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## Preaching in Times of the European ‘Refugee Crisis’

### Scandinavian perspectives

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Pia Nordin Christensen; Tron Fagermoen; Elisabeth Tveito Johnsen; Pernilla Myrelid;  
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#### **Abstract**

*Toward the end of 2015, 65.3 million people were seeking refuge or were otherwise forcibly displaced globally. This is the largest number since the recordings began around World War II. In Europe more than 1 million people arrived by sea in 2015 – more than four times as many as the previous year.<sup>1</sup> The crisis situation stirred public debate as well as church-based initiatives trying to deal with the situation. In order to understand the interaction between public discourse and local preaching a group of homileticians from seven European countries collaborated on an empirical study of how the refugee crisis impacted preaching. In what follows we present the initial results from the Scandinavian countries.*

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#### **1. The Research Project**

The research project on preaching in times of the ‘European Refugee Crisis’ is a result of collaboration between homileticians from Hungary, Greece, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. The study was initiated at the Societas Homiletica Conference in South Africa in 2016 by Professor Alexander Deeg. The initial research was presented and discussed at a meeting at Leipzig University in 2016 and as part of a panel presentation at the International Academy of Practical Theology in Oslo in 2017.<sup>2</sup> In the following we present insights from 104 sermons preached by 36 different pastors in Norway, Sweden and Denmark in the period from September 2015 until Easter of 2016.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In 2016 the number of refugees and migrants arriving in Europe declined drastically compared to 2015. Yet despite the decline, the number of people who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea in their attempt to reach Europe rose to a record of more than 5,000 people. cf. UNHCR Refugee Agency 25 Oct. 2016: ”Mediterranean death toll soars, 2016 is deadliest year yet” cf. <https://www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/articles/2016/12/29/year-in-review-the-refugee-crisis-in-2016>.

<sup>2</sup> For an introduction to the larger framework of the project see Alexander Deeg’s article: “Preaching in Times of the European ‘Refugee Crisis’ A Symposium in Leipzig” (October 2016) and the starting point of a European Research Project on the Relevance of ‘Pulpit Speech’ in Society and Politics in: *International Journal of Homiletics* 2017.

<sup>3</sup> 40 sermons from 17 Swedish preachers, 12 sermons by 6 Norwegian, 52 sermons by 13 Danish preachers. Thank you to all contributing preachers!

The research questions that guided the analysis of the empirical material gathered for the study were: 1) How do the sermons relate to the 'European refugee crisis'? 2) What words are used to describe this 'crisis'? 3) What aspects of the 'crisis' are explicitly dealt with? 4) What is the position of the preacher? 5) Is there a change in the way the 'European refugee crisis' is dealt with from September 2015 to Easter 2016? 6) How do the sermons relating to the 'European refugee crisis' make 'use' of the Bible? What kinds of Biblical hermeneutics can be analyzed? 7) How can the role of the preacher be described in the sermons? 8) Are there any other interesting or striking aspects in the sermons? The research questions have been treated more or less intensively in the three national contexts depending on the character of the received material. Therefore, the insights from the three studies are also presented differently as it suits the material. Since the genre of preaching is defined by a tension field between biblical texts and contextual situations, as well theological reflection and public events, we will begin with a brief introduction to the relationship between church, state, and society in the Scandinavian contexts before presenting the homiletical material that was gathered in this part of the world.

## **2. Relationships between Church and State in the Scandinavian Countries**

The term Scandinavia denotes the three countries of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, which have close historical and cultural ties as well as mutually intelligible languages. The Evangelical-Lutheran Church is the majority church in all countries with 61–76 % of the population as members.<sup>4</sup> Historically the Evangelical Lutheran Church has been the state church in all of the Scandinavian countries,<sup>5</sup> but the relationship between church and state has been loosened in a continuous process since the 1840's when freedom of religion was inaugurated.<sup>6</sup> The former close relations between church and state in Sweden were basically dissolved in the year 2000 when the church stopped being supported by the state and Lutheranism ceased being the country's official religion. Likewise, the Church of Norway became an independent subject separate from the state in 2012. Albeit no longer a state church, the majority church in Norway still bears the name 'Church of Norway.' However, it is spoken of as a folk church, as is also the case with Church of Sweden. In Denmark the majority church is called the Church of the People (Folkekirken).

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<sup>4</sup> In 2016, 61.2% of the Swedish population were members of the Church of Sweden, 71.5 % of Norwegians were members of the Church of Norway, and 76% of the Danish population were members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark (Folkekirken).

<sup>5</sup> The churches of Denmark and Norway can be labelled as "state churches" since the Reformation in 1537, when King Christian III of Denmark-Norway took leadership of the Church. However, the characteristic is more appropriate for the constitutional form of the church after 1660 when absolute monarchy was inaugurated in the twin-kingdoms.

<sup>6</sup> Denmark: National Constitution/Grundloven 1849, (Sweden: Edict of Toleration of 1781 + Religionsfrihetslagen 1951).

The Scandinavian countries are built upon similar social structures, also called the Nordic welfare model.<sup>7</sup> Characteristic for this model is that benefits are universal in the sense that all citizens have the right to help regardless of factors such as income. The welfare system is paid by the common tax base. Although the Scandinavian countries differ somewhat in their access to free health care, higher education etc. they all share high standards of living and tend to be placed at the top in international comparisons of mutual trust and happiness.<sup>8</sup>

The high degree of happiness is partly attributed to a significant equality between the sexes regarding shared participation in childcare as well as labor force and education. Actually the education gender gap is reverse from many other parts of the world in the sense that women make up the majority of students enrolled in academia. The populations of Scandinavia have historically been quite homogenous in terms of ethnicity, religious and political beliefs. However, the numbers of refugees and migrants arriving in Europe are perceived by many as a challenge to the traditional balance in which all citizens contribute to and are taken care of by the welfare state. One of the public discussions is whether the Scandinavian welfare models can survive the intake of a large group of refugees or, conversely, whether the welfare model depends on more new citizens in order to be sustained in the future?<sup>9</sup>

In the following we present how the interaction between public discourse and local preaching as well as responsibilities and possibilities of churches in light of the refugee situation are addressed in homiletical case studies in the Scandinavian countries in 2015–16. The presentation begins with the Norwegian, followed by Swedish and Danish case studies.

### **3. Norwegian Study – Salience and Silence: The Abstract Refugee as Religious Object in Norwegian Sermon Manuscripts<sup>10</sup>**

#### *Norwegian Context*

The political context for the Norwegian cases may be described as ambiguous. On the one hand it is characterized by distance: Though Norway received far more refugees than usual in this period, the numbers were moderate compared to other European countries. Norway is situated in the

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<sup>7</sup> See Uffe Østergaard, *Lutheranism, Nationalism and the Universal Welfare State* in: Katharina Kunter/Jens Holger Schjørring (eds.) for an analysis of the relationship between church and state in northern European contexts.

<sup>8</sup> <http://time.com/4706590/scandinavia-world-happiness-report-nordics/>.

<sup>9</sup> See also Grete Brochmann, Anniken Hagelund (eds.), *Immigration Policy and the Scandinavian Welfare State 1945–2010*, Hampshire 2012.

<sup>10</sup> The Norwegian authors responsible for this section are: Tone Stangeland Kaufman, Associate Professor in Practical theology, Norwegian School of Theology, Sivert Angel, Associate Professor in Practical Theology, University of Oslo, Elisabeth Tveito Johnsen, Associate Professor in Practical Theology, University of Oslo, Tron Fagermoen, Senior Lecturer in Practical Theology, Norwegian School of Theology, and Linn Sæbø Rystad, Doctoral Research Fellow, Norwegian School of Theology.

periphery of Europe. Refugees have to pass through several other countries to get to Norway and the country's borders are easily controlled. The Norwegian welfare system also lends a form of distance to the crisis, since there is a culture for primarily regarding the needy as a responsibility of the government. When refugees enter the country, they are therefore first handled by official institutions, which engage and hire civil society organizations to contribute.

