Speaking of God

Computational Analysis of God-concepts in Dutch Sermons

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A thesis presented for the degree of

Master of Arts in Theology

at the

Protestantse Theologische Universiteit

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Saturday 11th January, 2025

But I’m trying to trust in the heavens above
And I’m trying to trust in a world full of love
Fire and water and constantly dream
Of the balance of things and the music between

- MOON MUSiC, Coldplay

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the expertise and guidance of Theo Pleizier. I am thankful for the flexibility and critical feedback throughout the process of writing this thesis.

This thesis would not have been possible without Mark Wynn, who gave me the opportunity to study in Oxford and helped start the philosophical part of my research.

This thesis would not have been possible without the enthusiasm of my dad, who in 2011 inspired me to pursue my dream of going to Oxford, where a large part of this thesis was written.

This thesis would most certainly not have been possible without the love and care of my wife Judith, who has had to deal with me travelling back and forth between Oxford and home, who had to deal with me telling stories about obscure philosophers that I encountered during my research, who had to deal with my complains about broken computer code and who had to deal with countless other things. Through it all, she motivated me and asked critical questions throughout that have proven to be invaluable.

Abstract

Understanding how a preacher speaks of God in their sermons is an important, but a complex and difficult task. The purpose of this thesis is to study one aspect of this 'God-talk' in sermons and focus on the philosophical God-concept. Using computer algorithms and Natural Language Processing, a form of Artificial Intelligence, along with Immink's two contemporary homiletical models, 69 sermons from 4 different Dutch preachers were analysed to determine whether the God-concept articulated primarily classical theism or social constructionism. Two of the preachers showed affinity with classical theism, one preacher with social constructionism and one preacher seemed to have no distinct preference. The results of this study show that computer analysis alongside homiletic theory is a viable strategy of identifying philosophical God-concepts in sermons. Additionally, this study shows that mutually exclusive philosophical theories and homiletic models can act simultaneously in a sermon. Further research is required to improve accuracy and performance of computational models, and to re-evaluate philosophical and homiletic theories to better fit empirical data.

Keywords— God-concept - Homiletics - Artificial Intelligence - Philosophical Theology

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1 | Introduction

Ever since the beginning of Christianity, people have held sermons and preached the Christian message. In the Bible many examples can be found, arguably the most famous of them being Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Following Jesus' example, the first and subsequent generations of Jesus' followers have also preached sermons. Sometimes, like Peter in Acts 2, it would be in the form of a public address. Other times it was in an enclosed space to a group of believers, like the apostle Paul in Acts 20.

Preaching has since then become an inseparable part of the Christian worship. In nearly all Christian traditions and denominations worldwide, someone, or multiple people, voices the Christian message to people who have gathered for worship. Preaching can take on many different forms and occur with varying intervals, but nowadays a pastor or priest usually prepares and preaches a sermon for the weekly Sunday service. The sermon contains a message for the congregation in the church, long or short, based on the Scripture reading of the day. The task of preaching in this context is fairly straightforward: the preacher expresses to an audience whatever it is that they believe is contained within the reading of the Bible or what they believe is best on that particular occasion.

But preaching is as simple as it is complex. Depending on the complexity of the passage from the Bible, it can be a daunting task to find out what is contained in the reading and how it would be relevant for the audience. Even if someone has preached a sermon on a weekly basis for many years and they were to take the 'easiest' passage (assuming it exists) from the Bible, many priests and pastors will still express their difficulties with preaching.[1]

1. This is based on private conversations with pastors from a broad range of Christian traditions, both from a protestant, baptist, evangelical and catholic, orthodox and liberal background. The

This is not necessarily because preaching is an intellectually challenging task, although it can definitely be that, but also because many pastors and priests find it difficult to talk about God in sermons. Some experience discomfort when talking about God, as they are unsure if it is even possible to know who or what God is. For others, it is because they are unsure how to express Gods will and voice in sermons.

Adding to this already complex and sometimes uncomfortable task, is the fact that a persons biography can influence their understanding of God. Language in sermons might unintentionally trigger psychological reactions, or unintentionally change the meaning of the sermon completely for the listener. And, obviously, it is not just the audience that can have this particular reaction to language about God, but the preachers themselves can have this too, making it extremely difficult to discern who God is and what He is saying from one particular sermon.

But it is not impossible to consider what is *being said* about God in sermons. Analysing what is being said about God would result in a concept of God that is not (necessarily) God himself, but a notion that can help see more clearly in the complexity of 'God-talk.' Still, because of the complexity of a concept of God, there are about as many approaches imaginable as there are scientific (sub)disciplines. A choice has to be made from which perspective we analyse this God-concept.

Theologically, it would be of interest to study God-concepts from a philosophical theological perspective. This philosophical theological perspective is important for a number of reasons. First of all, it is important for the preachers' personal reflection to have a clear understanding of the God-concept and the language used to discuss the God-concept. Philosophical theology allows for clear and struc-

private conversations were with priests and pastors of various nationalities, but primarily from a Western European background and the majority from The Netherlands.

tured thinking, which is helpful to see more clearly in the complexity of the God-concept. This would benefit the preacher in their efforts of preparing a sermon, and it would most likely also benefit the audience and other professionals.[2]

Sermons provide a unique context for the analysis of this God-concept. The liturgical context already provides a 'God-filled' context, so to speak, and sermons are God-talks *par excellence*. Additionally, because a sermon is not an exact copy of the Scripture readings, but only connected to the reading, highlighting topics that are important for the listeners, it provides an insight into how the God-concept that is presented in the sermons of an individual preacher is constructed.

The aim of this study then, is to analyse the Christian God-concept within sermons. Before we can think about analysing the God-concept from sermons, however, we have to know *how* to do this. In this thesis, we will take three successive steps that will bridge the gap between sermons and philosophical God-concepts. First we will try to understand what a philosophical God-concept is, then how to relate this to sermons using homiletic theory and as a final step, we will use computer algorithms to analyse the God-concept from a database of sermons from 4 preachers.

The first step will be to understand what a God-concept is. We will approach this question from a philosophical perspective in chapter 2. Because we are focussing on a Christian context, we will focus on the Christian God-concept only. There, we will discuss two dominant positions in the Christian tradition that can be thought of as being at odds with each other and who have been debated intensely. The first position, classical theism, thinks of God as being a separate

2. For example, it could be of use for mental health professionals, who have started to use a patients concept of God for treatment. Understanding a God-concept from sermons better might aid in understanding religious language and religious background. Patients respond positively to discussions of God-concepts, see for example: Eleos, *Handleiding ROM Existentieel herstel*, p. 6.

reality from creation, who possesses divine attributes and who can be thought of as 'higher' than creation. The second position, social constructionism, takes a radically different approach and states that God is not separate from creation, but is constructed by the human mind and exists only as a construct. Exploring these God-concepts will help us understand the tension between the respective theological positions, but also show the strengths and weaknesses of either position.

This first step will prepare us for the next step, which is the homiletic discussion. In chapter 3, we will focus on what Immink describes as the kerygmatic and the expressive-symbolic homiletic models.[3] We will explore both models and form an understanding of how 'God-talk' functions in either of the models and what sermon-structure and language is associated with either model. We will also explore their respective relations to the God-concepts explored in chapter 2.

The final step will be to analyse a database of sermons from 4 different pastors coming from different Christian traditions. As we have noted before, it is difficult to explore a God-concept from one sermon alone because of the highly complex and contextual nature of one sermon on its own. Studying a large number of sermons would allow for a more balanced God-concept as different scripture readings have been used for the sermon. On top of that, if preachers use certain patterns to describe God in their sermons, these will most likely show up more clearly when analysing a larger amount of sermons.

Before this bigger picture will become visible and patterns can be analysed, a large number of sermons have to be processed. While this can be done by hand, it is time-consuming and labour intensive. Using computers to automate the processing of the 'raw' sermons in order to distillate and structure the data required for the analysis of God-concepts, seems like a logical next step. Recently, partly

3. Gerrit Immink, "Human Discourse and the Act of Preaching," in *Social constructionism and theology*, 1st ed., ed. C. A. M. Hermans, Empirical studies in theology, v. 7 (2002), p. 162.

as a result of the rise of interest in Artificial Intelligence (AI), theologians too, have successfully used computers to process large numbers of texts and sermons, proving that this is both a viable and potentially fruitful approach.[4] This thesis will attempt something similar, use AI, specifically Natural Language Processing, for sermon analysis.

The research-question for this thesis is thus formulated as follows:

> What, given computer-based analysis, are the dominant Christian God-concepts in the sermons of four contemporary Dutch preachers, in view of the intersection between philosophical theories of God-concepts and Immink's homiletic models?

This thesis will proceed as follows: In chapter 2, the philosophical background of God-concepts will be explored. The next chapter, chapter 3, will discuss Immink's homiletical models. In chapter 4 we will explain the various computer algorithms that were used, and argue why they might be of interest in exploring the God-concept in sermons. In chapter 5 results of this computer analysis will be presented. Chapter 6 will discuss these results and highlight the implications and limitations. Finally, chapter 7 will contain the answer to the research-question of this thesis and the final recommendations.

4. Anne Agersnap and Kristoffer Laigaard Nielbo, ""What is love...?": A study of thematic constructions in 11,955 Danish sermons," *International Journal of Homiletics* 5, no. 1 (November 2022): 86–116.

2 | God-Concept Background

In order to be able to analyse God-concepts in sermons, a deep understanding of what God-concepts are is required. So, in this chapter, I start with explaining what I understand the term 'God-concept' to mean, and discuss the two dominant models of Christian God-concepts.

Although in the introduction I quickly mentioned what is understood by a God-concept and touched on the philosophical character, it requires further clarification. This is what I will aim to do first. There are other words that have been used to highlight a particular perspective on God. For example, 'God image' has been used in mental healthcare to describe the conceptions patients have developed.[1] This 'God image' should be interpreted as a 'representation of God' that an individual has developed of God in their lives through their socialization and experiences.

This 'conception' of God is different from a 'conceptualization' of God. There are many mental models, 'conceptions', of God that one could imagine. For example, when God is discussed as being the 'Father', a person could subconsciously connect the divine to their own past experience of their father or their own experience being a father, even though this human fatherhood is not *necessarily* what is meant when theologians discuss Gods fatherhood.

Alongside the 'conceptions' or 'representations' of God, there are 'conceptualizations' of God. When 'conceptualising' the divine, people, usually theologians and/or philosophers, try to use various sources to deduce the nature of the divine

1. Hanneke Schaap Jonker et al., "Development and validation of the Dutch Questionnaire God Image : Effects of mental health and religious culture," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 11, no. 5 (July 2008): 501–515; Jessie Dezutter et al., "God image and happiness in chronic pain patients: the mediating role of disease interpretation," *Pain Medicine (Malden, Mass.)* 11, no. 5 (May 2010): 765–773.

and formulate their respective ideas of the divine in a structured way. This occurs in many different religious contexts. Different religious traditions in the world have different ideas about who or even what the divine is, and not all conceptualizations of the divine are called 'God'. Sometimes, they even go beyond 'God'. Arguably the most famous of this conceptualization of 'God' can be found in Buddhism, where there are gods, but the ultimate reality is something beyond those divine beings.[2]

For this thesis we will not discuss the conceptualizations from multiple religions, however, but focus on the Christian concept of God. As we will only discuss sermons from Christian churches, there is no need to discuss God-concepts that are employed in other religions.

Immediately, however, we arrive at a potential problem: If the Christian concept of God is discussed as a 'conceptualization' of God alone, one could argue that the God found in the Bible is nothing more than a conceptualization, a 'construction', of people. I describe this as a potential 'problem', but it has frequently been argued by theologians and other scientists alike, that God is indeed but a conceptualization of humans. This might seem irreconcilable with the traditional Christian idea of God as a reality in itself and the idea of God being independent from humans. If God is a reality in itself, then God cannot be just a construct that exists in human minds only, but God has to go beyond that.

So, on the one hand we have a classical theistic perspective, on the other hand we have a social constructionist view. These two main ideas about the concept of God are what we will discuss in the remainder of this chapter. We will do so by discussing both God-concepts in general terms and afterwards we will try to deepen our understanding by discussing authors that have made a considerable

2. Peter Harvey, "Buddhism and Monotheism," *Elements in Religion and Monotheism*, July 2019, p. 1-2.

contribution to the respective God-concepts. First, we will discuss the classical theistic God-concept as being a reality in itself, and study Augustine and Anselm. Then, we will discuss what it means to conceptualise God as a human construct and study Feuerbach and Kaufman. At the end of each subsection a short summary is provided.

Before discussing the different God-concepts in more detail, I would like to stress again that I will be discussing God-concepts, not *God*. Capturing God, even when discussing God as a construct, is always restricted by the specific perspective and background of this thesis. Additionally, in this thesis I will discuss the God-concept in the Christian context. This means that I will not aim to provide an after-God version of the God-concept, but a God-concept that still strictly functions within a Christian context.

2.1 Classical Theism

First, we will discuss the Christian God-concept where God is considered to exist beyond our reality. This means that God is radically different from us, because God cannot be part of creation. That does not necessarily mean that God does not act in creation, although it does not exclude this idea, as interaction between God and the creation could still be possible.

One of the aims of classical theistic theology is to search for the characteristics of God who exists apart from creation, or in other words, to search for the divine attributes. These divine attributes are properties of God that have to be necessarily true in order for God to still be God. While this may sound complicated, it means that if God would lose property x he would no longer be God, so He necessarily *has* to possess property x. In this example, x can be thought of as a divine attribute. The divine attributes allow for structured thinking about who God is, as it

allows categorization of attributes as essential or non-essential.

Ancient Greek philosophy has proven to be one of the main sources of inspiration for thinking about the divine attributes. Ever since the beginning of Christianity, Greek philosophy has been intertwined with Christian thinking. The apostle Paul famously quotes ancient poets and philosophers in his speech at the Areopagus. The Greeks have provided a method of philosophical reasoning to think about these attributes in a constructive manner.

