

Resonant preaching, sounding theosis: An exploration of liturgical homiletics

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Hartmut Rosa invites us to dream of resonant relations of all to the world. This paper will endeavour to envision what resonant relations would mean in the theological register of deification: God and the whole cosmos resonating with one another. If we allow ourselves to hear that vision for the whole of creation, could the humble soundings of liturgical preaching contribute to the vibrations of the world resonating within the rhythm of liturgical time, sacred place, sacramental presence, and holy people? On a very practical level, this article argues that for sermons to contribute to resonant relations being realised in the cosmos – for the whole cosmos to be divinised, sermons could be crafted for resonance. Within the pattern of the liturgy, as conceptualised by Lathrop and the scope of the liturgy delineated by Fagerberg, we will map out a tentative matrix for the mystery of meaningful resonance to reverberate in our homiletical craft.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This research facilitates conversation between a leading theory in the field of sociology and homiletics within the register of liturgical theology.

Keywords: Hartmut Rosa; resonance; preaching; theosis; liturgical theology; flourishing.

Introduction

Why should I go to church? Or, to be more in line with *Societas Homiletica's* *raison d'être*, why should we preach and listen to sermons? The first reason that Van Ruler gave in his famous Dutch book with the title *Waarom zou ik naar de kerk gaan* (1970:1) – is to stand a chance to experience conversion – '*om een kans te staan om tot bekering te komen*'.

Van Ruler is adamant that there is a *chance* that you can experience conversion because that cannot be guaranteed – it is not a given. I am almost anticipating one of the crucial factors of Hartmut Rosa's theory of resonance – namely 'uncontrollability' (2020:45) – as will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

The question of why we should go to church or preach raises the spectre of the question always lurking in the shadows: 'Why should we do anything?' In other words, it is the question of teleology. Another way of putting it is to ask what preaching should aim for.

Following Taylor (2007:21–28), Rosa (2019:21–28) is quite right to remark that sociologically speaking, positing uncontested and widely accepted ultimate ends is remarkably unworkable in our late modern age. We have lost an overarching horizon in which we can find shared meaning. To be sure, we have not been able to reach a consensus on how to describe the final horizon; but notwithstanding our lack of consensus, rationally speaking, such a final horizon is necessary for us to live as intentional creatures.

Rosa (2019) writes:

[...W]e can assume that human actors are only capable of acting and making decisions when they possess at least an implicit answer to the question of the good life that provides them with both positive and negative direction in their lives... (p. 20)

The logic of the intrinsic necessity of an ultimate horizon of what the good life might be is captivatingly portrayed by polymath David Bentley Hart (2013).

One desires money not in itself but only for what it can purchase; and one desires the things money can purchase not simply as ends in themselves but because they correspond to more general and abstract longings for comfort, prestige, power, diversion, or what have you; and one desires all such things out of a still deeper and more general desire for happiness itself, whatever that may be, and for a fuller share in

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the goodness of being. In this world, the desirable is always desirable in respect of some yet more elementary and comprehensive need or yearning. All concretely limited aspirations of the will are sustained within formally limitless aspirations of the will. In the end, the only objects of desire that are not reducible to other, more general objects of desire, and that may therefore truly be said to be desirable entirely in and of themselves, are a small number of universal, unconditional, and extremely abstract ideals that, according to a somewhat antique metaphysical vocabulary, are called transcendentals. (p.242)

Rosa (2019:21) is well aware of the problem that ensues when the working framework for living is one of a hypostasised individual teleology, where, on the one hand, there is no agreed-upon ultimate horizon to strive for, other than being authentic to yourself, but on the other hand where the authentic self can be elusive to find, within, but also within an ever-changing socio-cultural milieu where one constantly has to re-invent oneself.

So, instead of just focusing on maximising resources and opportunities as a proxy for a successful life lived, Rosa's project is an endeavour to focus on the quality of our relations to the world, ourselves, and other people. In short: a life well lived is a 'resonant' life.

While I suspect that Rosa would not 'elevate' his theory of resonance to the ultimate ethical horizon that would inspire every action and draw it to its end, Thompson (2024:6) is surely right that Rosa does accord his theory a normative status. I would like for a moment to juxtapose, or perhaps even to sacramentally relate, Rosa's concept of resonance to the ancient doctrine of theosis as the ultimate end of life itself.

To do so would, inevitably, be to foolishly rush in where better theological and sociological angels have fearfully trodden; still, the task of this article is to argue that the telos of theosis and that of resonance are congruent enough to be mutually enriching for homiletical practice.