On the other hand, in this particular period, there was also a sense of urgency in the political discourse on refugees: opposition and support in local societies for accepting a larger number of refugees than before, strain on the police and customs services that were to receive the refugees, a new right wing minister who took on responsibility for immigration and refugees and sharpened both refugee politics and rhetoric. Moreover, the public role of the Lutheran church was also debated in relation to the refugee situation.

*Method: Sampling, cases, and analytical strategy*

The Norwegian sermons are strategically sampled from two different cases: One, from what we call Case Border Area, where refugees enter Norway, and where the presence of refugees in the local community would most likely be prevalent, and one from Case Cathedral, which can be considered a public pulpit, playing a political role as part of a national folk church.<sup>11</sup> Thus, both of these cases can be described as extreme cases, or perhaps even as critical cases.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, we decided to ask for sermons from Christmas Eve and Christmas Day too, as our hunch was that the refugee situation might be more explicitly addressed during those days, where a larger part of members who don't attend worship regularly actually do come to church.

The sermons in our two cases relate to the context described above in two different ways. The Cathedral sermons relate to a context where refugees are very much discussed, but rarely explicitly encountered, whereas the Border Area sermons relate to a context where refugees entered into the country at a border station that is located in the parish. The timeline for the sermons is associated with a slight shift in public discourse. The time from September through Christmas is marked by a discourse on the number of refugees and Norwegian immigration politics, while the terror attack in Brussels and the discourse on IS terrorists hiding among refugees receives considerable attention around Easter.

In order to examine how the sermon manuscripts produce meaning and take part in a political and theological discourse on refugees, we analyze the sermons from three different perspectives.

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<sup>11</sup> Although the Church of Norway is no longer a state church, there are still strong bonds between the Norwegian people and the Lutheran church of Norway.

<sup>12</sup> Bent Flyvbjerg, Case Study, in: *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 4th Edition, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2011, 306–307.

Firstly, we ask how they use the Scripture in their argument. The findings will also be discussed in connection with the role of lectionaries in terms of enabling preachers to address a specific situation, such as the 'refugee crisis.' Secondly, we look at the role or function of refugees in various image grids,<sup>13</sup> such as what other images, characters, stories or situations refugees are combined with, as this might contribute to bringing out what the sermon says about refugees both politically and theologically. Thirdly, we describe how the role of the preacher is expressed. We arrive at the description of the preachers' role partly by the two previous steps and partly by studying the preachers' explicit and implicit self-presentations.

#### *Case Cathedral: A Salient Presence*

The sermons from the cathedral case were preached from what can be characterized as a public pulpit in one of the major Norwegian cities. The main finding is that the presence of refugees is salient in the sermons. In our material of twelve sermons (preached by six different pastors) nine deal with refugees. The other main finding is that none of the sermons are negative to refugees or signal support for a restrictive refugee politics. On the contrary, when refugees are mentioned, it is always in a positive way, and to the extent they address the political issue, it is always in favor of hospitality and liberal politics.

#### *Role of Lectionary*

The use of a lectionary seems to be quite flexible, since refugees are regarded as a relevant reference in the interpretation of almost all texts. Regulating the choice of the Sunday Gospel, the lectionary lends authority to the message about refugees. In our interpretation of the Case Cathedral sermons, the message does not simply arise from the preachers' political engagement, but from the text itself, which is not chosen by a politically engaged preacher. Rather it is laid out beforehand by a lectionary, which is chosen in relation to the liturgical year. However, having to preach from a lectionary might even strengthen the message in this particular situation. An example of this can be found in a sermon presented on the Sunday before Election Day in Norway. The preacher reminds his congregation to take the question of the refugees into account when choosing whom to vote for and to evaluate which party would serve hospitality and care best. He finds authoritative support for this call in the lectionary system:

*In today's reading, Jesus says: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." It is very special that this text was predetermined for us just today – "those who*

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<sup>13</sup> David Buttrick, *Homiletic. Moves and Structures*, Philadelphia 1987, 157.163.  
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*are persecuted because of righteousness". This is what it is all about, and what we are becoming increasingly aware of as one of the biggest challenges of our time, and which has only just begun.<sup>14</sup>*

*Use of the Bible: Exegetical Deduction, Analogy and Typology*

In our material, two sermons use the biblical text in an exegetical deduction arriving at a message of human dignity and love of neighbor, which is applied in a counsel on how to relate to the 'refugee crisis,' even though this specific concept is never mentioned. What to take into account in the election is how to think about the refugees, which gives the sermon a strong political profile.

Most frequently, the Biblical texts are interpreted as an analogy to the present situation. The situations or phenomena described in the text resemble present situations and phenomena. The vulnerability of the widow in Nain resembles the refugees' vulnerability, Jesus coming to us as a stranger resembles the refugees, in the parable of the weeds, wheat and weed that cannot be separated resemble Norwegians, refugees and terrorists that cannot be separated.

A sermon on Easter Day employs typology and interprets Jesus' death as a type for today's situation after the terror attack in Brussels where the people felt the forces of death. Common for these preachers, though, is that they negotiate an understanding of the present situation by drawing on the texts from the Bible.

*Image Grid: The Refugee as part of a Religious Inventory*

In some sermons, the refugees are mentioned as objects for a love of neighbor and as protected by the Christian view of human dignity. This way of mentioning refugees is associated with the exegetical deductive way of using the biblical text. The refugees play a similar role as an image in the sermon that employs a typological explanation of the Bible. Here they are mentioned together with the situation they are a part of in society and politics, a situation of terror, strife and struggle. The image appears in conjunction with images from the bible in a way that serves an altered or renewed understanding of the present situation. It is not a situation of fear and death, but of God's love and hope.

In the sermons that employ an analogical explanation of the biblical texts, refugees are combined with a variety of other images. In one sermon it is combined with the family bringing a child to baptism, traditions of the church, family rituals to let the refugees illustrate that the lives of humans are intertwined with each other. In another sermon refugees are combined with rich and poor Norwegians, stubborn children and a terrorist to make the point that it is impossible to distinguish between humans. In yet another sermon the challenges to refugee politics are combined

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<sup>14</sup> Sermon preached on Matthew 5:10–12, September 2015.  
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with readjustment processes, body image pressure, and loneliness, which are contrasted with positive images, such as peace talks in Syria, positive students, and positive stories on TV, as a sign of hope. In these sermons, refugees become part of a religious inventory and serve as a strengthening of religious experience and religious aesthetics. In this group of sermons we see a tendency that the sermon seeks to repeal distinctions. Good and evil may not be easily separated, and one should avoid demarcating us from them.

A tendency that can be seen in several sermons is that of paradoxical love rhetoric, not too dissimilar from the one expressed in the spontaneous rituals that responded to the terrorist attack in Oslo on July 22, 2011.<sup>15</sup> Fleeing refugees traveling for a better future are seen as symbols of hope, and the sense of vulnerability they represent are described as awakening a faith in what is good.

*Position and Role of the Preacher: The Political Preacher and the Reserved Interpreter*

Some of the preachers in the Norwegian context seem to take on a political role. Two of them take on a role as counselors in connection with the coming election, though without mentioning concrete party politics. One preacher does it as an interpreter of the terror attack and as a supervisor for how one should react to it and relate to the refugees, though without concrete instructions for action. In the majority of the sermons, the preacher takes on a very reserved role, where the political reality of the refugees come to serve their role as administrators of the cult and facilitators for religious experience. The cultic context frames their message, so that the refugees are there to enhance the relevance and reality of what takes place in the Sunday service. In general, the preachers seem to employ refugees quite flexibly and effortlessly, and they avoid antagonism when addressing the issue.

