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Religion as Metaphysical Instruction, and Its Influence on Political Participation

There is a popular view that religious teachings motivate political participation. In Kenya, Margaret Wanjiru and other political candidates announced their decisions 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. Beginning in 2016, Pastor Evan Mawarire of Zimbabwe delivered a series of sermons, online and in church, for which he was arrested. The pastor's words, the Zimbabwean authorities and media argued, were causing people to take part in protests against the current political leaders. In Ghana, citizens, reportedly moved by sermons, pledged to take action to resist and report petty bribes (Ghanian Times, 2016). In every case, journalists and other observers linked religious teachings to political action.

Similar claims about the influence of religious teachings on political participation have been made around the world. In June 2011, CNN ran the headline "Prayer and Politics: How Friday Became the Middle East's Day of Protest" (Mackay, 2011). The article posits that the religious ideas communicated in Friday sermons in the Middle East help drive political mobilization. Gathering to hear sermons, and then to pray, "can be a way of preparing to go to battle," an expert on the Middle East is quoted as saying. "It gives the people ... strength." In 2014, the Egyptian Ministry of Religious Endowments began mandating that imams discuss only a government-assigned weekly topic in their Friday sermons precisely because of concern over sermons' mobilizing influence (Maher, 2014). In the United States in the 1960s, ordinary participants in the civil rights movement, and many of its leaders, were reportedly driven by the "re-imagination of Christian thought" delivered in the sermons

2 *Religion as Metaphysical Instruction, and Its Influence*

and messages of black clergy and religious activists (Harvey, 2016). “That is what empowered the rank and file who made the movement move” (ibid). In 1980s’ Poland, the sermons of some Catholic priests “provid[ed] the moral center that emboldened [members of the Catholic Church] to peacefully and yet forcefully challenge the reign of the regime imposed by Moscow” (Time, 2005). And, today, journalists and other public commentators often argue that exposure to jihadist sermons and online teachings by prominent clerics influences individual participation in political violence (Cottee, 2016).

In contrast to the popular willingness to attribute patterns of political participation to religious teachings, political science scholarship has typically been more cautious in making such links (cf., Harris, 1994; Wielhouwer, 2009; Glazier, 2015).¹ Indeed, political scientists often dismiss cultural and ideational explanations for political behavior as either epiphenomenal or overdetermined (cf., Collier, 2017; Martin, 2018). Studies of the link between religiosity and political participation often focus instead on the material resources and skills (Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady, 1995; Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001; Campbell, 2004), the habits (Chhibber, 2014), the attachments to social identities (Wilkinson, 2006; Longman, 2009), or the social networks (Wald, Owen, and Hill, 1988; Lewis, MacGregor, and Putnam, 2013) that accompany religious practice, rather than on the content of religious teachings or ideas. Recent analyses of the causes of suicide bombing dismiss the role of religious teachings and instead stress the strategic logic and organizational structure involved (Giles and Hopkin, 2005; Pape, 2005). To the extent that social science scholarship ever analyzes the impact of religious ideas and beliefs on behavior, it has usually been to try to unpack the drivers of generosity and prejudice (Shariff and Norenzayan 2007; Sachs 2010; Norenzayan 2013; Ben-Nun Bloom, Arikan, and Courtemanche 2015; Warner et al. 2015) or to explain attitudes toward specific issue areas (Djupe and Calfano, 2013b; Glazier, 2013; Masoud, Jamal, and Nugent, 2016) rather than to explain decisions about whether and how to engage in politics.

¹ We focus in this book on political participation as the outcome of interest. But important research in American politics explores links between religious communication and other political attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Djupe and Gilbert, 2009; Djupe and Calfano, 2013a; Ben-Nun Bloom, Arikan, and Courtemanche, 2015). Djupe, Calfano, and Glazier are notable for their work in this area. In addition, new research considers the implications of religious communication for left-right views in Latin America (Tunón, 2017).

