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Preaching as Internal Interreligious Dialogue: A Harvard Case Study

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Abstract: *This paper explores the overlapping space between an internal conception of interreligious dialogue and models of conversational preaching and homiletical theology which embrace mutual critical-correlational theological method. At the heart of the paper is a close reading of a sermon focusing on John 5:31–47—preaching much influenced by interreligious hermeneutics. The analysis shows how preaching effectively may address some fundamental principles of interreligious dialogue, for example by offering space for open-minded, respectful, and attentive listening and learning from the religious other, or by encouraging curiosity as well as deep reflection on Christian gospel in the light of gospel resonant of voices from other religious traditions. In the concluding discussion, the implications of this research for the rhetoric of conversational preaching practice are highlighted, and further homiletical-theological reflection on the relationship between preaching and interreligious dialogue is encouraged, not only because it is possible but because it is desirable for Christian preaching and homiletics in particular.*

Christian preaching is probably not the most likely candidate venue for encouraging interreligious dialogue. Sadly, preaching has too often been a place where the identities of non-Christian others have been used as a foil either for defining or redefining a Christian group. Advocates of interreligious dialogue might point to other shortcomings that make preaching an unlikely partner for such work: the historically monological form of the sermon, especially in culturally dominant groups; the culturally privileged place that the pulpit has occupied in Euro American traditions; and the location of preaching practice within religious traditions for which preaching is often precisely a key identity marker. There are many good reasons for assuming that preaching is not the ideal place to engage in interreligious dialogue.

At the same time, we sense that this may just be the right moment to explore strengthening such a relationship. Two key insights about interreligious dialogue and the task of preaching themselves lead us to bringing the two together in practice.

First, the field of homiletics itself has begun to develop theologically more open, dialogical models to describe the preaching task. We think in particular of the rise of conversational models of preaching and more dialogical approaches to homiletical theology. At the level of preaching practice and theology, homileticians are embracing mutual critical-correlational ways of thinking about the relationship of preaching both to differences within communities of faith and the diverse sources and norms with which theological method is carried out in the preaching task. While conversational preaching as a practice remains monological, it attends internally to differences among congregants and develops and promotes rhetorical practices that expose dominant views to dialogue and revision.¹ Similarly, in homiletical theology, the theological task of preaching is viewed as unfinished. This is to say that within the

¹ See e.g. Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997); John S. McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001); O. Wesley Allen Jr., *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach to Proclamation and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); Ronald J. Allen, John S. McClure, and O. Wesley Allen Jr., eds., *Under the Oak Tree: The Church as Community of Conversation in a Conflicted and Pluralistic World* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013).

diverse sources and norms for doing theology in the pulpit, there is no clear, unified resolution of the tradition (say, Christian antijudaism in its ancient texts), but actually an ongoing dialogue of critique and revision: especially at the level of scripture, reason, tradition, and experience.

Second, the study of interreligious dialogue has helped to clarify the range of activity that dialogue actually entails. While we may usually think of interreligious dialogue as a meeting of religious leaders or groups in such a space that allows each to bear witness to each one's truth in an environment of mutual respect, the actual practice of interreligious dialogue happens across a much broader spectrum. Comparative theologian Catherine Cornille notes the many forms assumed these days by interreligious dialogue, e.g. "meetings between religious leaders in a common display of solidarity and friendship [...] collaboration between members of different religions in grassroots projects [...] intense discussion and debate between religious scholars [...] interreligious prayer [and] spiritual exchange."² Even then, a fundamental ontological distinction can be made between these various external manifestations of interreligious dialogue and *internal* or *interior dialogue*: "an internal conversation going on between two religions to which [an individual] has been exposed [...]."³ This is a dialogue, says Faisal Bin Abdulrahman Bin Muaammar, "about the meaning of life, through a search for meaning that investigates the foundations of religious, cultural, and ideological worldviews, as well as their constant interactions." It is appropriately labelled "internal" because it "takes place within one's own self-consciousness, stimulated by interactions with both written and oral sources of knowledge. It is a dialogue that is often invisible and inaudible because it takes place inside one's head and heart."⁴

We are convinced that this overlapping space, particularly between an internal conception of interreligious dialogue and models of conversational preaching and homiletical theology that embrace mutual critical-correlational theological method as a way of accounting for difference present a unique opportunity for rethinking preaching itself as interreligious dialogue. We particularly think it is valuable given the opportunity of developing and furthering an explicitly interreligious consciousness not just among leadership, but the faithful as well.

As a way of initiating a wider discussion of this topic in the field, we focus in this paper on an analysis of a sermon that embodies internally a profound dialogue with religious others and inhabits a kind of mutual critical-correlational view of theological method in actual preaching practice. We think a close reading of this sermon in light of some clear criteria of the "conditions" for interreligious dialogue will yield a helpful platform for the field of homiletics to consider a more wide-ranging, pluralistic vision for its conversational and theological practice in preaching. As we propose this, we aim to instigate a self-conscious dialogue in the field of homiletics itself about the relationship of preaching and interreligious dialogue. While we believe that specific models of conversational preaching and homiletical theology are open to such a possibility, the reality is that relationship has yet to be realized in the direction we hope to surface here. We want this study to offer a first step toward such dialogue. Following the sermon analysis, we also hope to draw out conclusions that may further buttress why such a move is not only possible but desirable for Christian preaching and homiletics in particular.

² Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 2008), 1.

³ Sallie B. King, "Interreligious Dialogue" in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity* by Chad Meister, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 102.

⁴ Faisal Bin Abdulrahman Bin Muaammar, "Agree to Differ in Matters of Ultimate Concern: Religious Diversity and Interreligious Dialogue" in *UNESCO: Agree to Differ* (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization/Tudor Rose, 2015), 48. Accessed December 4, 2016. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002315/231544E.pdf>.