*Case Border Area: A Surprising Silence*

In the Border Area case we were at first rather surprised to find that only one of the sermons preached in September actually addressed the refugee situation, and the term 'refugee crisis' was not mentioned at all in the twelve sermons we were given to analyze from September, January and Easter preached by one female and two male pastors.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the theme was referred to only on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, but completely absent in the few sermons available to us from January and during Holy Week. Thus, although various aspects of the 'crisis' or situation were referred to, the most salient observation was a surprising silence. Due to this silence, we don't

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<sup>15</sup> *Jone Salomonsen*, Graced Life After All? Terrorism and Theology on July 22, 2011, in: *Dialog – A Journal of Theology*, 54(3), 249-259; *Ida Marie Høeg*, Silent actions – emotion and mass mourning rituals after the terrorist attacks in Norway on 22 July, 2011, in: *Mortality* 20(3), 197–214.

<sup>16</sup> Only the female pastor addresses the refugee situation in some of her sermons.

see any changes from September to Easter in this case. Apart from one September sermon, it is the Christmas sermons that address the 'refugee crisis' most explicitly. However, when the refugee situation is mentioned, it is always in support of an open policy in terms of welcoming refugees, and whenever a call for action is uttered, it is a call for hospitality based on the biblical example and Christian ethics.

#### *Role of Lectionary*

Not yet having analyzed case Cathedral, we asked: Could the absence of attending to the refugee situation be understood in light of the lectionaries for the particular September Sundays? The Gospels of the Sundays were: Luke 17:7–10 (the widow of Nain), Luke 10:38–42 (Mary and Martha), Matt 5:10–12 (part of the Beatitudes) as well as the text chosen for the worship service particularly aimed at children and families from Matt 18:12–14 or Luke 15:4–7 (the one sheep that got lost and was found).<sup>17</sup> In the sermons preached in September based on the first three of these Gospel stories there are absolutely no references to the refugee situation.<sup>18</sup> However, at least in the case of the widow of Nain and the Beatitudes this theme could easily have been included, both based on the text itself as well as how the sermons were crafted. The link is not far from the widow of Nain who has to bury her son to refugees watching their children drown or die while seeking to cross the Mediterranean or other dangerous territories on their way to a safe space. When preaching on the Beatitudes, the preacher several times refers to those who are being persecuted, those who suffer, and even how Jesus himself was a refugee who had to flee to Egypt. This is also the case in the sermon from Epiphany on Matt 2:1–12 (the visit by the Magis).

#### *Use of the Bible: Typology*

In the one September sermon that explicitly addresses the refugee situation, the Gospel is interpreted typologically: What happens to the one sheep and the ninety-nine in the parable, is seen as a typos for the situation of refugees who "enter our country at [Name of] NN Border Station," as the preacher puts it. The biblical text is used to describe the situation of the refugee (now), and to interpret the presence of the good shepherd in the contemporary situation. Even though the parable is interpreted typologically, the preacher breaks with the logic of the parable. It is the sheep that searches and finds, not the shepherd. The sermon does not use terms such as 'refugee crisis' explicitly. The reason given for why the little sheep has fled to Norway is that "it is much better here" and that there is war in her home country. Norway is in other words described as the

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<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that we do not know what these preachers preached in August, October, November, and February. They might have addressed the 'crisis' more directly then.

<sup>18</sup> It is not unlikely that the listeners still experienced an implicit layer of refugees in their context when hearing the preacher describe Jesus as a refugee child, but this remains an undocumented assumption, as we have not interviewed listeners.

promised land, and the good shepherd has guided his flock through Russia to this land. Thus, we also find traces of the exodus-motif in this sermon.

*Image grid: The Refugee Situation as an Example of 'Bad Things Happening in the World'*

The refugee situation is typically referred to in conjunction with other examples and images of 'bad things' happening in the world. For example, in the sermon from Christmas Day the 'crisis' is only hinted at, as "pictures on TV of people fleeing across the ocean." Moreover, this is only one of several challenges in our present situation, which shows that the world "is still in the dark." Similarly, the sermon from Christmas Eve revolves around many images that can be linked to the 'refugee crisis.' The preacher mentions poverty, Jesus being born far from home, and the poor.

By using the refugee situation as one case among other challenging situations, the sting of this particular and critical case is partly glossed over by numerous other possible challenges that the congregants might face as part of a world that "is still in the dark." The preacher describes these challenges in an existential and rather abstract way. This serves to include as many of the listeners as possible as well as to avoid a distinction between us and them. Political deliberations concerning the 'refugee crisis' is on the whole absent, although the preacher on Christmas Eve makes an explicit reference to Norway sending out asylum seeking children "fast and efficiently," thereby revealing that she does not agree with this policy and treatment.

Rather than focusing on the ethical challenges that the 'crisis' creates, the sermons that mention the 'crisis' focuses on how it reveals God's presence in this world. The central point of the sermon on Christmas day is for instance that God became human, and thus became poor among the poor, a voice for those who have no voice themselves, our friend in need, and the one who overcomes death. Through the incarnation mystery, God has given us hope; hope for a better tomorrow. We are not alone: God is with us. Faith is not about understanding, but about receiving: and what we receive is a child that "soon had to flee." What we see in these sermons is that the political situation becomes a point of departure for invoking the refugee in a religiously oriented aesthetics.

*Position and Role of Preacher: Identification*

The position of the preacher in the sermons where the refugee situation is referred to is that of identification: She identifies with the little sheep that has to flee (refugee child), and emphatically acts out what it can be like to be a refugee. Every one of us is vulnerable and can be poor, if only in our hearts. Hence, she is careful not to distinguish between 'us' and 'them.' Rather, a larger 'we' is constructed, consisting of every human being who shares part of the same existential human condition. In one of the sermons she specifically calls for the congregants to act: The right thing to do is to help and to welcome the refugee. In a different sermon, the same preacher positions

herself as one who is "walking with" the congregation, as a sojourner: She is no expert on the refugee situation, and she does not prophetically challenge her listeners to take action in any specific way. Rather, she offers a theological reflection and interpretation of the situation.

#### *Comparison of the two Norwegian Cases*

When comparing the two Norwegian cases, there are both differences and similarities, which will be discussed in the following.

#### *Differences*

The most striking difference in the two cases is the salience of the refugee situations in sermons from the cathedral case and the silence of this theme in the border area case. Furthermore, it seems as if the preachers in the former case find themselves to have a more explicit political role than the preachers in the border area case. Another significant difference is how the same lectionaries were used as an entrance gate to address the refugee situation in the one case, whereas this did not happen in the other case.

Nora Tubbs Tisdale refers to a study on how the Gulf war was addressed the first Sunday after the Gulf war broke out.<sup>19</sup> The researcher found that strikingly few sermons attended to this vast political event. In interviews with twenty-four preachers the researcher was given the answer that they did not say anything about it because they "follow the lectionaries," and thus did not find any opportunity to include this world event.<sup>20</sup> This point was used by Eugene Lowry to question the use of lectionaries, or at least to identify some of its flip sides.<sup>21</sup> So whilst our border area case supports Lowry's point, the cathedral case opposes it.<sup>22</sup>

#### *Similarities*

In both cases, sermons that do address the refugee situation are unanimously positive towards welcoming refugees, encouraging the listeners to be hospitable. This attitude is not questioned in any of the sermons, and the biblical material is used to support such a position. Nevertheless, the 'crisis' is kept at arm's length, and the preachers call for a religious or Christian attitude rather than political action. By referring to this situation in conjunction with other negative things that indicate that our world is still "in the dark," the refugee situation is preached about in an existentialist and abstract way as part of our shared human condition. This is further supported by the refusal to

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<sup>19</sup> Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*, Minneapolis 1997, 101.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>21</sup> Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Beat: Why All Sermons are Narrative*, Nashville 2012, 91.

