

**Preaching as Resonance:
Critique, Hope and Sustainable Living in light of Rosa's Theory**

Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen
University of Copenhagen

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21827/ijh.6.1.68-86>

Abstract

Recent homiletical research has emphasized the intricate interaction between words, bodies and senses in the practice of preaching which can be difficult to explain in light of traditional approaches. In addition, many homileticians and preachers struggle to find ways of addressing the environmental crisis in a way that calls for hopeful response in spite of the dire environmental situation. In the following, I will analyze the homiletical potential of the theory of resonance as developed by the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa¹ in order to address some of these challenges. Although his analyses are based on sociological critique of acceleration societies and modes of aggression, Rosa describes ecclesial, ritual practices as unique in their ability to cultivate 'dispositional resonance' in contemporary societies. The phenomenon of resonance involves three axes namely the vertical / intersubjective, diagonal/material as well as the horizontal / existential. In order to show the homiletical relevance of the theory it is discussed in relation to HyeRan Kim-Cragg's postcolonial preaching, Marianne Gaarden's empirical studies of listeners of preaching, as well as a contemporary sermon held by Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm.

Keywords: homiletics; preaching; resonance; authenticity; sustainability

1. Relevance of Resonance in Homiletical Contexts

The field of homiletics has, along with other practical theological² disciplines, traditionally studied how religious practices shape and transform human habits, ways of thinking and communicating. These studies have provided important insights into the diverse kinds of human creativity, suffering, and resistance, which can easily be overlooked in abstract systematic theological discourses or historical texts. However, there are good reasons to consider whether the human-centered focus should give way to more ecologically oriented or earth-centered studies in a time defined as the Anthropocene era. The Anthropocene designates the contemporary situation in which the planet's climate and geology has been irrevocably transformed by the way human beings have lived their lives and used the earth.

¹ Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

² For further practical theological studies in the process of making this turn see: Pamela R. McCarroll and HyeRan Kim-Cragg "Practical Theology Amid Environmental Crises", special issue in *Religions*, Volume 14 (2023) <https://www.mdpi.com/books/book/6582-practical-theology-amid-environmental-crises>.

Hartmut Rosa's⁵ theory of Resonance shares recent homiletical emphases on the environmental crisis and otherness. In addition, the theory is useful in order to analyze and reinterpret recent empirical findings, which highlight the role of intersubjectivity with special emphasis on authenticity. The field of homiletics has undergone several developments in the past decades. Since the paradigmatic turn to the listener in the 1970's⁴ there has been a continued focus on the interaction between preachers and listeners supported by a growing number of empirical studies of listeners' reception.⁵ The studies have on one hand described the central role that preachers' play for listeners' appropriation of the sermon in the sense that many listeners emphasize on the importance of an authentic preacher. On the other hand, the empirical studies reveal that the sermonic discourse that churchgoers take home with them after worship services differs significantly from the sermon the preacher has held.

The demand or longing for authenticity is not only shown in empirical studies of preaching and worship.⁶ Authenticity has for several decades been regarded as the answer to the alienation experienced by many late modern people.⁷ The demand for authenticity has been seen as the solution to an existence contrary to our human nature and real needs. The hope was that a search for authenticity could overcome alienation and help people find their true selves. According to the analyses of Hartmut Rosa however, the one-sided search and demand for authenticity is problematic because it tends to lead to a monological search for one's own voice, perspective and self-determination. Furthermore, if one's inner voice is to be the only yardstick for what is genuine and true, one risks searching in vain.⁸

As a counterweight to the demand for authenticity, Rosa claims that what can remedy the rootlessness of modern human beings is resonance between the individual and their surroundings including nature, music and religion. In contrast to authenticity's inward search for one's own voice, a responsiveness to resonance results in the opening up of individuals to the environment around us. When a person experiences resonance, they enter into connection with something exterior which transforms them. The individual changes in the encounter with the outside and thus comes to her-or himself in the encounter with the other. The result is thus transformation of the individual rather than a return to a presumed authentic starting point.

⁵ *Hartmut Rosa* (born 1965) is Professor of Sociology at Friedrich-Schiller Universität in Jena and an Affiliated Professor at the New School for Social Research in New York. In addition, he is the director of Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies at Erfurt University.

⁴ *Fred Craddock*, *As One without Authority*, St. Louis, MO 1971, *David Buttrick*, *Homiletic. Moves and Structures*, Minneapolis, MN 1987, *Henry H. Mitchell*, *Celebration & Experience in Preaching*, Nashville, TN 1990, *Lucy Atkinson Rose*, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church*, Louisville, KY, 1997.

⁵ *Marianne Gaarden*, *The Third Room of Preaching: A New Empirical Approach*, Eugene, OR 2021, *Theo Pleizier*, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons. A Grounded Theory Study in Empirical Theology and Homiletics* Delft, NL, 2010, *John S. McClure et al.*, *Listening to Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies*, St Louis, MO, 2004.

⁶ *Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen* "Prædikenen mellem autenticitet og resonans" in: *Kritisk Forum for Praktisk Teologi* 2019 no. 156, 45-53.

⁷ *Charles Taylor*, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge and London, 2007.

⁸ *Hartmut Rosa*, *Resonanz. Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung*, Berlin 2016, 43.

Rosa's critique of the search for authenticity is particularly relevant for the study of homiletics because paradoxically enough, alongside listeners' emphasis on authenticity there has been a growing acknowledgement among homileticians of the otherness that characterizes the practice of preaching - not only between human beings and God as the 'Wholly Other' but also between people⁹ including questions of social justice.¹⁰ In addition, there has most recently been a growing homiletical emphasis on the role of environmental crisis,¹¹ embodiment¹² and materiality.¹³ In the following I will present and analyze Rosa's theory of resonance with examples and case studies from recent empirical studies of people participating in worship services and listening to sermons.

