

**INTERNATIONAL SERMON STUDIES ASSOCIATION
(ISSA)**

**FOURTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE
July 2-4, 2026**

**Theme:
“Preaching at the Milestones”**

**Venues:
Humboldt University
Catholic Academy of Berlin
Hotel Berlin**

**Co-Sponsors:
Catholic Academy of Berlin
International Center for Law and Religion Studies, BYU Law School
Richard L. Evans Chair for Religious Understanding, BYU**

THURSDAY, JULY 2

**Sessions at Humboldt University,
Festsaal Building, Seminar Room 144
(Sitzungen an der Humboldt-Universität)**

- 6:30 – 8:00** Breakfast
Hotel Berlin, The Breakfast Restaurant
- 12:00 – 13:00** **LUNCH:** *HU Nord (North Mensa, Hannoversche Str 7)*
- 13:15 – 13:45** **WELCOME** by Keith A. Francis and Paul E. Kerry
- 13:45 – 15:00** **SESSION I:** Preaching to/for Outsiders? Sermons for the Black Enlightenment, Women, and Sailors
Chair: Melanie Pickard, Arete Educational & Conference Services
- “What’s in a Sermon? Black Enlightenment Writing Found Beyond the Pulpit”
Brycen Eaton, Brigham Young University
- “Preaching Eve’s Redemption”
Pauline Bown, Brigham Young University
- “Seamen Can Be Converted: Maritime Preaching in the Early United States”
Ryan Tobler, Heidelberg Center for American Studies & Theologische Fakultät, Universität Heidelberg
- 15:00 – 16:00** **SESSION II:** Frances Knight Plenary
Chair: Keith A. Francis, Oxford Brookes University
- “Connop Thirlwall, Bishop of St Davids 1840-1874: A Life in Sermons”
Frances Knight, University of Nottingham
- 16:00 – 16:30** Coffee Break

16:30 – 17:45

SESSION III: Putting Sermons to Use
Chair: William Skiles, Regent University

“The Pharaoh and the Pulpit: The Mummy in Nineteenth-Century Religious Discourse”

Claire Griffiths, Brigham Young University

“Sermonic Modernity: Rudolf Steiner, Spiritual Science, and the Reconfiguration of Christianity”

Raven Skousen, Brigham Young University

“References to Other Faiths in LDS General Conference, 1850–2025”

Libby Reynolds, International Parliamentary Scholar, German Bundestag

18:00 –

Evening (on your own)

FRIDAY, JULY 3

Sessions at the Catholic Academy in Berlin Club Room (Sitzungen an der Katholischen Akademie in Berlin)

- 6:30 – 8:30** **Breakfast**
Hotel Berlin, The Breakfast Restaurant
- 9:30 – 9:45** **WELCOME:** Stephan Steiner, Catholic Academy in Berlin
- 9:45 – 11:00** **SESSION IV:** Sermons as a Mode to Think Outside the Box
Chair: Frances Knight, University of Nottingham
- “‘Do not imagine it can be a light thing:’ Confession in Keble’s *Sermons for the Christian Year*”
Ryan Blank, Harrow School & Pusey House Centre for Theology, Law, and Culture
- “Marx and Mary: Performing Catholicism in Socialist East Germany”
Kathryn Julian, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum & Georgetown University
- “Preaching Modernity: Sermons, Science, and Semantic Struggle at the World’s Parliament of Religions”
Erik P. Palmer, Brigham Young University/Harvard Divinity School
- 11:00 – 11:20** Coffee Break
- 11:20 – 12:20** **SESSION V:** Benjamin E. Park Plenary
Chair: Paul E. Kerry, International Center for Law and Religion Studies, BYU Law School
- “Theodore Parker and the Power of Sermons for the Un-Churched”
Benjamin E. Park, Sam Houston State University
- 12:20 – 13:15** **LUNCH** – Catholic Academy of Berlin

- 13:15 – 14:30** **SESSION VI: Sermons, Preaching, and Religious Liberty**
Chair: Jordan Watkins, Brigham Young University
- “Preaching Toleration: Revolutionary Sermons and the Contested Boundaries of Religious Liberty”
Noah Horlacher, Brigham Young University
- “Milestones of Liberty: Pulpit Discourse and the Rise of Religious Freedom in Early America”
Coleman Gagon, Brigham Young University
- “Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Protection of Sermonic Practice: Insights from the International Center for Law and Religion Studies”
Paul E. Kerry, International Center for Law and Religion Studies, BYU Law School
- 14:30 – 15:30** **SESSION VII: Workshop**
Led by Keith A. Francis, Oxford Brookes University
What is a Sermon? Definitions of Preaching...
- 15.30 – 16:15** **SESSION VIII: Roundtable on the SIPS Series and the Future of Publication in Sermon Studies**
- Keith A. Francis, Co-Editor of SIPS/Oxford Brookes University
Elizabeth Bento, De Gruyter Brill
Paul E. Kerry, International Center for Law and Religion Studies, BYU Law School
William Skiles, Regent University
- 18:45 – 21:15** Reception & Dinner at TV-Turm Alexanderplatz
Table Challenge: “So you think you know your preachers...”
Berlin Fernsehturm, Restaurant Sphere