<sup>22</sup> Also the Lutheran Church of Norway follows a three-year lectionary according to the Nordic model where internal coherence between the three texts to be read a given Sunday is prioritized over the coherence and connection from Sunday to Sunday.

distinguish between “us” and “them”, “good” and “bad,” which could be related to an egalitarian society and culture and a welfare state that is responsible for taking care of the needy.

The preachers in our material are situated in a privileged position. They themselves are not experiencing an existential crisis as refugees or find themselves in a political situation that is instable, volatile, or directly threatening to them. Hence, the 'refugee crisis' is no personal crisis for them. Sociologist of religion David Smilde argues that such a disengaged approach is often associated with people in a privileged and dominant position.<sup>23</sup> This could be a way of relating to the issue that conceals conflicts of interest and underplays the urgency of the concrete challenges of the refugees. However, there could also be different reasons for the way of addressing or not addressing this situation in these sermons that we have not been able to explore in this study.

#### **4. Swedish Study – “It Could Have Been Me!”<sup>24</sup>**

##### *Introduction to the study*

For the Swedish study we received 40 sermons from 17 preachers. We chose to focus on 15 sermons from five of the preachers, who all sent three sermons from the requested period of September 2015 through Easter 2016. These priests are all active in parishes which are part of the network “The Future Lives With Us” (Framtiden bor hos oss, FBHO<sup>25</sup>). We chose this network as the primary focus group because these parishes have several years of experience in direct work among people with origin from different countries, many of them with experience of being refugees. Of these 15 sermons there are 10 that in some way or another relate to the situation of refugees. The other five have a more general human focus and provide a picture of every preacher's unique way of preaching and theology. That is why we include them in our analysis.

The questions addressed in the project are: How do the sermons relate to the “European refugee crisis”? What descriptive words are used? Is there a change in approach during the specific period? What is the purpose of the sermon? What is the position and role of the preacher? In what way does the preacher use the Bible? We have also been looking into the theology of the sermons.

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<sup>23</sup> David Smilde, *Beyond the Strong Program in the Sociology of Religion*, in: Courtney Bender, et al. (eds.), *Religion on the Edge. De-centering and Re-centering the Sociology of Religion*, Oxford 2012, 47.

<sup>24</sup> Authors primarily responsible for the following section on the Swedish context are: Carina Sundberg, Diocesan Theologian, Linköping, Sweden, PhD Theology and Pernilla Myrelid, short term project leader in Migration and Theology, MA Interreligious Relations. See also article published in Swedish “Att predika om “flyktingkrisen”: En studie av några predikningar i Svenska kyrkan” in *Swedish Church Journal / SKT – Svensk Kyrkotidning*, January 2017.

<sup>25</sup> For a description of the network in Swedish see: [www.svenskakyrkan.se/framtidenborhososs](http://www.svenskakyrkan.se/framtidenborhososs).

There are many issues to look into within a short scope of time; therefore, the results presented will be provisional.

### *Imagery*

A first observation is that all the sermons have an open attitude as regards refugees coming to Sweden and the fact that they are being welcomed in Sweden and Europe. The sermons highlight the difficulties of what is happening globally, locally, and individually from slightly different perspectives, but the open welcome remains. It is also theologically motivated, and we will return to this. We see no major difference in perspective from September to Easter. We would rather say that it is a consistent view.

All preachers we have studied use stories and images in a clear and conscious way. The expression "refugee crisis" is not used, but the situation is described using words such as tragedy, chaos, darkness, walking in the desert. Two sermons make the comparison with the situation during and after the Second World War and the many refugees during that period. In this way they put the situation into a historical context, relating it to a greater dramatic story, which had a major impact on our world. One of these sermons also refers to history by saying that there is no example of:

"a country or territory [which] afterwards has had regrets that [...] we received and gave shelter to these refugees. However, history is full of examples of countries and contexts that subsequently have regretted and apologized for shutting people out and failing to take more action to provide protection to the people who were in distress."<sup>26</sup>

In this way statements made in past time become arguments for openness now. Individual stories are important in all sermons and a few links are made to history by highlighting individual stories such as the story of a relative who fled during World War II or an acquaintance that fled the Balkan War.

Some preachers refer to contemporary media images, pictures "we've all seen." Sometimes this is done with a few words, such as "barbed wire fences" or "the Mediterranean Sea", sometimes the picture is made bigger. This occurs both in September, as well as in the rest of the period. One preacher says:

"It is remarkable how far it has to go before we react. We have read and heard about this for such a long time but somehow it has come to a tipping point this week. Maybe there are images of refugees living in and outside the main railway station in Budapest. Maybe it's the knowledge that winter is coming soon with the cold and snow. But mostly I think

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<sup>26</sup> Sermon preached on Luke 10:23–37, 13th. Sunday after Trinity, 30th of Aug. 2015.  
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it's an image that has appeared in the media. This is a picture of a small child who has drowned, an image of a dead child on a beach."<sup>27</sup>

One of the sermons expresses reluctance to show these pictures, but believes they might still be necessary for us in order to understand what lies behind the statistics. In terms of statistics, all the preachers put the number of people received in Sweden and Europe into a global context, where those who come to us are described as only a small part of all the refugees in the world, for example compared with the people in Syria's neighboring countries. Statistics are used to reinforce the stories and highlight proportions. But the figures are not only used as a contrast. They are also exemplary. For instance, they show Germany as a good example of receiving refugees. Germany is said to have received 800,000 by September. At the same time, nobody claims that they know exactly what needs to be done. Or, as one says, "I do not know how we could help all those who are now on the run, but I know that we must do something."

Images and stories in a sermon serve as illustrations, but they can also form the supporting frame, on which the preachers attach images, stories, and arguments. One theme that is central in many of the sermons, is the question of who is inside and who is outside, and who is "them" and who is "us." A metaphor which supports this argument and occurs in several sermons is walls. This is used both for the outer and inner life. The sermons mention for example, politically constructed walls in Europe (barbed wire fence, passport controls, asylum laws, borders), social barriers between people (approaches), and inner walls (fear, uncertainty). To create walls, to shut people out by using these walls is seen as problematic.

Another metaphor is rootlessness, a complex of problems related to the relationship between internal and external. The theme of rootlessness is discussed in for example one sermon using the metaphorical image of trees/roots: "Every time I walked past the fence around the construction site and saw the tree, I was thinking of all those people who right now are plucked up by the roots and are fleeing."<sup>28</sup> This whole sermon then reflects on what it means to realize that "the stable foundation we thought we stood on is torn away" and the hope of "taking root and flourish again". Other supporting themes/metaphors are light/darkness, death/life, where the language is clearly taken from the biblical texts related to the liturgical year. None of the sermons express the way from darkness to light and from death to life as only inward or individual events, but events that unite the social and the individual, the community and the church.

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<sup>27</sup> Sermon preached on John 17:9-11, Eph 4:1-6, and other parts of the Bible on 14th Sunday after Trinity, 6th of Sept 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Sermon preached on Matt 6:31-34, 15th Sunday after Trinity, 13th of Sept, 2015.

Inspiring role models are also highlighted, from biblical texts (e.g. the wise men and Mary), and from history (Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Dag Hammarskjöld), and from contemporary life (Angela Merkel). But also local role models, for example people in the congregation who volunteer to meet refugees.

*The Purpose of the Sermon and the Position of the Preacher*

In homiletics there are different views on what is the purpose of any sermon; to convince, to touch, to evoke, to call to repentance, to draw listeners into a Christ-event, providing moral and ethical guidance, to provide knowledge, just to mention a few. We would like to summarize the purpose of these sermons with the words "empowerment" and "encouragement." In the 10 sermons that specifically relate to the refugee situation, we see that it is about encouraging people to maintain an open and empathetic mind, to strengthen them to remain with the hard reality and still have a welcoming practice. There is a strong empathetic approach in the sermons. This purpose is theologically justified and relates to the preacher's position.

