

## Multimodality and Repurposing in the Writing of the Sacred

Throughout history, the writing of the sacred has constantly evolved in meaning, purpose, method and participation. Within the realm of writing the sacred, writers often times have to employ skills like multimodality, recycling texts and awareness of certain religious social conceptions in order to create a purpose, develop a method of presentation and encourage participation among their audience. As part of a religious semiotic system, the ways in which multimodality, repurposing and social conceptions are practiced may differ from writer to writer. There is also a major differentiation in a religious writer's effectiveness based on the methods and practices they use. In this case study, I will be analyzing the approaches that Christian minister Mike Hipes takes when writing and preaching the sacred. Through avenues like multimodal writing, composing new pieces by recycling old ones and the constant social exchange that occurs within composing and presenting sacred texts, Mike is an example of how preachers participate in and contribute to the religious semiotic system. My aim in this study is to explain and analyze Mike's multimodal and repurposing practices, how those practices are influenced by sacred spaces, and his intentional knotworking of personal and professional lives and how all these things give way to a concrete understanding of the social implications of his writing/speaking.

Multimodality, or the intersection of multiple senses in a piece of writing has many benefits when communicating a message to an audience but does not always result in one coherent, organized piece. In Steven Fraiberg's case study "Pretty Bullets", Fraiberg follows the literary practices of DaVe, a combat veteran who's writing practices were heavily influenced by the things around him including the books he read, the games he played and his career as a soldier in the Israeli Defense Forces. All of these things in unison made way for drawings,

poems, lists etc. whose characteristics and consistent patterns make up DaVe's literate identity. And although DaVe's writings were proven to be very cosmopolitan because of multimodality and other factors, the pieces themselves did not hold much meaning to anyone other than DaVe mainly because they were not intended for anyone other than him.

In Mike's case however, his multimodality (by way of drawings, public speaking, physical writing, hand gestures etc.) helps him to be a more effective communicator and speaker because his audience is receiving his sermons from multiple points of entry like aural, gestural, visual and so on. What makes Mike different from DaVe in the realm of multimodal writing practices is that Mike's multimodality is for someone other than himself while DaVe's multimodal writing is solely for personal use. Part of what I am proposing in this case study about Mike is that his multimodal practices in the realm of religious texts, the presentation thereof and its effectiveness in reaching an audience is not as prominently looked at in other religious case studies.

Another thing that has not been analyzed closely in the study of religious writers and writing practices is the repurposing and recycling of old texts in order to create new ones. In Kevin Roozen's study "Tracing Trajectories of Practice", he analyzes college student Lindsey's writing practices; more specifically the continual repurposing of or reference to bible verses (previous text) to aid in writing college literature papers and journaling (new/current text). Through the examination of Lindsey's writing practices, Roozen is able to determine that writers do not just recycle old texts to 'update' those texts but can completely change them or reference those texts to construct a totally new and alternate text with a different background and purpose (hence the term repurposing).

In one of my interviews with Mike, I noticed bookshelf after bookshelf packed with various size 3-ring binders. He later showed me the contents of some of those binders revealing that he has kept every single sermon that he has ever written in his 40 years of preaching and explained that he frequently references these sermon notes when writing new sermons, classes or bible studies. Additionally, not only does he recycle old sermons to help him write new ones by pulling from old scriptures, focus statements or points that he once wrote, but Mike also repurposes those sermon notes to aid him in other areas of religious writing like when he's studying for a class that he is teaching or a bible study that he is leading either one-on-one or with a small group of people or even when writing for publication like the newsletter he currently writes for or the new book he is working on. Later, I will be further addressing this type of writing practice and how it assists Mike in his contribution to the religious semiotic system that he participates in.

The last important aspect to this case study that I have noticed has been vaguely touched on in the inspection of religious writing and its practices is the need to emphasize the importance of location when it comes to the writing of the sacred. In Brian McNely's piece "Writing in Sacred Spaces", he talks about his observations of people in chapels and sanctuaries and the pivotal results he came to. After having a conversation with one person in particular (Jason), McNely concludes that physical orientation to a holy place or a place of worship can have a profound effect on religious writer's spiritual experience and how it is made evident in their writing. He later goes on to explain how -- and concludes that -- closeness can in some ways dictate pioussness.