SATURDAY, JULY 4

Sessions at the Hotel Berlin

Room: Bereich C4

(Sitzungen im Hotel Berlin)

6:30 – 9:00

Breakfast

Hotel Berlin: The Breakfast Restaurant

9:30 – 10:45

**SESSION IX: War!(?), Rhetoric, and the Sermon as
'Challenge'**

Chair: Ryan Tobler, Heidelberg Center for American Studies &
Theologische Fakultät, Universität Heidelberg

“‘Marshalling the English Language’: Winston Churchill’s Sermonic
Rhetoric and the Christian Framing of War, May-June 1940”

Cory Clay, Brigham Young University

“Friedrich Forell and the Macedonian Man: A German Preacher in Exile
in the United States”

William Skiles, Regent University

“Preaching is not the Problem: An Analysis of Religious Reactions to 9/11
and Growing Islamophobia in the United States”

Max Farnsworth, Brigham Young University

10:45 – 11:15

Coffee Break

11:15 – 12:15

**SESSION X: Roundtable: “The International Sermon Studies
Association (ISSA): Where We Are and Future Directions”**

Chair: Melanie Pickard, Arete Educational & Conference
Services

Keith A. Francis, Oxford Brookes University

William Skiles, Regent University

Andrew Reed, Brigham Young University

12:15 – 13:15

Concluding Luncheon

Conference Location Addresses

Hotel Berlin
Lützowplatz 17
10785 Berlin
Telephone: +49 30 2605 2610

Humboldt University (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin)
Festsaal (Humboldt Graduate School/Veranstaltungsräume)
Luisenstraße 56
10117 Berlin
Telephone: +49 30 2093 70778

Catholic Academy in Berlin (Katholische Akademie in Berlin)
Hannoversche Straße 5
10115 Berlin
Telephone: +49 30 2830950

The Berlin TV Tower (Berliner Fernsehturm)
Panoramastraße 1A
10178 Berlin
Telephone: +49 30 2475750

Transportation and Useful Directions

OVERVIEW

In general, public transport is the cheapest way to get around Berlin. Buses, trams, trains (S-Bahn and U-Bahn, overground and underground) are all readily accessible. The center of the city is Zone A & B, the airport is in Zone C.

From Berlin's Brandenburg Airport, a taxi or Uber may be more efficient (especially if the traveler has awkward or heavy luggage). Depending on the time of day, a taxi will likely be more expensive than Uber, but the service is more regular.

If attendees want to try something different, Berlin's most popular ride app is Free Now

For journey times, the recommended transit planners are BVG Journey Planner and S-Bahn Berlin Journey Planner.

GETTING TO THE CONFERENCE VENUES

From Berlin Brandenburg Airport to the Hotel Berlin

1. Follow signs in BER Airport to the train station beneath Terminal 1
2. Take the **FEX (Flughafen Express)** to **Berlin Südkreuz** (about 15–20 minutes)
3. Take a taxi from Südkreuz to the hotel (about 10 minutes). OR
1. Follow signs in BER Airport to the train station beneath Terminal 1
2. Take the **FEX** or **Regional Railway RER20** to **Potsdamer Platz** (about 20 minutes)
3. Take the **Subway U2** to either **Ruhleben** or **Theodor-Heuss-Platz** (NOT “Pankow”)
4. Exit the subway at **Nollendorfplatz**
5. It is a 10-minute walk to the hotel

Total Time: 35–40 minutes

Cost: Approximately €10–20

From Berlin Hauptbanhof (Hbf/Main Station) to the Hotel Berlin

1. Take any **S-Bahn** (S3, S5, S7, or S9) from Berlin Hbf to **Zoologischer Garten** (about 5–6 minutes)
2. From Zoologischer Garten, take **Bus 100 or 200** to **Lützowplatz**, which is directly in front of the hotel area
3. Walk 1–2 minutes to the hotel OR
1. **Bus 187** from the Hauptbahnhof area to **Lützowplatz**