2. Resonance according to Rosa

The theory of resonance as developed by Hartmut Rosa has been analyzed and discussed intensely in a range of fields from sociology, over pedagogics, psychology, theology and philosophy to health care since the publication of his 800-page book *Resonanz. Ein Sociologie der Weltbeziehung*¹⁴ in 2016 [*Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*]. Rosa's development of the resonance theory stems both from the world of music where it designates the process of giving sound back (latin: resonare) as well as from physics in which tensions between different poles enter into resonance with each other. The phenomenon of resonance is however also essential in human beings' way of interacting with each other as well as nature, objects and religion as unfolded in the following. Although Rosa often uses it metaphorically he does not reduce it to a metaphor but approaches it as a phenomenon and concept that can be used both descriptively and normatively.¹⁵

Rosa draws upon a range of disciplines from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1908-1961) phenomenology of the body over social and developmental psychology to neurophysiological studies. He does this in order to show how "one's sense of the self is itself always already the

⁹ Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, *Dialogical Preaching. Bakhtin, Otherness and Homiletics*, Göttingen 2014, John S. McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics*, Saint Louis, MO 2001.

¹⁰ HyeRan Kim-Cragg, *Postcolonial Preaching: Creating a Ripple Effect*, Lexington, MA 2021, Luke Powery, *Becoming Human: The Holy Spirit and the Rhetoric of Race*, Louisville, KY 2022.

¹¹ Jerusha Matsen Neal, "Exodus or exile. Hermeneutic shifts in a shifting Fijian Methodist Church", in: *International Journal of Homiletics* vol. 1, no 2: 16–25 <https://www.societas-homiletica.org/jerusha-matsen-neal-exodus-or-exile-hermeneutic-shifts-in-a-shifting-fijian-methodist-church/>, Charles Campbell, *The Scandal of the Gospel. Preaching and the Grotesque*. Louisville, KY 2021, Leah Schade, *Creation-Crisis Preaching: Ecology, Theology, Preaching*, St. Louis, MI 2015.

¹² Donyelle McCray, "Sweating, Spitting, and Cursing: Intimations of the Sacred" in: *Practical Matters* 8 2015, 52–62, *The Censored Pulpit: Julian of Norwich as Preacher*, Lexington 2019.

¹³ Frida Mannerfelt, *Co-preaching: The Practice of Preaching in Digital Culture and Spaces*, Stockholm 2023, Linn Sæbø Rystad, *Overestimated and Underestimated - a Case Study of the Practice of Preaching for Children with an Emphasis on Children's Role as Listeners*, Oslo 2021, Tone Stangeland Kaufman/Hallvard Olavson Mosdøl "More than Words: A Multimodal and Socio-material Approach to Understanding the Preaching Event" in: *Preaching Promises within the Paradoxes of Life*, Stellenbosch, 2018, 123–132.

¹⁴ Rosa (note 1).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

result of processes of relation and encounter, developing as a consequence of various psychological and physical contacts and resonances.”¹⁶ Both the human body and consciousness develop through resonant interactions they relationally experience with another subject or object - for example the symbiotic relationship between mother and baby. As he summons up:

“Resonance is an emotional, neural, and above all thoroughly physical reality. It is the primary form of our relationship to the world. [...] Reifying, mute, distancing relationships to the world are, by contrast, the product of social and cultural learning. They are a cultural technique. Resonance is thus a core element of social and cultural existence.”¹⁷

It is important to note, that resonance should not be confused with harmony or consonance. Hardly any of us experience resonance when exposed to the pure harmony of ‘feel good music’, which accompanies us when shopping or waiting on the phone. Quite the contrary, many people share the experience that “through dissonance and tonal or rhythmic tension – in the dramatic action of an opera, or the bottomless sorrow of a requiem – the world suddenly begins to sing, even suggesting a kind of transcendence.”¹⁸ The experience of contradiction, disagreement and even lack of response is thus also a crucial element.¹⁹

Rosa draws upon biblical and theological traditions in order to describe the dialectic between dissonance and resonance. As an example, he refers to the words of Christ on the cross: “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani? [...] My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15, 34) as a powerless cry for resonance.²⁰ Furthermore, he interprets human sinfulness as a lacking willingness to enter into resonance.²¹ For instance he interprets Martin Luther’s descriptions of the soul’s “homo incurvatus in se ipsum” /curved inward on oneself as a “state of resonancelessness, or rather resistance to resonance”.²² In contrast to the tendency towards turning inwards towards ourselves and being unwilling to enter into resonance Rosa interprets the core of religion as the promise that God speaks to the world and the creatures therein – also when we are unable or unwilling to hear it: “Religion is then a promise that the world or the universe of God still speaks (or sings) to us even when we are incapable of hearing it, when all our axes of resonance have fallen mute.”²³

¹⁶ Ibid., 133.

¹⁷ Ibid., 458.

¹⁸ Ibid., 189. Rosa describes how this is not only characteristic of most classical Western music but also heavy metal cf. *Hartmut Rosa, When Monsters Roar and Angels Sing: Eine kleine Soziologie des Heavy Metal*, 2023.

¹⁹ *Rosa* (note 1), 317.

²⁰ Ibid., 441.

²¹ For a qualitative study of how young people in the Church of Norway reflect on sin and shame in relation to their existential dilemmas analyzed through the lens of Hartmut Rosa's concept of resonance see: *Kristin Graff-Kallevåg/Tone Stangeland Kaufman*, “When confessing sin feels good: The practice of confession explored through the lens of Hartmut Rosa's theory of resonance” in *Dialog. Journal of Theology* Volume 62, Issue 3, 2023, 259-269.

²² *Rosa* (note 1), 273.

²³ Ibid.

3. Resonance as Counterweight to Alienation and Acceleration

Rosa's work on resonance is a culmination of his earlier studies of alienation²⁴ and social acceleration²⁵ in which he analyzed how technical progress - intended to save people time - tends to lead to a sense of shortage rather than gain of time. The acceleration processes tend to transform society and human relationships in a problematic way because contemporary societies are trapped in a hamster wheel in which they only are able to stabilize themselves through never ending acceleration, expansion and growth.

