

Ilona Nord

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

## **Introduction**

Picturing God in a fragmented world. There is a specific world view connected to the title of this conference: The world is incomplete. It is "fragmented." In my speech today, I would like to discuss this world view because there is already an approach in German Homiletics which focuses on Fragmentation. At the end of the nineteen-eighties Henning Luther described what it means to understand a sermon as a fragment. I would like to introduce you to the basics of this approach and illustrate it with a sermon excerpt.

In addition, I would like to put the paradigm of "fragments" into the context of Communication Sciences. Since "Fragment" is a term from the fields of fine art and literary science, I would propose to expand upon the interdisciplinary perspective of the term. Though the paradigm of virtual reality has its roots in the field of communication sciences, it has been introduced into the discussion of homiletics. Virtual realities and fragmentations are similar in that they leave reality open for interpretation. They both cultivate the incomplete things in life. Homiletics benefits from this in several ways. Homiletic Theory was mainly developed through literary sciences, but is becoming more and more discernible as a multimedia experience. As a result, the complexity inherent in communicating through a sermon becomes more tangible.

In order to describe the sermon as a fragment, Henning Luther drew conclusions about anthropological consequences as he saw them from his perspective. In doing so, he had already begun describing the Sermon as a Fragment. He also labeled the identity of the listeners as well as that of the preacher as fragmented. Luther's thoughts pick up on the idea of a virtual body, a concept that comes from the field of Phenomenological Anthropology. With this concept, Homiletic Anthropology can be developed as the context for a culture of multimedia communication.

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## **Regarding Henning Luther's Thoughts about the Relationship of Identity and Fragments in the Homiletic as well as Margot Kässmann's New Year's Sermon**

Henning Luther's final book, Religion and the Everyday, was ready for print in 1991 when his life and work were cut short by his death at the age of 44. The book provides us with information about the fragmented nature of life. Luther also gives his critique of an understanding of upbringing, identity, and self which is carried over to the religious consciousness as wholeness, perfection, and balance. Luther agrees with Kierkegaard that identity and education should be discussed in non-ideological ways. The negative aspects of being, and the experiences of separation and conflict must not be left out or suppressed. "More important than a concept of identity...based on criteria such as uniformity, wholeness, and consistent continuity, is one based on the moments of incompleteness, brokenness, and times of imperfection. In short, it is important to give the fragments their proper worth."<sup>1</sup> This represents the principle of the never-ending nature of homiletical processes.

A homiletical process should be understood as an open and developing process of interpretation. Luther refers to the interpretation of biblical texts in order to establish his thesis. It is the case for biblical texts, as it should be for all texts, that meaning and tenor must not be interchanged, and it is important to remember that the interpretation of books of faith never surpasses an approximation of the original meaning. Our imperfect ability to interpret is not the only reason that interpretations remain fragmented. There are also hermeneutical reasons. To make this point, Luther includes perspectives of linguistic and symbolic theory in homiletics. The relationship between symbol and meaning should not be thought of in the context of the representational model, in which the symbol exists independent from the meaning, and the meaning represents itself. Meaning is without form, hence, unimaginable without a symbol. The meaning of Fragmentation, therefore, must not be limited to a world view that can be communicated through a sermon, rather, it is inherent within a theoretically symbolic foundation of the homiletic of the annunciation itself. Following Luther's teachings, then, the sermon text may not be presented as a completed whole, rather it should have the form of a fragment which invites a collaboration and continuation of the sermon itself. In other words, the listener must be included and integral in the interpretation of a text. Luther said very pointedly, "The fragment as an aesthetic of the call to repentance--I think that homiletics can learn from this aesthetic, from its theological particularities."<sup>2</sup>

Henning Luther proposes an aesthetic balustrade for homiletics. He developed it from his own understanding of communicating the gospel. Within his structure, form and content are brought into balance. The phrase, "Aesthetic of the Call to Repentance", sounds unusual to me in this context. In the realm of education of pastors in the Evangelical Church in Hessen and Nassau, which is my state church in Germany, I can say that the vicars are more likely to be led toward a narrative preaching style. Rather than instructing them to build up their sermons to a call to repentance, one is more likely to communicate to them the importance of reconstructing meaning in daily life. We set out to teach that a sermon should tell the people a small part of the story of God. The sermon should move people and encourage them to place themselves into this story. The attendants, then, should develop the continuation of the sermon as it applies to their own life. This very idea is also a part of the discussion of "the Fragment." What is missing from this education, in my opinion, is the normative attention to the call to repentance. This call could be as simple as referring to the first of Martin Luther's 95 Theses, which says, "The fact that in Matthew 4:17 our Lord and Master Jesus Christ says, 'Repent.', lets us know that He wanted the entire life of the believer to involve repentance."