Total Time: Typically, 15–20 minutes by train and slightly longer by bus

Cost: €3.50

From the Hotel Berlin to Humboldt University

1. Walk to the **Lützowplatz** bus stop (right outside the hotel)
2. Take **Bus 100** toward Alexanderplatz
3. Get off at **Staatsoper**
4. Walk about 3–5 minutes to Humboldt University's main building on Unter den Linden

Total Time: 20–25 minutes

Cost: €3.50

From the Hotel Berlin to the Catholic Academy

1. Walk to **Nollendorfplatz** U-Bahn station (about 10 minutes from the hotel)
 2. Take the **U2** toward **Pankow**
 3. Change at **Stadtmitte** to the **U6** toward **Alt-Tegel**
 4. **Oranienburger Tor**
 5. Walk about 3–4 minutes to the Academy on Hannoversche Straße OR
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1. Walk 3 minutes from Hotel Berlin to **Lützowplatz** (the bus stop right by the hotel)
 2. Take **Bus 100** Direction: *Alexanderplatz*
 3. Ride 7 stops (about 12 minutes)
 4. Get off at **Schumannstraße**
 5. Walk **6 minutes** to: **Katholische Akademie in Berlin**

Total Time: 25–30 minutes

Cost: €3.50

From the Catholic Academy to Berliner Fernsehturm

1. Walk about 3 minutes to **U Oranienburger Tor** (the nearest U-Bahn station to the Academy)
 2. Take **Tram M1** Direction: *Alexanderplatz*
 3. Get off at Alexanderplatz and walk to the TV Tower OR
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1. Walk 4 minutes from the Catholic Academy to **Naturkundemuseum** (Invalidenstraße)
 2. Take **Tram M5** Direction: *Alexanderplatz/Landsberger Allee*
 3. Ride 4 stops (approximately 8 minutes)
 4. Get off at Alexanderplatz and walk to the TV Tower OR
-
1. Walk about 3 minutes to **U Oranienburger Tor**
 2. Take the **U6** southbound one stop to **Friedrichstraße**
 3. Transfer to the **S-Bahn** (S3, S5, S7, or S9) and ride one stop to **Alexanderplatz**
 4. Get off at Alexanderplatz and walk to the TV Tower

Total Time: 15–20 minutes

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Hotel Berlin
Berliner Fernsehturm

Title: What's in a Sermon? Black Enlightenment Writing Found Beyond the Pulpit
Author: Brycen Eaton, Brigham Young University

This paper examines how certain Black Enlightenment texts serve a sermonic function without taking the formal shape of sermons. It argues that Ottobah Cugoano and Phillis Wheatley Peters write in ways that rebuke, admonish, and interpret their age morally, thereby challenging an ambitious notion of French, American, and English Enlightenment thinkers: the claim that humanity could be spoken of as universal. These writers sought, through contradiction, to oppose inherited, erroneous ideals of race and ethnicity. Universal humanity became meaningful only when it was confronted by those Black individuals whose contradictory exclusion had helped to sustain its apparent coherence.

I privilege the writings of Ottobah Cugoano and Phillis Wheatley Peters, with selective comparison to one or two eighteenth-century sermons. Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, which utilizes familiar sermonical terms of obligation, natural law, and divine judgment to characterize slave trade atrocities and cultural conceptions of Black-skinned peoples. Wheatley's poetry, especially his prose concerning Christian readers and sacred themes, often works through a different but related mode: it recalls its readers to truths they profess while exposing the narrowness of their racial assumptions. Read together, these texts suggest that Black Enlightenment writers did more than participate in debates over slavery and equality. They assumed the burden of interpreting morally in their age and summoned conscience.

The paper, therefore, proposes that sermon studies may profit from attending to writings that are not formally sermons yet nonetheless act sermonically within public culture. Black Enlightenment texts reveal how exhortation could move through poetry, political prose, and moral address, and how the question of who may preach, rebuke, or interpret the meaning of a people's professed ideals was itself part of the eighteenth century's struggle over what it meant to be human.

Pauline Bown, Brigham Young University

This paper considers the intersection of Christian theology and the American suffrage movement during the late 19th century, specifically analyzing how suffragists approached the biblical narrative of the Fall. It argues that both devout Christian suffragists and less religious suffragists were ultimately united in their efforts to reconcile Christian theology with their fight for the vote. Some suffragists became disillusioned by organized religion, but continued to seek ways to reinterpret Eve, and gain greater support from the Christian women of America. Other more devout suffragists, like Quaker preacher Lucretia Mott and Methodist preacher Anna Howard Shaw, were certain that suffrage was a righteous desire and used the story of Eve, and their skills as preachers, to justify women's political advocacy.

