


REVIEW ESSAY

Race and the Power of Sermons on American Politics.
By R. Khari Brown, Ronald E. Brown, and James S.
Jackson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 2021.
xii+167 pp. \$70.00 cloth.

***Decoding the Digital Church: Evangelical Storytelling and
the Election of Donald J. Trump.*** By Stephanie A. Martin.
Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press. 2021. xi.+266
pp. \$49.95 cloth.

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Despite the growing flight of Americans from religious institutions, these are still the largest voluntary organizations in the United States and they remain significant forces in American politics. As leaders of these organizations, clergy are often visible and influential political figures. In just the past few years, conservative Protestant pastors were frequent visitors to the Trump White House and played a crucial role in mobilizing a large Republican religious constituency. Black Protestant ministers have long been a vital force in Democratic circles and are joined at times by white liberal colleagues, as evidenced by the recent mobilization to preserve abortion rights in the wake of the Supreme Court decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*.

The two books under review here provide rich, but distinct, evaluations of the political role of religious leaders, one focusing on liberal clergy, the other on their conservative counterparts. One is rooted primarily in data from numerous national surveys, the other in careful “electronic” participant observation of over two dozen evangelical megachurches. Although the methodologies are very different, the findings sometimes mesh quite nicely, but more often one study fills in gaps left by the other, whether theoretically or empirically. Although both projects would have benefitted from a more thorough grounding in the extensive political science literature on clerical politics, read in tandem they add a great deal to our understanding of the political contributions of religious leaders.

Race and the Power of Sermons on American Politics looks at “political churches,” defined by the authors as those in which entire sermons are preached on politics. The volume provides copious illustrations of these, often from well-known progressive

preachers, such as William Barber, Mike Moran, and Michael Pfleger, but also from lesser-known clergy. The authors argue that pastors of such political congregations “tend to side with marginalized groups and call for greater peace in the world.” That stance reflects “a covenantal civil religious ideology” (p. 61), a variant of American civil religion that accepts national “exceptionalism,” but warns that any special relationship with the Creator is “contingent on the nation working toward providing opportunities for socioeconomic well-being, freedom, and creative pursuits” (p. 12).

The authors focus on the central place of religious narrative in these sermons, connecting Biblical stories with contemporary political issues of racial justice, peace and economic equality. They emphasize especially the Exodus account and other “Biblical stories and themes rooted in liberation and justice to frame temporal issues” (p. 71), embodying a domestic version of Latin American liberation theology. Not surprisingly, perhaps, they find some clear racial differences in the desire for, and reception of, political sermons: Blacks are more likely than whites or Hispanics to approve of such sermons and other political actions by clergy and churches. This tendency they attribute, no doubt correctly, to the historical experience of the Black church in fighting the embedded racism in American society. In addition, Blacks are also more likely to report hearing such sermons. Nevertheless, the authors report, a substantial number of whites and Hispanics have similar expectations of their religious leaders and also listen to sermons on social welfare, civil rights, immigration and related social justice issues.

Do such political sermons have an effect? Here the authors use three specialized National Politics Surveys (2004, 2008, and 2016) to assess that possibility. Although their rich exploration of the data precludes any quick summary, they demonstrate that members of political congregations are more likely to hear sermons on social justice issues, see those issues as important, take liberal stances on a wide range of such concerns, and to act on those attitudes in the political arena. These results are amply demonstrated in the authors’ surveys, but are also consistently supported by replications in other national polls from the past two decades, buttressing the findings.

The multivariate statistical analyses here are quite sophisticated—perhaps a little too sophisticated, especially given some relatively small subsamples of relevant groups. And in many instances the reader would like more information on the underlying bivariate relationships. Indeed, many of the variables the authors relegate to “control” status would seem to be of considerable interest in their own right. These include the standard range of demographic variables, but also religiosity, religious affiliation, and partisanship—all powerful influences on political choices by both clergy and parishioners.