The challenge for classical theism comes when trying to formulate what the essential attributes are. The problem that arises when thinking about God in classical theistic terms, is the certainty of the knowledge of of the God-concept. God can be thought of as the 'highest' or 'most perfect' being, but this is not too dissimilar to the way Greek philosophers thought about God, which makes it hard to recognise why this God-concept is distinctly Christian. Even when it is stated that 'all truth is Gods truth',[3] it does not solve the problem of knowing what the truth in the God-concept is, just that when the God-concept contains true objects it must be from God.

Especially when Greek philosophical thought about the divine is connected to the Christian God-concept, the question about the validity of the God-concept has to be answered. To use the famous imagery of Tertullian, Athens most certainly has lessons for Jerusalem, but from a theological perspective, 'Jerusalem' should take priority over what Greek philosophy has to say about God.

Thinking about God, especially when using philosophical methods, requires some intuition about what the divine attributes are, but because of sin, human intuition is always flawed.[4] So, the propositions about a God that is distinct from His cre-

3. Craig A. Carter and Carl R. Trueman, *Contemplating God with the great tradition: recovering trinitarian classical theism* (2021), p. 6.

4. Thomas V. Morris, *The concept of God*, Oxford readings in philosophy (1987), p. 9.

ation that are necessarily true must be in some sense 'a priori' knowledge.[5] In the Christian context of perfect-being theology, God being 'perfect' is not just a true statement from philosophical reasoning alone, but also a theological (and on some occasions a spiritual) statement. Generally, in the Christian context, God is considered to share insights about who He is through revelation. Opinions differ wildly within Christianity about how this revelatory process takes place and it goes far beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss this in more detail. From this revelation, conclusions can be drawn about the divine attributes.

In order to deepen our understanding of this way of thinking about God, we will discuss the theological thinking about God of Augustine and Anselm of Canterbury. Augustine was deeply influenced by the Greek (Neo)Platonic thought and has deeply influenced the Western, classical theistic God-concept with his writings. Anselm of Canterbury has arguably formulated the most famous ontological argument for the existence of God, and his theology has been widely identified as the foundation for the subsequent and current discussions on Perfect-Being theology.[6]

2.1.1 Augustine

Augustine was heavily influenced by the philosophy of Plato and his successors, most notably Plotinus and Porphyry. In his *Confessiones*, Augustine recalls that while reading 'certain books of the Platonists' he found many truths in those books and that those writing led him on the road to Christ.[7] That is not to say that Augustine was not aware that the (Neo-)Platonists were lacking, he shows this clearly in

5. Morris, *The concept of God*, p. 4.

6. Brian Davies, "Anselm and the ontological argument," in *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*, ed. Brian Davies and Brian Leftow, Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (2004), 157–178.

7. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Vernon J. (Vernon Joseph) Bourke, Writings of Saint Augustine ; v. 5 (1966), Book VII.9.

the same passage by mentioning that he did not find the Incarnate and Resurrected Christ. But rather than casting it all aside, in *de Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine uses the story of the Israelites leaving Egypt with riches as an analogy for taking the 'gold' from the Platonists and leaving the rest behind.[8]

One of the (many) things Augustine implemented in his theology was the Platonic ontological hierarchy. This is the idea that certain entities having a higher ontological status than other entities, for example, a soul is 'higher' and better than just a body. This Platonic idea gave Augustine tools to develop innovative ideas in his theology. Notably, contrary to many theologians before him, it allowed Augustine to include women in the 'imago Dei', along with men.[9]

This is because, according to his Platonic convictions, souls and especially divine νους in which the souls participate are not gendered. So, both men and women have souls. Along with Paul's reasoning in Galatians 3:28 that in Christ there is no male nor female, which is interpreted eschatologically by Augustine, Augustine concludes that the soul is the entity that 'makes humans an image of God.'

Augustine also needed this concept of *imago Dei* locating itself in the soul to combat the anthropomorphisms of his contemporaries, who believed that God had a bodily form and who had anthropomorphite conceptions about the *imago Dei*.[10] Augustine, throughout his life, argues against these anthropomorphic ideas of God and could not accept that God would have a bodily form.[11]

Surprisingly, Augustine uses this ontological hierarchy to formulate an 'a priori'

8. Louis Markos, *From Plato to Christ: How Platonic Thought Shaped the Christian Faith* (2021), p. 194-195.

9. Christian Tornau, "Augustine of Hippo," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2024, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (2024), sec. 9.

10. See for more information about the anthropomorphisms of his contemporaries: Brendan A. Harris, "Augustine and the Origins of North African Anthropomorphism," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 31, no. 1 (2023): 57–84.

11. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book V.10.

argument for the existence of God.[12] Augustine introduces a 'hierarchy' of souls, showing that the soul of a human is superior to the soul of a beast, because the former participates more in reason. Augustine then states that something more superior to our rational minds 'would be something to whom nothing is superior': God. He then establishes that Truth is superior to our minds, and so he concludes – with reference to John 14.6 – that God is Truth. It should be noted that this 'ontological argument' for God, whether the argument works or not, shows us that Augustine's thinking stands firmly in the tradition of Plato, but primarily of Plato's successors.[13]

This Platonic thinking of Augustine is not without problems, however, in the context of revelation of God in Scripture. Physicality becomes problematic for Augustine, as his background in Platonic thought made him believe that non-physicality is ultimately superior to physicality.[14] This becomes painfully clear when Augustine discusses prayer and how in the Bible the body seems to be included in prayer (e.g. kneeling, prostrating before God). According to his convictions, something that is ontologically 'lower' can not have any causal effect on something 'higher': The body cannot influence the soul, so it cannot influence the prayer, contrary to what can be found in the Scriptures. Ultimately, he cannot solve the 'problem' that bodily movements pose when it comes to prayer.[15]

12. I present here a short summary of Augustine's argument as presented by Matthews in Garreth B. Matthews, "Augustine," in *Ancient Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Graham Oppy and N. N. Trakakis, vol. 1 (2013), p. 248-250; He presents the same argument in a similar fashion in: Davies, "Anselm and the ontological argument," p. 62-65.

13. Lloyd Phillip Gerson, "Saint Augustine's Neoplatonic Argument for the Existence of God," *The Thomist* 45, no. 4 (1981): p. 577.

14. Contrary to popular belief, Augustine's reservations regarding sexuality do not primarily originate from Platonism (although this may have played a part), but from his argument that original sin is transmitted during sex.

15. G. B. Matthews, "Augustine," p. 261.

2.1.2 Anselm

Anselm of Canterbury was a theologian that was deeply influenced by Augustinian thinking, inheriting the Platonic philosophical tradition that can be found in Augustine's theology. There are many different aspects to this inheritance that can be discussed and that might result valuable insights, however, we have to limit ourselves in this short section.[16] Anselm is probably most famous for his ontological argument for the existence of God, and this argument will be briefly discussed in this section. But as we are most interested in the concept of God in this chapter, we will also spend time discussing his Perfect-Being theology.

Anselm's ontological argument is one of the most impressive arguments of the existence of God and probably one that has been discussed the most in the last 10 centuries.[17] In short, the argument goes as follows: The premise of Anselm is that God is 'something than which nothing greater can be thought'.[18] The problem that Anselm now has, is that this still does not prove that God *exists* apart from the thought, or the mind of the one that thinks. It might be argued that the 'something than which nothing greater can be thought' is only something that exists in the mind of the person that thinks, so God would exist *in intellectu* only.

Anselm then argues that it is greater to exist *in re*, rather than *in intellectu*. Because we can come up with something that is greater than something that exists *in intellectu* only, and because of Anselm's premise that God is 'something than which nothing greater can be thought', God has to exist outside of the mind, proving that God exists *in re*.

16. See for an overview: Gareth Matthews, "Anselm, Augustine, and Platonism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*, ed. Brian Davies and Brian Leftow, Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (2004), 61–83.

17. In this short discussion of Anselm's argument I have tried to summarize the main points of the ontological argument as presented by Davies in: Davies, "Anselm and the ontological argument."

18. Introduced by Anselm in Pros. 2, quoted from Davies, p. 159.

Of course, one could simply reject the premise of Anselm, and some will inevitably do so. However, it is hard to imagine that many who believe in the Christian God will argue against the premise that God is 'something than which nothing greater can be thought'. From this, it can be argued that Anselm's argument is a purely theological affair, like Barth did,[19] and not necessarily a philosophical line of thinking.[20] However, as Davies shows, it could very well be that Anselm uses the concept of God being Perfect Being to argue that God must exist, without presupposing the existence of God.[21] God as a Perfect Being is a premise, but God existing outside of reality is then proven.

This idea of God as being the greatest thing that can be thought of, also allows Anselm to say what Gods divine attributes are. Anselm does, however, admit that this does not mean that we *understand* what these divine attributes are to God, but only that what we say about them is true.[22]

Anselm's reasoning, as presented by Leftow,[23] is as follows: When we can describe God as being something (e.g. just), it is possible that God is just. Because God is perfect, according to Anselm, and there is a possibility that God is just, if it makes God greater being just than not being just, God has to be just. This argument allows Anselm to discuss various divine attributes and reason about who God is. This concept is generally known as Anselm's 'Perfect Being-Theology'.

It is not entirely without problems either, because can God be perfectly just and

19. Karl Barth, *Anselm: fides quaerens intellectum : Anselm's proof of the existence of God in the context of his theological scheme*, Library of philosophy and theology (1960).

20. After all, Anselm operates from the idea of 'fides quaerens intellectum', where faith is prior to the knowledge obtained through intellectual enquiry. This would mean that Anselm presupposes the existence of God, and he is trying to formulate an convincing argument for those who already believe in God, not come up with an argument for the existence of God without presupposing the existence of God.

21. Davies, "Anselm and the ontological argument," p. 173-174.

22. Brian Leftow, "Anselm's perfect-being theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*, ed. Brian Davies and Brian Leftow, Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (2004), p. 135.

23. Leftow, p. 140-143.

perfectly merciful simultaneously, for example? Additionally, if God is perfectly knowledgeable, and thus has knowledge about everything that has happened, happens and will happen, does this mean that if God knows I will do something, I will do this necessarily and human freewill is but an illusion, or worse, that it would make God the author of evil? Although Anselm provides a – more or less convincing – defence regarding these problems, it goes to show that Anselm's Perfect-Being theology and his ontological argument are impressive, but not immune to problems when discussing the divine.

2.1.3 Summary

Christian classical theism provides a solid philosophical and theological God-concept. It allows for structured thinking about Who God is, and reasoning about what the theological and ethical consequences of the divine attributes are. Obtaining this knowledge, however, cannot be through reason alone, as God is reality in itself and humans have no direct access to God. Aspects of the reality of creation often becomes troublesome for classical theists. Within Perfect-Being theology, arguments operate in the context of faith, where the belief in God takes priority over reason. Knowledge of God appears when God reveals himself, particularly in Scripture, but true, full knowledge of God is fundamentally unobtainable.

2.2 Social Constructionism

We have seen in section 2.1 that God is presented as being distinct from creation, and so distinct from humans, in such a way that God becomes unintelligible from the created universe with out revelation or *fides*. Direct religious insights, or revelation, are required to obtain true knowledge about the attributes of God. Certain 'a priori' premisses are required to reason about the God-concept. When this is

the perspective that is taken, it becomes difficult to discern how God acts in the physical world, and subsequently how the relation between God and creation can be thought of. Additionally, how creation should be interpreted becomes problematic, because Gods actions in and goals with it can become opaque.

The other, opposite position, which will be of concern now, is the idea that God is not unintelligible for humans/creation, but is a construct of creation itself. From this perspective, God is immediately intelligible, because He arises from creation itself. It reverses the order of acquiring knowledge about the God-concept compared to classical theism and links God and creation immediately. In figure 2.1, I have attempted to visualize this reversal: When God is constructed from reality in (2), X, Y, & Z is the knowledge from which God is 'constructed'. For classical theistic and Perfect-Being theology in (1), attributes of God are not proposed from knowledge that is found within creation, but in order to truly know Gods attributes a process of revelation is required.

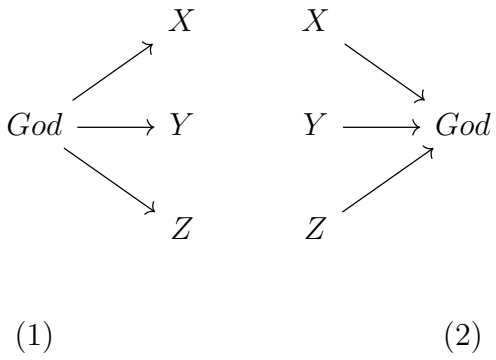

Figure 2.1: Figure illustrating God as construct.

It would be wrong to think about God who is distinct from reality and God as actually possessing attributes that would be ascribed to Him, but rather, when the mind constructs the concept of God certain attributes are taken from creation and 'projected' unto God. As a result, the cosmological dualism of God and

creation as being two separate realities disappears completely. Gods actions with the universe become clear, because the activity that can be seen in creation is the symbol of God. A bridge between God and creation does not even have to be built, so to speak, as God is 'simply' a part of creation.

This position, just like the previous position we discussed, is not without problems either. It becomes difficult to keep talking about God in a strictly Christian context, because God is presented, both in the Bible and in the Christian tradition, as being a real being and a person. Besides, it would make the work of theology extremely problematic or, at best, an endeavour purely focused on what is necessary for humanity and the line between sociology and theology might become blurry.

As in the last section, we will explore two authors that have made a significant contribution to the idea of a 'constructed' God-concept. First, we will discuss Feuerbach's concept of God, which will reveal the extreme position when it comes to our minds' construction of a God-concept. However, as we will see, although it remains possible, it will become difficult to keep thinking about a 'Christian' God-concept when discussing Feuerbach. After Feuerbach, we will see how Gordon Kaufman uses the ideas of Feuerbach to try to 'construct' a God-concept that removes the division between God and creation, the cosmological dualism, that is apparent in Christian classical theism.