Rosa's analyses show how this kind of escalation transforms the ways in which people relate to other people, work, nature and objects that surround us, as well as our own bodies and ways of thinking. The accelerated way of interacting with our surroundings and ourselves reveals itself in dysfunctional societies in the three major crises that characterize the world today:

- 1) *Environmental crisis* – which reveals a problem in the ways in which we as humans relate to nature
- 2) *Crisis of democracy* - which signals malfunctioning social relationships
- 3) *Psychological crisis* - as manifested by the many cases of burnout/pathological stress and other psychological problems

As if those crises were not enough in themselves, these problematic ways of relating to our surroundings continue to cause and expand crises in the sense that they tend to turn into self-reinforcing circular catastrophes.²⁶ Paradoxically, late modernity's attempt to obtain the good life involves a tendency to exclude it. Rosa has summoned up the multifaceted problem as the "Triple A Approach to the world," analyzing that many people in late modern societies take part in accelerated growth and expansion due to the belief that the good life depends on making a larger part of the world *available, attainable, and accessible*. This dominant understanding of the good life is an expression of the operating logic of modern societies which Rosa defines as follows:

"A society is modern when it operates in a mode of dynamic stabilization, i.e., when it systematically requires growth, innovation and acceleration for its structural reproduction and in order to maintain its socio-economic and institutional status quo."²⁷

Attempts to make more of the world available, attainable and accessible can be facilitated by various means of technology: through the use of cars, airplanes and smartphones the whole

²⁴ Hartmut Rosa, *Alienation and Acceleration. Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality*, Aarhus, 2010.

²⁵ Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration - A New Theory of Modernity*, New York, 2013.

²⁶ Rosa (note 1), 13.

²⁷ Hartmut Rosa, "Dynamic Stabilization, the Triple A Approach to the Good Life, and the Resonance Conception", in: *Questions de Communication*, 31/217, 438 (<https://doi.org/10.4000/questionsdecommunication.11228>).

world appears to lie at our feet. However, the quest of enlarging our scope and accelerating our accessibility to the world has revealed deeply problematic consequences because we appear to destroy what we are trying to make available. In other words: humanity's exploitation of our natural environment has transformed nature, making it impossible to inhabit. Rosa's analyses show how human beings' relationship to the world is ambivalent in the sense that on one hand our "[e]nvironmental awareness, the ever-growing concern about the destruction of the environment, is an expression of our desired resonant relationship to nature and our anxiety about losing it. Our behavior with respect to the environment, however, reveals a mute relationship to the world."²⁸

The inherent pathology of modern society furthermore reveals itself in the paradoxical insight that people across the world, in spite of different backgrounds, values, status and responsibilities, tend to feel pressed to accelerate despite the more they do so, the more they feel out of time. As individuals, many of us have experienced pathological stress or burnout where we either are overwhelmed by sounds that used to be pleasing or we lose the ability to relate and listen to the world around us:

"Individuals from Rio to New York, from Los Angeles to Moscow and Tokyo feel caught in a rat-race of daily routines. No matter how fast they run, they close their day as *subjects of guilt*: they almost never succeed in working off their *to do lists*. Thus, even and especially if they have enough money and wealth, they are indebted temporally. This is what perhaps characterizes the everyday predicament of the overwhelming majority of subjects in Western capitalist societies most aptly: amidst monetary and technological affluence, they are close to temporal insolvency."²⁹

The guilt-ridden temporal insolvency reveals itself in the sense that a majority of citizens in late-modern societies feel a lack of time to do our work properly, take good care of our children and elderly – as well as our own bodies and minds.³⁰

4. Critical Theory and the Good Life

Instead of merely criticizing the present societal developments, however, Rosa aims to explore and challenge existing claims about the 'good life.' This becomes apparent in the introductory summary of his book: "If acceleration is the problem, then resonance may well be the solution."³¹ Rosa employs the conception of resonance on three distinct yet related levels. At a fundamental level, drawing upon anthropological and biological studies, the conception of resonance can be used to describe how basic human (and to some extent animal) behaviour such as breathing, eating, speaking, crying, dancing and making love encompass resonant relations and responses. At a second level, Rosa uses resonance as a theoretical characteri-

²⁸ Rosa (note 1), 283.

²⁹ Rosa (note 13), 437.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Rosa (note 1), 13.

zation of modern society. Building upon the work of Charles Taylor, he analyzes how modernity has led to a culture in which subjects become less porous or even closed off from each other, self and the world. Simultaneously, Rosa claims that modernity can be seen as an époque of augmented ‘sensitivity for resonance’ because its promise was exactly the possibility that we could move out and find a place in the world which speaks to us in such a way that we can make it our own.³²

5. Four characteristics of resonance exemplified by reception of preaching

According to Rosa’s analysis, resonance is characterized by four aspects, namely being affected, responding, transformation and elusiveness:

Resonance is a kind of relationship to the world, formed through **af←fect** and **e→motion**, intrinsic interest, and perceived self-efficacy, in which subject and world are mutually affected and **transformed**. Resonance is not an echo, but a responsive relationship, requiring that both sides speak with their own voice. [...] Resonance implies an aspect of constitutive **inaccessibility**. Resonant relationships require that both subject and world be sufficiently “closed” or self-consistent so as to each speak in their own voice, while also remaining open enough to be affected or reached by each other.”³³

In the following I will describe the four characteristics in turn and exemplify through inclusion of selected cases from empirical studies of listeners of preaching:

1) Being affected

An experience of resonance arises from the sense of feeling moved, touched, or called by someone or something for instance a landscape, an idea or a song. The sense of being affected can be both emotional, physical and cognitive and happens when someone or something calls for us or appeals to us in a way that its value is not merely instrumental but of ultimate importance in itself. Although resonance often involves emotions it is not in itself an emotional state but rather a mode of relation.³⁴ The mode of relation is underscored by the prefix *ad-* in the latin root of the word *adfacere* or *afficere* – ‘to do to’³⁵ which signifies that it is something that comes to us from the outside.

2) Responding

The experience of being affected will often be followed by a reaction or response in the sense of answering to the ‘call’³⁶ with body and mind. This response can take on very different forms

³² Ibid., 370.

³³ Ibid., 177.