The position of the preacher in relation to those fleeing are in several of the sermons characterized by the preacher's identification with those who are called refugees, while the preacher at the same time is part of the worshipping congregation. One of the preachers says "... as long as anyone has to go into exile, we all live in exile, when someone suffers, we suffer with them." Another preacher says: "We want to help because we recognize ourselves in the pictures. It could have been me. You do not choose where to be born. We would all have tried to escape war, terror and death." Different experiences of how security has disappeared can help both the preacher and the congregation, in the identification. One preacher suggests that, for example, we can recognize ourselves in the situation where "the ground we stood on was pulled away." The preacher describes how despair, in more mundane, but still life changing circumstances, can manifest itself. "We are many that have curled up and cried our way through the night and wondered what exactly is happening?" A recognition and identification with the desperate is illustrated. This identification is found in several of the sermons. One of the preachers highlights people's capacity for identification, as described above, as part of being bearers of hope:

"In the midst of this tragedy that we are witnessing in Europe there is still a sense of hope. People are moved by these terrible pictures and we are torn in our hearts. Children crying at the borders, teenage boys clinging to the flatbed truck traveling through Europe. We want to help because we recognize ourselves in the images."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Sermon preached on 14th Sunday after Trinity, 6th of Sept., on Eph 4:1–6 and John 17:9–11.  
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In one of the sermons<sup>30</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer is quoted saying “the church is only the church when serving others.” It describes implicitly the refugees as the others that the church should be there for, therefore, in a sense, the opposite of identification with the refugees, as described above. The preacher however believes it is a constant challenge for the Church not to be present for its own sake. The preacher asks the rhetorical question whether this is a crucial part of our fundamental identity as a church.

None of the preachers expresses an intent to choose sides between the different political parties. One of the preachers mentions clearly that it is not the task of the sermon to be political in the sense of political parties. There are not many politicians mentioned by name but Angela Merkel is mentioned as a role model by two of the preachers. In one sermon she is mentioned as different from politicians in Sweden who normally talk about how we can limit the number of refugees. “If we are able to save the banks, we are able to save people” is highlighted as a quote by Angela Merkel.

#### *Creation Theology and Christology*

What hermeneutic have the preachers been working with? We identify two theological interpretation keys that seem to form the basic theology (a preacher’s “working theology”) that we perceive in these sermons. These control how preachers interpret and use biblical texts and how they relate these texts to the issues the sermon is touching on, in this case the refugee situation. The first key is creation theology. It is based on “the creation story,” an implied overall story, which is sometimes drawn upon by the preacher as referring to any fragment of Gen 1–3, though sometimes there is no explicit reference at all. The sermons are interpreted through this story. Humans are created in all our diversity by a God who loves diversity. Differences and diversity are good creation theology. Difference is not only about diversity, but is expanded so that we are described as unique individuals, with different skin color, faith, religious beliefs. This provides a theological justification for unity, but also for openness and compassion. A preacher says, for example:

“The basic story for our existence, both the biblical and evolutionary, teaches us that we all have the same origin. Everything comes from the same original cell. That God is behind all creation. And the whole world is linked. That man Adam and mother Eve live in the midst of all that God has created. There is a unity in this. But it should not be mixed up with resemblance. The story of our existence also teaches us that life is about diversity.

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<sup>30</sup> Sermon preached on 13th Sunday after Trinity. No reference to where the Bonhoeffer quote is from.  
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Different varieties, different species. Without the diversity of creation, all life would perish. We could not cope. The animals would not survive.”<sup>31</sup>

In this sermon Creation Theology is united with Christology, which is the second key of interpretation as shown in the following:

“Thus the unity carries diversity. Unity is not equivalent to uniformity. Unity is about commonality despite differences. We come from the same source. Everything flows from the same source. Is this valid also for the unity of Christ? Christ is not separate from God himself. Christ is God incarnate.”

One Sunday, one of the preachers finds John 17:9–11 problematic, in that “Jesus is praying, not for the world but for those whom God has given him.” The text has a tendency, says the preacher, “to be read in a way that excludes and rejects those who do not belong to Jesus.”<sup>32</sup> The preacher changes “spectacles” and uses other Biblical texts to make visible the point he/she want to make. Eph 4:1–6 is used to show that “God is the Father of all,” but also Matt 25 about what “you have done for one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it for me,” and Luke 15, and “the story of the Good Samaritan” (which was the Gospel reading the previous Sunday) where boundaries are said to be erased instead of walls built.

The Christological interpretation key is based on Jesus Christ, as God’s self-giving presence, both as a model and example. Past and present are brought together. Jesus knows the events from the inside. He “was a refugee, he cries, he is empathetic, he feels pain, he is present, he helps, he cried out on the cross, he calls out now. He is every child, his mother is every mother.” The stories of Jesus’ childhood are used both literally/historically (meaning, he was, for example, actually a refugee) and figuratively (he is every refugee today).

The Holy Spirit is hardly mentioned. We have previously mentioned that the main purpose of the sermons seems to be “empowerment,” and that Jesus Christ is seen as present in the midst of a refugee situation, and this makes a difference in the sermons. However this difference is not always very clear. If we were to polarize the matter, we could ask the question this way: Is it more focused on kenotic theology (God's total self-giving and powerlessness in the world) or liberation theology (God is taking the people out of oppression)? Or are these held together? This is worth further study, but we believe that compassion, empathetic and self-giving perspective of the image of God is strongly emphasized. God stands behind and stays along with. This applies not only in Good Friday sermons but in the whole period. At the same time, we think this gives hope in itself.

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<sup>31</sup> Sermon preached on 14th Sunday after Trinity, 6th of Sept. on Eph 4:1–6 and John 17:9–11.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

However, to abide, stand with and stay is also the challenge from these sermons to the Church and society. This is tied to Jesus as a model. We have already mentioned his refugee status. The story that seems to pop up no matter where in the liturgical year, that of the Good Samaritan, is highly interpretive of the whole situation. Jesus is the Good Samaritan. The congregation may be the Good Samaritan. The congregation is called to be there for the refugee, and as we understand the sermons, this is something that is already happening, and needs to keep being done in the congregations who listen to these sermons. Therefore these sermons can empower.

## **5. Danish Study – The Refugee Crisis as a “Game Changer” and Critique of Confusing Security with Peace**

### *Introduction to the Danish study*

In the following we present analysis of fifty-two sermons held by thirteen different preachers in Sept. 2015, January 2016 and Easter 2016 in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark.<sup>33</sup> We have chosen to collect sermons from four different groups of preachers, namely: I) Pastors who participated in a seminar called the “The Political Sermon” at the University of Copenhagen in March 2016, II) Pastors whose churches are situated close to the Danish/German border, III) Pastors who have a large group of refugees in their congregation, and IV) Two bishops<sup>34</sup> and a pastor whose sermons and statements in the media have stirred intense debate about the relationship between politics (namely the refugee “crisis”) and preaching.

The following analysis shows that preachers use the lectionary texts<sup>35</sup> to address the contemporary societal and political situation of migration in different ways. The sermons preached on the first two Sundays, namely 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity – or Sept. 6<sup>th</sup> and Sept. 13<sup>th</sup> – are the ones that most explicitly address the contemporary societal situation. Whether this is due to the changed situation, in which refugees started coming to Europe in numbers hitherto unseen,

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<sup>33</sup> Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, Professor in Practical Theology, University of Copenhagen and Pia Nordin Christensen, Pastor and MA in homiletics, Frederiksberg Kirke, Denmark, are responsible for the Danish study presented in the following pages.