Sermon, context and analytical procedure

The sermon used as our example (Appendix 1) was preached on 9 March 2016 during the “Thursday Morning Eucharist,” a recurrent event in the religious services calendar at Harvard Divinity School. The preacher, Francis X. Clooney, is a Jesuit priest, a leading authority on Hinduism, and the Parkman Professor of Divinity, Professor of Comparative Theology, and Director of the Center for the Study of World Religions at HDS. The sermon was prepared but Clooney used no notes. The Gospel reading of the day from John 5:31–47 “*If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true ...*” was focal to the sermon. Two main themes run through Clooney’s sermon. The first is our latent inability as Christians to acknowledge God’s acts of love that happen right before us and, consequently, our failure to follow Jesus and act as people for whom love has been revealed. The second is more metatextual in nature and addresses the hermeneutic challenges facing preachers taking on John’s gospel. In many ways, Clooney’s sermon could be seen as a response to Marilyn Salmon’s urgent call for Christian preaching not to “resort to false and harmful stereotypes” of Jews in the gospels and, in several places in the sermon, Clooney proposes hermeneutic and other approaches intended to counter the perpetuation of Christian anti-Judaism.⁵ The two themes come together to form a central message in Clooney’s sermon: do not point a finger at other people, do not engage in polemics about what may be right or wrong; instead, pray for your own transformation so that you can truly respond to Jesus’ call to love.

An audio recording was made of the service up to and including the sermon. Following the service, one of the authors transcribed the sermon in full. The author attending the service took observation notes (about the venue, people attending, things said or done, gestures etc.). While the notes were crucial as a supplement to our close reading of the sermon, they also formed the basis for a follow-up conversation with the preacher. Approximately three weeks after the sermon, one author met Clooney for a (semi-structured) interview where we talked about his preaching in general terms as well as the sermon in question in particular. Before the interview, Clooney had been asked to read a copy of the transcript, and encouraged to take self-reflective margin notes about anything that came to mind as he revisited his own sermon. In the informal atmosphere of the interview we compared our observation notes with Clooney’s reflections, adding to a comprehensive, and partly collective, initial analysis.

We would have done an “interreligious reading” of the sermon injustice if we had analyzed it line by line. Therefore, a holistic approach where we were guided by a set of established “principles” for interreligious dialogue was chosen, and we evaluated Clooney’s sermon on the basis of how it addresses these principles.

⁵ Marilyn J. Salmon, *Preaching Without Contempt* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 107. This second principle may prove to be especially significant for the practice of preaching as internal, interreligious dialogue. The unfinished work of the tradition around the relationship of the Christian sect that begins to emerge from Judaism after the destruction of the Temple in and after the latter part of the first century becomes an ever reinscribed space within the tradition where interreligious issues still haunt the tradition and offer within its own effective history, an opportunity to do homiletical theology other-wise.

Table 1. Principles of interreligious dialogue, adapted from King⁶

Interreligious dialogue is conditioned by:

- Principle 1:* Willingness and ability to listen to and learn from the religious other.
- Principle 2:* Willingness and ability to speak with confidence and bear witness.
- Principle 3:* Open-mindedness, curiosity, and sense of discovery.
- Principle 4:* Utmost respect for the other (and their beliefs, traditions, etc.).
- Principle 5:* Self-criticism rather than defensiveness.

Needless to say, this list of five principles for interreligious dialogue should not be considered conclusive. However, the principles serve a purpose in this paper by providing a framework of comparative standards for the empirical analysis (further elaboration on the principles is deferred to the analysis where they may be properly contextualized). These principles seem especially plausible to us in light of the very mutual critical-correlationist models that often guide conversational preaching and homiletical theology as a whole.⁷

An interreligious reading of Francis X. Clooney's sermon

As in most instances of analytical work of this nature, our analysis moves between, on the one hand, empirical verification evidenced by data and, on the other hand, informed yet tentative supposition. The analysis is concerned with both content and form as in preaching, a separation of form from content is unsustainable: "form and content are of a piece."⁸ Quotations from the sermon appear together with a line reference to make it easier for readers to go to the appendix and confirm the analysis.

Preaching and Dialogue Principle 1 (willingness and ability to listen and learn from the other)

Contemporary interreligious dialogue endeavors to place emphasis on the listening and learning mode (notwithstanding Principle 2),⁹ on "listen[ing] to the other with a certain attention, the hermeneutical openness to understanding the other."¹⁰

Clooney acknowledged the central place of sermon listening in our interview by way of a rhetorical question:

How can you carry on a conversation if you are not willing to listen? One's starting points need to be open to correction, what one thinks one knows must be open to be challenged; reducing the other to something static is a mistake. Really listening [to what the other has to offer] is indispensable.

⁶ King, "Interreligious," 107.

⁷ Ronald J. Allen, "Preaching as Mutual Critical Correlation through Conversation" in *Purposes of Preaching* by Jana Childers, ed. (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2004), 1–22. David Tracy takes up the relation to interreligious dialogue in particular in his chapter, "Western Hermeneutics and Interreligious Dialogue," in *Interreligious Hermeneutics*, C. Cornille and C. Conway, eds. (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010), 1–43.

⁸ Fred. B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Atlanta: Chalice, 2001), 18.

⁹ King, "Interreligious," 107.

¹⁰ Marianne Moyaert, "Interreligious Dialogue" in *Understanding Interreligious Relations* by David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt, and David Thomas, eds. (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2013), 217.

Early on in Clooney's sermon, listening is explicitly foregrounded:

(Lines 34–36): A powerful message I think all of us can hear in Lent: we already know what we need to know.

However, listening is thematic throughout the sermon, though perhaps less conspicuously than in this first instance. There are no less than 31 instances of “say”-speech events, all of which are suggestive of this listening theme, as the act of someone “saying” something also implies a listening agent. If we disregard for a moment the privileged speaking position granted Clooney by virtue of being the preacher, multiple other speaking subjects are foregrounded in the sermon: Jesus, John, and the Hindu teacher Shankara, all of whom invite us to listen attentively to what *they* have to say:

(lines 103–105): We, of all people, should know better. Shankara said this to his fellow Brahmins; Jesus (and John) SAID this to those who watched Jesus; and Jesus says the same to us today.