³⁴ Ibid., 177; *Hartmut Rosa, The Uncontrollability of the World*, Oxford and New York, 2020, 32.

³⁵ *Rosa* (note 1), 168.

³⁶ Rosa does not refer to the African American preaching tradition of call and response but the parallels are striking and it would be interesting to study this further. See for instance: *Evans Crawford, The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching*, Nashville, TN, 1995.

ranging from an increased rate of heartbeat, interpretation of a text, laughter or a tear in the eye. Rosa characterizes the response as an expression of “self-efficacy”³⁷ or emotion because in distinction from being affected from something exterior, emotion is a response that comes from us and thus moves outward. This is emphasized through the latin root of emotion in which the prefix *e-* in *emovere*, which signifies that it is something which moves outward.

3) Transformation

A resonant encounter with another person, text, landscape, music etc. is not only characterized by being affected and responding but furthermore lead to a kind of transformation. Rosa often inserts arrows to underscore the different directions of movements: *af<-*fection is something which comes to the subject from the outside whereas *e->*motion signifies the way in which the subject responds.³⁸ The experience of a responsive emotion and self-efficacy should not be mistaken for a one-way utilitarian efficacy because it is essential that the response happens in listening interaction with the sense of being moved or called upon - or as Rosa describes it: “What matters is not the effected outcome , but the experience of interplay and reciprocity that emerges in the process”³⁹.

The dialectic between the two movements which lead to transformation involves a medio-passive kind of mode which in many ways resemble Hannah Arendt’s concept of natality.⁴⁰ Arendt’s use of natality signifies that the new tends to be born in the between – in the movement between the active and the passive. The subject is neither solely responsible for doing or creating it - nor is it passively suffering through it. Rather it is an ongoing process in which we (as listeners, speakers, artists, parents etc.) become involved.⁴¹ Rosa often uses the act of dancing as an example: a dance will often be initiated by one person who gives a signal or leads the other. However, if there is a mutual openness and playfulness in which both give

³⁷ The theory of self-efficacy was founded by the Canadian psychologist, Albert Bandura, cf. *Rosa* (note 1), 164 ff.

³⁸ *Rosa* (note 1), 168ff.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁴⁰ Arendt’s emphasis on the miracle of birth existentially in the sense of ‘natality’ as described in her *The Human Condition* (1958) expresses a critical transformation of Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* (1927) in the sense that Heidegger’s conceptions of ‘Geworfenheit’/‘thrownness into the world’ and ‘Sein zum Tode’/‘being unto death’ in the work of Arendt is expressed as ‘natality’ and ‘mortality’ as articulated in the following:

“If left to themselves, human affairs can only follow the law of mortality, which is the most certain and only reliable law of a life spent between birth and death. [...] The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction were it not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin. [...] Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope [...] It is this faith in and hope for the world that found perhaps its most glorious and most succinct expression in the few words with which the Gospels announced their “glad tidings”: “A child has been born unto us.” *Arendt*, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, 1958, 246-47.

⁴¹ Rosa’s analyses of self-efficacy and resonance also builds upon Hannah Arendt’s analyses of labor cf. *Rosa* (note 1), 101-102.

in to the dance, the roles will often change until the point when both get into a kind of rhythm and flow in which the participants no longer know who is leading who anymore.⁴²

6. Being affected, response and transformation in preaching reception:

Various empirical studies of listeners of preaching have shown a great diversity in the way people are affected by and interact with preaching.⁴³ Listeners describe a range of responses from boredom on one end of the spectrum,⁴⁴ over being touched and moved by the words of the preacher or that they experience a deep, ineffable sense of peace during preaching in worship service in ways that they do not experience in everyday life.⁴⁵ Based upon her qualitative study of churchgoers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark, Marianne Gaarden has divided the three distinct ways in which listeners interact with preaching as either:

- a) **Critical interaction** — where listeners articulate disagreement or alternative interpretations of the preacher's interpretation and proclamation
- b) **Associational interaction** — where listeners connect to their own life experiences in continuation of the words and images expressed by the preacher, or
- c) **Contemplative interaction** — in which the listeners describe a sense of deep, ineffable peace which happens while listening to the sermon as part of a worship service.

The medio/active-passive kind of interaction and transformation also shares central characteristics with the empirical insights from Gaarden's study as summarized in the title of her book *The Third Room of Preaching*. The title signifies that the event of preaching neither belongs to the preacher nor the listeners but emerges in between them. The study indicated that preaching involves a reciprocal relation in the sense that listeners on one hand described how their ability to be moved or inspired by the sermon to a large degree depended upon whether the preacher appeared genuine in her proclamation – and moved by the text herself. On the other hand, the preachers also described the importance of the reciprocal movement and interaction between preacher and congregation. In addition to the embodied interaction between preacher and congregants, the listeners' reception of the content of the sermon also displayed a radical kind of transformation. In fact, the listeners' creativity was so

⁴² Hartmut Rosa, "Social Acceleration, Parametric Optimization, and the Resonance Conception", guest lecture held 11 Oct. 2022, Department of Culture and Learning at Aalborg University, Denmark <https://youtu.be/x-KN5jwUWqA> [accessed 6-11-2023].

⁴³ Diane Turner-Sharazz, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, Ronald J. Allen, Mary Alice Mulligan, *Believing In Preaching: What Listeners Hear In Sermons*, Saint Louis, MI, 2005, *Pleizier* (note 5), *McClure* (note 5).

⁴⁴ Linn Sæbø Rystad "I Wish We Could Fast Forward It: Negotiating the Practice of Preaching" in: *Homiletic*, 2019, vol. 44 no. 2 <https://doi.org/10.15695/hmltc.v44i2.4777>.