Methodology

The methodological guardrail to which I will cling to attempt this inter(trans?) disciplinary conversation is the post-foundationalist practical theology developed by Julian Müller (2004, 2005, 2009, 2013) on the basis of the work of Van Huyssteen (1999, 2006).

I adopt this approach because its transversal rationality allows sociology and theology to intersect without reducing one to the other, fitting the aim of relating Rosa's resonance to theosis in preaching. This approach relies on a transversal mode of rationality that is well described by Calvin Schrag (1992:149), where different disciplines bring perspectives that have a sense of '...lying across, extending over, intersecting, meeting and converging without achieving coincidence'.

For Van Huyssteen (2006:16): '... the dialogue between theology and other disciplines, transversal reasoning facilitates

different but equally legitimate ways of viewing, or interpreting, issues, problems, traditions, or disciplines'. Van Huyssteen (2006:4) argues the not exact terms such as 'theology and science'... should be replaced by a focus on specific theologians who are trying to do very specific kinds of theologies and are attempting to enter into interdisciplinary dialogue with very specific scientists, working within specified sciences on clearly defined, shared problems.'

For the sake of our exercise here, the 'shared problem' would be 'How can preaching enhance the Good Life?' For Rosa – the specific (social) scientist to enhance the good life – preaching would have to improve resonance, and for me, preaching would have to be in pursuance of theosis.

The programme is to first sketch theosis and resonance as transversally overlaid concepts of the 'good life' or the ultimate end of our strivings. I will then investigate whether there could be a potential resonance between the avenues for the realisation of theosis and resonance within the liturgical context. Finally, I will suggest three ways through which preaching can contribute to the potential of resonance being experienced within the liturgy.

The ethics of theosis and resonance in the context of the liturgy

To do so, I will have to reprise a concise and incomplete programme of the intersection between the sacramental worship service and the fullness of life (De Bruin 2019:1). Thereafter, I will briefly sketch how the realisation of the 'good life' could be understood through the lens of Rosa's theory, and subsequent to that brief sketch, I will attempt a transversal conversation between the two.

Theosis

In line with the Presbyterian confession of faith, I will assume that the chief end of life is to 'glorify God and to enjoy Him forever'. For me, at least, the chief end of life is realised through 'the process by which the action Holy Spirit unites us to the Father by one conforming us to Christ' (ed. Ortiz 2020:4).

Or to frame it in Trinitarian Soteriological parlance, Schlesinger (2017:10) argues that to be saved is '... being incorporated into the Son's place in the divine life'. In short, the true end of the human being is theosis.

From a reformed perspective, Calvin saw our union with Christ, through the spirit's work, as a kind of deification – a transformation where we are conformed to Christ and share in God's glory, not by becoming God ourselves, but by grace reflecting his divine life (Mosser 2002:40–46). Mosser refers to Calvin's commentary on 2 Peter 1:4, where Calvin calls this participation in the divine nature the 'greatest possible blessing', tying it right back to glorifying and enjoying God forever. Mosser (2021:139–146) also shows how conversations between orthodox and reformed

theologians – like those sparked by Thomas F. Torrance and Georges Florovsky – revealed this shared patristic vision. They found that Calvin's writings on the mystical union with Christ align with theosis, a process where the spirit draws us into the Son's place in the Trinity, just as Ortiz and Schlesinger frame it.

Participation in God

Along with a heuristic formulation of what virtue ethics would entail, Buskirk (2012:1) argues reaching the ultimate telos in life is facilitated by cultivating particular virtues.

In the Thomistic tradition, these would be the theological virtues. As Dominican Timothy Radcliffe (2008:10) eloquently describes it, faith, hope, and charity are ways in which God makes his home in us, and we are at home in God. They are 'virtues' because they touch us with God's virtues, God's dynamic grace, making us strong for our journey to happiness in God.

Underlying the cultivation of the theological virtues are practices. For Radcliffe, the theological virtues are cultivated and received through participating in the eucharistic worship service. Radcliffe (2008:10) glosses Thomas Aquinas: '...faith shows us the goal of human life, happiness with God; hope reaches out towards it, and love unites us to it'.

For the sake of the argument that Radcliffe walks his reader through a three-part drama of the eucharist, the first act of the dramatic eucharist relates to the virtue of faith to what could fairly be called baptismal practices, everything from the invocation of the 'Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit', to the confession and absolution of sins and the confession of faith. The second act relates to the virtue of hope. The presentation of gifts and, for our purposes, especially the eucharistic prayer, are practices of hope.