With an awareness of this idea, I notice that although Mike's writing does not change much depending on the location in which he is writing but his way of communicating drastically

shifts when he is behind the pulpit versus any other place. Aside from the church, Mike's disposition is more laid back, quiet and low-key whereas when he starts to preach, he gets louder, more expressive and talks with his hands a lot more. This change in Mike's persona and approaches to communication can be due to a variety of factors including the proximity to the pulpit being a major contributor, but all of which will be discussed later.

With the combination of writing as a multimodal performance involving repurposing and speaking in sacred spaces, Mike's contribution to the religious semiotic system is one that is set apart from many other sacred writers because Mike employs these things together to create not just one piece of writing, but an entire career with these principles as a foundation. This is a tactic that has not been discussed in depth but is however, one that presents a new perspective on the writing of the sacred and sacred writing practices.

When I decided to write about Mike Hipes and how his literary practices influenced his career and visa versa, I started off conducting my research with multiple hour long interviews; some of which were process tracing interviews. These process tracing interviews were managed with the goal of understanding how Mike became a preacher, what motivates him, how he begins writing a sermon or any other religious piece. I found that process tracing interviews were helpful in grasping Mike's thought processes, how those processes are put onto paper and how they are translated into spoken word in any ordinary Sunday service. In these interviews, I was also able to spot his vocal and passionate persona begin to resurface like it does when he steps in front of the congregation. Some of the interviews included joint analyzation of some of his writings like the drawings he composes during individual bible studies, reading entries from the journal he wrote during his mission trip to Russia and a copy of the notes from one of his most recent sermons. In addition, I frequently went to Mike's church where he preaches to hear him

speak to the congregation during Sunday worship and also looked to research written by other authors (Fraiberg, Roozen and McNely) to supplement some of my questions.

After I had collected all of the necessary data to accurately represent Mike and talk about the writing of the sacred in general, I found that these types of interviews and visiting the church that he preaches at was the most effective way to conduct my research because I was able to hear from Mike the methods he uses to write, read the pieces for myself and then hear how those pieces are put together and communicated in his verbal presentations to church members. By engaging all of these factors in my research, I feel that I am knowledgeable enough about Mike Hipes to talk about him and how his literary practices are influenced/influencing because I got to experience from conception to completion all of the stages of his writing and speaking process. From the beginning (thought process) to the middle (writing the sermon) to the end (speaking to the congregation), I was able to follow Mike throughout the entire journey to get an inside look as to how and why he writes week after week and Sunday after Sunday.

In order to be able to accurately depict Mike and his writing practices, I wanted to first start off talking with him about his background and how he got into preaching in the first place. Mike grew up poor in the 1960's in Queens, NY with 4 other brothers and sisters in an Italian Catholic family. Him and his family later moved to Levittown on Long Island and that is where Mike found the love of his life, Margie. Although Mike's entire family was Catholic, they were not practicing Catholics. Margie on the other hand was a non-denominational Christian. Mike started studying with Margie and was later baptised into Christ and married her. For Mike, that is where he intended on the spiritual journey ending. But his plan was thrown out when the preacher of the church he was attending with Margie 'volun-told' the congregation about how Mike was going to be guest preaching the next Sunday. One thing lead to another and a few

months later Mike and Margie and their newborn daughter packed everything up and moved to Lubbock, Texas where Mike attended the Sunset School of Preaching. But even then, Mike's plan was to go there and learn more about the scriptures, not to become a minister. He was enrolled solely to gain more biblical knowledge because he was interested in the subject. After his plans were again thrown out the window and he became a preacher, Mike started to write. But again, it was not intended for what it ended up being.

“The writing part began just as an exercise in relaxation. I used to write just to relax. I always had a fascination with time, time travel and that kind of thing. And I also had a fascination with biblical history. I really enjoy reading about biblical history and obviously I really like talking about scriptures. And so what I did to relax and to also exercise the things that I enjoyed, I would just kind of take things from scripture and some stories from scripture and where there were some gaps, I would fill in the gaps and develop story lines with a biblical basis. About the life of Jesus and some of the things that he did. And in doing so, it turned into a book. It's called *Flight 33 AD.*” -Mike Hipes

In one of our interviews, Mike expressed to me that he did not practice writing much at all before becoming a preacher; for him ministry prompted and required a development in writing. Mike's background, how he became a preacher and the evolution in the purpose and style of his writing are all part of what makes him a unique writer and communicator and therefore contributes to the understanding of the writing of the sacred.