<sup>34</sup> Because the two sermons by the bishops has been publicly broadcasted and discussed in the media, we have decided to give credit to the bishops by name and refer to the sermon manuscripts which are available on the internet. The rest of the preachers and their sermons have been anonymized for the study. Thank you to all preachers who have contributed!

<sup>35</sup> The lectionary used in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark consists of a two-year series of readings. The second series is from 1885 and both series were revised in 1992 where texts from the Old Testament were added as required readings for the worship service. At the present time only the Gospel readings are used as the primary preaching text. Although there are ongoing discussions on whether we should add a third series of reading to the existing lectionary in the ELCD and perhaps start to preach on the Epistles and OT texts in addition to the Gospel pericopes, there seems to be a dominant consensus among pastors and theological scholars that the fixed lectionary texts are important and appreciated in the Danish preaching tradition.

or whether the Biblical texts gave reasons for this focus is difficult to estimate on the basis of our survey. However, it is clear that the same lectionary text is used for opposing ethical perspectives.

*Early September: Refugee crisis as “game changer”*

One of the sermons which were held in the beginning of September 2015 was by Henrik Wigh-Poulsen at his inauguration as the new bishop of Aarhus diocese. Since it was held at a bishop’s inauguration it received great public attention. However the content of the sermon and the public situation in which large groups of immigrants have just started arriving at the Danish borders called forth stronger interest and reactions than at similar inauguration sermons. The sermon was on Jesus’ cleansing of the ten lepers in Luke 17:11–19 and revolved around the lack of gratefulness that tends to characterize those of us who live in stable, affluent societies as in the following:

“We are not always good at recognizing what we have and receive in terms of peace, freedom and daily bread [...] Children, a spouse whom we do not have to force through a barbed wired fence by a Hungarian border. We take the gifts for granted. We are not always small enough to let the greatness of life catch our eyes. And then gratefulness fails. It is one of the condemnations of the welfare society; the anxiety of not getting and having enough. Do the others get more than I? More money, better health, more likes on Facebook, a more interesting life? Instead of rejoicing over what we have, we become preoccupied with whether we have enough. Or, if somebody intrudes, crosses boundaries in order to take the well-acquired from us.”<sup>36</sup>

In a radio-transmitted interview broadcasted the week before his inauguration bishop Wigh-Poulsen describes the refugee situation as a “game changer” in the relationship between church and state. In reaction, politician and former pastor, Christian Langballe, confirmed that the refugee crisis challenges the present situation in Denmark but whether it changes the relationship between church and state is a political rather than a theological question to him – and as a consequence it does not belong in a sermon.<sup>37</sup>

*Fall of 2015: From worry to fear*

The preaching text that seems to have caused the most discussion of the refugee situation is Matt 6:25–34. The sermons on this text are however also those that show the biggest theological differences regarding the ethical behavior in relation to the present situation. It is important to

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<sup>36</sup> Sermon on Luke 17:11–19, held 14th Sunday after Trinity Sunday, September 6<sup>th</sup> 2015. The original sermon can be read in Danish at: <http://aarhusstift.dk/2015/09/henrik-wigh-poulsens-indsaettelsespraediken/>. All sermon quotes in the following pages have been translated from Danish by Lorensen.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Discussion of the sermon in the radio program “Religionsrapport.” Broadcast on Danish National Public Radio DR P1, Sept. 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

notice that these sermons are all held on September 13th, 2015, which was the time when the number of refugees arriving in Europe increased rapidly. This increase very likely plays a significant role in the preachers' choice of focus. The sermons preached on Matt 6:25–34 all relate Jesus' exhortation: "Do not worry!" to the present societal situation. However the way the exhortation is interpreted varies from the two poles of an ethic of control/responsibility versus an ethic of ultimate ends/risk.<sup>38</sup>

One of the preachers who articulated an "ethic of ultimate ends" in relation to Matt 6:25–34 was a preacher whose congregation is situated north of Copenhagen in an area that does not tend to have large numbers of refugees. In his sermon he discusses the numbers of refugees coming to Europe in relation to the number of who already live here. He does this in an apparent attempt to downplay the fear of great numbers of refugees coming to Denmark. The preacher ends his sermon by saying:

"We must hope rather than worry; hope for the best and believe the best – also about other people. Each day has enough trouble of its own - but today your trouble is my trouble, so welcome here, my Syrian brother and sister. You are safe here. Because we do not want the worries to overshadow our confidence, our humanity and hope for the future. Because we are a Christian country – as our government says ..."<sup>39</sup>

The latter part of the passage is, most likely, polemical reference to the present government who has described Denmark as a Christian country in their declaration for the new government of 2015.<sup>40</sup> Several critics have questioned the intentions behind this statement and interpret it as a way to mark a difference between the cultural-Christian values and original inhabitants of Denmark on one hand and newcomers of other cultural and religious backgrounds and the preacher appears to join this critique implicitly.

Another sermon which can be seen as emphasizing an ethic of ultimate ends, in the sense of Weber, was held at the inauguration of the Parliament where the bishop of the Haderslev Diocese, Marianne Christiansen, addressed those members of the parliament who had chosen to participate in the traditional inauguration worship service. In continuation of John 14:1–7 the bishop opens

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. *Max Weber's* distinction in *Politik als Beruf (Politics as a Vocation)* 1918. See also *Sharon Welsh's* distinction between an "ethic of risk" and an "ethic of control" as referred to in *Charles Campbell/Johann Cilliers, Preaching Fools, Waco, TX 2012, 33.*

<sup>39</sup> Sermon preached on the 15th Sunday after Trinity, Sept. 9th, 2015 on Matt 6:24–34.

<sup>40</sup> The declaration of the new government is titled: Together for the future and states, "Denmark is a Christian country, and the Evangelical-Lutheran church has special status as the national church. The Government wishes to preserve this special status." Translation of Danish text accessed June 1st, 2017 [http://stm.dk/multimedia/Sammen\\_for\\_fremtiden\\_-\\_Regeringsgrundlag.pdf](http://stm.dk/multimedia/Sammen_for_fremtiden_-_Regeringsgrundlag.pdf).

the sermon by saying: “Fear not, dear members of Parliament,”<sup>41</sup> and she continues by referring to the first letter of John 4:18 claiming that “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear.”<sup>42</sup> The bishop’s choice of addressing the theme of fear, rather than worries as in the sermons of September, can be seen as characteristic for the development of reactions toward the refugee situation among many citizens and politicians in Denmark.

The bishop asks whether we may even pronounce the word, love, in “the real world” of today where “fear has become terribly in fashion.” She contrasts the fear of the world today with the love narrated in Scripture as well as in the hymns of one of the Danish church fathers, namely Nikolaj F. S. Grundtvig,<sup>43</sup> who claimed that Denmark was chosen to be a people of hearts, an earthen realm of love. She describes that much of our life and much politics is driven by fear and the fear of fear: “How can we make room for foreigners and refugees in our country when we are afraid of them, and how can we encounter the future if we cannot be sure that everything continues to be as it used to be?”<sup>44</sup> Throughout the sermon the bishop describes how love can drive out fear. She describes love as a way in the world where realities continue to catch up on us so that we are urged to relate to the suffering of other people even if we had not planned to and rather would have enjoyed ourselves with those that we know and like. As an alternative, she describes the contemporary situation as a “reality in which we can suddenly get new friends, people who come to us unexpectedly with help and a future we do not know”<sup>45</sup>.

In contrast to the bishop’s insistence that love can drive out fear one of the other preachers in the Danish study criticizes this understanding and sees this “naïvety” or ethics of ultimate ends as part of the present societal and ecclesial problem – rather than as a solution. This interpretation is traced in the following.