The recurrent construal of these individuals as subjects of speech events is conversationally significant as it places them in a position to engage us as listeners, as individuals partial to conversation. While they are also occasionally construed as objects of speech events, i.e. when Clooney talks *about* them, the more frequent construal of Jesus, John, and Shankara as grammatical subjects suggests a discursive empowerment and acknowledgment of these individuals as real conversational equals, worthy of our listening. Their status as conversational partners in the sermon is further accentuated by *how* their speech is presented. Close to 23 % of the words in the entire sermon (i.e. including everything) is represented as “hypothetical” direct speech from one of these individuals, as in this important section where Clooney envisages the evangelist addressing us directly, creating an immediacy and certain urgency by virtue of the (hypothetical) direct rendition of his words:

(lines 64–69): ...John is saying this today too: “You are the educated people; you are the people of God; you are the people who have the sacred text; you are the people who have the temple. Why don’t you get it and see who this is?” And he is most concerned about the people just like himself saying: “I am a Jew” – unfortunately he does not say this – “I am a Jew, you are Jewish, why don’t you get it?”

Additionally, the religious belonging of these speaking subjects is significant. Obviously, Shankara is Hindu, but Clooney urges us also to remember

(line 54): ...that Jesus is Jewish, John is Jewish...

In other words, the speaking subjects privileged in significant parts by the sermon represent the religious other, the Hindu and the Jew; it is the words of these religious others that we hear echoing through the sermon and are called to attend to.

The voice of the religious other is also structurally prominent. Although this is a sermon which is deeply committed to an understanding of Christian gospel and its contemporary relevance, for the opening and framing of the sermon, Clooney turns to another religious

tradition, and we are invited to share in the central tenets of the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad and Shankara's teaching based on it:

(lines 3–4, 7–9): ...every self is ultimately one with the universe in a very powerful way... don't water down the scripture; don't take the scripture for less; don't make it something common sense, but change yourself to fit the scripture – because it is true.

Effectively, Clooney is utilizing central teachings from Hinduism to break open the underlying meaning of John's gospel; he seems to have complete faith in his listeners' opening themselves up to this exercise in interreligious hermeneutics, and thus in their willingness to learn from the religious other. Quite evidently, Clooney has a strong belief in the transformative potential of listening and learning from this message and what it can bring to our understanding of the Christian gospel:

(lines 108–112): ...we have two weeks of Lent left, and two weeks in which to pray that the transformation Jesus is calling for takes place. The changing of our hearts, the changing of our lives so that instead of throwing stones at other people realize that we are the ones being chastised...Now is the time to convert your life

Preaching and Dialogue Principle 2 (bearing witness and speaking with confidence)

Preachers, by virtue of their right to preach from within a faith tradition, are able to speak compellingly with confidence and integrity from within their own tradition and, importantly, have the ability to formulate a theology based on witness bearing which resonates with their Christian listeners. Interreligious dialogue, King says, also "requires witness, understood as expressing one's *own perspective*, experience, and commitment to one's religion."¹¹ Many Christians may want to resort to the comfort of a denominational identity and/or definition, at least during the initial stages of dialogue, but careful preaching can help people develop a stronger sense of confessional self that is open to a different kind of interreligious exploration. From the point of view of her "homiletic of comparative theology," Yarbrough confirms this position, saying that:¹²

the role of witness is crucial for the preacher.... In a religiously plural world, all people of faith must accept that their understanding of the divine reality we Christians call God is mediated through the lens of their particular tradition. What you see depends heavily on where you stand, and so no one can do more than bear witness to their *own experience* and observation.

Thus, the individual witness-bearing in the sermon is conditioned by the preacher's experience and individual sense-making of the text, and typically expressed affirmatively. Clooney's sermon highlights this witness-bearing dimension of preaching in several ways. Clooney represents in this sermon what Thomas G. Long calls a biblical witness: [...] a preacher [who] prayerfully [and dutifully] goes to the Bible on behalf of the people and then speaks on Christ's behalf what she or he hears there."¹³ Clooney's engagement with the gospel text boils down to his finding

¹¹ King, "Interreligious," 106, emphasis added.

¹² Yarbrough, "Practicing," 202.

¹³ Thomas G. Long, T, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 52.

(lines 20–21): a beautiful teaching in today’s reading from the fifth chapter of the Gospel of John, and ...a big problem.

The “problem” he witnesses to, the contemptuous gospel tone towards Jews, is brought into a different perspective as a result of Clooney’s interreligious engagement with Shankara. Effectively, this is an acknowledgement of “the witness we have heard from our interreligious neighbors about their experiences [...]”.¹⁴

Clooney is also bearing witness to how one can remain firmly established within one’s own (scriptural) tradition, and still engage in multiple ways and at various levels with other religious traditions. During the interview, he expressed it thus:

The complexity, the openness, the taking seriously, both the gospel, the Jewish interlocutors, and the Hindu parallel...this makes for a complicated kind of witness, but an important witness: See, you can take ALL [emphatic] of this seriously and still be here as a Christian.

Clooney’s confidence in the way the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Shankara’s commentary, and John’s gospel jointly carry an important message for the contemporary listener is reminiscent of one of his recent publications where he expresses a similar point: “we see the other in light of our own, and our own in light of the other.”¹⁵ There is definitely, he says, a “possibility of being intelligently faithful to tradition, even while seeking fresh understanding outside the tradition”¹⁶ Clooney’s position, as evidenced by such claims, represents an interesting case of inclusive Christian testimony.

Through his interreligious testimony, when it is appropriate, Clooney speaks unwaveringly and with strong epistemic confidence. Rhetorically, this testimonial confidence is reflected through the repeated use of determinate modality, conveying a sense of certainty characteristic of the poised witness:

(lines 34–35): ...we already know what we need to know. The word of Jesus is absolutely clear...

Such forceful rhetoric becomes even more acute when it is presented as Jesus speaking directly to us, naming us by name:

(lines 26, 30, 90): You already know who I am...you know who I am...you know all of this...

The preaching-conversational implications of expressing such conviction seem clear: Clooney wants to instill confidence in us too; he wants us to embrace a Biblical message, one which has become clearer to us by virtue of our dialoguing with Hinduism; he also wants us to become self-assured witnesses, testifying to the potency of religions in conversation, to the very positive impact such conversations may have on us and our religious convictions. Listeners could be

¹⁴ Yarbrough, “Practicing,” 202.