2.2.1 Feuerbach

Feuerbach was a German philosopher, who was meant to be a theologian. During his studies, he became a student of Hegel. While initially a follower of Hegel's ideas, Feuerbach criticized Hegel's theory on religion, and his theory on God. There are many approaches for discussing Feuerbach's thesis about the Chris-

encounter is re-presented.[2] Through preaching, the Christ-event can be created by God to act within the congregation. This model then, is very much based on the idea that Gods actions in history have a redemptive aspect to them. It is thus expected that Gods salvific actions in history play an important role within the sermons.

The language that is used in the sermons is therefore fairly rational, as it has to be an accurate representation of what is happening in history.[3] An artistic or a poetic style of language in which the preacher expresses themselves is therefore not of importance. Preaching is not about an expression of human experiences, or human feelings. Instead, it is a sacramental act, an act through which God is speaking. Therefore, the preachers themself are considered to be of less importance, as preaching is not about human experiences but about God. Human self-expression is not as important the divine self-expression through the act of preaching.

This also means that the language used in this homiletic model has relational aspects to it, because the Christ-act is re-presented in preaching and preaching has a sacramental character. Through preaching, as Barth states it, God is encountered by the mouth of one of his heralds.[4] This encounter inevitably has a relational component to it, which also requires relational language in the sermon.

One example of a homiletic framework that is very much inline with the kerygmatic model presented by Immink, can be found in the 'The Witness of Preaching' by Thomas Long.[5] Even though he highlights the 'witnessing' aspect of preach-

2. Gerrit Immink, "Homiletics: The Current Debate," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 8 (July 2004): p. 93.
3. Immink, "Human Discourse and the Act of Preaching," p. 163.
4. Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Fischer Taschenbücher. 190. Bücher des Wissens (1957), I/1, §3,1, p. 52.
5. Immink, "Homiletics," p. 94; Thomas G. Long, *The witness of preaching*, 2nd ed (2005).

humans. After all, in Hegelian thought God is self-conscious only because of the fact that humans, through revelation, recognise God. If humans would not exist, it could be argued that God does not exist at all.

Ultimately, Feuerbach rejects the order of the relation between God and humans that Hegel proposed, where God is prior to humans. Feuerbach argues that God did not create humans, but reverses the order and states that humans created God. The Christian God is created by humans who as a collective see their own good qualities and then create a separate entity whom they call 'God', while not realising it is in fact humanity itself. In Feuerbach's spirit, it would be better to describe theology as anthropology, as theology is in essence the study of what is human.

Using Hegel's theory about self-consciousness, Feuerbach argues that God is actually a construct when humans take an outside-perspective but do not realise it is in fact humanity they are looking at and calling it God. God is pure human being, stripped of all limits that a human is usually bound to, objectivity of human nature.[27] God is not an actual reality, but a reification, objectifying the abstract concept into an actual God-concept.

Initially, it would seem that this would discredit Christianity, and potentially all religions, and it would be an odd choice to discuss Feuerbach in the context of this study, that focusses on the Christian God-concept. This is not entirely true, however, as Feuerbach himself argues in favour of the truth of Christianity and, just like Hegel before him, wants to put Christianity on a solid footing for the modern world.[28] Still, it is difficult to see how Feuerbach can maintain a Christian God-concept when he has to sacrifice the way Scripture talks about God and reinterpret this so radically different, or as Stewart writes, 'whether the remedy [for

27. Stewart, *Hegel's Century*, p. 99.
28. Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums* (1843), xiv ff. Stewart, *Hegel's Century*, p. 94.

Christianity] is worse than the disease'.[29]

2.2.2 Kaufman

Approximately 140 years after Feuerbach published *Das Wesen des Christentums*, Gordon Kaufman is a theologian who also writes extensively about the God-concept. Interestingly, he too, argues in favour of the Christian God-concept while using many philosophical and theological (or anthropological?) ideas of Feuerbach. In this section we will explore how Kaufman argues that a God-concept can be constructed by humans and still serve a purpose within the Christian religious context. He has mainly done this in the second phase of his work,[30] on which I will focus now, as I am primarily interested in the way 'constructing' a God-concept can work theologically.

Kaufman asserts that God is indeed a human construct. He believes it to be a mistake 'to regard qualities attributes to God as though they were features or activities of such a particular being.'[31] From this short quote it becomes clear that Kaufman does not agree with the theologians of classical theism that God is a separate reality from our own, and rejects that it would make sense to attribute certain characteristics to such a being outside of our own reality.

Rather, Kaufman believes that God is a construction in the minds of humans. Just like Feuerbach earlier, he argues that is impossible to maintain that God is still the subject and humans the predicate, and subsequently he too, reverses the order of subject and predicate. In other words, God is constructed from the human mind.

Kaufman presents God as a concept required for proper personal development

29. Stewart, *Hegel's Century*, p. 94.
30. Myriam Renaud, "Gordon Kaufman's Humanizing Concept of God," *Zygon* 48, no. 3 (2013): p. 516.
31. Gordon D. Kaufman, *The theological imagination: constructing the concept of God*, 1st ed (1981), p. 29.

and self-fulfilment. This echoes the way Feuerbach uses God to tell humanity that what they believe God is, is actually humanity itself. For Kaufman, in his constructive paradigm, God can act as the ideal that the human can strive towards. God is a '*humanizing* God', a God who helps to renew humanity to a brighter future.[32] This concept works for both the individual human and for collective humanity. God is the concept that pushes humans and humanity respectively, to its full realization, towards constructive communities. I used the word 'constructive' in the last sentence on purpose, as a small pun, but also because for Kaufman it is essential to construct a reality that supplies humanity with a better world through love and self-giving. Kaufman thus formulates criteria for a constructive God-concept: a concept that cultivates love and self-giving life.

As an example, when writing about attachment, he discusses God as being the 'absolutely adequate attachment-figure'.[33] The human self always lives in, what he calls, 'ontological anxiety', which limits the ability of humans to be capable of social activities. Because we are social creatures, attachment is necessary for us. With a growing self-understanding (or to allude to Hegel and Feuerbach: 'self-consciousness') a human, through attachment to other humans, will realise his finite attachment and thus limited humaneness. This will make us realise (or construct) who God is, who He is as an 'absolutely adequate attachment-figure'. Attachment to humans and attachment to God are thus interdependent. Attachment to God cannot exist without the attachment to other humans. According to Kaufman, this self-understanding and interdependency is what Jesus means to say in Matthew 22:37-40.

It is not difficult to imagine, however, that humans can creatively construct God-concepts that are harmful. Because of our limited knowledge and self-interest, this

32. Renaud, "Gordon Kaufman's Humanizing Concept of God," p. 516.
33. Kaufman, *The theological imagination*, ch. 2.

seems like it is almost inevitable. Humans are able to create God-concepts that are oppressive to others, but also to themselves, for a number of reasons. The task of a theologian is therefore to make sure that creatively humanly constructed God-concepts are constructive, and to criticise those God-concepts are destructive.[34]

For this, Kaufman requires God to be both metaphysical and mythical at the same time.[35] The mythical is what he describes as the anthropological way humans talk about God, for example, in the way the Bible writes about God as a 'warrior' or 'Gods hand'. This humaneness is necessary to express what is going on in the world in intelligible terms. This anthropological description of God could act a constructive God-concept, as the 'ultimate warrior' could be someone who can inspire to fight harder and potentially protect the community.

At the same time, and it might be easier to imagine this, a warrior can also be extremely destructive to a community, but also to itself. According to Kaufman, this is the reason why conceptualising God as a warrior ultimately fell short in Israel and had to be abandoned, replacing it with a different God-concept. A God-concept should have metaphysical, transcendent qualities (e.g. God as being just and merciful) besides just mythical aspects, as a relativizing agent. The 'absoluteness' of God acts as a relativizing agent to remind humans of their limitedness and sinfulness, but also as an absolute and normative agent. In the perspective of God, actions of humans always fall short and should have been done better. So, both the 'humaneness' and the 'absoluteness' come together in one symbol: God.

This apparent synthesis does leave many questions unanswered. I have stated that Kaufman does not consider God to be a separate reality and have cited a statement from his book where he uses an abundance of Feuerbachian language. Because of the apparent tensions in his theological conceptualization of the mythic and

34. Kaufman, *The theological imagination*, p. 76.
35. Kaufman, p. 52.

metaphysical and his use of 'classical' theological language within the context of the God-concept, this has been a debate for scholars.[36] It has even led to the claim that Kaufman is using claims of the classical theism in his theology and that Kaufman is using 'objective components to the task of orienting persons and communities' in his theologies,[37] which in the context of his use of Feuerbachian language is a rather controversial claim.

2.2.3 Summary

Social constructionism describes God as a construct of humanity, in fact, God is considered to be humanity itself. Divine attributes that describe God are abandoned. The God-concept in this context can still function within a Christian context, even though theology becomes problematic. The task of theology is reduced to considering whether a God-concept is constructive or destructive to humanity. As a construct, God is dependent on humanity and the character of God has clear relational characteristics.

36. Thomas A. James, *In Face of Reality: The Constructive Theology of Gordon D. Kaufman* (2011), p. 6, note 5.
37. James, p. 6.

3 | Homiletics

In chapter 2 we have seen what is understood by the God-concept in Christian theology. Two seemingly opposing and mutually exclusive positions were found: One where God was considered to exist independent and outside of this reality, the other where God was considered to exist as a human construct in this reality only. In this chapter we will explore the God-concept further and study the homiletical implications of the God-concept. While doing this, we discover similarities between the two philosophical and homiletical models presented.

As stated in the introduction of this thesis, we will continue our homiletical survey by using the two contemporary homiletical models. These models were identified by Immink in a chapter with the title *Human Discourse and the Act of Preaching*,[1] in a book on social constructionism and theology. In this chapter, Immink discusses preaching as a communicative act between the preacher, the audience, the text and the divine. He then presents two homiletic models that are representative for the two main models in contemporary homiletics, namely the kerygmatic and the expressive-symbolic model.

I will argue in this chapter that the philosophical theological perspectives play a role in these models. We will explore both models in more detail and while doing so, focus on how 'God-talk' functions in each model.

3.1 Kerygmatic model

First, we will discuss the kerygmatic homiletic model. Within this model preaching is considered to be a kerygmatic event, an event in which the divine-human

1. G. Immink, "Human Discourse and the Act of Preaching."

encounter is re-presented.[2] Through preaching, the Christ-event can be created by God to act within the congregation. This model then, is very much based on the idea that Gods actions in history have a redemptive aspect to them. It is thus expected that Gods salvific actions in history play an important role within the sermons.

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5. Immink, "Homiletics," p. 94; Thomas G. Long, *The witness of preaching*, 2nd ed (2005).

ing, he uses many aspects of the kerygmatic model in his homiletics. We will use his book to get a deeper understanding of the God-concept in his homiletic, as this will help us in the next step to relate language to the God-concept.

When discussing various ingredients for preaching, the last ingredient Long discusses is the 'presence of Christ'.[6] In that section, he describes preaching as 'a human activity but not merely a human activity.' He mentions that preaching is an event where Christ is present. We preach not to create a presence of Christ, but Christ is already present and that is why we preach. Preaching is an encounter with God, because Christ has already chosen to meet humans in the act of preaching.

I think that there are two things to conclude from this relatively short passage, that are representative of the overarching, sometimes more implicit, concept of God that Long uses. First, God is considered to be prior to human activity. God is prior to the act of preaching, the act of speaking words to a congregation. Secondly, in addition to the first comment, God exists as objective reality. Humans do not always make the best sermons, or can even be false-preachers, but God is understood to be merciful because in the act of preaching a God-encounter can take place. This is not a God that is to be understood as a construct of our own imagination, but a God that exists outside of ourselves and that can still present truth through the human actions in preaching.

For Long, human acts play an important role in the *act* of preaching. He presents the preacher as someone who is a witness to (the acts of) God. This allows Long to ascribe a role to the human being in the process of preparation and act of preaching. It is, after all, the human who is bearing witness. At the same time, he is but a witness: It is a bearing witness of God in Christ.

6. Long, *The witness of preaching*, p. 28.

Still, for Long, human experience is problematic *in* preaching.[7] According to Long, there is a significant danger in 'creating' religious experiences with preaching, because experience can lead us to idol worship, instead of the true worship of God. Partially for this reason, Long acts reserved towards expressive poetic language in sermons.[8] He does, however, admit that poetic and artistic structure and language *can* be a valid form for the sermon if it suits the listeners of the sermon and it successfully delivers the message of the gospel.

As a witness, the preacher must be able to convey the truth claims of the gospel. Long admits that there is no single good sermon form and that this conveying of truth can be done in multiple ways, but still there is a need in sermons to convey a certain truth. Long presents a model for preaching in which he uses *focus* and *function*, and while this can be communicated in different sermon forms, it does require a sermon that has a certain clue or climax, requiring a logical progression of an idea. Long describes this sermon form at the beginning of chapter six as 'a plan showing the sequence of steps to be taken along the way towards a destination.'[9]

Long can construct his sermon as a journey, because he considers the preaching of the gospel as containing an encounter with God, an event in which the voice of God can be heard. Because of this, each step of the sermon leads to the understanding of what God has to say in a certain passage of Scripture. Long spends considerable time discussing how Scripture functions within the context of preaching. Long, with Brueggemann, uses the image of the preacher as a scribe to explain that the preacher re-enacts the text as a witness to show that is not primarily the humans whom the text is about, but about God who has acted in

7. Long, *The witness of preaching*, p. 56.
8. Long, p. 213.
9. Long, p. 166.

history.

In this sense, Long's homiletic framework can be considered as a kerygmatic model. It is the encounter with the God of history that is re-enacted. It is God's actions that the preacher has to convey to the listeners of the sermon. It is because of this presence of Christ in communicating the gospel that Long considers the sermon as a logical sequence of steps leading to the main message.