The virtue of love is very closely associated with the practices of communion itself. For Radcliffe, this includes the praying of the Our Father prayer, the passing of the peace, the communion of bread and wine, and being sent out into the world. Similarly, liturgical scholar Geoffrey Wainwright (2014:10) associates baptism with faith, prayer (especially the Lord's Prayer) with hope, and the eucharist with love.

The point is that the liturgical practices of baptism, prayer, and the eucharist are associated with cultivating theological virtues, which are, in turn, seen as gifts through which we can participate in God's triune life.

Resonance

I am now at a point where I can return to Hartmut Rosa's theory of resonance. I will apply the same heuristic matrix to this theory. Let me assume for a moment that Rosa's ultimate telos would be the achievement of resonance. What would that be, and how would it look?

While I cannot give a comprehensive description here, Rosa (2019:298) provides a short definition that will suffice to provide me with an approximation of what I am talking about: 'a form of world-relation, in which subject and world meet and transform each other'. Rosa contrasts resonance with alienation, which he describes as a state of relationlessness where individuals feel disconnected from the world. In an alienated state, subjects experience indifference or hostility towards their surroundings, leading to a lack of meaningful engagement. Resonance, on the other hand, fosters a sense of connection and purpose, allowing individuals to find meaning in their experiences and relationships.

For resonance to occur, four dimensions need to be in place. Reckwitz and Rosa (2023) write:

The four elements in question are: the moment of affect or touch where we are invoked and moved, as it were, by a person, music, an idea, an image, and so on; the moment of emotion, understood as an effective outwardly directed motion in response to something; the moment of transformation where when we resonate with someone or something, we do not remain the same; and the moment of constitutive uncontrollability where resonance can neither be forced nor instrumentally created, neither accumulated nor saved. (p. 10)

Rosa (2019:145) argues that resonance can take place in three different kinds of resonant relationships: horizontal relationships, which include social relations such as friendships as well as familial, romantic, and even political relationships; the somewhat cumbersome diagonal relationships to the world of things; and finally vertical relationships to life, existence, or the world as a whole or totality perceived as existing above or beyond the individual, in which the world itself, in a way, maintains its own voice.

Resonant theosis within the liturgy

Let me now leave Rosa for the moment and return to the field of homiletics – or at least to liturgical theology. The assumption I am working with is that the homily is part and parcel of the liturgy as a whole (De Bruin 2024:39). I side with Foley (2016:10), who avers that the homily '...is not only in but essentially of the liturgy, which means that such preaching itself is a liturgical event'.

There are multiple practical theological consequences of this assertion. From a practical perspective, an authentic homily needs to be in dialogue with the whole of the liturgical context. Speaking of the liturgical context in which the homily would come into its own, my conceptualisation of the liturgy takes a sacramental view from 'above' and 'below' (De Bruin 2024:39) by juxtaposing Fagerberg's famous definition of the liturgy with Gordon Lathrop's description of the ordo.

I come at last to the place where I can begin to transversally bring Rosa's theory of resonance and homiletical practice into conversation. Fagerberg (2015:518) estimates (pushing

the edges of mystery): 'Liturgy is the perichoresis of the Trinity kenotically extended to invite our synergistic ascent into deification'. The nature and end of liturgy is the participation in the divine life.

Fagerberg (2010:10) gives his explanation of what this definition could theologially look like in action. The Trinity's circulation of love turns itself outward, and in humility, the Son and the Spirit work for the Father's good pleasure for all creation, which is to invite our ascent to participate in the very life of God; however, this cannot be forced; it must be done with our cooperation.

Within this definition and explanation, one can identify four dimensions: the perichoretic life of the Trinity; this life extended to creation in Christ's incarnation and salvific death; an invitation extended to participate in this salvific work synergistically; and our transformation that enables us to participate in the very life of God.

Rosa (2019:258) believes the above conception of God is wholly in keeping with resonance theory – but he explicitly latches on to the theological notion of perichoresis:

Christian theology, at least, adds to this the idea of God as a kind of being of relation, as expressed mainly in the doctrine of perichoresis – the relationship of the three persons of the triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), which fully interpenetrate each other yet remain distinct – as well as in the early Christian notion that God and the human soul are constitutively connected. (Rosa 2019:258)

This life is extended to 'touch' us, as it were; within the incarnation, we are 'invoked' by the presence of God, the call of God in Christ through the spirit. There is an effect. In response to this touch, we are invited to participate in a synergistic ascent – we are called to 'move'; within the work of God, we also have agency. There is emotion. In this process of synergistic ascent, there is a fundamental transformation in our being divinised.