⁴⁵ Gaarden (note 5).

transformative that the sermon lingering in their memory afterwards often sounded like a completely different discourse than what the preacher had written in her manuscript.⁴⁶

The studies showed that rather than a passive reception of the sermon, listeners experience preaching as an encounter – and sometimes dissonant clash – between the preacher’s words and the churchgoers’ own understanding. Thus, the words of the sermon were transformed in an implicit dialogue, which reinterpreted the sermonic discourse in a way that enabled it to connect with the listeners’ situation and thinking.⁴⁷

7. Elusiveness / Uncontrollability

In order to understand the characteristics of resonance it is essential to recognize its elusiveness in the sense of uncontrollability. Regardless of our best efforts, it is impossible to ensure a resonant interaction with something or someone. The inaccessibility or uncontrollability of resonance is an essential feature rather than a fault. Phenomenological descriptions of resonance reveals that it is an experience that only happens momentarily and can neither be planned, forced or kept as described in the following:

“whether or not we “hear the call” is beyond our will and control. This in part is due to the fact that resonance is not an echo – it does not mean to hear oneself amplified or to simply feel re-assured, but involves encounter with some real “other” that remains beyond our control, that speaks in its own voice or key different from ours, and therefore remains “alien” to us.”⁴⁸

Rosa’s analyses of resonance includes a biographical perspective on human life to show how there is an intricate dialectic between alienation and resonance that might even be a condition for experiencing a deep resonance. The development from childhood through puberty to adulthood usually includes an evolution from immediate resonant relationships to the child’s closest caregivers and surroundings to a stage in which the teenager feels alienated from people and places that s/he used to take for granted. The questioning of one’s parents, culture and authorities expresses a critique and detachment from the immediate relations yet at the same time, they facilitate developing a deepened identity, which open up the potential for a deepened resonance:

“Resonance theory should thus by no means be misunderstood as a doctrine of salvation. In fact, alienation in the sense of the continued existence of the Other that cannot be adaptively transformed is a constitutive condition of the possibility of resonance and,

⁴⁶ Marianne Gaarden/Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, Listeners as Authors in Preaching - Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives. 2013). *Homiletic*, 2013, 38(1), 29-30

(<https://homiletic.net/index.php/homiletic/article/view/3832>).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Hartmut Rosa, “The Idea of Resonance as a Sociological Concept”, in: *Global Dialogue*, 2018, vol. 8 no. 2, 2
<https://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/articles/the-idea-of-resonance-as-a-sociological-concept>

moreover – e.g. during puberty – also a prerequisite for the development of deep resonance, as it is alienation which first makes it possible to develop one’s own voice.”⁴⁹

Empirical studies of preaching also underscore elusiveness⁵⁰ or uncontrollability⁵¹ of the resonant interaction. Although the preacher’s interpretation of the Gospel as presented in the sermon often created a room for dialogical interaction, the preacher had no control of this room. Several preachers in Gaarden’s study could articulate what they aimed for with their sermon but interviews with the listeners revealed that the subjective meaning-production more often than not were far from the preacher’s intentions and expectations. Nevertheless, listeners described how the preacher played a crucial role as facilitator of this third room.⁵² These observations correspond well with Rosas analyses of the ways in which lack of immediate resonance or even clashes of dissonance might open up for a longer process of deepened, transformative resonance.

In spite of the central role, which many churchgoers ascribe to the pastor and his/her words and ways of interacting with the congregation, recent empirical studies have shown the importance of embodiment⁵³, materiality and ritualization⁵⁴ as constitutive of experiences of resonance in the practice of preaching. These insights can be further illuminated by the three axes of resonance in the sense of intersubjectivity, materiality and existentiality as developed in the following.

8. Theological cultivation of dispositional resonance

Although resonance is characterized by elusiveness and uncontrollability it is not to be understood as a completely random or contingent phenomenon.⁵⁵ While the actual encounter with resonance cannot be controlled or predicted, there are essential components which facilitate it as well as social conditions, which tend to hinder the experience of resonance. Rosa problematizes modernity’s one-sided focus on the experience of resonance primarily in relation to other human beings as if the rest of the world is mute. Instead, he claims that people engage in three⁵⁶ forms of resonance:

⁴⁹ Rosa (note 1), 459-60.

⁵⁰ Rosa acknowledges the theological tradition of Rudolf Bultmann and Kierkegaard when using the notion of uncontrollability or “Unverfügbarkeit” when using the concept see e.g.: Rosa (note 34), 58.

⁵¹ The American homiletician Charles Campbell, likewise argues that the practice of preaching involves an “ethic of risk, rather than the ethic of control” cf., *The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching*. Louisville, 2002, 81.

⁵² Gaarden (note 5); Gaarden/Lorensen (note 46), 30.

⁵³ McCray (note 12); Mannerfelt (note 13); Kaufman/Mosdøl (note 13).

⁵⁴ For further analyses of ritualization in relation to preaching see Alexander Deeg, *Das äußere Wort und seine liturgische Gestalt. Überlegungen zu einer evangelischen Fundamentalliturgik*, Göttingen, 2012, Alexander Deeg, “Disruption, Initiation, and Staging: The Theological Challenge of Christian Preaching”, in: *Homiletic*, 2013, 38(1), <https://ejournals.library.vanderbilt.edu/index.php/homiletic/article/view/3830>.

⁵⁵ Rosa (note 34), 58.

⁵⁶ In lectures held in 2023 Rosa has expanded the number of axis of resonance in relation to the common good of society to include the following 4: “1 Between citizens 2) Between citizens and institutional structures 3) Between

- 1) **Horizontal resonance** can take place between two (or more) people, in love and family relationships, friendships or political space.⁵⁷
- 2) **Diagonal - or material - resonance** can happen when we interact with things and activities in work, education and sports: for instance, the interaction between pianist and piano, baker and dough, gardener and garden.⁵⁸
- 3) **Vertical axis of resonance** is that which provides us with a sense of being connected to nature, life or some kind of ultimate reality. In modern societies vertical resonance is often constituted by ideas and practices of religion, art, history or nature.⁵⁹

Rosa describes how religious, ritual practices are unique in their ways of combining all three axes of resonance. As an example, he describes how the Christian Eucharist consists of a vertical relation to God, a horizontal fellowship as well as a material interaction with the Eucharistic elements, bread and wine.⁶⁰