3.2 Expressive-symbolic model

As the name suggests, expression of the human self plays an important role in this homiletic model.[10] Contrary to the kerygmatic models, in the expressive-symbolic model the preacher does play a very important role in the process of communication, as he *expresses* his own experiences and consciousness of the Ultimate.

When talking about the expressive-symbolic model, Immink mentions two theologians that are representative of such a model. First, he mentions Schleiermacher and subsequently Buttrick. For Buttrick objective history is suspect, and the idea of a God-event is all but unintelligible.[11] Faith comes only on a symbolic level and is as such expressed by the preacher.[12]

While Immink's suggestion of Buttrick could provide an interesting theological perspective into this homiletical model, this thesis will take a slightly different approach and postcolonial homiletics will be studied in the context of the expressive-symbolic method. In the 1990's, postcolonial theory arose as a movement of critical theory, whose aim was to expose the limits of (Western) society.[13] In the course

10. G. Immink, "Human Discourse and the Act of Preaching," p. 162.
11. David Buttrick, *Homiletic: moves and structures*, 1st pbk. ed (1987), p. 129.
12. Tim Sensing, "An Assessment of Buttrick's Homiletic," *Restoration Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (July 1993): p. 183.
13. Robin Celikates and Jeffrey Flynn, "Critical Theory (Frankfurt School)," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2023, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (2023); Leela

of its growth and development, postcolonial theory focused on the effect of inter-relation of power structures on our thinking, leading to a suspicion, or sometimes even distrust, of institutional knowledge.

Postcolonial theory, that emerged predominantly from literature studies, was also incorporated within the theological discourse. Postcolonial theology studies the complex entanglement of (Western) societal ideologies and Christian thought, where colonial ideologies of Western superiority were developed in the same geological location as Western Christian thought, rarely criticizing, but – sadly – often reinforcing each other.[14] Employing postcolonial theology can help deconstruct this entanglement and use analytical tools to find new methods of interpreting the Bible. Postcolonial theology focusses on finding ways to express the liberating message of the Bible for groups in the margins.

In this section we will look at Travis' postcolonial approach to preaching in her book *Decolonizing Preaching*.[15]

The entire book is focused on addressing the issue of colonialism and empire. Her book is centred in the North American context, which helps to explain some of the highly polarized language she uses to describe colonialism/imperialism. She paints a picture of omnipresent oppressive and dominating colonial ideologies that seek superiority over other individuals or groups, even when the historical colonialism itself seems to be less present. The aim of this book is to provide a homiletically sound answer to these voices, or as she puts it:

> To preach the good news of God's kingdom is to speak a resounding "no" to discourses that seek to dominate, separate, and homogenize

Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction: Second Edition* (2019), p. ix.

14. William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Global dictionary of theology: a resource for the worldwide church* (2008), sv. POSTCOLONIAL THEOLOGY.

15. Sarah Travis, *Decolonizing preaching: decolonizing preaching the pulpit as postcolonial space*, Lloyd John Ogilvie Institute of preaching series 6 (2014).

others.[16]

When her arguments are taken seriously, Travis' book will challenge every reader. She tries to deconstruct the oppressive voices that act within society, but also in Western theology. This in itself is already a thought provoking strategy that asks for a careful analysis of theology and the power claims that it makes. Travis' tries to create space and openness for others, and argues that naming the reality of colonial rhetoric and colonial acts will 'lead to the imagining of a new future governed by freedom, mutuality, variety and endless possibility.'[17]

In order to advance this freedom, openness and space theologically, she employs the concept of Social Trinitarianism. Social Trinitarianism focuses on the relationships within the Holy Trinity, and less emphasis is put on the unity of God as, for example, in Augustinian theology. This interrelatedness is non-hierarchal and power is shared between the three Persons.[18] God is thought of as a social being that is a loving relationship with itself. While emphasis is put on the three Persons being differentiated from each other, God is still God-in-Trinity.

Travis stresses the importance of the unity of the differentiated Persons for the building of community.[19] Travis considers the Trinitarian relationships of love as a symbol and model for the relationships human being should have with each other. When Travis stresses differences between the Persons in the unity of the Trinity, it allows Travis to see (i) that different beings can exist in community by engaging in a loving relationship. Additionally, (ii) the relationship of the Trinity is non-hierarchal and power is shared equally between the three Persons of the Godhead. It follows from (i) and (ii) that the model of the Trinitarian relationships allows for communities in which non-hierarchal, loving relationships can exist while still

16. Travis, *Decolonizing preaching*, p. 12.
17. Travis, p. 99.
18. Travis, p. 73.
19. Travis, p. 64.

giving room for differentiated human beings. The Social Trinity thus provides Travis with an answer to the problem of (destructive) dominion and submission.

Social Trinitarianism allows her to 'construct' relationships that allow for loving and self-giving life. This echoes the constructionist discourse of Kaufman in section 2.2.2, who also argues against destructive God-concepts and argues in favour of a God-concept that allows for self-giving relationships. Travis' and Kaufman's aim look similar, as both want to provide a concept of God that allows for the deconstruction of God-concepts that are harmful and oppressive to human relationships. Travis' model is different, however, in the sense that she still considers God as revealing Himself in Scripture.[20]

Here, a certain tension between the two philosophical models introduced in chapter 2 arises. On the one hand, there are certain similarities to how the divine relates within itself and how humans relate to each other. To put it slightly differently, there is a similarity between the divine and humanity, albeit primarily relational. The divine is also a being that reveals itself through Scripture, so there is also a certain dissimilarity between humanity and the divine that requires revelation.

Sometimes, this causes somewhat confusing and ambiguous theological reasoning and terminology. For example, to highlight the non-patriarchal relationship within the Trinity, Travis' opts to describe God as Creator, rather than Father.[21] While I understand her decision in the light of feminist critique on the traditional language used for the Trinity, I believe she herself is absorbed in the dichotomy of oppression and suppression by using the word 'Creator' for one of the Persons of the Trinity, she is desperately trying to overcome.

Her choice to change the word 'Father' associates the word 'Father' with oppres-

20. Travis, *Decolonizing preaching*, p. 117.
21. Travis, p. 61.

sion and colonialism, and while this may indeed be the case, it is not necessarily true that a father has an asymmetric and hierarchical relationship with his children. Additionally, because within her Social Trinitarian model she believes it is necessary for humans to mirror the loving relationship of the Trinity, it now becomes difficult to shape a loving relationship between a father and his children, as the 'mirror' or 'symbol' is theologically deemed oppressive. By changing the theological terminology, Travis tries to overcome colonial discourse, but inadvertently complicates it and potentially creates new (feminist) imperialist discourse.

One other factor that is theologically confusing is the concept of God's lordship. In the third chapter of the book, Travis argues that it is 'not his lordship and power over humanity' that reveals God's liberty.[22] Liberty is shown through God's love, not through his lordship and dominion over humanity. Later, in chapter five, she approvingly cites the United Churches of Canada who speak of 'Jesus as Lord of our time and our history.'[23] While her main argument, that theology should be used to deconstruct oppressive and colonial actions and language remains an urgent call throughout the book, the theological language can seem ambiguous.

It could very well be that this ambiguity is a result of her attempts to deconstruct colonial and oppressive discourse. According to Travis, colonial discourse itself can be ambiguous and thus deconstructing it can be a process that is ambiguous in itself. Language that deconstructs can sometimes seem conflicting or confusing for the exact reason that colonial discourse is sometimes unclear and conflicting. The fact that I problematize this ambiguous theological language could very well be because my colonial desire is to systematize theology because it suits me and my environment. In this sense, for Travis, the egalitarian end justifies the ambiguous means.

22. Travis, *Decolonizing preaching*, p. 73.
23. Travis, p. 97.

The openness and non-hierarchical relation of the Trinity allows for the creation of what Travis calls a 'Third Space':

> The Third Space is a location in which community and identity are negotiated and where postcolonial subjects can enter into discourse not bound to the typical boundaries of colonizing discourse.[24]

This Third Space is a space which changes the boundaries of imperialistic discussion and separates itself from the dichotomy of oppression and submission. It allows for the creation of a new reality and new truths, while old knowledge can be discussed and potentially adjusted or rejected. Normativity is not found in superiority or inferiority, but in hybridity, where both worlds are allowed to exist and interact with each other, 'overcoming' the colonial dichotomy. Because the Trinity is diverse and at the same time exhibits perichoretic love, this Third Space, or Perichoratic Space, is allowed to exist, in which colonial discourse is deconstructed and a new reality in diversity is 'constructed'.

Preaching in this Perichoretic Space asks for the use of specific language that is functional within that space. Travis emphasises that it is vital for postcolonial preaching that the preacher is aware of the social space and position they occupy. In order to deconstruct colonizing discourse, a preacher should be aware of their own position and interests and then consider how this space or position could negatively influence others. In other words, where idols that are harmful and destructive are located in their own space. Only then are preachers able to address oppressive discourse.

This does require self-awareness, which in turn requires engagement with other opinions and ideas, other social spaces and cultures. While it is impossible to represent another social space completely accurately, it is important for preachers

24. Travis, *Decolonizing preaching*, p. 136.

to engage in relationships with others and truly try to understand their positions. This reflection will, according to Travis, lead to reflection upon the preachers own space and potentially destructive interests.

This will cause preachers to use language addressing their position in a manner that also considers the validity of other positions. The idea that a common, universal experience exists is rejected within Travis' homiletic model.[25] Preachers can chose to voice their own opinion with a 'conscious *I*' by expressing their own opinion as exactly that: their own opinion. This would, according to Travis, ask for language like: "'I believe', 'from my perspective' and 'according to my own experience,' just to name a few."[26]

Additionally, it requires language of negotiation. Because the preacher is limited in his ability to both understand and express truth, as it is not an objective truth but only truth in the context of a certain power dynamic, preachers should leave room for other voices and counter-testimonies. This might be difficult, so Travis suggests that metaphors and also fictional encounters can be used to try to incorporate different voices. Art and metaphorical language starts to play an important role to raise (self-)awareness and deconstruct colonial discourse.

Ultimately, however, postcolonial preaching should allow to be open to engagement with others. It should, according to Travis, be 'open and flexible, accepting ambiguity and contradiction.'[27] It is through God's loving freedom that the Trinity can create new things 'beyond our imagining.'

25. Travis, *Decolonizing preaching*, p. 104.
26. Travis, p. 105.
27. Travis, p. 114.

4 | Computational Methods

Finally, we can take the last step and analyse a database of sermons for the God-concepts. However, as we have seen, the God-concept that is employed by a specific preacher has consequences for the way language is used in sermons. For this reason, we will analyse the language used to talk about God in sermons. However, because the God-concept is a highly complex concept it might prove difficult to produce useable data that can be used to study the God-concept from a single or a very small number of sermons.

We will try to create a more complete picture of the God-concept by using multiple sermons of a single preacher. This will allow us to analyse the 'God-talk' in the sermons more easily, as patterns will be easier to spot. However, doing this manually would, quite frankly, be time-inefficient, as computers can assist us with the processing of the 'raw' sermon data to assist us with the analysis. This chapter describes one of those pathways that can be used for the computer analysis of a database of sermons.

Multiple computer algorithms will be used to paint a more complete picture of the structure of the sermon and the language used. There are many different programming languages and algorithms to chose from. In this chapter, the usefulness of each of the algorithms for finding the God-concept is evaluated and where possible, alternatives are considered. Here, two criteria are of importance: i) the algorithm has to provide us with useful, reliable results and ii) for practical and monetary reasons, the algorithm has to be (cost-)efficient. The results of the computational analysis can be found in chapter 5.

To process the data, we will use the Python3 programming language.[1] Python is

1. The Python code used for this research can be found on Github. https://github.com/tjeerdbrand/MA-Thesis

used frequently in scientific research and has various advantages, it has an easy to understand and versatile syntax, and while it is not the most efficient programming language available,[2] for most scientific and word-processing purposes it will be more than adequate.

The following section describes the pipeline used in this study, or in other words, the process of structuring the data and analysing it using various algorithms.

4.1 The Sermons

In this study we will use a small database from four different Dutch pastors and priests from different Christian traditions. The pastors and priests have been so kind to share some of their sermons from 2024 for the use in this study, which resulted in a varying amount of sermons for each preacher. The target was roughly 15 sermons, and the total ranges from 14 to 20. The total amount of sermons used for this study can be found in table 4.1. For privacy reasons, the names and specific denominational background of the pastors and priests have been anonymised.

Preacher	Amount of Sermons
A	20
B	15
C	20
D	14
Total	69

Table 4.1: Amount of sermons for each preacher

Each of the sermons were provided in different formats and with different special characters, that made it difficult to work within a programming environment. In order to be able to work with the data, the Python programme needs to be 'fed'

2. For example, lower level programming language will, if implemented correctly, be most likely faster. However, they are difficult to learn. Meanwhile, Python is fairly easy to learn and understand and has a vast library available. For this reason, it is a popular choice for scientists.

data that can be 'read' by the programme. For this reason, all sermons from a specific preacher were converted into a single format. A single sermon was then put in a single file, and the files were renamed and arranged chronologically.

Because both God-concepts and sermons are highly complex entities that need to be analysed using various strategies, importing the data in a way that offers maximum flexibility is necessary. After the user has decided on the settings of the user inputs, the programme imports a single sermon in its entirety and loads it into memory. After the sermon has been analysed, it is removed from memory and the next sermon is loaded into memory. With a relatively small database, such as the one in this study, although not advised, it would have been feasible for modern computers to import all the sermons at once, but when handling bigger datasets this is highly impractical or even impossible.

Importing the text of the sermon in its entirety is important. The sermon is imported with all punctuation present, as punctuation gives key information about sentence length, for example. On top of that, all words are kept in their original capitalization. A preacher may be pointing to a different being when describing 'god' or 'God', for example. Additionally, quotes from Scripture are also imported at this stage. After the sermon is loaded into the computer's memory, it can then be used for further analysis using various algorithms.