There are good reasons to be skeptical that religious teachings would drive political participation. Nothing requires people to listen to and absorb messages from the pulpit. People might hear what they want to hear (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995). They may project their own views onto clergy's words (Krosnick, 1989; Krosnick et al., 1993), ignore ideas that contradict their own prior beliefs (Djupe and Calfano, 2013a), or simply tune out altogether. They may choose to attend worship services less frequently and limit their exposure to certain ideas. In addition, especially within large faith traditions (Christianity, Islam), people have some degree of choice over their place of worship, selecting particular denominations, sects, or religious leaders who "speak to them." As a result, any relationship between exposure to religious messages and political participation may be spurious. Exposure to religious messages and political participation may both be a function of people's prior political inclinations.² People may show up to Friday or Sunday sermons because they are already inclined to participate in protest; they may attend houses of worship that preach disengagement from politics because they are already inclined to do so. Alternatively, people may try to separate their religious beliefs from their analyses of politics. They may consider religious leaders' purview as limited to the spiritual realm (Güth et al., 1997; Beck, 2008), and discount or delegitimize explicit political directives from the pulpit.³ Religious messages could go in one ear and out the other, be simply a symptom of people's political proclivities rather than a cause, or be divorced from understandings of politics.

Yet the dissonance between these two perspectives raises important questions. *Do* religious teachings influence how people think about and engage in politics, or are they merely symptomatic of people's preexisting political leanings? If religious teachings do influence political

² In some cases, political changes and preferences may even drive religiosity, as Margolis (2017) shows happens in the United States.

³ Of course, in many contexts, the leaders of churches and other houses of worship are prohibited by law from endorsing specific candidates or engaging in explicit partisan politics. This book concentrates much of its empirical analysis in Kenya, where "Public Benefit Organizations," or PBOs, enjoy tax-exempt status so long as they are "autonomous, non-partisan and nonprofit ... and engage in public benefit activities." A PBO can be a "religious organization which is primarily devoted to religious worship or propagation of religious beliefs." But prohibitions need not necessarily be legal. Grzymała-Busse (2015) argued that European churches historically lost influence over their congregants when they visibly joined the political fray and were unable to appear "above politics." Choosing sides in political contests, or mobilizing people around partisan issues, often seems to diminish churches' moral authority.

4 *Religion as Metaphysical Instruction, and Its Influence*

behavior, *how and under what conditions* do they do so, and *what is the extent* of their influence? These contemporary and politically salient questions touch on old debates. In the early twentieth century, Weber's *Protestant Ethic* argued that Calvinist and Catholic teachings influenced economic behavior. Just a few years later, Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* instead characterized religious teachings as symptoms rather than drivers of individual and social thought and action. In one view, religious teachings directly shape behavior; in another view, religious teachings reflect but do not drive our social and material conditions. These debates remain pertinent today. The world remains, overall, deeply religious. Houses of worship are ubiquitous, and attendance is regular. Religious messages appear on billboards, in magazines, and in leaflets. Religious programming travels radio airwaves and occupies television channels. *How, in this era, do religious teachings shape political participation, if at all?*

In this book, we take a new look at whether, how, and to what extent religious teachings, even when not explicitly political, might shape the mindsets and behaviors of citizens and thereby influence their political participation. We focus on the influence of sermons, and use contemporary Christian sermons in sub-Saharan Africa as our empirical vehicle for exploring that influence. We take social scientists' cautions about making causal claims about religious teachings seriously, and, through a mix of experimental and observational methods, we seek to advance our understanding of these important questions.