¹⁵ Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 13.

¹⁶ Ibid.

challenged to pursue, Clooney reminded us during the interview, “a new hermeneutic of their own, open to relevant interreligious influences”:

[Preaching] is a step toward getting Christians to have a more mature and nuanced relationship to their own scripture, which therefore would be a development of their maturity as Christians, their Christian identity. There must be stages of growth, so you go from “everything in the scripture is simply as it is”... to a very critical relationship... to some kind of sense that we are not authorized to dismiss or censure scripture... but we may up to now have had an incredibly naïve sense of how it works and therefore have to listen to it anew...and provoke a sense that “the way I have been reading these texts no longer works and therefore if I am serious about taking them seriously, I have to find a new hermeneutic”...

The notion of identifying a new hermeneutic is a significant theme in much of Clooney’s preaching and obviously relates to his conviction that preaching, and faith more generally, benefits from productive interreligious exchange. A consequence of finding this new hermeneutic is that it will greatly help sermon listeners to develop an authentic testimony to their own faith, and in Clooney’s sermon, listeners are encouraged to turn to another religious tradition for hermeneutical inspiration.¹⁷ Clooney is adamant that anyone can apply hermeneutical tools for the benefit of hearing an authentic gospel – he wants his preaching to be an incentive for listeners to explore what is outside an “ordinary” Christian frame of reference. The result, if done properly, is not only a more nuanced form of Christian hermeneutics, but a conversation opener with religious traditions other than our own.

The same kind of hermeneutics can be applied to a Christian text as to a Hindu text, if a person is willing and able. The hermeneutical process, the interpretative process, there is no good reason, even if there are doctrinal differences, why we cannot learn how to read better, how to think better about a text [regardless of its religious origin].

To summarize, what we are seeing in Clooney’s sermon with respect to Dialogue Principle 2 is evidence that preaching in conversation with the religious other, nourished by a nuanced hermeneutic, can effectively sustain a Christian philosophy (through witness bearing from *within* the tradition) while simultaneously acting as (and encouraging the listener to be a) witness of *another* tradition, and how these two testimonies can be mutually supportive.

Preaching and Dialogue Principle 3 (open-mindedness and a sense of discovery)

Preconceived ideas about dialogue (e.g. what it will accomplish) is a poor starting point for any dialogue, King argues, primarily because it is impossible to know how the other will affect us individually.¹⁸ The objective of interreligious preaching could be to encourage and cultivate in the listener a sense of curiosity about where a continued conversation with the other may lead, a sense of discovering gospel *involving* the other. Yarbrough recommends that listeners be gospel explorers, that they go “into the world with an open mind and heart, ready to see God at work in the midst of all our worldly encounters, including those with people of

¹⁷ Catherine Cornille, “Conditions for Inter-Religious Dialogue,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue* by Catherine Cornille ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 8.

¹⁸ King, “Interreligious,” 108.

different religious traditions.”¹⁹ Through open minds, we open ourselves to a conversation with others about *their* “gospel,” and what we might take away from it.

Clooney incentivizes such discovery and curiosity by foregrounding the Upanishad, rather than John’s gospel, so that it becomes the frame of reference; a Hindu “gospel” shedding light on the Christian gospel. Clooney makes no attempt at hiding his own enthusiasm for the impact that this conversation with the religious other might have, and he obviously wants his listeners to share that enthusiasm. To facilitate a start of the conversation, the other is described in appreciative, almost passionate, terms:

(lines 1–9, 61): one of the most important ancient Hindu texts... is a text that teaches pure non-dualism, that every self is ultimately one with the universe in a very powerful way... the great Vedanta teacher, Shankara... it [the Scripture] is true... Shankara, the great teacher

Such positive appraisal of the other may be conducive to the listeners’ overall positive evaluation of what dialogue with the other may entail.

Clooney conveys how his own discovery of Shankara’s commentary on the Upanishad has allowed him to arrive at an alternative understanding of the relevant section in John’s gospel. He hopes, no doubt, that having provoked the listeners’ enthusiasm for discovery beyond the “ordinary,” the internal dialogue between the listeners and the other may continue in some shape or form.

What I see myself as doing in any preaching context is helping people to see that the word of God is far more interesting, unfamiliar, and challenging than they thought it was. I often urge people to go home and “get out your Bible and re-read this chapter and think about this for yourself... Once the things you think you know well, once that opens up and you realize that you really do not know how to read these texts or what they are about”. I think that would set up a model of openness, a willingness to learn also from other traditions that one ostensibly knows a lot less about and that that needing to know more, not knowing enough, is quite compatible with being a person of faith.

Clooney triggers our curiosity by pointing to an inherent duality of the gospel reading, represented at the surface level as lexical contrast along the positive-negative continuum: the reading is variously described with reference to a beautiful teaching (e.g. line 20) or a powerful message (e.g. line 34), whereas in fact the text also raises a big problem (e.g. line 21). Addressing this problem is the real challenge of this gospel, according to Clooney; the challenging nature of the word of God means that listeners would be wrong in accepting just the beautiful teaching; rather the word of God challenges them to thoughtful engagement, indexed by the many verb phrases involving cognitive activity that goes well beyond a mere reading:

(lines 76–77, 82, 85, 87, 93): the reading today... challenges... in this Gospel... requires deeper thinking... what we can struggle with... to sort out for ourselves... if we can imagine... we could realize...

¹⁹ Yarbrough, “Practicing,” 196.

The lesson of the sermon is clear: the listeners' (and indeed the preacher's) conversation with the religious other becomes a real and viable resource for profound reflective engagement; openness to the other paves the way for genuine gospel discovery. This gospel discovery recalls what Allen refers to as "theological discovery" and the preacher's task of "help(ing) the congregation as a community engage in theological reflection."²⁰ Theological discovery as conceived by Allen is ultimately about revising one's point of view as a result of "thinking afresh about her or his own theology."²¹ As we have seen, the internal interreligious dialogue prompted by preaching conversations offers an excellent platform for pursuing such discovery.