In worship services and religious rites such as the Eucharist and the benediction, the “experience” of deep vertical resonance is connected both to horizontal axes of resonance between the faithful, who in Christian culture constitute a parish or community in “communion,” and to diagonal resonant relationships, inasmuch as things and artifacts such as the bread, chalice, wine, and cross – or, at other times and in other cultures, relics, altars, bones, totemic and taboo objects, etc. – are here “charged” with resonance. From this emerges a kind of sensory network of resonance in which all three axes are capable of mutually activating and reinforcing each other.⁶¹

Rosa even argues that churches are some of the last institutions that provide a different relationship to the world than the mute, alienating relation that tends to dominate in the late modern society. In a lecture published under the title *Democracy needs Religion*⁶² he discusses how it may affect society and democracy if belief in and practice of religion loses its ability to create conditions for cultivating the sense of resonance. Democracy builds upon the recognition that all voices count. In several cultures the essentials of democracy can be traced in the language since the notion of voting and votes is described as ‘voicing’ (“stimmen” in German and “stemme” in Danish). However, democracy only works properly if people in addition to exercising their voices also make use of their ears. Rosa even claims that contemporary societies are in need of religion in order to cultivate the sense of listening which

the body politic and its natural environment 4) Between past, present and future” cf. 2023 Keynote lecture at the Conference of European Churches General Assembly. Streamed live on Jun 16, 2023:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PK69FT63N8&t=1354s>.

⁵⁷ Rosa (note 1), 299–332.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 232–366.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 267–316.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 267.

⁶¹ Ibid., 271.

⁶² Hartmut Rosa, *Demokratie braucht Religion*, Munich 2022.

is constitutive of a democratic society in which the ability to listen to those of different perspectives and opinions are as important as the ability to gather a majority or exercise one's ability to vote.⁶⁵ The emphasis on the ability to both listen and exercise one's voice in order for a democratic society to work reflects the way Rosa describes the anthropological conditions for being capable of entering into resonance for the individual and the reason why he emphasizes on the unique potential of ecclesiastical practices and rituals.

9. Resistance and Resonance in light of Postcolonial Preaching

Rosa's claim that churches are some of the last institutions in our contemporary societies which have the potential of cultivating "dispositional resonance" is an important reminder to those religious communities which seem out of tune with the 'rat-race' of contemporary accelerated societies. Worship services and the participation in rituals are unique ways of incorporating "dispositional resonance"⁶⁴ because they typically are characterized by an interplay between all three axes of resonance; namely horizontal, material and vertical. In addition they operate on the basic acknowledgement of the potential of transformation yet uncontrollability hereof. However, Rosa is also well aware that there is far from any guarantee of resonant relationships in church communities even though the potential is there. The churches are part of the contemporary societies in which racism, sexism and oppression play a dominant role. One may ponder how much has changed since Martin Luther King Jr. claimed that "the most segregated hour in Christian America is 11 a.m. on Sunday"⁶⁵ ⁶⁶ back in 1960.

A critical consideration in light of recent postcolonial homiletical voices is whether Rosa's conception of resonance resonates better with those of us who are white, Western, heterosexual, cis-gendered and welcomed in the Academy as well as the pulpit than those who suffer from oppression and exclusion due to their ethnicity, sex or sexual orientation? In order to wrestle with this question, professor of homiletics at Toronto University HyeRan Kim-Cragg's book on *Postcolonial Preaching* can be helpful. Kim-Cragg calls for a postcolonial approach to preaching and homiletics⁶⁷ that engages with pressing questions of identity and migration as well as practice and liturgy. As part of her research, Kim-Cragg analyzes the contemporary challenges of racism and deterioration of our environment.⁶⁸

Postcolonial Preaching provides a paradigmatic example of how a critical approach can enter into resonant interaction with radically different voices and perspectives of others –

⁶⁵ Rosa (note 62).

⁶⁴ Hartmut Rosa, Keynote lecture at the Conference of European Churches General Assembly, streamed live on Jun 16, 2023: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PK69FT63N8&t=1354s>.

⁶⁵ Martin Luther King Jr. Interview April 17 1960 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1q881gIL_d8.

⁶⁶ For more contemporary analyses of racism in church communities, see: *Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Marcia W. Mount Shoop*, *A Body Broken, A Body Betrayed: Race, Memory, and Eucharist in White-Dominant Churches*, Eugene, OR, 2015, *Luke Powery*, *Becoming Human: The Holy Spirit and the Rhetoric of Race*, Louisville, KY, 2022.

⁶⁷ HyeRan Kim-Cragg, *Invisibility of Whiteness: A Homiletical Interrogation*. (2021). *Homiletic*, 46(1), 28-39 (<https://homiletic.net/index.php/homiletic/article/view/5140>).

⁶⁸ HyeRan Kim-Cragg, *Postcolonial Preaching: Creating a Ripple Effect*, Lanham, MD, 2021.

whether they are contemporary or represent an older theological tradition. Kim-Cragg accomplishes this by narrating her experiences of ethnic stereotyping, racism, and gender bias with a remarkably open spirit. She invites her readers on a journey that names the absurd injustices and misrecognitions that are part of the history of preaching yet she does so in a way that avoids the entrapment of stark dichotomies and divisive narratives. Kim-Cragg explains her postcolonial approach as follows:

Facing white supremacy and the colonial legacy of North American society is an urgent task of preaching. What is required is an attitude that will not yield and is endlessly persistent but is nevertheless flexible and able to bend in response to changing situations and contexts. Postcolonial preaching in this sense becomes like a bamboo tree, supple enough to bend but strong enough not to be broken. The postcolonial vision is not iconoclastic and does not seek to erase the past. Rather, like a ripple in a lake, it moves out with reference to certain central events that continue to impact our lives. Postcolonial scholarship examines works that contribute to colonial patterns or fall short of adequately dealing with them.⁶⁹

Kim-Cragg's examinations of colonialism in contemporary society, preaching and homiletic scholarship are critical yet the critique serves as the basis for imagining and suggesting healing alternatives to the traditional discourses and practices rather than trying to erase them. As described in the quote her approach to postcolonial preaching consists of a resistant yet flexible position. This position resembles in many ways Rosa's descriptions of resonance, which requires difference or even opposition as a precondition for a genuine transformative encounter or understanding.

