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Book Talk:

Race and the Power of Sermons on American Politics,
by R. Khari Brown, Ronald E. Brown,
and James S. Jackson
(2021, University of Michigan Press)

Response by Corwin E. Smidt*
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This book analyzes the interplay between race and the likelihood of hearing sermons containing political content. While other endeavors have examined the political attitudes and behavior of clergy, this is the first book that examines what congregants report hearing from their clergy and how the messages given by clergy may shape the political attitudes and behavior of their congregants.

The book consists of six chapters. After an introduction to the study, each of the next four chapters addresses an important question that the authors seek to answer through an examination of multiple relevant surveys. These four chapters are then followed by a concluding chapter.

In each of the four chapters analyzing data, the authors examine a host of surveys to address their question. In all their analyses, the authors control for religious affiliation, political partisanship, and other standard sociodemographic controls such as age, education, income, region, and gender. Once these factors are taken into account, the analysis examines the statistical probability of differences across whites, blacks, and Hispanics in terms of the empirical question addressed.

The first chapter analyzes “racial differences in Americans’ approval of religious leaders discussing social justice issues in and outside of worship settings” (17). After the authors explain why they believe it is reasonable to expect racial differences in approval, the data demonstrate such differences are present: African Americans are more likely than whites, as well as to a slightly lesser extent than Hispanics, “to favor their religious leaders and institutions taking public stands on social justice issues and politically acting on their beliefs” (37). In concluding the chapter, the authors note that “these findings reinforce our contention that respondents are answering [such] questions based on their political positions within the racial order” (38).

In the second chapter, the authors “examine the role race plays in determining the likelihood of American worshipers attending congregations where they hear sermons about and are encouraged to take action on sociopolitical issues....” (39). Several factors affect the likelihood of worshipers hearing such messages. First, when clergy choose to do so, they may well take public stances that are not aligned with the preferences of their congregants. However, black clergy are more likely than white or Hispanic clergy to believe they share similar social and economic views as their congregants and, as a result, may be more inclined to take public stands from the pulpit. Moreover, whites are less likely than blacks and Hispanics to support clergy and religious bodies taking positions on public policies. And, the data indeed reveal that blacks have a greater likelihood, relative to whites and Hispanics, of “attending congregations led by clergy who have a stronger commitment to social justice and peace” (62). As a result, blacks are more likely than their white or Hispanic counterparts to hear their clergy deliver sermons about sociopolitical issues, although Hispanics are far more likely than blacks and whites to attend congregations where they hear sermons about immigration.

The third chapter examines how attending houses of worship led by clergy who discuss political issues (labeled as “political congregations”), and how hearing political messages within the worship setting, may shape “support for public policies that aim to increase opportunities for the poor, racial minorities, and immigrants” (63). In addressing this matter, the authors raise a counterintuitive expectation that the effects of hearing such “political messages” may have a greater effect among whites than among blacks and Hispanics in enhancing support for progressive policy positions. And the data do suggest that attending political congregations enhances the probability of white respondents supporting such policies to a greater extent than that found among either blacks or Hispanics (when the control variables noted above are applied). Moreover, although whites who do not attend worship services hold quite similar political attitudes as those whites who attend political congregations, white attendees are, however, far more likely than non-attendees to be more politically active.

In the fourth chapter, the authors examine how exposure to religiously-based political discussion within the congregational setting shapes the likelihood of political engagement among blacks, whites, and Hispanics. And, after analyzing the relevant data, the authors conclude that “attendees of political congregations are more likely than attendees of nonpolitical congregations to participate in electoral and non-electoral activism” (100). Thus, the data reveal that hearing sermons has political effects and that the likelihood of hearing “political” sermons varies, given the respondents’ patterns of worship attendance, with the race and ethnicity of such respondents.