Preaching and Dialogue Principle 4 (respect for the other)

According to King "each party to the dialogue *must* be recognized as occupying a place of respect equal to the others."²² The lack of compromise is noticeable here – there is nothing suggesting that respect merely *enriches* dialogue – without respect for the other, there can simply be no dialogue. Respect for the other (not just the religious other but all "others") is also a cornerstone of postmodern (post-apologetic) homiletics: "each participant [in the preaching conversation] must respect the otherness or integrity of all other participants."²³ Preaching is, therefore, a discourse well prepared to handle the pronouncement and sustenance of respect as a necessary condition for the relationship with the other and, arguably, preaching can contribute significantly and profoundly by way of ideationally and interpersonally constructing respect in the sermon. During our interview, respect was addressed conceptually on several occasions with Clooney noting, e.g. that

...respect is central, and respect is a very demanding virtue... Respect should not be superficial, and the most respectful thing to do is to really get to know the other tradition.

In Clooney's sermon, respect may be understood as having different dimensions. In one sense the sermon addresses respect ideationally, i.e. as an experiential phenomenon, problematized as respect for a text about otherness prone to misunderstanding, and how this impacts directly on the participants in the dialogue. Listeners' relationship to the text, and the deployment of an interreligious hermeneutic to counter a misreading (essentially a "disrespectful" reading) of the text becomes a central theme. Closer inspection of the sermon confirms that Clooney is concerned both with the text as other, and with the religious other who is *in* the text and consequently subject to our (mis)interpretation of the text. Clooney is adamant, however, that this gospel about religious otherness deserves our respect:

...I want people to learn to respect this chapter of John's gospel. This is about self-respect. It's easy to dismiss it and say let's skip that because it's problematic. That would not be respectful... We are at the service of the Biblical text; this is what we have. The Bible is not simply one more book on this shelf to pick from.

²⁰ Ronald J. Allen, "Preaching as Spark for Discovery in Theology" in *Homiletical Theology: Preaching as Doing Theology*, by David Schnasa Jacobsen, ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 151.

²¹ Ibid.

²² King, "Interreligious," 107, emphasis added.

²³ Allen, "Preaching as Mutual Critical Correlation," 3.

In addition, however, respect becomes a central interpersonal concern in the discursive relationship between Clooney and the listeners where, clearly, Clooney is anxious to open up a conversational space to further the internal interreligious dialogue. According to Wesley Allen Jr., sermon listeners must be granted the “freedom to assent or disagree” with a sermon.²⁴ This freedom presupposes that there is an interpretative or dialogic space in the sermon that is open to the extent that listeners may inhabit it and exploit it, informed by their experiences, opinions, and desires. When preaching invites listeners to share in a dialogue involving the religious other, preaching must respect that listeners want to participate in the conversation on their own individual terms; for this reason, certain conversational allowances must be made. In the Andover sermon, Clooney is sensitive to listeners’ desire to extend the conversation.

A prominent feature of the sermon is thus the prolific use of so-called hedging language, typically used to express alternative viewpoints, possibility and open-mindedness about a proposition.

(lines 48–61): One view is just to, you know, not say those words... Another thing is to not do... A third thing to do...Fourth, I think we can also

A powerful message I think all of us can hear in Lent; ... I think we cannot just wave our hand... I think, probably, if we put ourselves in that spot... And I think if we took it in that tone... probably...maybe...I suppose...I think it reminds us... I think the point is...I think we can also, probably, as I was suggesting...I think there’s a way in which John is saying this today too.

This language, rejecting assertiveness in favor of non-assertiveness, is not intended to convey uncertainty or doubt in the epistemic sense, rather the purpose is to acknowledge sermon listeners as active participants in the sermonic conversation, and to further their internal dialogue without imposing on them. By resorting to this kind of rhetoric, Clooney is encouraging listeners to explore further on their own, to offer their own alternative individual interpretations of states of affairs with which they are presented, and to open up their own (tacit) internal dialogues. Clooney needs, however, to strike a reasonable balance between showing respect for the listener in this regard, and expressing the confidence of the credible and passionate witness. Cornille draws attention to this challenging dimension of interreligious dialogue, saying that “whereas the receptive side of dialogue requires complete openness, the active side on the other hand presupposes total commitment.”²⁵

Preaching and Dialogue Principle 5 (self-criticism rather than defensiveness)

Addressing this last of the dialogue principles, King observes that “all religious traditions are embodied in human institutions, which are limited and fallible” and an interreligious dialogue participant must engage in “appropriate self-criticism of one’s tradition,”²⁶ necessitating a re-evaluation/re-perspectivization of definitive confessional truths, or as Cornille notes, a recognition of “the limited or finite way in which the ultimate truth is grasped or expressed

²⁴ O. Wesley Allen Jr. “Introduction: The Pillars of the New Homiletic” in *The Renewed Homiletic*, by O. Wesley Allen Jr., ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 8.

²⁵ Cornille, “Conditions,” 8.

²⁶ King, “Interreligious,” 107, emphasis added.

within one's religion."²⁷ Effective dialoguing is, to some extent, about exposing one's vulnerability and failure to understand something completely, even when it applies to one's own tradition. Preachers can be instrumental in making self-criticism dialogically constructive rather than destructive, and they can help listeners find their way out of the apparent conversational conundrum of witness-bearing offset by a critique of self.

Clooney addresses the self-criticism head on in the Andover sermon, indeed, it can be argued that the sermon as a whole constitutes a critique of the complacent Christian self, or even a general critique of spiritual complacency across religious boundaries, since neither Hinduism, Judaism or any other religious tradition is immune to Clooney's words in this sermon. By framing his argument with the example of Shankara's critique of the Brahmins (lines 62, 12–13) – those who are “people like himself” yet, depicted as “pointless fools... totally blind to the meaning of the scripture...” – Clooney intertwines Hindu and Christian self-criticism for a powerful message.

The argument with the Jewish leaders that happens there turns into a kind of indictment of us, our failure to listen...I think it's a principle of not thinking that you are in a position to scold people as if you are exempt from scolding, ... Don't be complacent and don't assume that it applies to someone else but not to you.