This research considers how the context of 19th century America allowed greater discussion on the nature and role of women in Christian theology. For centuries, many societies relied on the narrative of the Fall to further justify the subjugation of women. As the study of higher criticism entered the American continent from Europe, there was an increase in alternative interpretations of biblical passages generally. Additionally, Antoinette Brown Blackwell became one of the first women ordained in the Protestant church in 1853, and Anna Howard Shaw became one of the first female ordinations in the Methodist church in 1880. Combined, these milestone events provided an ideal moment in American history for women to engage in theological discussions that would advance women's rights.

This paper considers two general approaches suffragists took in reinterpreting Eve's actions in Genesis to more readily align Christian theology with their suffrage advocacy. Some sought to justify Eve's nature and her actions in the Fall, while others reinterpreted the narrative to redeem her from her actions. United, these narratives refuted any biblical arguments employed to assign woman a secondary role to man in society. Suffragists' reinterpretations of the Fall highlight an important part of the larger history of changing biblical interpretations and their powerful use in political and social movements.

Ryan Tobler, Lecturer, Heidelberg Center for American Studies &
Theologische Fakultät Universität Heidelberg

"Seamen Can Be Converted: Maritime Preaching in the Early United States"

This presentation will explore the homiletic fruits of an intriguing but largely unexplored historical convergence in the antebellum United States: the simultaneous rise of evangelical missions and reform activism on the one hand, and the dramatic expansion of American maritime commerce on the other. Expanding mission and moral horizons during this period led to a reappraisal of many at the social margins, including American seamen—a group whose number and visibility were growing rapidly as their labor propelled a critical and expanding sector of the American economy. Reformers and missionaries consequently began to champion the “Seamen’s Cause,” a project intended to reform and evangelize America’s sailors, who were re-conceived as approachable and redeemable. This project soon acquired many dimensions—the creation of mariners’ churches, sailors’ homes (morally-regulated boardinghouses), savings banks, temperance activism, didactic literature, and more. But it prioritized the exposure of sailors to the preached word and produced new strategies of maritime evangelization. In the presentation I will outline some of its most engaging innovations, from shipside worship practices and floating churches to the production of a redemptive message theologically, liturgically, and rhetorically calibrated to the sensibilities of seafaring men.

Frances Knight, Professor Emeritus, University of Nottingham

“Connop Thirlwall, Bishop of St Davids 1840-1874: A Life in Sermons”

Connop Thirlwall (1797-1875) was a major figure in the intellectual life of mid-nineteenth century Britain. He was notable for his early translation of Schleiermacher (1825), for his eight volume *History of Greece* (1835-44), and for his detailed commentaries on contemporary ecclesiastical affairs. A progressive thinker who wanted the University of Cambridge to admit Protestant Nonconformists several decades before it actually did so, Thirlwall did not fit into the mainly Tory clerical culture of his day. A Whig prime minister, Lord Melbourne, rewarded his academic achievements and political sympathies by appointing him to the enormous Welsh diocese of St Davids in 1840, where he remained until his retirement. He was an unlikely Welsh bishop, but an effective one. Despite his public persona, Thirlwall remains a somewhat enigmatic figure. Failing to fit any of the standard categories which classify nineteenth-century churchmen, he has been under appreciated by ecclesiastical historians.

The chance discovery of a substantial deposit of his manuscript sermons in the National Library of Wales makes it possible to gain new insights into the man, his theology and his approach to preaching. An estimated 350 sermons, the majority of which were unpublished, provide a remarkable record of a preaching career that stretched over a lifetime. The earliest surviving sermon was written when he was eight, and the latest one when he was seventy-five.

The paper will provide a preliminary analysis of this sermon material, paying attention to questions including his different approach to preaching in English and Welsh, his use of biblical texts, and evidence of the development of his thought over the decades. I will attempt to link my paper to the conference theme of ‘preaching at the milestones’ by considering the sermons that he used on one of the annual liturgical ‘milestones’, the one which marks the birth of Christ. What can we learn about Thirlwall and his theology from his Christmas sermons?