As shown above resonance can happen in interaction between being moved, reacting and being transformed. This transformative process requires an intricate balance between openness and closure which can best be illustrated by the body – or resonance chamber – of an acoustic guitar or violin; In order to be able to enter into resonance a person needs to be *open enough* to pick up an impulse from the outside and at the same time *closed enough* to be able to respond or resonate with her/his own voice.⁷⁰ These preconditions can be challenged and temporarily suspended in a number of cases and the ideal balance between being open or closed for resonance can change according to different circumstances in a person's life, as described below:

- A person who has been exposed to violence and has experienced touch as an offence has good reasons for trying to avoid being touched for a period of time. This closedness can be an indispensable means of self-protection and survival for a while but it becomes problematic if the situation becomes permanent.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁷⁰ Rosa (note 34), 35.

- Someone who is very open and tends to be moved by all and everything easily loses the ability to develop and express her own voice and perspective. In this case, the person can benefit from closing of from the perspectives and voices of others from time to time in order to find her or his own voice.
- A person who does not believe that s/he can move others or has forgotten that s/he herself can be moved tends to limit him/herself in the encounter with others and get his/her way through manipulation and aggression rather than open encounters.⁷¹

This balance between opening up and closing off or resisting and criticizing in order to open up for healing and resonance has some parallels in the ways in which Kim-Cragg argues for the need of resistance to powers of colonialism in the exegetical interpretation of Scripture. Rather than either trying to ignore or submit to oppressive statements found in Scripture such as “slaves obey your masters” or “women must be silent in church”, she encourages a critical engagement which “de-normalizes readings that seek to normalize slavery and sexism as if they are natural”⁷². Kim-Cragg explains the importance of paying critical attention to the stories of sexual violence and oppression because if and when those stories are normalized in preaching the church community misses out on the possibility of acknowledging the victims or consulting their perspectives in a way which opens up the potential for resistance and healing.⁷³

Kim-Cragg’s descriptions of how postcolonial preaching does not try to ignore or erase oppressive structures and discourses but rather names and confronts them in order to emphasize the dignity of life and “give voice to the voiceless”⁷⁴ shares certain characteristics with Rosa’s analysis of the dialectic of alienation and resonance:

At the root of resonant experience lies the shout of the unreconciled and the pain of the alienated. At its center is not the denial or repression of that which resists us, but the momentary, only vaguely perceptible certainty of a transcending “nevertheless.” Alienation born of indifference and repulsion must first become palpable before resonant relationships to the world can be developed. Capacity for resonance and sensitivity to alienation thus mutually generate and reinforce each other, such that the depth of the indifference or repulsion one experiences seems also to define the potential depth of one’s resonant relationships.⁷⁵

Rosa’s claim that a sensitivity to alienation and capacity for resonance can reinforce each other can be traced in a number of ways throughout the history of Christianity. In a homiletical context several of Luke Powery’s works can be seen as paradigmatic examples of how resonance can happen in a place of dissonance and suffering. In his book, *Dem Dry Bones*.

⁷¹ Ibid., 36.

⁷² *Kim-Cragg* (note 68), 109.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ *Rosa* (note 1), 189.

*Preaching, Death and Hope*⁷⁶, Powery draws upon the vision of the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37 as a metaphor for his assertion that death is the context for all preaching. Powery analyzes the tradition of African American spirituals as case studies and designates them as "sung sermons" which take their departure in the experience of suffering and death. It is however crucial for the spirituals that the embracing of death aims at the proclamation of hope in the form of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁷

The ability to pursue and proclaim hope and resonance in the midst of suffering and death is of paramount importance in the present times of environmental degradation, which leaves many people feeling helpless and hopeless. According to Kim-Cragg postcolonial theologians emphasize the need for a creation-oriented approach to preaching which acknowledges that human beings are only one of many species rather than the epicenter of universe:

“A creation centered approach to preaching helps to ground us in the urgent concern of the Anthropocene age when environmental exploitation and the consumption of fossil fuels threaten our very existence [...] This cosmological view acknowledges that God intends the world for all its creatures. Preaching, therefore, must not merely strive to proclaim “a dwelling place of all of the people”⁷⁸ but must “seek the right relationship with the entire creation.”⁷⁹

In her analysis of postcolonial preaching Kim-Cragg refers to several instances in which preaching and Scripture involves the lilies of the field, birds of the air and all kinds of trees and the rest of the natural realm which abounds us. In addition she criticizes the traditional dichotomy between preaching and Eucharist/ word and meal and emphasizes the need to let the two be integrated due to the understanding that “sacramentality points to our embodied nature as creatures of God within a creation with which we are intimately connected.”⁸⁰

Kim-Cragg’s insistence of the importance of including the Eucharist and the non-human community in the practice of preaching and worship shares several insights with Rosa’s analysis of the three aspects of resonance; namely horizontal⁸¹ resonance which refers to relationships between people, diagonal⁸² or material in which we interact with elements such as dough, bread, musical instruments etc. and the vertical axis of resonance which signifies the sense of being connected to nature, religion etc. Kim-Cragg includes a number of sermons in her *Postcolonial Preaching* which exemplifies her position but in the following I will include excerpts of a sermon held by the American homiletician, Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm⁸³ because it

⁷⁶ *Luke Powery, Dem Dry Bones. Preaching, Death and Hope*, Minneapolis, MN, 2012.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 105ff.

⁷⁸ *HyeRan Kim-Cragg, Story and Song: A Postcolonial Interplay between Christian Education and Worship*, New York, 2012, 30.

⁷⁹ *Kim-Cragg* (note 68), 22.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Rosa* (note 1), 299–332.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 232–366.

⁸³ Professor of Preaching & Worship at Bethany Theological Seminary, Richmond, Indiana.

shows the interaction between alienation and resonance, as well as how the sense of powerlessness can be transformed into empowerment or, in the words of Rosa; self-efficacy in a joint experience of being affected and transformed by gardening.