The critique, exemplified below, is explicit, relentless, and shows how the sermon can be an effective platform for constructive self-criticism:

(lines 31–32, 69, 88–97, 110) ... you are turning away...you've not seen or understood anything...you don't get it. You fools. You call yourself Christian, you call yourself Catholic, you claim to know the Bible, you claim to go to church on Sundays...you damn Catholics, you damn Christians, you don't get it...wasting your life when you should be following me ... throwing stones at other people...

Negative appraisal of Christians is prominently foregrounded in the sermon: as much as one third of the sermon amounts to Christian critique, either inscribed or evoked. Three things are noticeable about this negative appraisal.

First, it is addressed directly to the listeners, who are specifically named in the sermon, using the second person pronoun “you.” Second, the critique is typically attributed to Jesus or John (rather than averred by Clooney himself or the Church), using direct speech to address the listeners. This is consistent with the conversational circumstances as conveyed by the gospel text where Jesus is speaking in the first person to his interlocutors. The sermon listeners are thus construed as directly responding to Jesus' critique rather than merely observing the criticizing of someone else (arguably, an effective move by Clooney if the intention is to “replace” the Jews with the listeners in the reading of the gospel text). Third, the criticism is targeting listeners' tenacity, veracity and propriety *as Christians*; in other words, it is questioning their behavior with reference to what being a follower of Jesus amounts to. This is the same form of critique that Jesus uses for his interlocutors in the gospel reading.

In sum, therefore, it is interesting to note that Clooney chooses to communicate self-criticism very much in keeping with the sentiment and form of the gospel text, providing

²⁷ Cornille, “Conditions,” 21.

additional evidence that respect for the text (even at the rhetorical level) is important and serves a theological as well as dialogic purpose.

From Sermon as Internal Interreligious Dialogue to a Revised Conversational Preaching Theory

An analysis of Clooney's sermon is likewise both an occasion for "beautiful teaching" and a "big problem" for conversational preaching and homiletical theology today. In one sense, the kind of conversational moves made here build on the many insights of emergent theory in the field. We have already seen frequent elaborations of key features of conversational preaching in Clooney's homiletical praxis in the preceding analysis. On the other hand, a move toward preaching as internal, interreligious dialogue ends up challenging seriously the limited frames by which both conversational preaching and homiletical theology have conceived their tasks, especially on the level of underlying theological method. In this way, Clooney's sermon becomes an occasion to assess both the promise and the limits of the ways in which preaching has been conceived and its theological practice undertaken. We will consider this in six respects, three of which impact the rhetoric of conversational preaching practice and three of which challenge deeply the form of mutual critical correlational homiletics that has brought us to this crucial moment:

Conversational Preaching and the Rhetoric of Internal Interreligious Dialogue

1. Framing to thematize listening to the other

One of the most telling features of Clooney's sermon is his use of Shankara's reading of the Upanishad in connection with the assumptions of the people in his own Brahmin class at the very beginning of his sermon. Clooney wishes to place interreligious dialogue at the center of the unfolding conversation in this sermon. In order to do this, however, he must also offer a hermeneutical angle of vision that gives his hearers purchase on such a move. In the course of this first part of his sermon, he not only introduces the subject matter (presumably to students, some of whom may know Shankara and the traditions involved), but also "frames" it by virtue of an analogy with the Biblical text: Shankara is to fellow Brahmins as Jesus is to other Jews. David Buttrick argues that sermon introductions are especially important for setting a hermeneutic frame for the sermon as a whole, which he calls "hermeneutical orientation."²⁸ While this functions here as a key rhetorical feature of setting up conversational preaching in the form of internal interreligious dialogue, it poses underlying material issues theologically which we will cover below. For now, it is sufficient to notice that thematizing listening to the other becomes important not just as a matter of content and context, but hermeneutically through the use of rhetorical framing.

2. Preaching and the vocative

As a way of engaging hearers conversationally, Clooney adopts the use of the vocative "you" in his sermon language. The sermon analysis has indicated how the use of "you" and hedging language work together to leave room for hearers to participate in the emerging insight provided by the preacher's shared internal interreligious dialogue. With the use of vocative language, the preacher also gains added immediacy in speech: the conversation is not merely about "something," but direct address, and specifically in the form of "hypothetical direct speech," a mode of the vocative that builds on Jesus' address in the text and elaborated through

²⁸ David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 90–91.

the interreligious analogy from the Hindu tradition. Where this *stretches* the conversational frame in contemporary homiletical theory is the way it grounds the vocative on Jesus' authority relative to the disciples. While conversational preaching typically aims to accommodate difference with a relativization of power relations between preacher and hearers,²⁹ this particular rhetorical use of the vocative wishes to grant a more significant presence to the "other" that is the analogical relation of Jesus and Shankara. Here, we begin to press beyond the more horizontal terms of much conversational homiletics and move toward something different. In his article, "Western Hermeneutics and Interreligious Dialogue," David Tracy argues that the very nature of conversation interreligiously does more than simply level the relation between participants in the conversation, but also opens up the possibility of conversation/dialogue (in a Gadamerian sense) being sometimes subject to a "Hermeneutics at the Limit," where conversation invites participants into a play around dialogue that eventuates in something beyond conversation itself.³⁰ If preaching is to lay itself open to internal interreligious dialogue, it may need to proceed with Tracy toward a wider sense of conversation that includes "hermeneutics at the limit."

3. *A rhetoric of mutual respect*

This rhetorical commitment is, of course, never *merely* rhetorical in interreligious dialogue and reflects an *a priori* commitment to the other and the possibility of openness to transformation. Preaching has been plagued by the use of the other as a rhetorical foil and a caricature of positions and identities unlike one's own. Conversational preaching is focused on respecting difference, even as such difference is typically instantiated within a tradition, about a practice, or in relation to a community of interpretation internal to the homiletical "round table" itself. Interreligious others, though implicit in the conversational impulse, have yet to be treated widely and explicitly in the literature.³¹ The challenge of a rhetoric of mutual respect in interreligious dialogue, even in our own admittedly more internal mode through the use of a conversational homiletic, likely also calls forth a special focus on respect on the part of the preacher, who, internally, renders the religious other present (see #1 above) by thematizing a discursive listening to an otherwise "absent" other. Given the potential range of interreligious knowledge in contexts of Christian preaching, the cultivation of such respect may require an ever more complex theological formation on the part of the preacher not only to render the "other" accurately as represented in the sermon, but to embody a respectful and engaged interest in the other as Clooney clearly does. In this way, a rhetoric of mutual respect has both direct and indirect consequences with conversation partners: direct to the interreligious dialogue partner represented in the sermon and indirect to hearers who, like the preacher, share in a process of internalizing the respect necessary for such an internal interreligious dialogue to occur.