Title: The Pharaoh and the Pulpit: The Mummy in Nineteenth Century Religious Discourse
Name: Claire Griffiths, Brigham Young University

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Egypt had long represented an intriguing contradiction of sinfulness and sanctuary. The same land that had oppressed the Israelites in the time of Moses had also offered sanctuary to Joseph, and later the Holy Family. As the budding field of Egyptology brought a craze for mummy unwrappings and traveling exhibits to America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is unsurprising that this Egyptomania made its way to American synagogues and chapels. While mummies are typically linked with the occult and spiritualist movements of the Gilded Age, a closer examination shows that mummies had been used rhetorically in sermons for decades to negotiate fears about mortality, agency, and tradition. This paper will analyze the treatment of Egyptian antiquity in the works of several religious figures, from the Presbyterian minister T. DeWitt Talmage to Isaac Meyer Wise, an influential rabbi in Reform Judaism, to Joseph Smith, the founder of the Latter-day Saint movement. Their use of mummies, like Biblical attitudes towards Egypt itself, presents a fascinating duality. Even as mummies are invoked as a literal *memento mori* to encourage listeners to uphold traditional society through good works and the hope of immortality, the Egyptian past is also used to prove the historical accuracy of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament and appeal to a shared tradition, whether philosophically, as in the case of Joseph Smith, or literally, as in Wise's works. In essence, American theologians used mummies to evoke two different strains of tradition: one school, represented by Talmage, that championed traditional American society and another that legitimized and reminded listeners of a common origin. The recent scandals and ongoing public interest in the contested field of biblical archaeology show that the seemingly disparate domains of Egyptology and faith have always been entangled.

Title: Sermonic Modernity: Rudolf Steiner, Spiritual Science, and the Reconfiguration of Christianity

Author: Raven Skousen, Brigham Young University

Proposal:

This paper interprets Rudolf Steiner's spiritual discourses as sermonic in form—sermons of modernity—and presents him as a Christian initiate, social reformer, and teacher who understood Christianity as a decisive event in spiritual history. Focusing on *Christianity as Mystical Fact* (1902) and *From Jesus to Christ* (1911), it examines his claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Christ historically realize truths once confined to esoteric mystery traditions, thereby transforming initiation into a publicly accessible spiritual path.

Situating Steiner within the intellectual crisis of fin-de-siècle Europe, the study shows how his “Philosophy of Freedom” responds to epistemological limits, cultural fragmentation, and the rupture between subject and world. Across his extensive lecture corpus, Steiner develops a “Spiritual Science” that unites rigorous thought with religious experience, synthesizing German idealism, classical mystery traditions, and modern psychology. He reconceives knowledge as participatory, intuition as a means of encountering spiritual reality, and freedom as the result of inner transformation.

The paper argues that Steiner's vision remains relevant today, proposing that the future of religion lies not in rejecting tradition or reverting to dogma, but in recovering Christianity's experiential and transformative core.

Libby Reynolds, International Parliamentary Scholar at the German Bundestag

Title: References to Other Faiths in LDS General Conference, 1850–2025

Proposal:

This study analyzes more than 1,497 references to other faiths in LDS General Conference talks from 1850 to 2025. Through mixed-methods analysis, it examines changes in the frequency, context, and tone of references to other religious traditions, including the frequency of mentions relative to missionary work, baptisms for the dead, proxy ordinances, and cooperative language. The project investigates which faiths are discussed most often, how they are portrayed, and whether references emphasize conversion, cooperation, or doctrinal distinction. Findings reveal significant historical shifts in LDS discourse about religious others, differences between various individual speakers, and provide new insight into the development of interfaith engagement within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Ryan Blank
Head of Politics, Harrow School
Pusey House Centre for Theology, Law, and Culture

“Do not imagine it can be a light thing”: Confession in Keble’s *Sermons for the Christian Year*

John Keble is, perhaps, most remembered for his poetry—most notably in *The Christian Year*—and his leadership of the Oxford Movement, and while these projects were significant in the development of Kebleian theology, the overwhelming tendency of historians’ engagement with Keble’s theology is to focus on his ecclesiology or to characterise his theological output as essentially moderate and lacking the innovative qualities of John Henry Newman or Edward Bouverie Pusey. Furthermore, Keble’s departure from Oxford and focus on parish ministry is largely seen as a project independent from the more University-centric project of Tractarian and Anglo-Catholic theologising. Keble’s *Sermons for the Christian Year* reveal a wealth of pastoral theology that has largely escaped the notice of historians and theologians. This talk will focus on a series of four sermons, delivered in the first four Sundays of Lent in 1851, on “Confession” from Keble’s *Sermons for the Christian Year: Sermons from Lent to Passiontide*, particularly parts 2 and 3, and consider Keble’s theology of confession in the context of his *Letters of Spiritual Counsel and Guidance*, his Tractarian poetry, and the wider context of Tractarian practices around Confession in mid-19th century England.

