

# Before the face of God

## An interdisciplinary study of the meaning of the sermon and the hearers' God image, personality and affective state

All over the world, millions of people attend the church service every week. In most of these services, church-goers will hear a sermon, and in churches from a Protestant tradition, preaching is the central element of worship. But what happens between the sermon and the listener? Does the sermon become meaningful to the listeners, and, if yes, in which ways? To what extent do psychological variables play a part in the hearing and interpretation of the sermon? All this leads to the following primary question:

What is the relation between the meaning of the sermon and the psychological characteristics of the listeners of the sermon, namely God image, personality, and affective state?

Two research questions follow from the main question:

1. To what extent is the meaning of the sermon related to the hearers' psychological characteristics, namely God image, personality, and affective state?
2. How are the hearers' psychological characteristics related to the meaning of the sermon as regards content?

This dissertation study is an interdisciplinary one. A focus on the hearers is in line with the current developments in practical theology and homiletics, in which the subject or hearer with her or his 'faith as it is lived' has become an important theme. At the same time, attention to the role of psychological processes in religion and religious experiences is central to the psychology of religion. In *chapter 1*, the research is situated within these fields. It is argued that a shared interest in the anthropological dimension of religion forms the basis of the interdisciplinary dialogue, with both disciplines functioning as equal partners in the dialogue.

Regarding psychology, the relational anthropology linking practical theology to psychology of religion takes shape in Donald W. Winnicott's object relations theory. This theory also forms the general hermeneutical framework of this study, and is discussed in *chapter 2*. Winnicott's ideas about transitional experience and object use, which have epistemological consequences, are highly relevant to this study. According to Winnicott, an object is both 'created' in the individual's intrapsychic world and 'found' in the external world; subjectivity and objectivity come together in a transitional experience. In the case of object use, the strangeness and otherness of the object is more experienced. The significance of these concepts for the understanding of meaning and images of God is discussed, and broader implications of Winnicott's theory for the study of religion and religious phenomena are also highlighted.

In *chapter 3*, the focus is on the sermon. Attention is paid to preaching as religious language, as a ritual, and as a transitional phenomenon. Subsequently, an interactional model of preaching is presented in which the core concepts of Winnicott's theory are key notions. An encounter between the hearer and God is considered to be the core of the process of preaching. Various homiletical theories are discussed in connection to this model.

In *chapter 4*, the interactional model of preaching is translated into a model of hearing. The process of hearing is unfolded in five parts, namely reception, attention, meaning, reaction and remembering. Because of the research question, the hearer's frame of reference and its schema's is paid attention to in great detail. Empirical studies on preaching and hearing are discussed.

The following chapters deal with the hearer's psychological characteristics in more detail. In *chapter 5*, we turn towards the individual's God image with reference to Rizzuto's influential theory of God images. Rizzuto, who builds on Winnicott, distinguished the God image, which is characterised by emotional experience and understood as the personal God of the individual, from the God concept, which has a rational nature. Rizzuto's theory is evaluated, which results in a new conceptualisation of the God image. *Chapter 6* presents a review of existing studies on God images, amongst which the present

research is located. Following the exploration of empirical studies that focus on the God image in connection with parental images, personality, mental health, biographical and cultural context, and gender differences is a discussion of research literature that focused on an impersonal and abstract image of God and a reflection on methodological issues.

Chapter 7 addresses the nature of personality and affective state. Personality is a multi-dimensional concept which comprises 1) stable personality traits, 2) personal concerns and characteristic adaptations such as the individual's personality structure and cognitive schemas, and 3) identity as expressed in life story. Affective state refers to mood and any psychic complaints. Both theoretical aspects and instruments which measure the different aspects of personality and affective state are examined.

The empirical section begins with chapter 8, which presents the research questions and the design and methodology used in the study. The study consists of a quantitative and a qualitative part. It was conducted three congregations which belong to the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, the largest Protestant Church in this country, which were all Calvinistic. One congregation was quite orthodox, while the other were more liberal. After a worship service, the listeners were invited to complete a questionnaire about the sermon and the service. In addition, participants filled out the Dutch Questionnaire God Images, NEO Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI), and Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS). In each congregation, two persons were interviewed about the sermon. They also completed the Dutch Short MMPI and a short version of the Schema Questionnaire.