²⁹ The literature in conversational preaching ranges from the conversational "asymmetry" of McClure's collaborationist proposal in *Roundtable Pulpit*, 52–54, to the more thoroughgoing egalitarian impulses of Lucy Rose's non-hierarchical vision in *Sharing the Word*, 122–23.

³⁰ Tracy, "Western Hermeneutics," 18ff.

³¹ To be clear, representatives of conversational preaching have anticipated interreligious realities as a possibility, see McClure, "Collaborative Preaching from the Margins," *Journal for Preachers*, 19:4 (Pentecost 1996), 37–42. At the same time, the issue of such interreligious difference has only begun to be theorized with respect to conversational methodologies.

Homiletical Theology and the Work of Internal Interreligious Dialogue in Preaching

4. *Homiletical Theology and the Principle of Recognizability*

Homiletical theology, says Ronald Allen, attends both to the prospect of theological discovery in preaching, and to the principle of recognizability as well.³² In order for a true dialogue to take place, preachers as homiletical theologians need to root theological discovery in relation to traditions participating in a hermeneutical, dialogical process. Clooney's foregrounding of this issue begins at the point of introduction and with the use of the analogy itself. Attending to this theological reality becomes a ground by which transformative theological discovery becomes possible. This move does not merely "discuss" scripture, but uses, in tandem with the vocative rhetoric, a kind of direct "trialogue" between two traditions and contemporary interpreters all of which is predicated on the "recognizable." It is that which embodies the very possibility of "bearing witness" and "speaking with confidence" in the unique form of internal, interreligious dialogue represented by the homiletical-theological task of the conversational sermon in this case.

5. *Triangulating Dialogue as Internal to the Christian Tradition Itself*

Building upon this recognizable relation in the triologue between two religious traditions and diverse, contemporary hearers, it is important theologically to drill down into the nature of the interreligious impulse that impacts the sermon's development in light of its own tradition. Clooney's sermon brings to the surface a key element of why internal, interreligious dialogue is an especially apt way of thinking about the theological task of preaching within the Christian tradition. Lurking underneath the contemporary issue of interreligious dialogue today (say, between Christians and Hindus), is the struggle of the Christian tradition as it begins to define itself as an emerging sect within Judaism in its most "recognizable" source: its founding texts. While this ancient reality differs in that it represents an intra-Jewish dynamic in the first century, its history of effects includes an emerging interreligious dialogue between Christians and Jews. This is to say that there is *in nuce* a recognizably Christian interreligious struggle embedded in one of the most recognizable sources of the tradition: The scriptures themselves. The conversational preaching issue of accommodating difference does not become manifest solely at the level of contemporary religious pluralism, but is a latent issue in the founding documents with which conversational preaching does its homiletical-theological work. Internal interreligious dialogue is no postmodern homiletical novelty, but is in a sense internal to the tradition itself.

6. *Discovering Gospel through the Unfinished Work of Internal Interreligious Dialogue*

The tentativeness of the conversational preacher who wishes to try his/her hand at internal interreligious dialogue is therefore inviting hearers to an unfinished, constructive theological task in preaching. At the heart of this homiletical-theological tradition, which internal interreligious dialogue exposes, is the unfinished business of a tradition. A presupposition of conversational preaching and the mutual critical correlational theological method that underlies it, is an openness to "discovering" gospel in a pluralistic, interreligious context. In one sense, this embodies the interreligious dialogical principle of the possibility of self-criticism. This particular sense is not unique to preaching, even though it has not always been practiced. What it does from

³² Allen talks about this in terms of relating theological discovery to what he calls "recognizable continuity" with Bible and tradition, "Preaching as Spark," 147.

the standpoint of homiletical theology, however, is to place the interreligious task not at the periphery of preaching practice, but at its heart. Conversational preaching and homiletical theology both place the gospel at the center of their work. The internal, interreligious model of preaching is more than a “man bites dog” one-off event, but stands at the heart of its unfinished theological task.

Appendix
Sermon (John 5:31-47) offered by Francis X. Clooney S. J. on 9 March, 2016

1 I am teaching a course this semester on Hinduism and one of the most important ancient
2 Hindu texts, the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, and the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad is a text that
3 teaches pure non-dualism, that every self is ultimately one with the universe in a very
4 powerful way. And we are reading with the Upanishad the great Vedanta teacher, Shankara,
5 who lived maybe a thousand years after the Upanishad but wrote a commentary trying to
6 bring out the full meaning of this teaching of your self as the self of the universe. And he
7 constantly drives home the point: don't water down the scripture; don't take the scripture for
8 less; don't make it something common sense, but change yourself to fit the scripture –
9 because it is true. In class the other day, there's one passage where he talks about his worst
10 enemies, they are the Brahmans, what he impolitely calls "the scum of the Brahmans" (as one
11 translator puts it,) the logic choppers, the mere ritualists who just do rituals in a closed-
12 minded way. He yells at them like they are pointless fools, they are nothing else, they are
13 stupid, they are his enemies, totally blind to the meaning of the scripture. But what's ironic
14 about it, is that these targets are precisely of his own class, because he is a Brahman, he is a
15 ritualist, he is a teacher, he uses logic. While he talks to many people in the course of his
16 commentary on his teaching of the self and universe, the people he gets furious at are his own
17 kind.