4.2 Algorithms

In this section, each of the algorithms used in this study are explained. For each algorithm, the user can select how many and which specific sermons are selected for analysis. First, the general use case and relevance of each of these algorithms is highlighted. Afterwards, a short explanation of how the algorithm is constructed is provided.

4.2.1 Word Counting

Arguably the most 'simple' algorithm is the Word Counting-algorithm. As the name suggests, it allows users to check whether a specific word is used in sermons and how often it is used. The programme simply checks whether the word is present and returns the total amount to the user. In the context of this study, it allows us to check if words that are associated with one of the groups of God-concepts and homiletic models are mentioned in the sermon.

4.2.2 Concordance

The frequency with which certain words are used might already be useful information for this study. However, it lacks the context in which the words is used. A concordance can provide this context. In the case of this study, each sentence in which a specific word is present are put together. The word of interest is put in the middle, and all the other words in the sentence are provided on either side of the word. Users are not limited to building concordances with just the sentence of the word, but can also chose to include a limited amount of words around the word of interest, or entire paragraphs.

An example of how this concordance looks to the user can be seen below, where the word of interest is 'is'.

This | is | a sentence
| Is | this a sentence?
... | is | ...

Using the imported sermon, the user-provided a word of interest that is localized in the sermon text. When this word is found in the sermon, the programme uses punctuation to build a list of words in the sentence prior to the word of interest,

and a list of words in the sentence after the word of interest. It then outputs this in a separate file for each word of interest, containing a list of all the sentences in which the word can be found.

4.2.3 Word Plotting

Not only are the immediate surroundings of a specific word of interest, so is the position of the word in the course of the entire sermon. This algorithm allows users to plot the position of all the times a specific word was used in the text.

For this algorithm, the position of the word of interest is once again localized and then plotted. The user can decide which, and how many sermons are to be included in the plot. Additionally, the user may chose to plot the absolute or the relative position (with 0 the beginning and 1 the end of the sermon respectively) of the sermon.

4.2.4 Natural Language Processing

Natural Language Processing (NLP) is a form of Artificial Intelligence that allows for fast processing of natural language in large quantities, similar to what humans would be able to do with smaller amounts of texts.[3] NLP can be used for many applications, like spell check and corrections, but crucially, it can also be used for the retrieval, extraction, categorization and summarization of information.[4] This processing of text and being able to extract and visualize data has proven extremely useful in the recent past, illustrative being the introduction and popularity of advanced applications like chatGPT.

3. K. R. Chowdhary, "Natural Language Processing," in *Fundamentals of Artificial Intelligence*, ed. K.R. Chowdhary (2020), p. 603.
4. K. R. Chowdhary, "Introducing Artificial Intelligence," in *Fundamentals of Artificial Intelligence*, ed. K.R. Chowdhary (2020), p. 12.

There are many strategies to perform NLP. For our research, we will use Sentiment Analysis and Topic Modelling.

4.2.4.1 Sentiment Analysis

Sentiment Analysis is a well-known strategy of NLP and can be used for a wide variety of scientific as well as commercial applications.[5] Sentiment Analysis assigns a value between $+1$ and -1 to small corpus of texts based on their calculated positive or negative sentiment, respectively. For example, a positive sentence like 'I really like you' would be given a value close to $+1$, and a negative sentence like 'I hate you' would be assigned a value close to -1.

For Sentiment Analysis, a machine learning language model has to be used. A BERT-based model[6] is a language model that is widely used, fairly lightweight and adequate for the purposes of this study. Such a model has to be trained and unfortunately training a model requires computational resources, is usually an expensive endeavour and is therefore beyond the scope of this study.

For this reason, a pre-trained model has to be used that is fine-tuned for use in sentiment analysis. We will use RobBERT,[7] a Dutch BERT, RoBERTa-based-model, to perform sentiment analysis on sentences in the sermons in our database. In simple terms, BERT is a language model that through self-supervised learning is able to learn the context of words. BERT was trained for the English language and while a multilingual version is available, RobBERT, a model specifically

5. See for some of the most common commercial applications of sentiment analysis: Mayur Wankhade, Annavarapu Chandra Sekhara Rao, and Chaitanya Kulkarni, "A survey on sentiment analysis methods, applications, and challenges," *Artificial Intelligence Review* 55, no. 7 (October 2022): p. 5763-5767.

6. Jacob Devlin et al., *BERT: Pre-training of Deep Bidirectional Transformers for Language Understanding*, May 2019.

7. Pieter Delobelle, Thomas Winters, and Bettina Berendt, "RobBERT: a Dutch RoBERTa-based Language Model," in *Findings of the Association for Computational Linguistics: EMNLP 2020* (November 2020), 3255–3265.

trained on Dutch language data, outperforms other versions of RoBERTa-based models. For this reason, the pre-trained RobBERT (v2) for sentiment analysis `DTAI-KULeuven/robbert-v2-dutch-sentiment`[8] is used.

While for this study a pretrained model was used, it is important to note that the RobBERT (v2) model used is not specifically used to train on religious language, but is fine-tuned on book reviews. This will inevitably yield skewed results, as sermons might employ certain religious jargon that the RobBERT model cannot account for. For better results in the future, a model specifically trained on religious language or a large database of sermons should be used.

Each sentence of the sermon is put through the RobBERT model and is assigned a value. These values are stored and after the entire sermon is analysed, a trajectory of the sentiment in the sermon is plotted.

4.2.4.2 Topic Modelling (Word2Vec)

Another method of Natural Language Processing is Topic Modelling. Topic Modelling clusters groups of words in texts that are similar, in order to identify words that are related to each other in the text.

One of the techniques to do Topic Modelling is by using Word2vec, introduced in 2013 by Mikolov.[9] Word2vec is a simple yet effective 2-layer neural network that is used to represent words as multidimensional vectors.[10] Words that are similar semantically and syntactically, will be close to each other by cosine similarity in the multidimensional vector space. While Word2vec is now mostly obsolete and

8. https://huggingface.co/DTAI-KULeuven/robbert-v2-dutch-sentiment
9. Tomas Mikolov et al., *Efficient Estimation of Word Representations in Vector Space*, September 2013.
10. A clear explanation of how Word2vec works can be found on the StatQuest-YouTube channel: StatQuest with Josh Starmer, *Word Embedding and Word2Vec, Clearly Explained!!!*, March 2023.

better machine learning algorithms have succeeded Word2vec, it is still useful in various unique use cases. For the analysis of God-concepts in sermons it still has considerable advantages.

First of all, it does not require a pre-trained model and because of its relative simplicity it is possible to train the algorithm on a small database. This might not always provide the most accurate results. Obviously, more data will help to improve the models accuracy. Regardless, a single Word2vec model can be trained on sermons of an individual preacher to construct a cluster of words that are similar to each other.

Secondly, again because of its simplicity, Word2vec is a cheap and fast method of building Topic Models. It is highly efficient and does not require (high-end) GPUs to train efficiently (like BERT does), but it is very feasible to run Word2vec with less computational resources. These two reasons make Word2vec the ideal method for Topic Modelling within the context of this study.

This is not to say that Word2vec does not have its limitations. Its simplicity will also yield fairly simple and sometimes inaccurate results, or results that might not make sense. Additionally, the Word2vec algorithm that was implemented for this study is not able to account for the capitalization of words. As we have noted before in section 4.1, capitalization of words can indicate important differences between the meaning of words. The Word2vec programme used is not able to account for these differences. So, while Word2vec can provide useful insights into words associated with a specific topic, results have to be interpreted alongside other analytical methods to judge whether the results provided by Word2vec are accurate. In general, however, while some anomalies were found, Word2vec still proved to be a useful and efficient tool for computer analysis.

For the Topic Modelling algorithm, all of the sermons of a specific preacher are

imported and loaded into memory. All of the punctuation, capitalization and digits were removed from the sentences. The Dutch stopwords provided by the `nltk`-package were also removed. Stopwords are removed to not disturb the topic modelling.

Then all of the words are tokenized and the `gensim` Word2vec-model is trained using this data. Each word was represented by a vector with `vector_size=300`, meaning that each vector received 300 dimensions. Additionally, the `window=10`, which meant that the maximum distance between the word and the predicted word was set to 10. All words that were only used once in the sermon were removed, again to remove cluttering in the data.

After the model was trained on the sermons of an individual preacher, the trained Word2vec-model was used to find words that the Word2vec-model considered to be similar to specific terms that were presented to the model. In order to find words that were similar to 'God', for example, the Dutch various terms and spelling possibilities for God and Lord, 'god, heere, here, heer', were used, again without capitalization. The Word2vec-model then presented 5 terms that showed the most cosine-similarity to the input words. Those terms were subsequently grouped in Topic-groups.

5 | Results

In this chapter the results of the computer analysis are provided. Just like the way the algorithms are presented, we will start with notable observations from the more 'simple' steps and progress to results from more complex analytical methods. This will hopefully allow us to get a deeper insight into the language and structure of the sermons.

5.1 Word Counting and Word Frequency

For each preacher, the average use of the words 'God', 'Jesus' and 'Lord' are collected. These words are chosen as they evidently relate to God and are used by all four preachers. The results of this analysis are presented in table 5.1. Immediately, it becomes clear that preacher A uses these words with a significant higher frequency than the other preachers. This is most likely explained by the average sermon length. The average sermon length is added to table 5.1.

	Average Length Sermon	'God'	'Jesus'	'Lord'
Preacher A	5198 words	32	25	52
Preacher B	1625 words	14	6	3
Preacher C	1000 words	5	8	4
Preacher D	1744 words	8	7	4

Table 5.1: Average sermon length and average mentions the words 'God', 'Jesus' and 'Lord' per sermon.

To get a better understanding of the frequency with which the words are used on average, the density is calculated by dividing the total amount of words used in the sermon by the total mentions of each word-of-interest, using equation 5.1.

$$Average\ Density = \frac{Total\ words\ in\ sermons}{Total\ mentions\ of\ word-of-interest} \tag{5.1}$$

The results of this calculation are presented in table 5.2. The lower the value in the table for a specific lemma, the higher the average usage of the word is. For example, preacher A uses the Dutch word for 'Lord' on average every 100 words, which is on average 5.8 times as often as preacher B uses the same word.

	'God' used every	'Jesus' used every	'Lord' used every
Preacher A	161 words	212 words	100 words
Preacher B	114 words	294 words	580 words
Preacher C	213 words	121 words	263 words
Preacher D	224 words	246 words	498 words

Table 5.2: Density, or the average amount of words between each mention of the words 'God', 'Jesus' and 'Lord' per sermon.

From these tables, we can see that each preacher uses the three words associated with God with varying frequencies. While preacher A seems to prefer to use the word for 'Lord' in their sermons, preacher B and D rarely do so. Preacher B on the other hand, has the most asymmetric use for the three lemmas and uses 'God' most often, while using the other lemmas considerably less. Other preachers show stable use for 2 lemma's, while the other word is either used more often (preacher C: 'Jesus') or less (preacher D: 'Lord', preacher A: 'Jesus').

5.2 Position of Word Use in Sermons

While counting words can give us information about the frequency that the words are used, it does not give any information about the structure of the sermon and the position of the words in the sermon. For this reason, the positions of the lemmas are plotted in a graph in order to visualise when the words are used.

The positions of the word 'God' in the sermons of each preacher can be seen in figure 5.2, the positions of the word 'Jesus' in figure 5.1. On the `x-axis` the

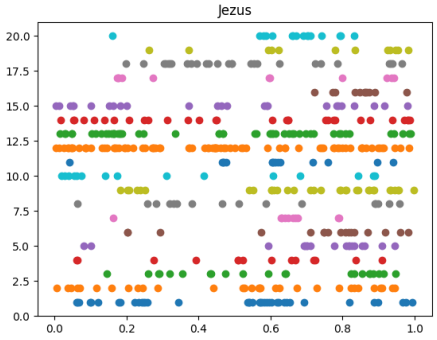
start of the sermon is at the origin $x = 0$, the end of the sermon can be found at position $x = 1$. The `y-value` of each new sermon is increased by 1, and the sermons are colour-coded. For example, the first sermon for each preacher can be found at the value $y = 1$ and is given the colour blue, the second sermon at value $y = 2$ with the colour orange, etcetera.

The graphs give us a sense of the structure of the sermon. Notably, preacher B tends to end their sermons with mentioning Jesus. While preacher A does this too on various occasions, for preacher B, Jesus seems to temporarily 'disappear' from the sermon to (re)appear near the very end of the sermon. The density of 'Jesus-mentions' for preacher C is found more towards the middle of the sermon, rather than the end, with sermon 1 (blue) being the clear exception.

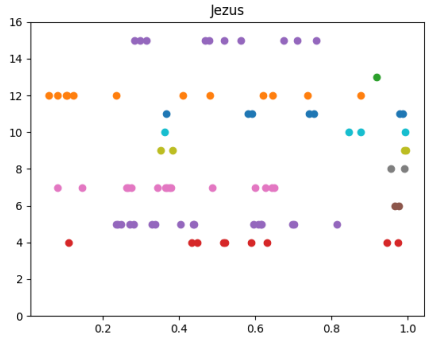
Because of the long sermons and the abundant use of words in general of preacher A some of the images are hard to fully interpret on first glance. However, there are some observations that can be made. Notably, preacher A seems to use 'Jesus' and 'God' alternately. This becomes clear from, for example, sermon 12 (orange). Here, 'Jesus' is used much more often than 'God' is mentioned, but God is mentioned around $x \approx 0.4$, when Jesus is not as present as often. The opposite movement is also observed, for example in sermon 1 (blue), where 'God' is used a lot throughout the sermon, but disappears when 'Jesus' is frequently mentioned around $x \approx 0.6$.

For preacher D, 'Jesus' and 'God' are more connected, however. This becomes clear from sermon 2 (orange) and sermon 14 (red), where both 'God' and 'Jesus' are used at $x \approx 0.6$ and $x \approx 0.8$, respectively.