*New Year’s sermons: Wake up call to recognize evil forces at work*

Although most of the sermons we have studied that mention the refugee situation appear to admonish their congregations towards a welcoming attitude and an ethic of ultimate ends, some of

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<sup>41</sup> Sermon held at Christiansborg Castle Chapel on October 6th, 2015 on 1. Cor. 13 + John 14:1–7. The following quotes are Lorensen’s translation of the Danish original which is accessible at: <http://www.folkekirken.dk/Resources/Persistent/b/b/8/0/bb80b0acc0e82a10f9f59a847e0d210aa5643a03/Pr%C3%A6diken%20ved%20Folketingets%20%C3%A5bningsgudstjeneste.pdf>.

<sup>42</sup> With reference to the hymn sung at the worship service titled: *Kærlighed til Fædrelandet* [Love of the Fatherland] by *Nikolai F.S. Grundtvig* (1853) including the line: “Therefore, Denmark, fear not! Fear is not of love!”

<sup>43</sup> For an introduction to the work of Grundtvig see *Anders Holm*, *Nikolai F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872)*, in: M. Becker (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century Lutheran Theologians (Refo500 Academic Studies, Vol. 31)*, Göttingen/Bristol (USA), 2016, 67–86. Grundtvig was a contemporary of the Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard. For an analysis of this perspective see: N.F.S. Grundtvig. *The Matchless Giant*, in: Jon Stewart (ed.): *Kierkegaard and his Danish Contemporaries. Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources: Vol. 7. Tome II: Theology*. Farnham UK/Burlington USA, 2009, 95–151.

<sup>44</sup> Sermon held on October 6th, 2015 on 1. Cor. 13 + John 14:1–7.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

them clearly belong to the ethics of responsibility category in the sense of Weber. One of the representatives of the latter group interprets the present societal situation as a wakeup call to face the evil forces at work in the world. While trying to illustrate this seriousness the preacher criticizes those who use the situation as a means of staging oneself or, as other critics have put it, of “flashing their own goodness.” This preacher claims that the present situation places most of us in a grey area where the impetus to act wisely in the great picture and the impetus to witness of oneself tend to be confused.<sup>46</sup>

In her sermon on January 3, 2016, this preacher claims that the great question which the year of 2015 has brought us all is whether we understand the seriousness and how we react on it – because people have always had troubles being sufficiently alert. With the events of 2015 the preacher refers to the killings in a concert hall and cafés in Paris in November 2015 as well as in the synagogue and at a public debate arrangement in Copenhagen in February 2015. As a way to substantiate her interpretation, the preacher paraphrases an excerpt from one of Martin Luther’s sermons on the Gospel of John:

*“Do not walk around as if in sleep all the time – as if there was no danger in sight! The world is so daft and foolish, so blind and hardened, that it thinks that happiness lasts forever, as long as it smiles and everything looks good. Therefore people walk around in a daze and cannot imagine anything evil; but they live their life as if both the Devil and all afflictions were nothing.”<sup>47</sup>*

In the interpretation of this Danish preacher the words of Luther could as well have been written in the year of 2016 “where the events of 2015 have caught us unguarded.” The preacher asserts that the surprising societal development has several causes, but that part of the explanation is that it is so difficult for us to acknowledge that evil really exists. As an example, the preacher criticizes the Danish Prime minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, who quoted the father of the Jewish man who was shot while guarding the synagogue in Copenhagen in February 2015 by the same person who, on the same night, shot a film instructor participating in a debate arrangement on freedom of speech. The Prime minister quoted the father of the young Jewish man saying: “Evil can only be conquered through goodness between people.”

The preacher acknowledges the good intentions behind this statement but rejects it as a fundamental misunderstanding. She claims that if human beings only encountered evil with goodness, evil would conquer time and again. The root of the problem lies in the belief that human beings possess the power and ability to do well towards each other and thereby fight evil. However,

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<sup>46</sup> The critique of works righteousness or using the refugee situation as an opportunity to “flash one’s own goodness” runs as a common thread through several of the sermons and public debates in the year of 2015. We have chosen not to go into this discussion in the present essay although the theme is worth discussing further.

<sup>47</sup> Sermon held on Epiphany Sunday, January 3, 2016 on John 8:12–20.

this is dismissed as an unchristian thought that neglects the fact that the presence of evil in the world supersedes human powers. The preacher emphasizes that it is important to realize that the presence of evil rests in all of us but that the idea that human beings can exterminate evil powers is prevalent particularly among those who see themselves as very civilized. The preacher claims that in our context, there is a great groping and embarrassment towards the religious which is part of the problem of our lacking sense of the existence of evil – regardless of how civilized we become.

The preacher articulates something similar to the ethics of responsibility's critique of the ethics of ultimate ends by asking: "But isn't it Christian to believe that goodness will conquer in the end? And shouldn't we let compliance step forth? She answers the rhetorical question as follows:

"No, not unconditionally, because we must remember that although we should never hate anyone, it isn't us who can conquer evil through goodness – only Christ can. We are not the triumphant ones, he is, and the well-intended words that the prime minister quoted illustrate how we continue to put ourselves in the place of Jesus. Thereby we demonstrate our impotence because we have lost sense of our own limitations as well as the insight that there is a fundamental battle that must be fought. Evil cannot be rendered harmless through more love but must be fought through resistance.<sup>48</sup>"

The preacher continues by claiming that if we are to infer anything positive from the year of 2015 it must be that perhaps these events can make us wake up and recognize the existence of evil in the world as described by the preacher: "With its conflicts, migration, and terror massacres perhaps the year that has passed can contribute to a new alertness toward the human life which can never just be seen as something that cannot waver.<sup>49</sup>"

*New Year critique of confusing peace and security*

Most of the sermons in the Danish study articulate a fear of the stranger and an uncertain future as a characteristic of large parts of their congregation as well as the Danish society as a whole. Several preachers dismiss the worries in light of the biblical exhortations of "Fear not." However, others claim that the contemporary situation forces us to take the fear seriously and acknowledge that there are evil forces at work in the world. These voices emphasize that it is about time that people recognize this battle between good and evil and stop being naïve. The two perspectives tend to collide in the sense that they criticize each other's position indirectly in their sermons or explicitly in the public media. One of the preachers who tends to choose the via media between the "fear not" versus the "wake up" position is a preacher who

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<sup>48</sup> Sermon held on Epiphany Sunday, January 3, 2016 on John 8:12–20.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

throughout his sermons recognizes the fear that people have, yet challenges and qualifies common understandings of fear and peace in a theologically thoughtful manner.

In his sermon on New Year's Day this preacher describes how the refugees tend to call forth not only sympathy and compassion but also anxiety and perplexity. He describes how fear has become a theme and it feels as if the world never has been as insecure and chaotic as right now. However, he also claims that this is where we are mistaken: "The world has never been secure and safe. There has always been war and chaos. There have always been severe, threatening forces around us and people have always felt as if their time was the worst and the most threatening."<sup>50</sup>

The preacher refers to the words of the angelic hymn: "Peace on earth to people who enjoy his favor!"<sup>51</sup> and continues, "Yes, so we think; let us hope for peace. Let us be in peace from all that threatens us in the world that we live in. Peace and safety. But the question is: What lies in the word "peace"?" As an answer, the preacher quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer's speech at an ecumenical conference on the Danish island, Fanø, in 1934, before the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War broke out<sup>52</sup> in which Bonhoeffer warned against our tendency to mistake peace for security:

"Peace cannot be created through security. Peace must be awoken. Peace springs forth from courage – courage to live together with others here in this world. Courage to live strongly and with hope, in spite of war and violence and insecurity. The courage not to run for cover. Yes, security is the opposite of peace - for the more we secure ourselves, the more we try to make our own little world safe, the more we cultivate distrust and the hatred towards what is foreign."<sup>53</sup>

During his paraphrase of the Bonhoeffer speech the preacher acknowledges that we do have to fight evil and that Bonhoeffer himself took part in the unsuccessful assassination attempt on Hitler in 1943. In spite of this acknowledgement the preacher continues his paraphrase of Bonhoeffer when he claims that:

"Peace is not won through weapons. Peace is won through faith and strength, through courage and spiritual edification. Peace is a commitment. Peace is to put our lives in the hands of God, in faith and obedience. We tend to associate peace with silence, passivity, a kind of happiness or wellness. We think that it is our right to be left at peace. But that is

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<sup>50</sup> Sermon preached on New Year's day, 2016, on Matt 6:5–13.