Up until the beginning of this year I felt that sermons of repentance belonged relegated to the past. When one is aware of the plurality of opinions; when, as a (female) preacher, one takes the relationship between position and person seriously; and when one strives not to abuse the position as a vehicle to communicate personal political opinions, one begins to be very cautious about delivering sermons that call the attendants to repentance. I find it helpful at times to present such reservations. The caricature of the preacher in the pulpit bringing his congregation to a point of understanding that they must repent or be condemned to the eternal fire and brimstone of Hell still circulates, though its effect was almost never very believable.

I say "almost never" because there was, indeed, an exception this year. In her New Year's sermon in the Frauenkirche in Dresden, Margot Kässmann spoke about the extent to which people hope that everything will work out for them. She talked about how we wish ourselves all the best at the start of a new year, and also about how necessary it is for us to name the things that are not good. Her sermon sparked a discussion in political and cultural circles. Kässmann was described as being naïve. One could even use a biblical word and say that she was called a "Fool." This, of course, is also a commentary on her timeliness. Whether one

agrees or disagrees with her opinion, we cannot escape the fact that Margot Kässmann, who was at that time the Bishop of Lower Saxony and Head of the Board of the Evangelical Church in Germany, made a call to repentance in her sermon. Allow me to quote from her sermon from the first of January, 2010:

"Nothing is going well in Afghanistan. All of these strategies have, for a long time, deceived us and distracted us from the reality that soldiers are using weapons and civilians are being killed. The people in Dresden know this reality all-too well! We need people who are not scared off by the ways of war and are able to deliver clear plans for peace in the world. We need people who will cry out against abuse and war and say: 'Hope in God's future gives me the courage here and now both to talk about alternatives and to take part in them.' Some people find this stance naïve. An officer in the German Army wrote to me, somewhat cynically, and said that he thought that I was of the opinion that I could use my feminine charm to convince the Taliban to agree to peace. I am not naïve. Weapons, however, are apparently also incapable of bringing about peace in Afghanistan. We need more imagination in order to bring about peace. We need imagination for new and different ways to overcome conflict. Sometimes *THAT* can have more effect than all of the agreements in the so-pragmatically-intended call to arms. Twenty years ago, many people laughed about the candles and prayers in Dresden..."<sup>3</sup>

Kässmann calls for an alternative. By doing so she keeps her view of the world open. She is not offering a solution. She speaks inclusively and does not point fingers at those whom she deems guilty. Instead, she motivates us to a collective movement to search for peace. In this passage she concludes with a reminder that Dresden has already experienced a peaceful revolution. She uses other words to recall the past in order to show that the discussion about a different reality is not, as it is sometimes derogatorily declared, only virtual, rather that this imagined reality for the future possesses a relationship to a historical reality.

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

Though the term "Fragment" was included fairly easily into the theological lexicon, the term "Virtual Reality" was not. Virtual reality is regarded by some as an illusory world, and by others as a world of escape. One could sum it up by saying, "It is all just virtual! There is no actual, real life." PCs and smartphones are present in almost every part of our society, providing near-seamless access to the internet. For some people this evokes a need for something the philosopher Wolfgang Iser referred to as "Real Reality". He said, "Physicalness, durability, constancy, resistance, and dependability have developed a new worth. There is a need for a reality which electronics cannot replicate. Not even the media can escape this need, and "Reality TV" is the paradoxical proof."<sup>4</sup> It is not possible, however, to satisfy this need. Simply to develop an understanding of and to experience what reality is, symbols and meanings are required. One person's meanings, as we know, are not necessarily identifiable with another person's meanings. Thus, people are not given the opportunity to experience, absolutely, the world or God. In spite of this, there is to be found in everyday communication, again and again, a great longing for that which is constant, for that which will always be there for me. This longing is the result of the intense rate of technical advancements in the fields of media and communication. Philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels sees a technologically heated relationship between the sense of reality and the sense of possibility as one of the consequences of these developments. For Waldenfels and many other interpreters, virtual realities are worlds of possibility. Those who enter into and act in these