Kathryn Julian, Ph.D.
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.

Title

“Marx and Mary: Performing Catholicism in Socialist East Germany”

Abstract

This paper takes as its point of departure the surprising fact that Roman Catholic religious orders grew dramatically from the end of the Second World War to the Second Vatican Council within the German Democratic Republic (GDR), a state that was officially atheist, following Karl Marx’s famous dictum that religion was “the opiate of the masses.” East Germany’s competing traditions and ideologies would mean accommodation by both state and religious actors, something the Catholic Church in East Germany was no stranger to having survived Bismarck’s Kulturkampf, the National Socialist liquidation of monasteries, war, and now socialism. Unlike the Protestant Church, which for many years pursued pro-regime policies, or at least a tacit acceptance of socialism, the Catholic hierarchy established a kind of political abstinence, refusing paths of assimilation and opposition to socialist society. These policies established an insular Catholic presence in East Germany, but one that did not preclude nuns and sisters from interacting with secular communities and state officials and making a life for themselves in East German society. This paper thus takes gender as its primary category of analysis and explores how women religious both used and subverted the language of the state to carve out a unique space for a semi-Catholic public sphere.

Because of the compromises made by both the Catholic Church and the Socialist Unity Party (SED), by the 1980s, the state tolerated pilgrimages and public sermons at these events.

Religious leaders, and especially sisters (around seventy to eighty percent of the Church’s global workforce and social services in the latter half of the twentieth century) were able to adapt the language of socialism to align with their mission. In the case of socialist East Germany, it was even possible to view the act of religious travel as aligning with socialism, as pilgrimage also supported notions that there was an absence of inequality, poverty, rank, or distinction. This talk will analyze the popular piety of nuns and sisters, the cult of St. Elizabeth in the GDR, and sermons and official letters from the male-dominated East German hierarchy to understand the dynamic of mutual accommodation between religious and state actors.

Title: Preaching Modernity: Sermons, Science, and Semantic Struggle at the World's Parliament of Religions

Author: Erik P. Palmer, Brigham Young University

This paper examines the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions as a decisive moment in the transformation of preaching, arguing that the event compelled religious leaders to recast sermons within the intellectual and linguistic frameworks of modernity. Functioning as what Eric Ziolkowski terms a curated "Museum of Faiths," the Parliament subjected traditions to comparative evaluation under the standards of industrial civilization, thereby reshaping the sermonic task itself. In this context, preaching became a site of semantic negotiation, where religious authority depended increasingly on the ability to articulate doctrine in terms legible to modern, ostensibly scientific audiences.

The study argues that the Parliament operated as a universal arena of semantic struggle, forcing delegates to adapt their rhetorical strategies to maintain legitimacy. Drawing on Reinhart Koselleck's concept of "temporalization," it shows how participants repositioned their traditions within a progressive historical narrative, presenting their teachings as compatible with—or even anticipatory of—modern intellectual developments.

This competitive environment incentivized a shift from inherited theological language to the prestige vocabulary of modern expertise. Engaging the frameworks of Peter Mandler and Raymond Williams, the paper demonstrates how Protestant, Catholic, Hindu, and Buddhist speakers translated doctrinal claims into the idioms of biology, psychology, and sociology. Terms such as "evolution," "consciousness," and "solidarity" became central to sermonic discourse, enabling delegates to assert intellectual parity within a shared epistemic field shaped by scientific authority.

Through a comparative analysis of the Parliament's addresses, the paper contends that this linguistic transformation marked a foundational moment in the emergence of the modern sermon as a form tied to sociological and scientific legitimacy. Ultimately, the study argues that the Parliament established enduring norms for global religious discourse, offering insight into how traditions recalibrate preaching in response to the epistemic demands of modernity.

PLENARY

Benjamin E. Park, Associate Professor of History, Sam Houston State

“Theodore Parker and the Power of Sermons for the Un-Churched”

Like many other abolitionists of his day, Theodore Parker believed that the many Protestant churches that dominated American life comprised “the bulwark of slavery.” Their inability to address the nation’s most pressing issue—or, as Parker saw it, their willingness to defend the slave institution—forfeited the United States’ claim to be a “Christian nation.” Indeed, he called America an “empire of atheism” due to its lack of moral foundations. While scholars have noted how the Civil War prompted a “theological crisis,” Parker and his thousands of followers demonstrate how it was a denominational catastrophe, too, as they envisioned innovative roles for churches and their congregants.