Quantitative data are presented in *chapter 9*. Different indicators of a meaningful sermon are found. The most important factor, which is called Relational Meaning, refers to theological-existential relationality. Those scoring high on this factor report an encounter with God and prospect beyond the limits of life. Attention is the second factor. The third factor is Negative meaning, which reflects feelings of guilt and shame, anxiety and senselessness. Relational Meaning can be explained in part from hearers' psychological characteristics, especially their God image; the perception of God's behaviour as supportive and anxiety towards God are the most important predictors. Likewise, the meaning that consists of negative affect can be predicted in part by the hearers' psychological make-up, in particular by their anxiety towards God and negative affect. The attitude towards the preacher is the most important predictor of Attention. In addition, the content of the meaning of the sermon, as expressed in themes and images of God that were heard, can be predicted from God image, personality, and affective state.

*Chapter 10* presents the results of the qualitative part of the study, which are based on the interviews. Themes that were heard by the interviewees are related to their personality, especially their personality structure and life story. The content of meaning is also related to the participants' God image. In addition, the psychological characteristics of the hearers are related to the process of meaning making, which is characterised by relating the sermon to one's own context. Three aspects can be distinguished, namely focusing, dialogising, and actualising. During focusing, hearer concentrate on the sermon's content. During dialogising they reflect on what they heard in relation to their own situation. During actualising, they apply what they heard to their own lives, wondering what they should do.

In chapter 11, results are discussed in relation to the psychological framework of object relations theory and the theological homiletical theory of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose work is characterised by a relational anthropology and whose perspective on reality matches Winnicott's view. From a psychological perspective, it is important that hearers consider relationality, as understood in a theological way, to be an essential aspect of a meaningful sermon. Relationality also characterises the process of meaning making. Listeners experience the hearing of the sermon as a transitional experience which is both supportive and transformative. Psychological states and traits play an important role in the process of hearing, which forms an affirmation of Winnicott's view that meaning is both created and found. In Bonhoeffer's work, the concept of incarnation plays an important part. From this theological perspective, the giving and finding of meaning to/in the sermon can be understood as a form of incarnation which consists of an encounter of divine and human reality. Hearers feel sustained and accepted by the incarnate Christ, who includes and recreates them into a new mankind, resulting in the hearers becoming bearers themselves. Hence, without behavioural intentions or ethical implications, the meaning of the

sermon is incomplete to the hearers. In addition, the concept of incarnation is a useful metaphor for understanding the interdisciplinary relationship of psychology and theology.

In chapter 12, the research questions are answered and conclusions are drawn. A theory of hearers that is based on empirical results is presented. Implications for psychology of religion are discussed, with a focus of meaning making, relationality and God images. In addition, the role of the subject within practical theology and homiletics is elaborated on, and a theological understanding of hearing that allows for the psychological factor is reflected on. Finally, suggestions for the practice of preaching are presented.

## Author's qualifications

I am a psychologist (MA, 2000, University of Leiden, the Netherlands) and a theologian (MA, 2001, University of Leiden, the Netherlands). In April, I will defend this dissertation study at the Protestant Theological University, Kampen, The Netherlands, to take a PhD in theology.

Research interests are the interface of religion and mental health, in particular the God image, and relational psychoanalysis.

## Marketing information

Prospective readers of the book are psychologists of religion, theologians, and clinical psychologists. Psychologists of religion will be interested in the interpretation and application of the work of Donald W. Winnicott and Ana-Maria Rizzuto, and in the empirical research on meaning making and God image. Theologians will be attracted by the empirical study of the homiletical praxis and the role of psychological characteristics in the hearing of the sermon, as well as the homiletical theory of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Clinical psychologists will pay attention to the relationship between an individual's personality and affective state on the one hand and religious life and behaviour on the other.

## Originality

To my knowledge, the relationship between the psychological characteristics of the hearers and the subsequent meaning given to the sermon has not yet been explored. Psychological characteristics of the hearers have only been theoretically related to preaching.

The present study is unique because 1) it highlights the *psychological* factors in the hearing of the sermon and the contents of hearers' interpretations; 2) it offers an *empirical* study of the hearing of the sermon in relation to the hearers' psychological traits and states; 3) it combines a quantitative and a qualitative approach; 4) it is the first one which demonstrate the selective functioning of the God image in the process of meaning making, which has been hypothesised by others.

In the USA, Allen et al. have conducted an empirical study on the listening of the sermon, but their study did neglect the psychological characteristics of the hearers, was only qualitative, and did not centre on the hearer's interaction with one specific sermon.

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### **Typescript**

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