18
19 The reason I mention this today – you may have figured this out already – is because on the
20 one hand we have a beautiful teaching in today's reading from the fifth chapter of the Gospel
21 of John, and on the other hand we have a big problem. The beautiful teaching that continues
22 in the common lectionary Tuesday, Wednesday and today Thursday, is that Jesus has helped a
23 man who is crippled to get up and walk, and when this man gets up and walk Jesus says
24 basically: "This is the power of God in your midst; the Father has sent me. This is the power
25 of the true God." And the reading today, despite its many complications (because we have to
26 be brief on Thursday mornings!) is basically saying: "You already know who I am, but you
27 will not accept me. You see what I do. You've had messengers like John the Baptist, you have
28 the scripture, the word of Moses himself, and you saw me take this man, who was well-known
29 for being unable to walk, and helping him to walk. You can read your own hearts. If any of
30 this is clear to you, you know who I am. And it's really annoying that you are not going to
31 follow me. It's really annoying that you are turning away, as if you've not seen or understood
32 anything."

33
34 A powerful message I think all of us can hear in Lent: we already know what we need to
35 know. The word of Jesus is absolutely clear, John thinks. And this word really calls us to
36 change our lives. And we often don't.

37
38 The problem is that this message is addressed to "you Jews". Earlier in the chapter "the Jews"
39 are very annoyed with Jesus because he told the man to get up and walk, "you were crippled,
40 now take your mat and go home." And "the Jews" are annoyed because this is on the Sabbath
41 and he is not supposed to carry his mat. And then Jesus says: "This is the word of my Father".
42 And then since "the Jews" hate him because he says God is his Father, "the Jews" want to kill
43 him. Now this is highly problematic, I think we know this. This language of "the Jews": "The

Jews hate Jesus”, “the Jews want to kill Jesus.” And I think the problem is we have a powerful message: God is here; God is before you; change your life. And then John again and again saying: “And ‘the Jews did not get it’”.

And so what do we do with this? One view is just to, you know, not say those words. Any time in John’s gospel “the Jews” are mentioned, change it to “the leaders” “the people” or something like that, but of course we did not do that this morning. Another thing is to not do what the Catholic Church (in this Common Lectionary) does, adding today (as yesterday) “Jesus said to the Jews” which is actually not in the text; we are reminded that Jesus is speaking to “the Jews”, without further explanation given. A third thing to do, I suppose, is to realize that Jesus is Jewish, John is Jewish, the people he is arguing with are Jewish. This is not some kind of gentile attack on the Jews. But it’s an in-house argument in some way, and you can go back and anyone who wants to go to the library later on I can show you all the books about the controversies in the earliest church when John and his community felt persecuted and they are pushing back against the establishment and fell into this language of “Jesus and the Jews” and “Jesus against the Jews”. So we can see this kind of battle going on in a text like this. Fourth, I think we can also, probably, as I was suggesting before, we can generalize it. The reason I mentioned Shankara, the great teacher, he was most annoyed at people like himself, who he thought should know better, and said: “You have the text, you are smart, you are educated, you’ve done all these things, you see it all – why don’t you realize that the self is one with the universe.” And I think there’s a way in which John is saying this today too: “You are the educated people; you are the people of God; you are the people who have the sacred text; you are the people who have the temple. Why don’t you get it and see who this is?” And he is most concerned about the people just like himself saying: “I am a Jew” – unfortunately he does not say this – “I am a Jew, you are Jewish, why don’t you get it?”

Still, none of this takes away the problem — the problem of the 2000 years since then, in which texts like this start to have an odious life of their own: the “Jews hate Jesus”, “the Jews are narrow-minded”, “the Jews don’t like curing on the Sabbath”, “the Jews want to kill Jesus because he is a good man.” This afterlife has lived a disastrous history for 2000 years and I think we cannot just wave our hand and explain it away. Nor can we ignore other, subtler challenges and problems in this Gospel, such as Jesus’ claim that Moses was already writing about Jesus himself. That too requires deeper thinking, facing up to differences between how thoughtful and pious Jews and Christians read the Torah. But today we stay close to the surface, words such “the Jews” – and the irresponsible paths they travel if we don’t say anything about them.

But what we can struggle with is probably the fact that the historical situation, the point of what John is trying to say, the struggle and his frustration with the people who should know best, unfortunately that got all tangled up in this polemic. And in some way then we will be able to sort out for ourselves what is the message and the point he is trying to make, even when he uses this unfortunate language. And I think, probably, if we put ourselves in that spot, if we can imagine that John came today, or if Jesus came today, he would probably start yelling at us, and say: “You fools. You call yourself Christian, you call yourself Catholic, you claim to know the Bible, you claim to go to church on Sundays, and sometimes you are even

90 so good you go to church during the week, you know all of this, you are the people who
91 should be best at following me and living like Jesus. And you damn Catholics, you damn
92 Christians, you don't get it; you of all people should see and understand and follow Me —
93 and you don't." And I think if we took it in that tone, we could realize that Jesus today,
94 maybe John today would be angry at people like me, saying: "What are you doing, why are
95 you wasting your life when you should be following me, you should be setting the people
96 free, you should be preaching the good news, you should not be caught up in your rituals, you
97 should not be entangled in your laws. What's wrong with you Catholics?" And while this
98 does not again take away the problem, the 2000 years of misuse of texts like this, unfortunate
99 language that we have in our Bible, I think it reminds us that the real pit to fall into is not
100 whether we should change a word here or there but that because we are clever, because we are
101 educated, because we know how to talk about things, we do everything to avoid the presence
102 of Christ right before us; as it were, we walk around Jesus and keep going without changing
103 our lives. We, of all people, should know better. Shankara said this to his fellow Brahmins;
104 Jesus (and John) said this to those who watched Jesus; and Jesus says the same to us today.
105
106 I'd be happy to talk to anyone who wants to talk about this after Mass. But I have to stop my
107 sermon at this moment. But I think the point is, we have two weeks of Lent left, and two
108 weeks in which to pray that the transformation Jesus is calling for takes place. The changing
109 of our hearts, the changing of our lives so that instead of throwing stones at other people
110 realize that we are the ones being chastised saying: "What don't you get. Now is the time to
111 convert your life." It is as if Jesus says: don't label and caricature others and blame them: it is
112 you I am talking to, you I expect now to change your lives.