Thus, a little more descriptive data on the larger religious and partisan patterns would have been especially welcome. For example, what variations appear between evangelical and mainline Protestants? Are Catholics different? What part does religiosity play in shaping responses in major religious communities? Although the authors’ interest is in the effect of political sermons, net of all other influences, readers might expect some discussion of those other forces. Indeed, even a cursory exploration of the National Politics Studies data (available at ICPSR) suggests some

fascinating possibilities not addressed by the authors, leaving a lot of room for fruitful secondary analysis.

Despite these caveats, there is no doubt that the results discovered by the authors are there. Put in the larger context of clerical politics, however, the book is unfortunately limited to one side of the political–religious spectrum. Like much of the early work on clergy political engagement in the 1960s and 1970s, the authors focus both on quintessential liberal issues and on liberal activism “styles.” Almost all the questions on sermons in the surveys ask about predominantly liberal concerns. And the kinds of political activism tapped also have a liberal bias: these clergy are “more likely to protest, engage in civil disobedience, and participate in community organizing” (p. 91), with those in the pews tending to follow suit.

As the research on clergy politics has shown, however, conservative clergy have very different political agendas, tend not to preach “political sermons” but use more indirect forms of political cue-giving, and prefer different forms of activism. They are more likely to talk about “moral” (rather than “political”) issues as they define them, such as abortion, homosexuality, and religious freedom, and more often use venues other than the sermon to communicate their views. None of this is captured by the authors’ surveys. Although their research interests are clearly on the “religious left,” the book would have been enriched by greater curiosity about the other end of the political spectrum. Of course, that would have required considerably different survey instruments than those central to their analysis.

In some ways, Stephanie Martin’s truly innovative work on megachurch pastors fills in a good bit of what *Power of Sermons* neglects, studying conservative Protestant clerical politics. Using “digital rhetorical ethnography,” communications scholar Martin does her field work remotely, intensively observing a few dozen megachurch pastors from all over the country via their website offerings. Just as *Power of Sermons* uses visible liberal clerics for illustration, Martin’s examples often come from prominent conservatives, like Rick Warren, Andy Stanley, Ed Young, John Ortberg and other noted megachurch leaders. These comprise what she calls “a carefully culled convenience sample” (p. 43). Although this “sample” may leave methodological purists uneasy, her argument that their perspectives are widely shared among American conservative evangelicals is certainly plausible, making them a useful target for “rhetorical analysis.”

Like *Power in Sermons*, Martin’s book highlights the centrality of narrative, but of a very different kind. She found a conservative frame that “blended Bible accounts and American narratives—for example, putting together the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14–30) with plotlines that emphasize duties to hard work, investment, and saving—to explain contemporary problems and provide a lens for understanding a potential future” (p. 50). Such themes were prominent both during the economic crisis of 2009 and aftermath, as well as throughout the 2016 election season. Although not overtly “political,” such narratives inevitably favored conservative causes and Republican candidates. As she puts it, “the natural beneficiary of these types of homiletic stories and appeals is the Republican Party. This is because there is nothing in them that suggests a progressive politics” (p. 79).

Martin’s findings remind us of the staying power of this conservative perspective, evoking shared values through narratives recounting patriotism, individual

responsibility, hard work—the modern American expression of the old Protestant ethic. Although megachurch pastors may not be altogether typical of evangelical clergy and conservative rhetoric may have changed over time, the themes she discovers bear a remarkable resemblance to the “civic gospel” that we found among evangelical clergy in the late 1980s, expressing those very themes, as well as the remarkably similar “Christian nationalism” preoccupying scholars more recently (*The Bully Pulpit*, Lawrence KS, 1997; “Protestant Clergy and Christian Nationalism,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 48 (2)). This suggests a greater degree of continuity in conservative political theology than is often recognized, at least over the span of the past few decades. (One suspects a comparable degree of historic persistence in the themes revealed in *Power of Sermons*.)