10. Sermon example: “Your kingdom, come”

The American homiletician, Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, recently held a sermon⁸⁴ on Matt 6:24-33 in Copenhagen, Denmark, in which she addressed the present climate crises as well as examples of hopeful responses to crises of poverty and climate. The sermon was titled “Your kingdom, come” and it was structured around the many ways in which God’s kingdom can be approached; namely as 1) a prayer 2) a vision 3) a promise, calling us to participate and 4) a choice. Ottoni-Wilhelm opens her sermon by describing present times of need which make people pray and call for help:

*“Fires in the western US, Canada, Chile, and recently in Greece have destroyed
hundreds of thousands of acres, countless wild animals choked to death
some of the world’s oldest trees charred to the ground;
Homes burned to ashes;
Historic landmarks and human communities decimated;
People displaced, many dead;
Flooding in Hong Kong, Pakistan, and Greece;
with houses and cars floating down waterways
forged by torrents of rain and rivers of mud.
This past April, in the city of Richmond, Indiana, where I live
A warehouse packed with industrial chemicals,
dangerously toxic
Exploded.”*

After the opening description of the present crises, Ottoni-Wilhelm refers to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and how he taught the disciples to pray “Your kingdom come”. Throughout the sermon she weaves together interpretation of Scripture with a poem, images and stories because as she says “It is a promise that bears hope through words and work, silence and song. We need to taste it, feel it, know it is coming. We need to look and see, to listen and hear: for this prayer, this vision of God’s realm, to live differently, for another way of living in which we participate today”.

Ottoni-Wilhelm’s emphasis on the need to involve all senses echoes Rosa’s descriptions of the diagonal and vertical axes of resonance. Furthermore they both emphasize that the

⁸⁴ Sermon titled “Your kingdom, come” held in Hans Tausens Kirke, 14 Sept. 2023 in conjunction to a homiletic conference at the University of Copenhagen. Unpublished manuscript received from Ottoni-Wilhelm.

practice of prayer has the potential of transformation because it connects the inward and the outward as defined by Rosa:

“The form and attitude of prayer, which in its very concept is designed to produce “deep resonance” in the form of speech and action that both listens and responds, evolved in a way naturally from this promise. Prayer aims at the form of our relationship to the world as such, as can be seen from the fact that it is both inwardly and outwardly directed. A person in prayer closes her eyes and turns within, but addresses something outside of herself, with the aim of establishing a palpable, intense connection between the two. Because and to the extent that resonance points to a moment when the relationship between self and world becomes fluid, in this attitude she can no longer say precisely what is within and what is without.”⁸⁵

One of the ways in which the sermon shows the kingdom of God as both a prayer and a vision is through quotation of a poem by the American poet, Jericho Brown⁸⁶ which describes how her mother and other black women “grew morning glories that spilled onto the walkway toward her porch” though they did not get to enjoy them because: “By the time the blooms unfurl themselves for a few hours of light, the women who tend them are already at work”. The poem ends with a critic of whoever it was that “started the lie that we are lazy” and describes how she would love to show him “all those black folk waiting to go work for whatever they want” and ends with the statement: “My God, we leave things green.”⁸⁷ The poem testifies to how an experience of alienation and dissonance between people of different colors and cultural backgrounds can be countered through resistant empowerment and the insistence to cultivate gardens and perform green transformations.

In the last part of her sermon Ottoni-Wilhelm tells the story of two Detroiters, Myrtle Thompson and Wayne Curtis, who responded to a desperate situation of poverty, hunger and malnutrition in their neighborhood by transforming an abandoned lot into a vegetable garden. Through their gardening and harvesting they discovered that:

“they were not just growing food but community”
 a community which they founded as the “Feedom Freedom Growers”⁸⁸
 which they describe as “a community group and resource
 committed to growing community relationships through the cultivation of
 food, hearts, and minds.”⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Rosa (note 1), 270.

⁸⁶ <https://time.com/5349540/jericho-brown-poem/>.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ For further documentation see: “Feedom Freedom Growers: A Documentary Film” at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OGmOqUrVGVE> [accessed 10-10-23].

⁸⁹ Cf. interview of Myrtle Thompson Curtis and en sawyer: <https://wdet.org/2021/07/15/feedom-freedom-growers-and-taproot-sanctuary-growing-community-care-through-gardening/> [accessed 9-7-23].

Wayne describes it this way:

“Along with growing food, we’re growing culture, we’re growing community, we’re growing ideology, we’re growing a lot of things to make sure that our existence is no longer threatened because of us being marginalized in a system where we’re being marginalized. Developing consciousness is very important. We’re realizing a whole aspect of human relationships ...”⁹⁰

The sermon emphasizes that through the garden-work Myrtle Thompson, Wayne Curtis and their community experienced an interaction between growing vegetables and fruits and a shared spiritual connection to the earth and each other. These experiences are strong expressions of resonance in the sense that **being affected** by something from the outside (a desperate situation of poverty as well as an abandoned lot) can be encountered by a **response** involving empowerment or **self-efficacy** which leads to **transformation** of the individuals, the community and the earth around them.

Concluding Remarks

As shown in the preceding, Hartmut Rosa’s theory of resonance can be used as an analytical tool to study the practice and theory of preaching as embedded in liturgical as well as societal contexts. The theory can furthermore be used to reflect on how and to what extent churches cultivate dispositional resonance in societies marked by acceleration and aggression. Crucial to understanding the theory is that resonance should not be mistaken for harmony or echo. In contrast, resonance requires difference or even opposition as a precondition for a genuine transformative encounter. Resonance happens in the tension field between harmony and dissonance and eludes deliberate orchestration. Rather than strategic manipulation, it involves an encounter with an authentic 'other' that defies our control—a voice or key different from our own, hence remaining 'foreign' to us. The resonance theory can remind homileticians as well as preachers living in the anthropocene era of the importance of entering into resonance not only with other human beings but also with nature, art and music.

Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen is Associate Professor and Vice Dean at the Faculty of Theology, University of Copenhagen, Denmark.

⁹⁰ From 2015 interview with *Krista Tippit*, op. cit.