Bibliodrama in the Netherlands: a short history and the current methods

Bibliodrama first became known to a small group in the Netherlands in the 1950s. Henk Aalbers, preacher and educator at the center of *Oud Poelgeest*, near Leiden, was in touch with German preachers, including Dr. Eberhard Bethge. The German preachers had been introduced to bibliodrama as the exploration of lively biblical stories with the entirety of a human’s senses, allowing for the stories to appeal to the human being as a whole. As a result, bibliodrama earned its place in the broad collection of creative methods already mastered by Aalbers. As part of his work for the Dutch Sunday School Association (NZV), he inspired several Sunday School teachers.

In the 1970s, two movements emerged side-by-side. The first movement was embedded in Protestantism, with the second being rooted in Catholicism. Both movements surfaced in the context of a broader progressive evolution towards rethinking practical theology. This eventually culminated in three bibliodrama movements: one being Protestant, with the remaining two being Catholic.

At the theological faculty of the UVA, a new field was maturing within the department of practical theology: pastoral counselling. The key figure overseeing the inception of pastoral counselling was Wybe Zijlstra, who was one of the pioneers of the Clinical Pastoral Formation, the KPV. In cooperation with Coert Lindijer and Arnout Roscam Abbing, amongst others, Zijlstra developed a new field for the Protestant world. Roscam Abbing also worked on bibliodrama within the Theological Seminary of the Reformed Church. In the early 1980s, the loss of Rev. Henk Aalbers led to a demand to continue his work. Cilia Hogerzeil, theologian and a creator in musical theater, drew from her knowledge and experience in drama and dramatic works and developed a very playful and creative way to experience bibliodrama. Her approach embodied the possibility of discovering the entirety of biblical stories and poetry from a musical angle. Her work, and that of Riëtte Beurmanjer, Lex Grandia and Bas van den Berg, led to the creation of two foundations: ‘*Stichting de Santenkraam*’ came into being in the 1980s and from 1996 onwards, ‘*Stichting de 7evende Hemel*’ was created.

In Catholic circles, people had already followed in the footsteps of pastoral counselling. People such as Frans Andriessen, Willem Berger, and later Sjaak Körver, worked on a very well thought out form of Clinical Pastoral Education. Within the department of practical theology, two movements developed in the 1980s and 1990s in which bibliodrama began to play a role. One was the school of Frans Andriessen, Nico Derksen and Maria Nolet, who developed bibliodrama as a form of “faith meeting in movement”. The other school was founded as a consequence of the work of Jan Lap and Marjorie Streur, who had opted for psychodrama as a working method to aid participants in bibliodrama in becoming acquainted with their personal possibilities of existence. In contrast, Derksen's working method was aimed at religious deepening in the context of a religious community.

In 2014, two of the three schools started cooperating in the Centre for Bibliodrama ([www.centrumvoorbibliodrama.nl](http://www.centrumvoorbibliodrama.nl)). The mission was stated as follows: to train new supervisors so that the accumulated experience, knowledge and skills of bibliodrama are passed on to new generations. Participants learn to connect their life story and the written story in a creative and existential manner.

The method developed by Nico Derksen and Frans Andriessen is called the “pastoral-existential method”; the method of Cilia Hogerzeil and Bas van den Berg is called the “physical play method”.

*The pastoral-existential method*

In the pastoral-existential method the biblical story is read and visually laid out in the playroom. So for example, ‘*here is the tree in which Zacheüs climbs, there is his house et cetera*’. In this way the different events and roles from the story also obtain a physical spot in the room. In the playroom, the participants walk around in silence and choose their role. The instructor helps them with short interviews, allowing for the appropriation of the chosen role and demonstrating how the participant can embellish that role with one’s own experiences. The game commences as the participants hear and see each other's roles and react to each other in movement, gestures and language. During the discussion, the participants exchange how the game has impacted them. This leads to new discoveries.

We call this method *existential* because the instructor searches for the existential-spiritual dimension in understanding the biblical text in each participant. This dimension is related to the individual’s life story. Furthermore, the method is also *pastoral* because the participants help each other under the guidance of the instructor in further exploring and expanding this dimension, throughout the play and discussion phases of the game. In essence, the discussion phase amounts to an exercise in communicating one’s faith.

*The physical play method*

Bibliodrama within the physical play method is aimed at the discovery of purpose and meaning in the encounter between biblical story & one’s own life story. This is done through the exploration of a role, empathizing with that role, broadening and deepening the role and improvising. If one empathizes and immerses oneself in the role of Ruth or Naomi, for example, one experiences firsthand what these two women go through and what is at stake in Ruth's novella. Rather than being invented, the meaning and the sense of life are discovered while participating in the game and reacting to one another. As such, anything can happen when participants meet. For example, in the story of the Wise Men from the East, which includes the scribes and King Herod, participants discover what touches or affronts them, either in small or large games. Subsequently, the participants share with each other where and how they recognize a connection between the experiences in the game and their own life story, as well as what they have discovered in the biblical story.

The physical play method is rooted in cultural traditions of drama and an approach to playing which is equally rooted in drama. Biblical stories are regarded as bearers of emotion and value-charged insights and experiences. The foundation for the participation in the game and the drama encased within the physical play method is, first and foremost, the human body. The combination of the human senses, one’s mental and physical abilities and a person’s active imagination allow participants in bibliodrama to explore a biblical story with a view to discovering purpose and meaning for their lives.

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