Martin also describes the very different nature of political expression among evangelical clergy: more elusive, subtle, indirect, and emphasizing values rather than specific policies or candidates. Parishioners are expected to “fill in the blanks,” which Martin says they do—at least if evangelicals’ overwhelming Republican vote is the indicator. All this reminds us that overt political “preaching” (which she finds very little of) is not necessary for political impact. The subtle inculcation of broader worldviews may have even more powerful long-term effects among believers. Although Martin’s methodology does not allow her to undertake rigorous assessments of clerical influence along the lines of the *Power of Sermons*, she does offer some intriguing speculation.

While conceding the power of partisanship in shaping evangelical politics, Martin offers the novel argument that the political efficacy of evangelical clergy depends on a discourse of “active-passivism.” Rather than a militant summoning of conservative parishioners to the political ramparts, this discourse stresses the responsibility of believers to vote, but also to remember that it is God who is in control of electoral outcomes. Such discourse, Martin argues, had the effect of reassuring evangelicals disgusted by both presidential candidates in 2016, but ultimately allowing “believers to vote for Donald Trump without worrying about American constituencies that might face harm through his election.” As a result, “vulnerable constituencies become elided and obscured through an evangelical discourse that privileges only those issues and consequences that fit a preconceived political worldview” (p. 78). Although there is the germ of an acute insight here, one fears that the author’s ideological bent has replaced analysis, or at least infiltrated it, a tendency that appears elsewhere in the book—and, incidentally, is not entirely absent from *Power of Sermons*.

These criticisms aside, Martin’s work is a lucid analysis of contemporary evangelical political theology, as expressed by some of the tradition’s thought leaders and trend-setters. The author’s frequent quotations from her sources and astute observations at almost every turn make this volume a great read, especially for those political scientists with a repressed gene for participant observation, even if done remotely. (The book also provides retrospective validation for my decision to have a pandemic-era political methods class do their participant observation, like Martin, “in their pajamas”!)

Despite (or rather, because of) their different foci and methodologies, these books provide many substantive insights to our understanding of clerical leadership. That being said, the authors would have benefited by a closer reading of the considerable

political science literature on clergy politics. Indeed, both books fail to utilize most of the major works on clergy political activity from the last three decades, whether survey-based or experimental. At the very least, this means that the authors miss some arguments and analyses which, if considered, would have enriched their own findings or put them into a larger frame. A good example is Martin's discovery of a distinctive conservative Protestant political narrative which, in fact, has been around a long time. (Although this deficiency is perhaps forgivable in an author trained in a different academic discipline.)

More seriously, the failure to consult the literature sometimes leads the authors to make assertions that contradict other findings or at least are highly contestable. For example, the frequent assertions in *Power of Sermons* that liberal clergy and parishioners are more politically active today than their conservative counterparts not only seems to contradict much evidence from political reporters, but also does not mesh with a good bit of social science research that finds much more equivalence in liberal and conservative involvement. As we have suggested, the claim of a liberal advantage tends to rest on a narrow definition of political issues and a restricted repertoire of political acts. Are liberal or conservative clergy more active? The answer from the literature is that "it depends": on the forms of activism, on the nature of "political" issues, on the mechanism of cue-giving, and on lots of other factors. In the same vein, the informative experimental literature on religious leadership by Paul Djupe and his colleagues (e.g. *God Talk*, Philadelphia, 2014) would have supplied a firmer theoretical grounding and keener insights—as well as some qualifications—for *Power of Sermons*' empirical analysis of clerical influence.

Despite these quibbles, both *Power of Sermons* and *Decoding the Electronic Church* are stimulating additions to research on clergy politics and more broadly, on religious politics in the United States. The former provides a model of the insights possible from rigorous analysis of survey data, while the latter exemplifies new research possibilities emerging in the internet age. Religion and politics scholars who neglect these books do so at their peril—and will miss some really fascinating reading.