With these overlaps, I could perhaps venture a resonant definition of liturgy or a liturgical theological definition of resonance: (liturgical) resonance is the perichoresis of the Trinity affectively extended to invite (not control) my emotional ascent into the transformation of deification. But let me now return to the more phenomenological description of the liturgy of Gordon Lathrop and the three axes of Rosa.

Rosa (2019:262) specifically speaks about prayer as a practice of vertical resonance. For him, the whole Bible could be read as a singular document of human pleading, begging and praying, waiting and hoping, and whispering and shouting for an answer. And one might also add that its response to all of this pleading is a single great promise: there is one who hears you, who understands you, who can find ways and means of reaching you, and responding to you.

Rosa (2019) believes that prayer, at root, is a way to experience 'deep resonance'. Rosa also does not neglect to mention the experience of horizontal resonance, '...between the faithful, who in Christian culture constitute a parish or community in "communion..."'. Likewise, Rosa (2019:263) also mentions diagonal resonance in the context of a worship service '... 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'. (p.263)

In fact, he says that these axes of resonance in the worship service are mutually enriching and reinforcing – one could almost say that they are in a perichoretic relationship with one another. Notice that Rosa specifically mentions prayer, community, and the sacraments as ways to experience resonance. With that in mind, we can visit the description of the liturgy from 'below' of Lathrop (1995:40–41).

This Ordo organizes a participating community together with its ministers gathered in song and prayer around the scriptures read and preached, around the baptismal washing, enacted or remembered, and around the holy supper. The Ordo is these things done together side by side. (My emphasis)

Note again the description of Lathrop on the centrality of prayer, community, and sacraments. I could then lay the axes of resonance transversally across the description of Lathrop to conceptualise a potentially resonant ordo: a participating community together with its ministers gathered (for horizontal resonance) in song and prayer around the scriptures read (and preached) (for vertical resonance) around the baptismal washing, enacted or remembered, and around the holy supper (for diagonal resonance).

A very enriching dimension to this ordo is that it can potentially flow into the whole of life – the 'liturgy after the liturgy'. Ordo represents the total ordering of the Christian life as it expresses itself in the assembly and as it leads to and flows from that assembly (Duba 2005:10).

Now let me return to the virtue ethical framework of telos, arete, praxis, and polis, as described earlier. If I were to transversally juxtapose the telos of participation in the perichoretic triune life of God as the most profound experience of resonance following Rosa, the virtues of faith, hope, and love (not necessarily with a one-to-one direct correspondence to the three axes of resonance [vertical, diagonal, and horizontal]) and the practices that engender the virtues are virtually the same: prayer – vertical resonance; baptismal washing, among others – diagonal resonance; and communion – horizontal resonance.

One could then say that for the promotion of the telos of resonance by way of the axis (virtues?) of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal resonance, paying attention to the nexus of practices of prayer, baptism, and the Lord's supper (communion) could be a way of promoting the experience of resonance in and through the worship service. I say resonance in and through the liturgy with a view to the idea already alluded to of the liturgy after the liturgy of the ordo,

including the formal liturgy and all of life that flows from and into the liturgy.

In this way, one might posit, acknowledging the Second Vatican Council, that the liturgy could be the source and the summit of resonance.

Preaching towards resonance

At this point, one might ask: what about preaching and resonance specifically? Hopefully, I am now at the point where I can answer the question within the framework that has been sketched so far.

If I were to assume that the sacramental liturgy, as described by Lathrop (1995:40) and Fagerberg (2015:518), has as its primary end to form people to reach their proper end in God (theosis), or human flourishing (De Bruin 2019:1), and that the liturgy also has the potential to advance resonance (Rosa 2019:20), and that the preaching event is part and parcel of the liturgy, one could ask what kind of preaching would be conducive to the experience of resonance or how can the horizon of resonance as part of the end of preaching inform the preparation and delivery of sermons within the liturgy. Preaching could highlight and foster the three axes through which resonance could be experienced in the liturgy.

Diagonal resonance

It can be as simple as mentioning or commenting on not only the biblical text(s) (as potentially signifying vertical resonance) that are preached 'on' but also the 'texts' of the axis of horizontal resonance and diagonal resonance. A core tenet of resonance theory is that being affected is not a guarantee, but in the echo of Fagerberg's definition of the liturgy, we can be invited to notice, think about, or experience an artefact in the church, be it a stained-glass window, a candle, a chalice, and the like.

The same could be said, of course, of sacramental celebrations: the sermon could make connections to the shape of the baptismal font, the sound of the water, and the colour and taste of the wine.