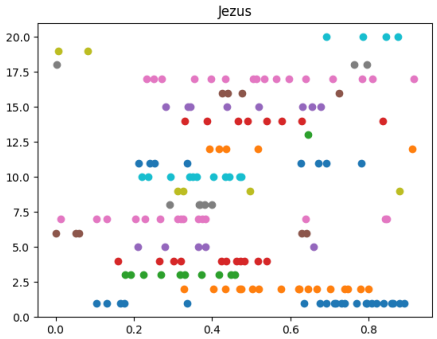
On some occasions, the Scripture readings seem to have a considerable influence on the frequency with which certain words are used. The second sermon (orange) of preacher B is about the book of Job. In the passage, Job and God are in discus-



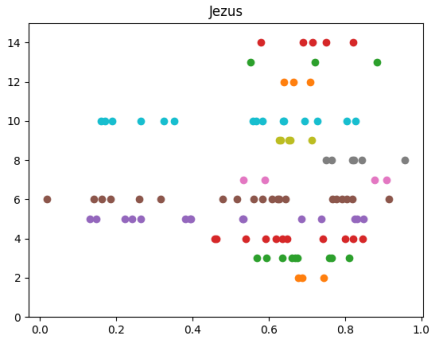
(a) Jesus mentions preacher A



(b) Jesus mentions preacher B



(c) Jesus mentions preacher C



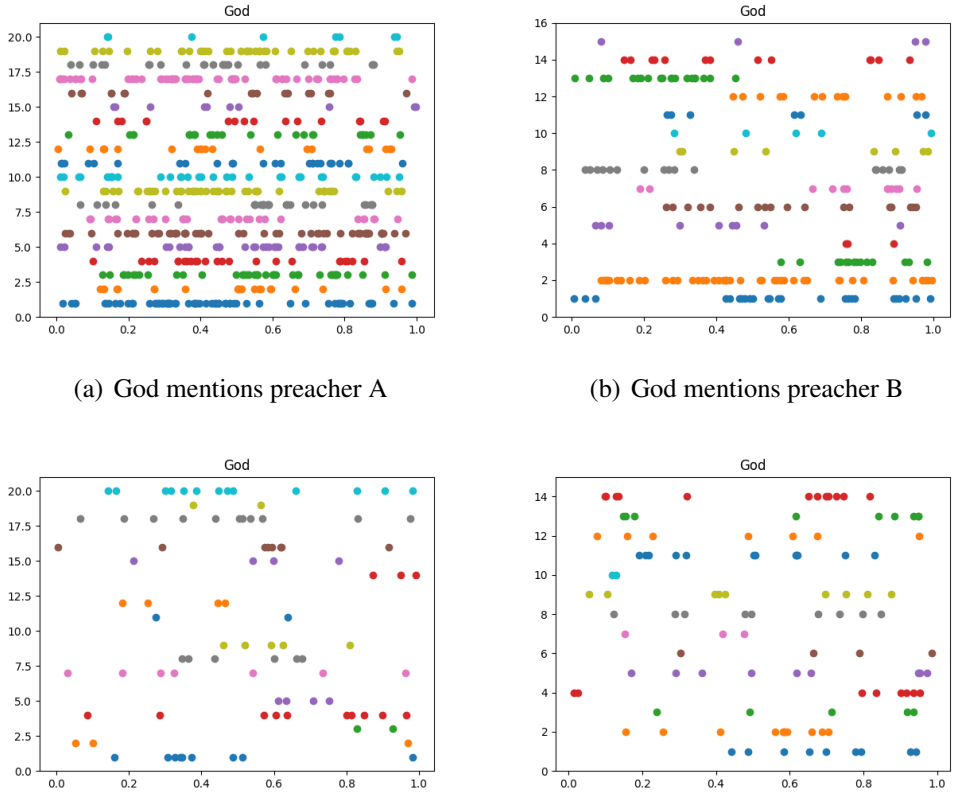
(d) Jesus mentions preacher D

Figure 5.1: Mentions of Jesus in the course of the sermons.

sion. Using the concordance built in section 4.2.2, it becomes clear that 'God' is mentioned so often because the dialogue is re-enacted; God is presented as Jobs dialogue partner. Sentences like 'Job blamed God', 'God says:' and 'God has said:' are found in the beginning of this sermon.

Similarly, several sermons of preacher A also seem to be influenced by the Scripture passage that was read in church on the day of the preaching. Sermon 12 (orange) might be the clearest example of this phenomenon. Compared to the other sermons of preacher A, Jesus is mentioned much more often. The Scripture passage comes from Luke 10 where Jesus answers Martha. Again, when the

historical episode is painted and 're-enacted' in the sermon, 'Jesus' is used more often. Both preacher A and B show that the Scripture passage influences their language behaviour.



(a) God mentions preacher A

(b) God mentions preacher B

(c) God mentions preacher C

(d) God mentions preacher D

Figure 5.2: Mentions of God in the course of the sermons.

5.3 Sentiment Analysis

For each sermon in the database a sentiment trajectory was calculated. Along with the plotting of word-use that is associated with God, this will provide further insights into the structure of the sermon. For example, if there is a certain progression or climax in the sermon, one would expect the sentiment to develop from

negative to positive or vice versa.

First, however, the RobBERT model was tested on random sentences across all sermons of all preachers to check the appropriateness of this model for use within the theological context of this study. Six of the results of this check are presented in table 5.3. As expected, the model seems to perform generally well and assigns positive sentences with a high value (sentence 1, 2 & 4), while negative sentences receive a low value (sentence 3).

	Sentence (Dutch)	Sentence (English)	Assigned value
1	Ook wij kunnen steeds onze hoop weer vestigen op die kleine tekens van Gods aanwezigheid.	We too can always place our hope in those small signs of God's presence.	$+0.99$
2	De blinde ziet alles nu heel helder.	The blind man now sees everything very clearly.	$+0.99$
3	Daar hebben de mensen de buik vol van: van harde en liefdeloze taal.	People have had their fill of that: of harsh and unloving language.	-0.99
4	Opdat er genezing komt, opdat het licht van God gaat schijnen.	So that healing comes, so that the light of God will shine.	$+0.94$
5	Ze zitten nog vast in hun eigen dromen en verlangens.	They are still stuck in their own dreams and desires.	$+0.97$
6	Van nature zijn we allemaal kinderen van de duivel geworden.	By nature, we have all become children of the devil.	$+0.96$

Table 5.3: Caption

At the same time, it also struggles with the specific religious context of sermons, where high scores are assigned to sentences that express wrong or sinful behaviour, for example in sentence 5 and 6. The context of sentence 5 is that the disciples of Jesus are still 'stuck' in their own dreams, while the preacher argues

that they should have listened to Jesus instead. Clearly, this sentence expresses a negative or at least a disapproving sentiment. Still, RobBERT assigns a very high (positive) value to the sentiment of this sentence and fails to assess the proper sentiment of this 'religiously-loaded' sentence.

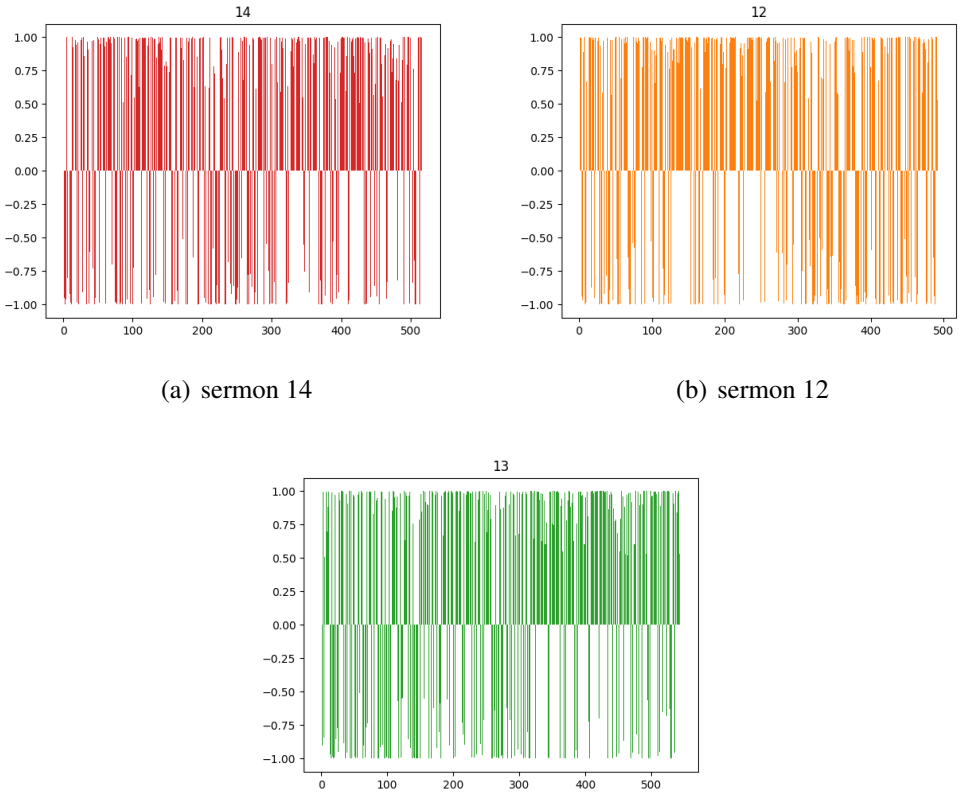
In sentence 6, the preacher addresses sinful behaviour in the sermon and exposes their view on the sinful nature of man. The preacher does so with religious language that gets its meaning through the religious tradition in which it is uttered. Illustratively, the preacher admits in the next sentence that this sentence might be viewed as extremely negative. However, the RobBERT-model struggles with assigning the correct sentimental value and gives it a positive value.

Because of the limitations of the model, a select number of individual sentences can be assigned a wrong value. Therefore, the trajectories were used to look for patterns in the sermons of the preachers. For each preacher the Sentiment Trajectories were analysed and in the list below notable observations are presented.

A. Because of the length of the sermons, considerable variety and alternation is visible in the trajectories of some sermons. Also, because of the historical Dutch language the preacher occasionally uses, the RobBERT-model struggles and more erratic changes are visible. For this reason, trajectories are sometimes hard to interpret. Still, some patterns still are still observable:

   The sentiment trajectories of preacher A show that some sermons contain a certain progression, while the expressed sentiment of other sermons is influenced primarily by the structure of the main 'points' of the sermon.

   An example of the latter type can be found in figure 5.3 (a). This trajectory is from a sermon on Luke 24 verse 5, where two men in 'clothes that gleamed like lightning' asks a question. The preacher highlights this verse and then explores three points. The first point is about who the question is posed to,



(a) sermon 14

(b) sermon 12

(c) sermon 13

Figure 5.3: Sentiment Trajectories for Preacher A

the second point about who the question asked and finally about the fact that the question is answered by Christ. The first and third point express positive sentiment. In the second part of the sermon, however, the preacher is critical of those who ask the question and a more negative sentiment can be observed.

Preacher A is the only preacher who shows a sentiment trajectory that progresses towards more negative sentiment. 3 of the 20 sermons analysed show a similar trajectory, where on average the sermon starts more positively than it ends. An example can be seen in the trajectory of sermon 12,

which is shown in figure 5.3 (b), where an increased density of negative sentiment is visible. There are also trajectory that develop more positive sentiment, for example in sermon 13, shown in 5.3 (c).

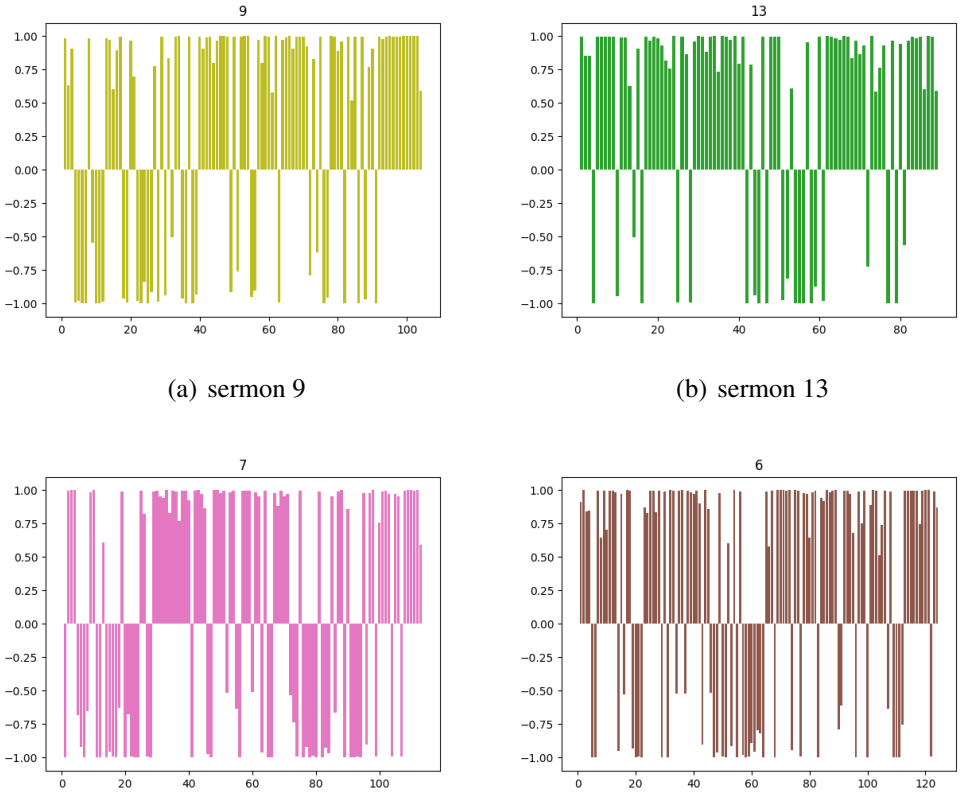
B. The sermons of preacher B show three types of structure for sentiment expression.