<sup>51</sup> Luke 2:14, International Standard Version.

<sup>52</sup> The Danish preacher has paraphrased and altered Bonhoeffer's original German speech which can be read in its entirety at: <http://www.dietrich-bonhoeffer-verein.de/index.php?id=48>.

<sup>53</sup> Sermon preached on New Year's day, 2016 on Matt 6:5–13.

not the way it is if we go to the great Christian thinkers: Bonhoeffer, Luther or Grundtvig.”<sup>54</sup>

*Impact of the presence (or lack) of refugees in the congregation*

When we compare the geographical location and demographic context of the analyzed Danish sermons, it turns out that the pastors who have large groups of refugees in their congregation do not mention the refugee situation particularly often. When they do, they tend to refer to the situation of the refugees rather briefly. In our interpretation this is not due to ignorance of the refugees and their situation. Quite contrarily, the presence of the refugees seems to be such an integrated part of the congregation’s shared situation that they play an implicit part in the way the sermon is prepared and heard.<sup>55</sup> When the refugees and their situations are mentioned in the sermon it is often treated briefly, as an example drawn from the congregation’s shared reservoir of experiences. One of these preachers only needs a few key words to make a connection between the events of Good Friday and the experiences of the refugees in the congregation when he talks about the “witnesses to pain and suffering, seeing the person, that one loves, get whipped.”<sup>56</sup>

Another of the briefly mentioned references to the situation of refugees could be heard in a sermon held on Easter night where several refugees were baptized following the sermon. The sermon was on Matt 28:1–10. In order to describe Christ as conqueror of death, the preacher took his departure in a painting printed in the worship bulletin that portrays Christ in the realm of the dead. In continuation of an interpretation of the painting, the preacher refers to the situation of the refugees: “the many rows of empty, hollow faces. People left to themselves, self-sufficiently autonomous. This emptiness and darkness in the people’s faces is not just about people who end up in concentration camps or have to drag away their years in asylum centers.”<sup>57</sup>

These kinds of references to the refugees differ from the congregations who only have a few, if any, refugees in the congregation. When the refugee situation is mentioned in these congregations it is often in the form of an illustration that is brought into the congregation as a foreign element with several details<sup>58</sup> and time for a plot to unfold. The experiences of the ethnically Danish part

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> This interpretation is consolidated through a qualitative study of the Apostles’ Church in Copenhagen in June 2014. cf. *Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, Preaching as Repetition – in Times of Transition*, in: *International Journal of Homiletics* volume 1 (2016), 50.

<sup>56</sup> Sermon held Good Friday, March 25th, 2016 on John 19:17–37.

<sup>57</sup> Sermon held Easter night, March 27, 2016 on Matt 28:1–10.

<sup>58</sup> These illustrations might also be compared with the anthropological notion of “thick description” as developed by *Clifford Geertz*, *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture*, in: *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays*. New York 1973, 3–30. *David Buttrick’s* distinction between examples and illustrations can be illuminating in order to understand the different approaches in our study: “Examples emerge from common IJH vol 1 no 2: 74–100

of the congregation and those of the refugees, primarily of Middle East descent and Muslim background, tend to be very different, which supports the contemporary homiletical acknowledgement of the otherness at stake—not only between God and humans but also at an intersubjective level.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to the different kinds of references to the refugee situation there tends to be a difference in the way the question of responsibility is discussed. In some of the congregations who have very few, if any, refugees in the pews the pastors appear to take the question of responsibility rather lightly, as described earlier in the sermon of Sept. 6<sup>th</sup> where the preacher said: "... today your trouble is my trouble, so welcome here, my Syrian brother and sister. You are safe here. Because we do not want the worries to overshadow our confidence, our humanity and hope for the future".

On the other hand the preachers in the congregation with large numbers of refugees express an acknowledgement of their limitations in carrying the burdens of those in need of help. In a sermon on the Magnificat, one of these pastors explains that Mary sings about the joy in suffering because it is about what God has done for us – rather than what we are able to do: "God will lift up the one who is lonely, the one who is kept down – because we just don't have the energy ..."<sup>60</sup> In our interpretation the preachers of the congregations who are composed of a significant number of refugees tend to balance somewhere between the earlier mentioned poles of "ultimate ends" and "ethics of responsibility" because they are forced to acknowledge the human limitation in spite of an ideologically well-intended ethics of all means.

## 6. Summarizing comparison

Despite the internal differences between the three Scandinavian countries there seems to be a consensus that the number of people seeking refuge in Europe must be acknowledged as a challenge to the traditional roles and responsibilities of churches and society.

The most striking difference between the two Norwegian cases is the salience of the refugee situations in sermons from the Case Cathedral and the silence of this theme in Case Border Area. Furthermore, the preachers in the former case seem to have a more explicitly political role than the preachers in the border area case, and their use of the lectionaries differ respectively. In both cases, though, sermons that do address the refugee situation are unanimously positive towards welcoming

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congregational consciousness whereas illustrations are brought to a congregation from beyond the sphere of shared experience." *Buttrick*, (note 13), 128–135.

<sup>59</sup> See *John McClure*, *Otherwise Preaching. A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics*, St. Louis 2001 and *Ronald J. Allen*, *Preaching and the Other. Studies of Postmodern Insights*, St. Louis 2009.

<sup>60</sup> Sermon held on Luke 1:46–55 on Annunciation Day, March 13th, 2016.

refugees, encouraging the listeners to be hospitable. As opposed to the Danish case, this attitude is not questioned in any of the sermons, and the biblical material is used to support such a position. Nevertheless, the 'crisis' is kept at arm's length, and the preachers call for a religious or Christian attitude rather than political action.

In the Swedish study one overall conclusion is that the sermons share a general and consistent openness towards the refugees coming to Sweden. The message is that the Swedes, as church and society, have to do something, even if we are not able to help everyone. The preachers' position in relation to the migrants or refugees is most often "to stand with" as a kind of identification with the refugees. The identification is expressed in statements such as: "As long as someone is in exile, we are all in exile" or "it could have been me" – as the title of the Swedish contribution summarizes it. This is closely linked to what we see as the overall purpose of these sermons, which is about "empowerment."

The common voice found in the Swedish and Norwegian studies stands in contrast with the findings of the Danish study, where the preachers express quite different interpretations of the situation: the question of fear as well as whether we ought to receive more refugees or not. One of the reasons why there appears to be greater diversity in the theological positions and interpretations of the contemporary societal situation could be that the Danish study includes a larger number of sermons than the other two studies – and that the strategy of sampling has included preachers whose sermons and theology has caused discussion in the public media. However, it is also likely that the reason has to do with different understandings of ecclesiology in the Scandinavian countries. Specific to the Danish context the sermons are characterized by theological differences in relation to the concern for the future as well as whether evil forces can be conquered by human goodness. According to our interpretation the congregations that are substantially influenced by the present situation, in the sense that they have a large group of refugees as part of their congregation, tend to transcend the dichotomy of the two kinds of ethics as they help the refugees and other marginalized people as much as possible yet are painfully aware that the final responsibility must be left to God.

In spite of the differences between the sermon material collected from the three countries as well as the preachers within each country, the sermons that we have studied appear to express a more welcoming attitude towards refugees than in the societies at large, especially when compared to the discussion in the public media during the same time period.

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