Along with the pre- (post?) modern accepted reality, one could gently invite worshippers to listen to what objects within the sanctuary might be 'saying' to them. (Even while putting the word 'saying' in scare quotes gives our suspicion about the enchantment of the word away.) In the register of theosis, the sacramental celebrations *par excellence*, in the reformed tradition, want to speak to the assembly. It is part of the proclamation of the world – and the diagonally resonating sacraments wish to proclaim to the assembly their union with Christ and, therefore, their participation in the triune life.

Horizontal resonance

The same could be said about a sermon that potentially could resonate horizontally. In fact, Rosa (2019) argues

diagonal, vertical, and horizontal resonance co-implicate one another:

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. (p.236)

When it comes to horizontal resonance as such, Rosa discusses three spheres of horizontal resonance: the familial spheres with romantic partners and children, friendships, and the political order – specifically democracy. For this discussion, I will focus on the aspect of democracy.

Rosa (2024) believes that the survival of democracy depends on:

... a promise and can only function when everyone has a voice that can be heard. Moreover, Rosa came to the conviction that 'our ears are just as essential. It's not enough for me to have a voice that's heard; I also need ears to hear the voices of others'. (p. 37)

Rosa (2024:12) goes further, saying that we need a particular disposition for democracy to work, to wit – 'a listening heart'. It is striking that, almost a decade earlier, Brian McLaren (2010:10) wrote in almost precisely the same terms as Rosa when he (McLaren) wrote about listening to a sermon.

Listening to sermons falls under what McLaren calls 'communal' practices, or we could say in Rosa's parlance, as falling on the horizontal axis. It is a practice that fosters the virtue of attentiveness – where the speaker, preacher, or whomever begins by simultaneously attending to the Scriptures, the faith community, his or her own soul, and the larger world in which they are all situated, listening for resonances that indicate places where God may be speaking. The people similarly come, attending to resonances between the text, the sermon, and their own lives, seeking in that resonance to integrate sacred theology and personal biography and shared history.

The practice of preaching as an act that fosters attentiveness or a 'listening heart' could well be a way of opening societal spaces for resonance.

One could mention two practical applications of preaching along the axis of horizontal resonance (apart from the general implicit formation that is at play). It is conceivable that the preacher could, in a sermon, refer to the actual gathering that constitutes the liturgy. It could be an invitation to become aware of the people gathered here – or if it would be appropriate to make reference to specific people in the community. Of course, with great judiciousness!

Vertical resonance and preaching

In speculating on what vertical resonant preaching could entail, I could develop a resonant definition of preaching with Rosa's help. Rosa (2019) writes:

Religion is then a promise that the world or the universe or God still speaks (or sings) to us even when we are incapable of hearing it when all our axes of resonance have fallen mute. (p. 259)

Could one say that preaching fulfils the promise that God still speaks?

I could then propose a conceptual description of preaching through the lenses of theosis and resonance:

The spoken [W]ord of God invites us to consciously participate in the resonance of theosis through the diagonal axis of sacramental participation, the horizontal axis of community participation, and the vertical axis of prayer.

Reflecting on the vertical axis of preaching, one baulks at a heavy-handedness where the preacher would explicitly state that the sermon is God's speech to the congregation; but I find the counsel that master homiletician Sam Wells (2018) gives when writing about his meditative book *Walk Humbly* particularly helpful when thinking about the 'vertical' axis of preaching resonantly. He thinks of his own writing in the book along the lines of Thomas Traherne:

Traherne is always teasing, dancing, inciting, and pirouetting. But he has the ability to stay still and dwell deeply on just one moment, one article, one insight – and Mother Julian once cradled a hazelnut, and as God treasures us. It is such intensity, such wonder, such concentration, such joy that this book seeks to enliven. It is an invitation to a way of being, a way of becoming fully alive, in which reading, contemplating, celebrating, discovering, and praying meet and gradually become indistinguishable from one another. (n.p.)

Crafting sermons with a vertical axis of resonance in mind could do worse than participating in the spoken word of God as an invitation to a resonant way of being, to participation in the life of God. In such a sermon, preaching, listening, contemplating, celebrating the liturgy, and praying could resonate with one another.

Conclusion

One could ask what could be gained by juxtaposing theoretical concepts of theology and sociology for homiletical practice.

One answer could be the sheer joy of discovering and enjoying the resonance between various ways of looking at the world – and this joy of 'making connections' is inherent in the task of preaching and listening to preaching.

Furthermore, offering a 'lens' through which the liturgist can aim for the ultimate goal of having an impact with their preaching, may be beneficial. The sociological concept of

resonance could just be one helpful way for us to participate in the synergistic ascent into deification.

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