Yet if Parker was anxious to give up denominational affiliations, he refused to forfeit the importance of the sermon. Indeed, the sermon became his primary weapon in his war against slavery. He preached to two thousand people every week in his Boston congregation and traveled the nation preaching to all that would listen, often giving hundreds of sermons a year during the 1850s. He called the sermon “the original American contrivance,” the most important tool for educating the American people. Sermons were, according to Parker, a key asset in changing the national climate and making emancipation possible. And people listened. This presentation will demonstrate how Parker appropriated the sermon genre for political aims, particularly in his quest to pull people out from their churches and into the congregation of abolitionists as he preached a government by, of, and for the people.

Title: Preaching Toleration: Revolutionary Sermons and the Contested Boundaries of Religious Liberty

Author: Noah Horlacher, Brigham Young University

This paper examines Revolutionary-era sermons not as vehicles for disseminating a coherent ideal of religious liberty, but as arenas in which the meaning and limits of religious toleration were actively contested. In the pulpit, clergy did not simply translate political ideology into popular religious idioms; they struggled to define who and what toleration would include, producing formulations that were often denominationally specific, internally inconsistent, and shaped by local political pressures.

Drawing on sermons from across the revolutionary period, this study argues that the sermonic sphere exposes the fragility of toleration at the very moment of its articulation. Rather than revealing a straightforward transition toward pluralism, these texts show ministers negotiating the boundaries of acceptable belief and practice within the unstable coalition of the thirteen colonies. Sermons became a key site where Protestants attempted to reconcile calls for liberty with inherited confessional assumptions, fears of disorder, and competing visions of civic belonging.

By treating sermons as sites of contestation rather than transmission, the paper reframes the origins of American religious freedom. It argues that religious liberty emerged not from the diffusion of a shared principle, but from sustained struggle over the terms, reach, and exclusions of toleration in Revolutionary America.

Title: Milestones of Liberty: Pulpit Discourse and the Rise of Religious Freedom in Early America

Name: Coleman Gagon, Brigham Young University

In light of America's 250th anniversary, this paper reexamines the emergence of religious liberty during the Revolutionary and Founding eras by centering the role of pulpit discourse. While the Constitution is often treated as the decisive milestone in the development of religious freedom, sermons reached far broader audiences than legal or political texts and were instrumental in shaping public understanding. By analyzing widely circulated sermons from the early republic, this study argues that the pulpit functioned as a primary medium through which ideas of religious liberty and toleration were translated into lived social and religious experience

The paper demonstrates that sermons did not merely reflect revolutionary ideology but actively participated in redefining the relationship between church and state. Clergy frequently framed resistance to British authority in theological terms, linking liberty of conscience to political liberty. At the same time, these sermons reveal persistent tensions between inherited models of confessional uniformity and emerging arguments for pluralism. Ministers navigated these tensions in complex ways, at times advancing expansive visions of religious liberty while still affirming religion's foundational role in civic life.

Methodologically, the study draws on primary sermon literature and engages historiographical debates over whether this period represents a decisive rupture or a gradual evolution toward pluralism. By situating these sermons within the broader commemorative context of America at 250, the paper highlights their function as cultural and ideological milestones—moments in which abstract political principles were rendered intelligible, persuasive, and experientially meaningful to a wider public.

Ultimately, this project argues that the anniversary of American independence invites renewed attention to the sermonic sphere as a critical site in the formation of a distinctly American approach to religious liberty and toleration.

Title: Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Protection of Sermonic Practice: Insights from the International Center for Law and Religion Studies

Name: Paul E. Kerry

Institution: International Center for Law and Religion Studies, BYU Law School

Proposal:

This presentation will introduce the work of the International Center for Law and Religion Studies (ICLRS) at Brigham Young University Law School and explore the foundational relationship between freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and the practice of preaching, teaching, and sermon delivery within religious communities.

For more than two decades, the ICLRS has worked globally to advance religious freedom through scholarship, education, diplomacy, and engagement with governments, religious leaders, academics, and civil society organizations. Its efforts focus on strengthening legal and social environments in which religious communities can flourish according to their own beliefs and traditions.

The presentation will argue that sermons, homilies, religious instruction, and other forms of faith-based teaching are among the most visible expressions of religious freedom. The ability of clergy and lay leaders to interpret sacred texts, communicate doctrine, address moral questions, and teach adherents depends upon robust protections for freedom of thought, conscience, religion, expression, association, and institutional autonomy. Restrictions on religious speech often represent some of the earliest and most consequential infringements on religious liberty. Drawing on international human rights principles and examples from the ICLRS's global work, this presentation will examine how legal protections for FoRB help sustain the sermonic traditions that are central to the life, identity, and continuity of religious communities worldwide.