While I do not have any major criticisms related either to the authors’ analysis of the data or to the conclusions they have drawn, I do have some questions related to some of their supportive material. In their Introduction, the authors suggest that certain clergy and congregations stand closer to a “covenantal wing of American civil religious thought,” and that those who do so would be more likely to “endorse public policies intent on increasing the economic, social, and political rights of people who lack political power” (13). My first question relates to the basis (or possible bases) upon which clergy address matters of public policy. It has been noted, for example, that the book of Exodus plays (or has played) a far more significant role in the religious lives of African Americans than it has for white Christians in America. Accordingly, if one were to compare the sermons delivered in “political congregations” with congregations not so characterized, would one be far more likely to hear sermons based on texts drawn from the Old Testament compared to the New Testament? Thus, is it really the covenantal civil religion that provides the foundation for hearing such sermons, or is it the particular biblical passages that speak to a pastor’s spiritual core that do so? Christians (and thereby Christian pastors) are called to balance different biblical commands that are in tension with each other (e.g., maintaining doctrinal purity and maintaining the unity

of the church). In this balancing effort, some come down stronger on doctrinal purity, while others come down stronger on church unity. In the same way, although Christians hold the Old Testament and the New Testament as being equally sacred texts, some pastors may choose to draw sermon texts more from the Old Testament, relatively speaking, than other pastors. Is it then the biblical texts utilized by different pastors rather than the covenantal civil religious orientations of clergy that contribute to the presence of such “political congregations?”

Second, the authors contrast two different versions of American civil religion—namely, what they label a covenantal civil religion and what they label a constructive civil religion. As noted earlier, the former holds the “nation’s special relationship with the Creator is contingent on the nation working toward providing opportunities for socioeconomic wellbeing, freedom, and creative pursuits” for all, in that God’s covenant “requires inclusion of people who may have different life experiences but who, nonetheless, are equally valued by God and worthy of dignity” (12). On the other hand, it is noted that whites are more likely than African Americans and Hispanics to espouse a “constructive civil religious ethos” in which the existence of “global inequality and economic marginalization” is viewed to be “less an indication of systemic inequality and aversion of God’s plan for the nation than an unwillingness of certain individuals and groups to avail themselves of opportunities” (27). However, in the last several years, we have also heard considerable discussion within the American context related to white Christian nationalism, which contains certain elements related to civil religion (e.g., that America has a special relationship with the Creator). So my second question relates to the nature of civil religion. Is civil religion, regardless of the form it takes, problematic in relationship to the Christian faith? Is one form heretical while the other is not, or do both forms have the potential to become heretical? In other words, what, if anything, may serve as potential “downside” implications related to covenantal civil religion?

Third, the authors seek to explain why Hispanics differ from African Americans in their perception of opportunities related to American society and politics in that Hispanics, as a group, tend to have modestly more “positive” perceptions of their situation than African Americans. The authors suggest that the reason this is the case is that first-generation Hispanic immigrants view such opportunities differently than those Hispanics who have lived in the United States over several generations, as first-generation Hispanics make their comparisons in relationship to what they experienced in the country from which they emigrated whereas second and third generation Hispanics do not. Such a contention sounds highly plausible. However, the authors never really examine this possibility empirically. Their lack of testing this contention may be due to the limitations of their data. But, is there any scholarly evidence to show that different generations of Hispanic immigrants

hold different views of American politics? And, if so, do such views also vary by level of attendance at religious services?

Author's Reply by Ronald Brown Wayne State University

Corwin E. Smidt's thoughtful critique of our book provides an opportunity to clarify the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of our work. Furthermore, responding to his inquiries allows us to point to our ongoing research on sermons and public opinion in the aftermath of the Black Lives protests, the pandemic, and citizen participation in the 2020 national election.

We begin our response by first describing why a covenantal civil religious ethos may include a preference for specific biblical scriptures and narratives, doctrinal purity, and church unity in a quest to affirm human personhood. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (1963) grounds our explanation.

We then address a second intriguing inquisitive thought by Dr. Smidt. In the main, is it plausible that either or both a constructive civil religious ethos and a covenantal civil religious worldview can become heretical? One can assume that "heretical" often implies losing faith or taking the wrong turn in one's spiritual journey. Triggering social phenomena, such as the tragic death of George Floyd amid COVID and deep-seated partisan divisions, have the potential for civic-religious activists to denounce each other as unfaithful and un-American. We discuss the normative importance of examining this empirically in our research.