   (a) The first pattern is the most simple. The sermon starts with expressing mostly negative sentiment, with a twist or progression near the middle of the sermon. The trajectory of this kind of sermon is presented in figure 5.4 (a).

   (b) The second pattern has a kind of 'V' shape. The sermon starts with positive sentiment, expresses negative sentiment later on in the sermon and ends with positive sentiment. The trajectory of this kind of sermon is presented in figure 5.4 (b).

   (c) The third pattern exhibits the shape of a wave. Positive and negative sentiment is used alternately throughout the sermon. The sermon does, however, always end with a positive sentiment. Two variations of this 'wave'-model are presented in figure 5.4 (c) and (d), where (c) starts with mostly negative and (d) with mostly positive sentiment.

C. Preacher C usually expresses some negative sentiment in the sermon, while ending with a positive sentiment. While this is the general pattern that is visible, there seem to be two variations of this structure. The first variant can be seen in figure 5.5 (a), where the sentiment is mostly positive, with a short episode of mostly negative sentiment towards the beginning of the sermon. The second variant can be seen in figure 5.5 (b), where the negative sentiment is expressed with much larger frequency. This negative sentiment aligns with moments the preacher discusses his own experiences. For ex-



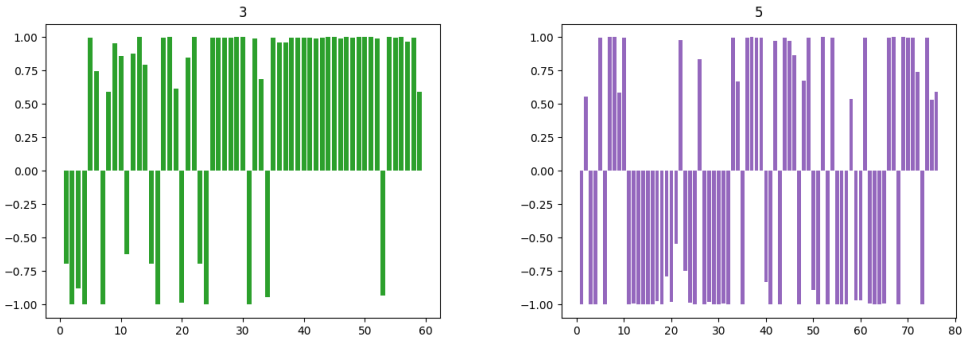
(a) sermon 9

(b) sermon 13

(c) sermon 7

(d) sermon 6

Figure 5.4: Sentiment Trajectories for Preacher B

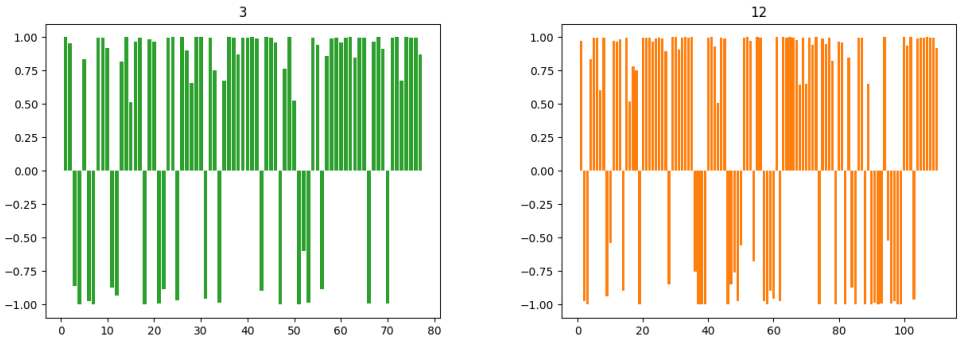


(a) sermon 3 (b) sermon 5

Figure 5.5: Sentiment Trajectories for Preacher C

ample, childhood memories, or the experience of contemporary political situations. When the preacher preaches with more emphasis on the Scripture reading, most notably the Gospel readings, the sentiment of the entire sermon is more positive.

D. Preacher D tends to end their sermons with a positive sentiment. In the sentiment trajectories, the endings of those sermons are assigned a distinctly positive value. In figure 5.6 (a), the sentiment trajectory of sermon 3 is shown, that is typical for these sermons. The preacher seems to express more negative sentiment towards the beginning or middle of the sermon, near the end of the sermon the sentiment is assigned a positive score. A similar structure can be seen in figure 5.6 (b), where a negative sentiment is expressed and near the end of the sermon is resolved, but it differs in that a negative sentiment is expressed multiple times and also further near the end of the sermon.



(a) sermon 3 (b) sermon 12

Figure 5.6: Sentiment Trajectories for Preacher D

5.4 Topic Modelling

The Word2vec-algorithm was used to find word-clusters that are semantically and syntactically similar to God within the sermons, from which topic-groups for each preacher were made. The results of this analysis are presented in table 5.4. To check the functionality of the Word2vec-algorithm for a relatively small database of text, three Dutch Bible translations (the HSV, SV and NBG'51) were also analysed and a word-cluster was made. As expected, the Word2vec algorithm grouped words that are often used in the Bible in combination with the lemma 'God', like 'Abraham', 'Isaac' and 'Jacob' in the expression 'the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob'.

The topic-group for God of preacher A is the only topic-group of all the preachers that does not include Jesus. That is not to say that Jesus and God do not occupy roughly the same vectorspace. If a topic-group for the word Jesus is constructed and the topic-group is expanded past the limit of 5 words, it does eventually include God. Other terms, however, are closer to God than Jesus. The Word2vec-algorithm constructs a topic group that associates 'God' with the pos-

sessive ‘Gods’ and the Spirit. Additionally, preacher A connects God with ‘Holy’ or ‘holiness’ and no mention of humans or a form of the first person pronoun is observed in the topic-group. In contrast, preacher B, C and D all have a form of the plural first person pronoun in the topic-group. Most prominently in this aspect is preacher D, where the topic-group includes two personal pronouns and the noun ‘humans’ or ‘people’.

There are some more notable differences and similarities between the preachers. Preacher A and C both closely associate God with Lord (‘heere’ or ‘heer’ are both accepted spellings of Lord in Dutch), while preacher B and D do not. Preachers B and C relate God to life or living, this aspect is missing for the other preachers. Finally, while preacher A uses ‘coming’ with God, preacher B employs the word ‘going’.

Preacher & Topic-group		
Preacher	Topic-group (Dutch)	Topic-group (English)
A	god, heere, komen, heilige, licht, geest	god, lord, come, holy, light, spirit/ghost
B	god, jezus, gaat, woorden, we, leven, waar	god, jesus, go/going, words, we, life/live, true/where
C	god, heer, jezus, zien, we, leven	god, lord, jesus, to see, we, life/live
D	god, wij, onze, jezus, we, mensen	god, we, our, jesus, we, humans
HSV/SV/NBG’51	god, izak, jakob, zie, abraham, zei	god, isaac, jacob, see!, abraham, said

Table 5.4: Table listing the topic-groups constructed by Word2Vec model for each preacher in both Dutch and English.

6 | Discussion and Reflections

Finally, we have all three ingredients that are necessary to answer the research question. There are, however, still steps to take before the conclusions can be served. In this chapter we will try to integrate the knowledge we have obtained from the philosophical survey in chapter 2, the homiletic study in chapter 3 and the results in chapter 5. For this chapter, we will do so in the reverse order: We will start to discuss the results of the computer analysis and use the homiletic models to deepen our understanding. Then, we will use the philosophical background of God-concepts as the final step in our process towards understanding the God-concept advanced in the sermons of the individual preachers.

First, we will consider the results collected for preacher A. We will start with the topic-modelling, presented in section 5.4. The most striking observation is the absence of Jesus in the topic-group associated with God of preacher A, while Jesus is present in the topic-groups of all the other preachers. Jesus most likely does not show up in the topic-group because word position analysis showed us that this preacher tends to use 'God' and 'Jesus' alternately. Preacher A very often employs the theological idea of justification in his sermons, where Jesus' salvific actions justify the fallen sinner (see for example sentence 6 in table 5.3) before Gods judgement. Because of this recurrent emphasis on justification, Jesus starts to play a role of an 'opponent' to God in the act of justification, which also becomes clear from both the topic-group and the word plotting.

Now, it could be argued that the sermons of preacher A are distinctive of the kerygmatic model introduced in section 3.1. Each sermon, the Christ event of justification and subsequent repentance is 're-enacted'. Additionally, a progression towards a climax was observed in multiple sermons using Sentiment Analysis,

which is similar to the idea of sermon progression that Long presents. In the example presented in 5.3 (b), the 'climax' of the sermon is found in the judgement of Christ. The progressional structure of the sermon combined with the 'focus' of the sermon could explain why preacher A is the only preacher that has sermons ending with a negative average sentiment in the Sentiment Analysis.

The apparent absence of relational language in the topic-group is curious, however, as the homiletical model highlights the importance of relational language in the re-enactment of the Christ-event in a sermon. Still, the topic-group of preacher A does not show any personal or relational language, while personal pronouns are present in the topic-groups of the other preachers. In other words, preacher A does not seem to connect God to everyday reality as much as the other preachers do.

However, within the homiletic model God is considered to be objective reality. Similar to the God-concept in Augustinian philosophy we encountered in section 2.1.1, where God is distinct from creation. Talking about God in this way could lead to impersonal language when talking about God. Because Jesus' acts in creation itself and preaching Jesus' acts in history would closely relate Jesus to creation, this would lead to potential separation between language used for God and for Jesus. This is also what we see happening in the sermons of preacher A.

In contrast, the topic-group for preacher B shows that God is closely related to both Jesus and humans. Even though 'God' and 'Jesus' are used at different times in the sermon, just like preacher A, the contextual language used for both terms is similar, which is why the words occupy a similar vector-space and are thus grouped in the same topic-group.

The sermons of preacher B are also highly influenced by the Scripture passages that were read during the services in which the sermons were delivered. As discussed in section 5.2, the language used in the sermon changes significantly when

the narrative of the readings is retold, or if the acts are re-enacted. The fact that the language changes considerably hints at the fact that preacher B is trying to convey the proposed message of the Scripture passage and therefore contains a substantial kerygmatic content.

This is further supported by the fact that the word 'waar' shows up in the topic-group. 'Waar' is a Dutch polysemous word. The word can act as a noun, an adjective and an adverb, and carry the meaning of goods, true and where, respectively. A concordance for the word 'waar' in the sermons of preacher B was used to understand the usage of the word. In the sermons, the word was used either as adjective or as adverb, so to indicate either location or truth. In sentences that used both 'waar' and 'God', 'waar' was used to designate truth.

For preacher B, truth can be found in God. God is a being that is bigger than humans, who are unable to fully grasp who God is. We are not able to fully 'enclose' God in our minds and our experiences. In one sermon, preacher B is explicitly critical of people that believe they can grasp the existence of God. This is indicative of a God-concept in the Augustinian and Anselmian tradition, where God is a being outside of human reality who is never fully comprehensible.

Still, preacher B uses 'God' with the highest frequency compared to the other preachers. As we have seen during our philosophical study, when God is incomprehensible for human reason, special revelation starts to play an important role. We have already seen that the Bible plays an important factor deciding the type of language that is used for God. The Bible can be considered as God's special revelation, so that this would dictate the word usage is not remarkable. Additionally, God is presented in the sermons as someone who is able to speak. Crucially, in the topic-group, God is connected with 'words'. Preacher B presents God as someone who communicates truth about Himself to humans through revelation.

The kerygmatic aspect of the preaching also becomes clear from the sentiment analysis. Similar to the progression-model proposed by Long, preacher B journeys through the sermon towards a climax at the end. For this, he uses various twists, that also show up in the three structural models proposed in section 5.3, that always end up at a positive, practical message. The sermon is concluded with the main (kerygmatic) message for all humans.

The, on average, shortest sermons of preacher C usually contain comforting and sympathetic messages to the listeners with practical applications for day-to-day life. Preacher C tends to problematize a specific topic and subsequently tries to communicate a solution or comforting message. The values in the sentiment analysis reflect the language used in the sermons, showing both this problematizing language, assigning a negative value to it, and this 'caring'-character, which is given a predominantly positive evaluation.

This positive message that the preacher preaches in his sermon is reflected by the way that is spoken about God. God can be found in the syntactic and semantic vicinity of 'life'. In the sermons of preacher C, God is presented as the one who gives life and Life; God is the being that provides life in this creation and in eschatological perspective. It is this kerygmatic aspect that is expressed in the sermons and, similar to preacher B, why the language used at the end of the sermon is generally positive.

However, for preacher C, aspects of the expressive-symbolic homiletic model can be recognized. In multiple sermons, preacher C expresses their own experiences, like childhood memories or current events. Sermons that contain these private experiences also follow the general sentiment-pattern as the other type of sermons, but the sentiment is generally much more negative when personal experiences are incorporated in the sermons. The experiences the preacher vocalizes are problems

and struggles the preacher encounters and believes others ('we') also experience. Clearly, preacher C tries to empathize with their listeners and at the same time shows awareness of the social space the preacher occupies.

Change happens when God is communicated. This is similar to the Perichoretic Space Travis introduces, where change can happen because of the relations within the Trinity. The Perichoretic Space allows for change precisely because it is grounded in God's love. Preacher C, knowingly or not, uses the 'space' God creates to allow for change in their sermons.

Additionally, Jesus is often used as a symbol for change in the sermons of preacher C. Preacher C, when discussing Jesus, often calls on his listeners to follow in Jesus' footsteps and do as He did. Often when preacher C does so, Jesus is associated with the Dutch 'Heer', the English 'Lord'. Similarly to preacher A, 'Lord' is related to God, but in the case of preacher C, it is used in 'fixed' expressions of repentance towards Jesus. 'Lord' functions like a name for Jesus when language of discipleship is used.

