

Gwyneth H. McClendon and Rachel Beatty Riedl. *From Pews to Politics: Religious Sermons and Political Participation in Africa*. New York, NY: Cambridge UP, 2019. \$39.99.

*From Pews to Politics: Religious Sermons and Political Participation in Africa*, by Gwyneth H. McClendon and Rachel Beatty Riedl, examine selected sermons from Pentecostal (60 sermons out of 100 churches visited) and Catholic and mainline Protestant churches (24 of 50 churches visited) in Nairobi, Kenya, in order to test how and whether sermons shape political engagement from their hearers. According to the authors, a primary question driving their research is, “Does exposure to contemporary sermon content have an impact on political participation and, if so, how?” (107). What McClendon and Beatty find in field and laboratory work at the Bursara Center for Behavioral Economics at Nairobi undertaken from 2013–June 2014 and July–August 2016 is that religious belief, even when long held, can fluctuate. Sermons help to “reinforce” or “recharge” faith (138).

The reenergizing of congregants’ faith also takes place in contrasting ways. For the Pentecostal preachers that McClendon and Riedl heard, messages asserted that inward change produces outward transformation in the name of God. For the Catholic and mainline Protestant preachers studied, preachers encouraged their listeners to name and address systemic social problems in order to pave the way for building a society that more resembles what God intends. McClendon and Riedl exemplify the contrast by highlighting different interpretations of Job from Pentecostal and Catholic and mainline Protestant preachers. Pentecostal sermons see in verses such as Job 22:28—where Eliphaz the Temanite replies to Job, “You will also decree a thing, and it will be established for you. And light will shine on your ways”—a challenge for believers to change their circumstances with more dedication to God. For McClendon and Riedl, Pentecostal preachers proclaim how the verse “underscores the power of positive thinking and prophetic prayer: have faith that something will happen, speak that it will happen, and God will make it happen, the passages says” (80). McClendon and Riedl see in such Pentecostal sermons a consistent message that problems on earth are due to a lack of faith or inward turmoil. Stronger faith brings “imminent success” (80). By contrast, when mainline Protestants and Catholics preached from Job, they shared that sometimes even the faithful suffer. Nevertheless, God sustains the faithful in the face of trial (79–80). For McClendon and Riedl, the ideational content of the sermons they studied provided “metaphysical instruction” that they then correlated to political activity documented in survey data, focus groups, and examining the divergences of political behavior across Pentecostal and mainline Protestant and Catholic citizens, political candidates, activists, and others as documented by local newspapers and other media repositories.

The fieldwork and laboratory testing driving the findings of McClendon and Riedl give weight to their conclusions about trends and political implications of Pentecostal and mainline Protestant and Catholic preaching. Their methodology also provides a measurable apparatus for tracking how trends in sermonic messaging from varying traditions appear to influence individual and group political engagement. In short, the technical detail fortifies their thesis that sermons influence the political behavior of hearers. Yet homileticians already familiar with the difference in ideational content between Pentecostal and mainline and Catholic preaching may wonder how the discovery of McClendon and Riedl regarding the differences between Pentecostal and mainline Protestant and Catholic sermons is breaking new ground. In other words, McClendon and Riedl do not uncover something unknown, but provide a sociological apparatus to give weight to what many homileticians have likely already intuited about

Anglophone African preaching and about preaching in Pentecostal and mainline Protestant and Catholic congregations around the world. Also, the overall sample size of 84 total sermons, as well as building the link from sermon analysis to political engagement primarily through laboratory study, makes their claims less striking. Still, any preaching scholar interested in resourcing empirical approaches to make a social argument regarding the relevance of preaching would do well to see how McClendon and Riedl arrived at their conclusions.

*From Pews to Politics* could provide a contemporary and sociological counterpoint with female authors to titles like *The New Measures* from Ted A. Smith, *Preaching Must Die* from Jacob D. Myers, or initiatives such as the *Listening the Listeners* project from John S. McClure, Ronald J. Allen, Dale P. Andrews, L. Susan Bond, Dan P. Mosely, and G. Ramsey, Jr.

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