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Gwyneth H. McClendon and Rachel Beatty Riedl, *From Pews to Politics: Religious Sermons and Political Participation in Africa*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 286 pp. ISBN-10: 1108486576.

Reviewed by: Serah Shani, Assistant Professor, Westmont College.

The book *From Pews to Politics* examines the connection between religious sermons and political engagements within the African continent. This book captures a very timely topic because it reveals important research findings for the current century; a period during which religious beliefs and practices have the capacity to influence behaviors in most institutions. Thus, it makes sense to investigate this highly contested arena; that is, the relationship between religion and politics.

McClendon and Riedl began their book by stating that, “There is a popular view that religious teachings motivate political participation. In Kenya, for example, Margaret Wanjiru and other political candidates announce their decision to run for office with reference to their journeys in the church, arguing that the content of their faith was leading them to seek positions in political leadership.” (p.1). This gives legitimacy to their political moves and activities. It invokes focalized religious leadership traits and validates their position via religion. Religious validations seem to work in a county where mass ideology, regarding qualities of successful leadership, is embedded in religion. The authors argue that about 80% of the African continent is religious.

The authors based their findings on research in Africa that incorporated various research methods such as qualitative and quantitative methods, archival research, and lab experiments. This enabled the authors to exhibit a nuanced exposition of the religious sermons’ content and context of the study. The authors, drawing from generated data on sermon-content, expose the dynamics of political participation exhibited by both mainland traditional churches such as Catholics and protestants as well as contemporary Pentecostal churches. These two categories of churches shape the discussions displayed through the book as the authors continuously compare and contrast dynamics of political engagements.

Though the authors indicated that both these categories of churches are engaged in political activities and criticism, both categories had varied ways of expressing their political engagement and addressing concerns of political leaders, political institutions and systems. The authors argued that though both categories of churches are from the Christian religious traditions, both also participate in politics. Their mode of political participation varies from active participation to passive participation. The authors attributed these differences to the mode and content of sermons congregants were exposed to. Different churches imbued their congregants with a specific political view and stand point. Although the authors explain the fluid social boundaries between church distinctions, they categorize Mainland and Pentecostal churches using deferring sermon content.

They were quick to note that regardless of these distinctions, the common thread among them was that of political engagement.

Speaking about churches in general, the authors stated that “Christians of all denominations share similar goals: national development, state building, and improving human welfare. Yet the routes for achieving this goal have been different” (p.16). These differences are articulated in the sermons and the political responses to those contents. The authors quote that, “We propose that exposure to religious teachings, through sermons, can influence political participation by providing metaphysical instruction that influences how listeners respond to political opportunities” (p.4). Moreover, the authors argued that these messages are crucial because they have the capacity to reach people in the margins of the political arena, the socioeconomically underprivileged and women.

The authors argued that for the sermon’s content to be efficient in political participation of congregants, there has to be a continuous reminder, otherwise, the congregants might easily forget. They noted that churches are set up in a way that facilitates constant renewal of messages and reinforcements from the religious elites. The recurrent weekly sermons and some mid-week meetings, prevalent in churches reinvigorate the sermons and protects what the authors term as “decay” (p.8). This term ‘decay’ connotes a status where congregants easily, overtime, forget the content of the sermon and its influence on political engagement if not exposed to politically charged sermons on a regular basis. Thus, the need for recurrent sermons.

On one hand, the authors described Protestants as interested in questioning systemic and institutional reform such as addressing issues of social justice and poverty; they thus blamed the system and structural political organization in failing to meet the needs of the masses. On the other hand, the Pentecostals are more concerned with behavioral transformations of leaders and the immediate outcome. They showed a can-do attitude and have political engagement goals that can be achieved in the current world. According to the authors, the reactions of these two divides (i.e. Mainland churches and Pentecostal churches) mirror the reaction to politics that each group engages in regarding what should be addressed. The mainland churches were found to be more engaged in criticizing political systems, institutions, and leaders. They provided services that eliminated or lessened political challenges in order to meet the immediate needs of the masses. They provide, for example, food, health and education for the citizens. The mainland church sermons indicated that all the problems could not to be solved but that there can be continuous changes in the political system and its institutions. The Pentecostal churches, on the other hand, concentrated on individual qualities and character transformations. They believed that these personal changes can contribute to moral leadership in the political arena. Thus, their sermons inspired the congregants to focus on inward personal changes, to engage, and to vie for political positions in order to effect productive governance. Thus, Pentecostals were more likely to enact programs that trained Christian leaders for political participations. The authors finally reasoned that sermons from the Mainland churches such as Protestants and Catholics prepared their congregants to be *reluctant reformers* (p.237), while the Pentecostal sermons equipped their congregants to be *empowered players* (p.237).

This exposition of religion and politics is crucial to the understanding of human economics and political development especially for the contemporary African continent where religion, as the authors discussed, plays a greater role in legitimizing political activities. This research has the capacity to invoke an interest in more studies on how the church might influence women's participation in politics. Though this might not have been within the authors' scope of this book, there is a large patriarchal communities in Africa, as noticed in the political representation, where men outnumber women. Therefore, there is a change to develop this research further to include a gender dynamic. Understanding the relationship between religion and political empowerment as well as participation of women could enhance gender representation in most parliaments.

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