Author: Cory Clay, Brigham Young University

Title: “Marshalling the English Language”: Winston Churchill’s Sermonic Rhetoric and the Christian Framing of War, May–June 1940

This paper argues that in the critical months of May and June 1940, Winston Churchill effectively “marshalled the English language and sent it into battle,” deploying a form of rhetoric that functioned analogously to sermonic discourse. Through speeches that fused Christian, national, and civilizational themes, Churchill transformed reports from the war front into morally charged appeals, framing the conflict as a struggle for the survival of a shared Western and Christian inheritance.

Focusing on key speeches from this period, the study demonstrates how Churchill shaped public understanding of British war aims by combining stark realism with carefully calibrated hope, grounded in his rhetorical authority and political ethos. His language cast Nazi Germany as a civilizational and moral threat, while presenting British resistance as both a national duty and a broader defense of Christian civilization.

Methodologically, the paper analyzes the texts of Churchill’s speeches alongside archival materials from the Churchill Papers, War Cabinet and Joint Intelligence Committee minutes, and contemporaneous events such as the National Day of Prayer at Westminster Abbey. Particular attention is given to how Churchill’s rhetoric extended beyond Parliament to global audiences—especially the United States—where appeals to shared religious and cultural heritage were designed to cultivate sympathy and encourage support amid prevailing isolationism.

By situating Churchill’s wartime oratory in relation to contemporary British sermons, the paper shows how his speeches operated within a wider sermonic register, translating political crisis into a quasi-theological narrative. In doing so, Churchill’s rhetoric functioned not merely as communication, but as a unifying force that mobilized language itself in the service of national survival and civilizational defense.

William Skiles, Regent University

Associate Professor of History; Chair, Department of General Education
Associate Dean, College of Arts & Sciences

Friedrich Forell & the Macedonian Man: A German Preacher in Exile in the United States

This paper presentation will focus on the preaching ministry of Friedrich Forell during the Second World War. Forell was a German pastor of Jewish descent who faithfully served his community of faith until Nazi persecutions forced him into exile in 1938, shortly after the Austrian Anschluß. He was a member of the oppositional Confessing Church. His wartime sermons preached in the United States reveal his desire to share information on the plight of the Jews in Europe, to condemn National Socialism as a false ideology, and to support missions to Jews. Forell operated with the underlying assumption that the gospel message of Christianity was a life-affirming worldview capable of effectively countering what he considered to be a bankrupt and destructive Nazi ideology that had sown confusion and disunity in the German churches. This research provides greater illumination on the history of German pastors during the war, and specifically German pastors of Jewish descent forced into exile.

Title: Preaching is not the Problem: An Analysis of Religious Reactions to 9/11 and growing Islamophobia in the U.S.

Author: Max Farnsworth, Brigham Young University

This paper examines the relationship between organized Christian leadership and the surge of anti-Muslim prejudice that followed the September 11, 2001 attacks. It argues that while certain prominent religious voices contributed to Islamophobic discourse, they were exceptions to a dominant pastoral pattern of restraint, and that preaching was not the primary driver of post-9/11 Islamophobia. Explaining the disconnect between what most religious leaders said and how the broader culture reacted calls for a structural account rooted above all in Christian Nationalism. The study reconstructs that argument through a close reading of sermons and institutional statements from the immediate aftermath of the attacks, drawing on Billy Graham's National Cathedral address, Gordon B. Hinckley's general conference remarks, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' statement "Living with Faith and Hope After September 11," and local sermons by Bill Haley, Randy Smith, and James Forbes Jr. It shows how these voices—across national platforms and local congregations alike—consistently called for restraint, rejected collective blame, and warned explicitly against scapegoating Muslims. It also engages the scholarship of Jane Smith, Yvonne Haddad, John Esposito, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, and Mark Juergensmeyer not simply as support, but as points of dialogue, showing where a close focus on religious discourse extends arguments that have centered primarily on media framing and counterterrorism policy.

Finally, the paper identifies Christian Nationalism—drawing on Paul Miller's analysis of its fusion of American and Christian identity—as the primary structural force responsible for the gap between pastoral counsel and public reaction, with civil religion and the clash-of-civilizations thesis treated as reinforcing mechanisms. Although most Christian leaders attempted to call their communities toward peace, those efforts were overwhelmed by ideological frameworks operating at far greater cultural scale. More broadly, this case illustrates how responsible religious speech can be rendered politically ineffective when it enters an environment already primed to react to a national crisis in civilizational terms.