In light of Travis' postcolonial homiletics, the word 'Lord' can be problematic, as it presents a non-egalitarian relationship. At the same time, Travis' argues that critical preaching requires a preacher to be flexible and open to strategies that at first might seem to be problematic for the critical (postcolonial) model. It could be argued that in the case of preacher C, using the word 'Lord' in a context where repentance is required in order to change a social space, is a 'justified' reason, even when accounting for the non-egalitarian power-relations associated with using the word 'Lord'.

Clearly, the sermons of preacher C reveal that the expressive-symbolic model is an appropriate description for the way in which the sermons are made. It would be a bridge too far, however, to completely remove all aspects of the kerygmatic-

homiletic model, as they have also become visible during our analysis.

Against the background of the philosophical models, a hybrid between the two philosophically very different views also becomes apparent in the sermons of preacher C. On the one hand, God is the being that has the final say, a being that provides both life in this creation and the next and who is bigger than both. On the other hand, God is the symbol within this creation that 'we' should follow.

Finally, we will discuss the results of preacher D. The topic-group for preacher D shows language that by majority is human and relational. This is a notable difference compared to the other preachers, who either have one or no personal pronouns. For preacher D, however, the two different Dutch first person plural pronouns and the first person plural possessive pronoun are present in the topic-group. As relational language was found to be important in the expressive-symbolic homiletic model, these results indicate that preacher D primarily uses this model for their sermons.

Some aspects of the kerygmatic model can be observed. For example, preacher D refers to God as a God who speaks, who gives life, but crucially that God is a God that 'has the first and last word, who is at the beginning and comes at the end.' This quote from one of the sermons indicates that God also functions as a being in itself.

While this aspect is present in some of the sermons, it is only marginally present. Most of the time, God as a being is employed in the sermon to deconstruct things that are deemed to be harmful for humans, like strife and discord. In one of the sermons, preacher D tells their listeners that when contact with God is broken, hatred and envy spread. The presence of God is then explicitly connected with relationships with other humans, with social change and social care. When the listeners help others, they are connected to God. The social critical notions that we

found in our discussion of the expressive-symbolic homiletic model are obvious in the language that preacher D uses.

On top of that, preacher D uses language about power-relationships explicitly. God is identified with the God who provides and guarantees freedom. This freedom is contrasted to oppressive power-relations of humans that occupy powerful positions in the social space. These people are described as wanting to act like gods over us and who are in it for the money. Preacher D connects this rhetoric explicitly to colonial language, by discussing the power-relationships as ones where the oppressed can be considered 'slaves.' Preacher D then deconstructs these power-relationships by contrasting how God is the one who liberates from these oppressive power-relationships and warns their listeners that it is not right to 'leave God'.

There is one more observation in the sermons of preacher D that points in the direction of the expressive-symbolic model. Preacher D uses poetic language in their sermons and includes poems in several sermons.

Having discussed the results of the computer-based analysis in detail against the background of philosophical theories and Immink's homiletic models for each preacher individually, at the end of this discussion I will summarize the main findings and subsequently reflect on the implications of these results.

Starting for preacher A, the sermons of this preacher close resemble sermons that are typical for the kerygmatic model. Recognising this pattern helped identify the God-concept as resembling that of the Augustinian and Anselmian tradition. Preacher A considers God to be a reality in itself. Preacher A is primarily concerned with the idea of justification in eschatological perspective and, similar to Augustine, struggles with the physicality of the Gospel. It is partly for this reason that Jesus is regularly positioned opposite to God.

Preacher B also shows affinity to the kerygmatic model. Preacher B is concerned with communicating the truth that is contained in the Scripture reading and to provide a practical application to their listeners. This truth is connected to God. Most notably, the way that the God-concept is addressed is heavily dependent on the reading of Scripture that the sermon talks about. At the same time, knowledge of (the existence of) God and of truth is never fully obtainable for the human mind. This is indicative of a God-concept akin to that in the Augustinian tradition. Against this philosophical background, which is known to struggle with the division between the human and the divine, it also becomes clear why revelation is an important topic for preacher B. Preacher B needs Gods revelation to 'bridge the gap' between the God-concept and the everyday life of the listeners.

Preacher C exhibits behaviour of both the kerygmatic and expressive-symbolic model. An attempt is made in the sermons to communicate the message of the Scripture and sometimes this leads to a focus on God's actions in history, who as superior being is able to create and sustain the world where humans fail. Other times, preacher C expresses himself in the sermon and invites listeners to participate in this expressive behaviour. Additionally, preacher C often uses Jesus as a symbol for doing the right thing in a social space. The God-concept is explicitly used to deconstruct harmful and destructive thoughts and behaviour. The God-concept of preacher C incorporates elements of the Augustinian God-concept, but also elements of the God-concept proposed by Kaufman. Preacher C, then, shows a God-concept that is a hybrid built from both theoretical mutually exclusive philosophical and homiletic models.

Finally, the sermons of preacher D are connected primarily with the expressive-symbolic model. The God-concept is interpreted symbolically for the relationship that people should form with each other. The God-concept is used almost exclusively in the context of human acting, thinking and speaking. Poetic lan-

guage is regularly used in sermons, also in connection to the God-concept, to express human experience of God. Preacher D is also explicitly concerned with power-relationships, which is illustrative for the employment of a postcolonial homiletical model. The God-concept shows affinity with Kaufman's idea that the God-concept is aimed at personal development and self-fulfilment.

To summarize, the sermons of two preachers (A and B) show strong affinity with Immink's kerygmatic homiletic model and the God-concept close to that of Augustine and Anselm. One preacher (D) primarily uses language connected to Immink's expressive-symbolic homiletic model and the constructionist God-concept. One preacher (C) takes an in-between position, incorporating elements from both homiletic models and God-concepts in their sermons.

These findings require re-assessment of the homiletic models and the philosophical God-concepts. Illuminative is the fact that for each preacher elements of other homiletic models can be discerned, even when one model is favoured by the preacher. In this study, preacher C in particular does not seem to employ an obvious favourite. Clearly, both models can act at the same time. This would require a re-evaluation of both models to see if the dichotomy between the two is justified, or that another model can be constructed that better fits the data from this study.

Additionally, the philosophical God-concepts need to be re-evaluated. Personally, I feel sympathy towards Perfect-Being theology. It goes beyond the scope of this thesis to work this out in detail, but I believe that the description of God as a Being that is not dependent on this reality for its existence fits best to what is found in Scripture. I find the idea that God is a construct or dependent on creation an interesting idea, but not one that I find in the way the Bible speaks about God.

While I believe that the God-concept of the Augustinian and Anselmian tradition are to be favoured, they are not without significant problems, primarily associated

with the impact of God in the daily life. The divide between the divine and creation is too rigid and is difficult to overcome. The sermons of preacher A and B show that this is indeed the case, and both preachers have found their own way of dealing with this problem.

Feuerbach, taking a more extreme position, and Kaufman have both addressed serious shortcomings in the God-concept of Perfect-Being theology. Still, when addressing these issues they have taken a position that can be described as being polar-opposite or mutually exclusive towards Perfect-Being theology. In the sermons that were analysed in this study, again, elements of both God-concepts seem to sometimes work in tandem. And when preachers do not, preachers seem to struggle with adequately addressing both the divinity and otherness of God, while keeping the humaneness of God and vice versa. Further philosophical and theological research is required to explore the possibilities of using both God-concepts to address shortcomings in both.

The results of this study relied heavily on computational analysis, but filtered content of the sermons was still used to help explain findings that were difficult to interpret from computational analysis alone. Apart from the comments addressing the computational limitations at the beginning of this discussion that have yet to be addressed in upcoming studies, the field of Artificial Intelligence is rapidly developing. New strategies for NLP could be used to help identify God-concepts more effectively in larger datasets, like poetry analysis or methods to help understand abstract reasoning, to name just two possibilities that could be of interest in understanding God-concepts.[1] This study then, should be considered as a proof-of-concept, proving that it is possible to study a highly complex concept as the

1. Mirella De Sisto et al., "Understanding poetry using natural language processing tools: a survey," *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* 39, no. 2 (June 2024): 500–521; Kyle Hamilton et al., "Is neuro-symbolic AI meeting its promises in natural language processing? A structured review," *Semantic Web* 15, no. 4 (January 2024): 1265–1306.

God-concept in theological texts using computer-based analysis.

The God-concepts found in this study are limited concepts, in the sense that the God-concept could benefit from analysis from the perspective of other disciplines. Different theological enquiry, like a study of the God-concept in relation to Biblical theology can potentially show how the Scripture reading influences the 'God-talk'. Finally, sociological and psychological studies might reveal personal or congregational preferences in using specific language to describe God.

Finally, some general remarks regarding the computational limitations and their effects should be made. First of all, the dataset used for this study was fairly small compared to what computers are able to handle. For example, another computational study on sermons used 11995 sermons.[2] Because of the scope of this thesis, a smaller dataset had to be used. Unfortunately, this also limits the clarity of the results and also affects the accuracy of machine learning programmes. The Word2vec-algorithm is useful because it is efficient and works with small databases, but it would still benefit from using more data for better word-embeddings and more accurate results.

The size of the database especially limits language learning models that rely on large amounts of training data for accurate results, like the BERT-models. For this reason the pre-trained language learning model RobBERT was used, as discussed before in section 4.2.4.1. This model provided satisfactory results for analysing sentiment analysis, but it clearly failed when it had to analyse archaic language or language that gets special meaning and sentimental value in a Christian context. A machine learning model that is specifically trained on a large database of Dutch sermons would most likely produce much clearer results for Sentiment Analysis than this study is able to achieve.

2. Agersnap and Nielbo, ""What is love...?"

That is not to say that the results of the computer analysis in this study are useless, on the contrary. Because of these limitations results form the computer analysis were, and will be, assessed critically before conclusions are drawn from them. For example, while performing the Sentiment Analysis, random sentences from the sermons were taken and parsed through the algorithm to check their assigned value. From this, it can be concluded that the model in broad terms works, but the model might make a mistake with judging the sentiment for individual sentences. Additionally, the functionality of the Word2vec model was checked by letting the model construct a topic-model of various Dutch Bible translations. The output, shown in table 5.4, shows that the Word2vec-algorithm used in this study can be effectively used to construct a topic-model on a single text.

7 | Conclusion

This study has used computational analysis to study the God-concept in a database of 69 sermons of 4 different contemporary Dutch preachers. Multiple simple algorithms were used to identify in broad terms the language associated with the God-concept. Using two AI-algorithms for Natural Language Processing, a more detailed model for the God-concept was constructed. Word2vec was used for topic-modelling and the Dutch RobBERT-algorithm was used to construct sentiment trajectories. Identifying God-concepts directly from these results, however, is made difficult by the fact that a God-concept is a highly nuanced and complicated concept to directly identify in sermons.

For this reason, the results of the computational study were related to the two homiletic models of contemporary homiletics proposed by Immink. He identifies a kerygmatic-model, in which preaching is primarily understood as proclaiming the acts and words of God, and an expressive-symbolic model, in which preaching is understood to have a more evocative function. To get a deeper understanding of both models, for the kerygmatic-model Long's book *The Witness of Preaching* was examined and Travis' book *Decolonizing Preaching* was reviewed as an example for the expressive-symbolic model.

These models helped identify the philosophical God-concepts on the one hand, while simultaneously helping to identify language and sermon structure associated with a particular homiletical model. Generally, sermons that belong to the kerygmatic-model seem to exhibit a progression, or a journey, towards a climax and use mostly rational, non-relational language. God is identified as a being that is different from creation, who reveals a message that has to be proclaimed; the sermons re-enact the divine-human encounter. Expressive-symbolic sermons tend

to use more relational and poetic language. God is identified as a relational being who is dependent on inter-Trinitarian and divine-human relationships. God allows for the expression of thoughts and feeling, and for social change through love and relationship.

The homiletical models proved invaluable in bridging the gap between computational analysis and Christian philosophical theology. The last step was the task of understanding the philosophical God-concepts themselves and understanding how they relate to Immink's models. For this study, God-concepts were studied from the perspective of classical theism and social constructionism. For classical theism, Augustine and Anselm were studied, and for social constructionism, Feuerbach and Kaufman were analysed.

In classical theism, God is identified as a Perfect-Being who exists independent from creation. God can never be fully grasped, but He reveals Himself in creation as God. This philosophical movement shows affinities with the kerygmatic homiletic model. For social constructionism, God is considered to be a human construct and is interpreted as being a symbol rather than a separate being. This God-concept shows affinity with Immink's expressive-symbolic homiletic model. God does not exist outside this reality and can ultimately be considered as being true humanity itself. According to Kaufman, the God-concept should be used to deconstruct behaviour that is harmful to humanity itself.

Finally, then, we went from a sermon database and built a bridge towards philosophical God-concepts. Now we have taken all the necessary steps to answer the research question posed in the introduction to this thesis:

> What, given computer-based analysis, are the dominant Christian God-concepts in the sermons of four contemporary Dutch preachers, in view of the intersection between philosophical theories of God-concepts

and Immink's homiletic models?

The God-concept presented by two preachers showed affinity with Immink's kerygmatic homiletic model and consequently with the God-concept of classical theism. One preacher showed affinity with the expressive-symbolic homiletic model and major elements of the constructionist God-concept. One preacher takes a hybrid position, incorporating elements from both philosophical God-concepts in their sermons, without evidently favouring either.

These results show that using computer-based analysis for an abstract concept like a philosophical God-concept is a viable strategy. Studying these God-concepts could help identify strengths and weaknesses in preaching, as philosophical God-concepts come with their own strengths and shortcomings, which can help adjusting sermons accordingly.

Still, these results also show shortcomings in the models and movements themselves that demand reevaluation of the theories. In the sermons of all preachers elements from both homiletic models and philosophical movements were incorporated, while the theories themselves can seem mutually exclusive. A re-evaluation of the models can help to construct a new theory that better fits the data presented by this study.

There are more opportunities for further research. Using a larger database will improve the accuracy of an AI-model, as it allows for training on larger datasets. Additionally, it would be beneficial to future studies if language-learning models were developed specifically for processing theological texts and religious language.

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