In this case study, my aim is to outline Mike Hipes' writing and speaking practices, how/why those are composed and how those contribute to and influence the writing of the sacred and how the writing of the sacred in turn regulates Mike and his practices. Throughout my time

studying Mike and his writings, I noticed that there are two different tasks that he writes for: writing for performance and writing for print.

As a preacher, Mike is constantly writing sermons, classes and Bible study outlines for the sole purpose of presenting them to an audience. The thing that makes this type of writing so multifaceted is the idea that what Mike writes on paper to perform is not for other people's eyes, but for their ears. What he writes for performance does not necessarily have to make sense to other people because Mike is the only one that is going to be reading those notes. In later examples you will see that the notes are overall hard to follow due to his handwriting, formatting and keywords that, to any onlooker, would be confusing. These keywords are what he likes to call "trigger thoughts". These are shorthand statements or phrases that Mike writes down in his sermon notes so that when he preaches to the church, he can look at that "trigger thought" and remember what it was that he wanted to talk about without having to read directly off the paper. For Mike, this gives him the freedom to do more off-the-cuff storytelling. After hearing Mike preach to an audience, those notes that seem all over the place and impossible to read are translated into a message that is clear, compelling and well thought-out. Below is an excerpt taken from one of Mike's most recent sermon notes with the focus being on forgiveness. You can see how his personality is demonstrated just by looking at his illegible handwriting, frequent spelling and grammar mistakes and seemingly disorganized formatting.

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# Letting IT GO (Forgive + Combat)

Somebody hurt you - Can't shake it  
- Can't forgive  
- log it in your heart  
Feb. 1 - 2009  
- don't know how to handle it!  
- you want to retaliate!  
- Sometimes you want to forgive  
- but to hard - always possible

As we can't always...  
Read 2 Cor. 12:1-11

Fin: 1:10  
Text 2 Cor 1:12  
2:11  
Reading 2:11  
Intro.

struggle to let it go!  
- it happens to you  
- for most you -  
- blame your enemy -  
- to blame you - it's like you can't see past it!

To see the importance of not only seeking to comfort our  
brother + sister as we have been <sup>comforted</sup> by God, but to also have an  
attitude + spirit of forgiveness to repentant brother + sister  
have been forgiven by God.  
(2 Cor. 12 - 2:11)

My neighbor  
my dad died - will you do the funeral?  
Q: Ever struggle with letting something go?

While living in N.Y. - serving as minister - Community C.O.F.C.  
neighbor called - asked if I could come over -  
she said I don't want to - invited me in -  
my dad died - is it possible if you would do the funeral  
- so sorry - can't help - older sister

What did this happen - 15 years ago  
we had 2<sup>nd</sup> time - we only had enough money to have him cremated + buried  
in a Community Grave -  
now my dad + I are going to Exume his  
site - + re bury him in his own place - serenity

I did the ultra - the Emotions - fear pain tears regrets  
of the if occurs + more / real / as if  
fulfill  
They never let go of  
the good memories -  
as well as the Anger + regret - of the  
15 year

Ever been hurt  
+ struggled to let it go? - rough a year past -  
2-15 - I still suffer - from it!  
Real  
struggle

Today's lesson is about letting it go!  
to Forgive + Combat

What makes Mike's writing unique is that it is not read as much as it is heard. On top of Mike's physical notes and their surprising transformation from written to spoken, what makes his writing and way of communicating just as -- if not more -- effective is watching him preach.

“Somebody said to me one time ‘Can you send me your sermon?’ so I sent them my sermon on tape and Margie (my wife) said ‘That tape will never do you justice.’ and I said, ‘Why do you say that?’ and she said ‘People can’t just hear you preach, they gotta see you preach.’” - Mike Hipes

If you go to this link (<https://mtpchurch.org/service-times/sermons/>), you will be taken to the website for the church at which Mike preaches and where there are also published recordings of his sermons. In the sermon titled “Letting it Go” from times 3:45-6:20 you can listen to Mike tell a story that he wrote in his sermon notes (as seen above) in the form of a “trigger thought”. This tactic that Mike uses in his written sermons help him to be a better communicator though the notes themselves may not make sense to others, is why this type of writing is solely for the purpose of performance.

