Müller and Jasime Suhner, challenge the traditional, male-dominated, and often conservative practices of homiletics in the German-speaking world. Müller, a Swiss practical theologian, focuses on the interplay between lived religion and theological reflection, while Suhner identifies as an expert in the field of religious education with experience in art, dance and mysticism. Together, they developed an experimental and playful book design, drawing inspiration from walks in the mountains, sketchnotes, and a conference with Wim Wenders and Hartmut Rosa. Their homiletical blueprint breaks with conventions and draws insights from postcolonial studies, feminist theology, and process theology, presenting a “breathing theology” with new words and perspectives. The book’s premise is that effective, soulful, and meaningful preaching can happen both inside and outside the church, while addressing the shortcomings of classical homiletical contexts and traditional church preaching that – in their eyes – often fail to meet preachers’, homileticians’, and listeners’ expectations. The authors acknowledge departing from traditional notions of homiletics and emphasize that their approach is not classical. In her foreword, Uta Pohl-Patalong summarizes the book’s purpose as igniting a spark in people’s eyes to inspire them to change themselves and the world by taking the sermon out of the pulpit. The book’s dedication (p. 10) suggests it will be valuable reading for those inspired by the Ruach, explorative-homiletically active, or dancers both inside and beyond the pulpit.

The book belongs to the new “Interdisciplinary Studies on Transformation” series, which holds a promising name. It begins with a foreword by the editorial team (pp. 11–14) authored by Thorsten Dietz and Tobias Faix. Uta Pohl-Patalong, an expert in dialogical forms of preaching, provides an additional foreword (p. 15f.). These forewords highlight the resilient network in which the series and the book stand, signifying that the book’s concerns may resonate with a larger part of practical theology in the German-speaking world. Therefore, the book is not alone
on a wide corridor, as some of the authors’ claims may suggest. The book’s substantive exploration of the topic commences with reflections on the authors’ subjectivity and contextuality (esp. p. 24). They believe that the subjectivity of researchers and their context is relevant to understanding the content of the book. They criticize white theologians who do not situate themselves and draw on postcolonial and feminist insights. They try to look beyond the “plateau of Western-white theology” (p. 14).

After a brief introduction (pp. 17–31) outlining the book’s main concerns, research methodology, and structure, the book is divided into three detailed parts: Part 1 (pp. 33–77) offers a critical analysis of homiletic lines of development. Part 2 (pp. 70–143) addresses identified problem areas and connects them to power-theoretical issues to promote a homiletical theory and practice that meets feminist and postcolonial requirements. Part 3 (pp. 175–227) proposes a transformative homiletics and provides concrete recommendations for action in preaching practice. The section includes examples of transformative preaching practice that is sensitive to issues of power, culminating in practical applications at the “homiletical construction site” (pp. 219–226).

Particularly enlightening is the section in Part 2 on the pneumatological foundation of the authors’ passionate plea for a transformative and power-sensitive homiletics (chapter 16, pp. 159–173), which is based on the Hebrew “non-concept” of the spirit, Ruach. The pneumatological justification of homiletics is certainly not new, but rather a part of the “classic sermon theory” criticized by the authors before, although they certainly set new accents here – not least through the choice of the “feminine” Ruach as a fundamental homiletic category.

The ideas presented by the two authors may not always appear groundbreaking to readers familiar with the homiletical debate. Many of their core concerns have been previously discussed and explored by other scholars. For example, decades ago, Otto Haendler highlighted the importance of reflective subjectivity for both theological research and preaching culture. Manuel Stetter’s dissertation recently focused on the transformative nature of preaching, which is another notable example. Unfortunately, this book fails to adequately acknowledge such significant contributions. It is not my intention to imply that this omission is deliberate or a result of the authors disregarding the findings of white male academics. However, it is worth noting that while Stetter and Haendler are not mentioned at all, Rudolf Bohren, another prominent figure in traditional German Homiletics (who is also a “white man”), is referenced more than ten times.

The book features gray-highlighted boxes that provide theoretical depth on terms, concepts, and literature references. It also includes jagged-line boxes with thought-provoking impulses and questions for further consideration. The authors’ intent is to empower readers to position themselves in ongoing debates, rather than
closing them. Additionally, the book includes sketchnotes for visualization, making it both more practical and enhancing its comparatively loose and fresh style.

In general, the authors’ approach with their focus on transformation, change, and positionality provides valuable help for those who view preaching as a comprehensive phenomenon of Christian-religious speech and wish to move beyond traditional, Sunday pulpit speeches in church services. The authors appreciate non-theological theoretical constructions such as Hanna Arendt’s discussions on the potential power (cf. pp. 94–107) and implement them to the homiletical debate. While some scholars may argue that the authors are overly critical of German homiletics from the past years and decades, they acknowledge that many impulses from various approaches, such as dramaturgical homiletics, sign-theoretically inspired homiletics, and aesthetic homiletics (cf. pp. 61–70), can still be beneficial and linked to their concerns, even if they were written by “primarily white men” (p. 50).

The book makes a significant contribution by emphasizing the need to consider the relationship between media culture and preaching culture in contemporary society. Traditional homiletic research that mainly focuses on the reference to texts, text production and text presentation is insufficient in the current era of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube or mobile apps. Instead, homiletic research must incorporate an understanding of the role of elements such as corporeality, visuality, and digitality in preaching practices. This practice-oriented book is undoubtedly a profitable source of inspiration for late modern homiletics and preachers, regardless of their gender or age.