The third and final questions revolve around our empirical inference that first-generation Hispanic immigrants view economic opportunities differently than those Hispanics who have lived in the United States for several generations, and whether the country of origin determines policy attitudes. The 2006 Changing Faiths: Latinos and the Transformation of American Religion survey (which we employed in our analysis), the 2016 Collaborative Multi-Racial Post-Election Survey (CMPS), and a 2021 survey of pastors by the Pew Research Center allow for exploring the influence of generational differences and country of origin on political attitudes. Does the evidence show that different generations of Hispanic immigrants hold different views of American politics? The answer is yes. Social group identity or a felt sense of group fate and political anger may play a role.

As we all know and tell students, on April 16, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. was sitting in a Birmingham jail, defying a court order, when he penned *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. King maintains that "Any law that degrades human personality is unjust." This is the ethical and theoretical grounding of a covenantal religious ethos. Our non-random selection of clerical vignettes includes Liberal White Protestants, Evangelical Protestants, Catholics, and Black Protestants whose

sermons address human suffering. Moreover, all may use different religious texts, narratives, or stories aiming to affirm the spiritual relations humans have with the Creator. While we did not systematically select a random sample of the clergy, there were triggering social events including the Iraq War, anti-police marches in Ferguson, and opposition to President Trump's border policies that influenced our selection of online sermons. We realize that triggering events can crystalize political support or opposition to existing policies.

It is plausible, rational, and reasonable that religious congregations' missions vary. Some may focus exclusively on family relations, undocumented immigrants, police relations, or various other permutations. Nonetheless, we are exploring the possibility of using the Pew Research Center's July 2021 survey, "Pastors Often Discussed Election, Pandemic, and Racism in Fall of 2020," as grounds for our current research project. We are developing an interfaith questionnaire of religious congregations in the Detroit metropolitan area to interview clergy directly and explore mission statements, ministries, and recorded sermons. The region has a rich array of religious congregations catering to second- and third-generation Mexican Americans, Chaldean Americans, Black Americans, and Evangelical and White Protestants. Having national data and in-depth case studies of Detroit congregations will increase our knowledge and understanding of the variable sentiments within constructive and covenant worldviews. By capturing these sentiments, we hope to learn more about how and why clergy select terms and topics that address procedural justice, community building, or support for or opposition to regulatory or redistributive policies. Furthermore, we have 2020 national and Detroit area surveys exploring attitudes toward Black Lives Matter, COVID mandates, Governor Whitmer, President Trump, and President Biden. We ask questions about the region's polarizing political climate and related sermons about these matters.

A cursory Google search reveals that "heresy" can be philosophical, historical, or theological. Looking for the word "heretical" in sermons may not yield much information; however, exploring the degree to which specific individuals or public policies are associated with being "un-American" might be a starting point. In *Federalist Paper 51*, James Madison's declarative statement, "If men were angels, no government would be necessary," is instructive. While we did not empirically explore social identities among respondents, it raises the question of whether out-group rejection covaries with one's perception of heretical religious beliefs. We believe that neither a covenantal nor constructive religious worldview is inherently "un-American." The rise of White Christian nationalism speaks to the urgent need for peoples of religious faith to engage in constructive dialogues and joint ventures that work toward reducing mistrust, anxiety, and fear of social groups outside of one's faith tradition.

An exploration of public sentiments of Latino voters in 2016 by Gutierrez, et al. (2019) reveals, first, that country of origin matters. Central American or Cuban

origin increases the likelihood of having favorable attitudes toward Donald Trump. Second, third-generation respondents who expressed political anger were more likely to be politically active. Third, perceptions of racialized discrimination toward Latinos and immigrant-linked fate correlate with unfavorable Trump ratings among Latino respondents.

Morales, et al.'s (2020) review essay, "Latino Political Attitudes: Myths and Misconceptions," implies that immigration is best understood as a gateway or validating issue for most Latinos. Latinos are likelier to tune out other politicians with whom they might otherwise agree on other issues. Therefore, we will explore more closely sermons about immigration and the degree to which, if possible, the congregation's composition influences the religious rhetoric of the clergy.

Again, we want to thank Dr. Corwin E. Smidt for his review.

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