Along with his paper-to-performance writing, another task that Mike exercises is writing for print. This applies to pieces that Mike has written for church quarterly newsletters, a published novel and a book that he is currently writing. In 1995, Mike published a novel called “Flight 33AD”, a biblically motivated historical-fiction book. As mentioned above, this novel was not something that Mike intended on going public but was a relaxation tool that just happen to be in line with his career. Mike also currently writes for a local quarterly publication called *House to House Heart to Heart* which is a magazine exclusive to Churches of Christ. Mike told me that he is also in the process of writing a new nonfiction book compiling a series of handpicked sermons he's written over the years on the subject of overcoming. This task for

writing is very different from writing for performance for Mike specifically because of the way in which he preaches. His writing is just as effective as his speaking, but the tools Mike uses to preach to an audience are a little different from the ones he uses to write to an audience. These tactics will be expanded on more in the discussion.

The thing that makes Mike unique from other sacred writers is that not only does he employ these two tasks in his career, but he also uses many different avenues in order to accomplish the goal of any religious semiotic system. Avenues like personal anecdotes, drawings, public speaking, personal and published writings all join in unison to form Mike's literary identity.

Now that there is an understanding of what practices Mike employs in his writing and speaking (multimodality and repurposing), there needs to be an understanding of why these practices are effective for him as a writer and communicator and what else influences (sacred spaces, knotworking and social conceptions) him when writing/speaking the sacred.

Mike's multimodal practices include physical writing, speaking, gestures, facial expressions, volume, drawings and more; but all of these things in unison give way to a fluidity that although may seem overwhelming, actually comes together to make him one of the most effective and powerful religious speakers I have ever heard. The reason why this practice works for Mike is because he can engage multiple senses with his audience and reach them through different points of entry. Some people relate more to personal stories, while others drawings or direct readings of scriptures. By combining all of these into one half hour sermon, Mike is not only able to communicate with more people, but communicate with them effectively.

With respect to Mike's recycling and repurposing of sermon notes over the years, this may seem counterintuitive because repetition may breed a lack of passion or apathy. On the

contrary, with Mike's repurposing, he is (1) not verbatim copying old sermons and (2) is constantly keeping in mind his audience and the time at which he wrote the old sermon. Using these sermons as a reference tool can help Mike in times of writer's block or develop and build upon an idea that he had when his knowledge of scripture was not as concrete as it is now. In many ways, repurposing gives way to more new ideas than it holds him captive to old ones because his understanding of writing the sacred has developed so that building upon those old sermon help create new and more well-informed ones.

Preaching in sacred spaces, like standing in front of the pulpit, exponentially increases Mike's effectiveness for many reasons. Standing in front of an audience and preaching for over 40 years, one may think that a minister may grow tired or lose his zeal. But with Mike, he consistently delivers the same fervor that he would have given if preaching 20 years ago versus now. As addressed earlier, Mike's personality aside from the pulpit seems more laid back, reserved and quiet. But when he walks into the church building and begins to talk to the congregation, his disposition flips almost completely on its head and you can see Mike's true, passionate self start to show. This excites other people in the church as they start to blurt out "Amen" periodically and heads start to nod in response to different points. Mike really believes what he has been studying for almost his entire life and that can easily be seen once he steps behind the pulpit. As the authenticity grows, so does the positive spirit in the auditorium therefore increasing his effectiveness.

Mike's multimodal and repurposing practices are not only influenced by his proximity to the pulpit, but also through his knotworking between personal and professional life. As a minister, there is a constant interaction between Mike's religion, background, culture and home and family life. Mike uses this interaction to his advantage by tying knots between all these

different aspects of life and inserting them into his sermons and writings. This synergy helps Mike minister to others by way of sermons, classes, books, newsletters and bible studies. These personal anecdotes that he creates helps him make personal applications in sermons, sparks discussion in classes, help make a larger point in published works and relate to others in one-on-one interactions. Through knotworking, Mike is able to contribute to the social interactions that come with writing in general and writing the sacred specifically; but social interactions also make way for more knotworking for Mike, social interactions that he can use for more personal applications, “trigger thought” stories in sermons and effective conversations with those of his congregation.

In conclusion, Mike’s communicating practices include multimodal and repurposed writings influenced by speaking in sacred spaces and the continual knotworking between personal and professional life that all come together to create a complex yet highly effective writer and contributor to the writing of the sacred whose practices in summation are not often seen or studied.