ARGUMENT

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. Consider two individuals we spoke to during focus group discussions with congregants in Nairobi, Kenya. The first, whom we will call David, told us that he is considering running for public office, and that he is taking leadership and other training courses to that end, to learn how to be the best leader he can be. He participates in forums with public officials in order to help guide them on the challenges facing ordinary citizens, and makes gentle appeals to them to follow Christian values. His orientation toward politics is active but largely uncritical of existing institutions and formal rules. Instead, he is eager to pursue change through his own internal transformation and those of others. He seeks *personnel* change

in politics: to get more people of faith and character into office, and to encourage the internal transformation of those already there. The other individual, whom we will call Leon, admits feeling overwhelmed at times, but when he feels absolutely fed up, he participates in social media criticism campaigns, directed at calling out widespread poor governance and the need for institutional reform in order to force politicians to behave better; he contributes to efforts to get campaign finance law enacted, since he thinks the structure of current laws makes corruption more likely. His orientation toward politics is hesitant but highly critical of institutions and structures. He assumes most politicians will behave badly unless the proper constraints are put in place and enforced. When he engages, he seeks *structural* reform.

On most indicators, David and Leon are similarly situated: employed, with some higher education, from the same ethnic group (which as we discuss later in the book often indicates partisan leanings in this context), and living in the same neighborhood; it is not readily apparent why one would be more eager to work through existing political institutions, seeking change in people rather than in structures, while the other would take a more critical stance toward that system, seeking change in structures more than in the personal characters of citizens and leaders. Indeed, both David and Leon could choose to stay out of politics altogether. Instead, they take actions (in Leon's case, occasionally) down different political paths.

We propose that exposure to religious teachings, through sermons, explains important divergences in political participation. Sermons are sources of metaphysical instruction, informing people's understanding of how the world works. Sermons regularly tackle deep questions about the causes of the problems of this world, the possibilities for change, and the nature of human agency. Answers to these questions can inform citizens' subsequent assessment of what kind of political change is necessary and whether that political change can be made. Sermons need not be explicitly political to have this influence. Whether a sermon depicts the state of the world as one shaped fundamentally by people's characters, or instead as one fundamentally shaped by structures and the sets of extrinsic incentives in which people are embedded, can affect how listeners diagnose and respond to political problems, even if the sermon names no specific political policies, candidates, parties, or debate. Likewise, how sermons discuss the nature of human agency can shape listeners' sense of internal and external efficacy – whether they think their individual actions can affect material outcomes – making them feel more

6 *Religion as Metaphysical Instruction, and Its Influence*

pivotal and inclined to participate in political collective action, *even if the sermons made no explicit call for political engagement*. All else equal, sermons have the potential to shape political participation, even when they are not explicitly political, because they provide interpretative maps for understanding cause, effect, and possibility in the world.

David and Leon – the first focused on leadership change, the second on structural reform – were also each frequently exposed to sermons that provided different views about how the world works. David was primarily affiliated with a Pentecostal church in Nairobi. When he spoke with us, he had just attended a Pentecostal service, in which the pastor preached vividly about the world's problems being due to a pervasive lack of faith, and about the material change that would come if more people embodied strong faith. This left David energized about bringing his own strength of faith to leadership positions and about helping to guide the character development of sitting public officials. Leon, on the other hand, was primarily affiliated with a Catholic parish. When he spoke with us, he had just attended Sunday mass, in which the priest's sermon discussed people's cultural incentives to mistrust and neglect each other as sources of the world's problems. The sermon encouraged listeners to change social norms around caring for one another, to sanction those who were inhospitable and mistrusting, but offered no firm promise of the possibility of success in changing these dynamics, leaving Leon focused on extrinsic incentives and structural solutions (e.g., new legislation to constrain politicians) but cautious about presuming he could make a difference. The sermons provided guidance on metaphysics: how cause and effect operate in the world, what the nature of human agency is, how change happens. These lessons could straightforwardly be applied to grappling with political questions and opportunities.

David and Leon self-selected into these houses of worship, so their exposure to these sermons might simply be a reflection of their preexisting inclinations to pursue political participation in these ways. Yet, it is plausible that, even if people choose a house of worship because they find its teachings appealing, their political views and inclinations may still be susceptible to shaping and sharpening. Indeed, people may attend religious services precisely *in order* to receive metaphysical guidance and direction – that is, to have their viewpoints changed, clarified, or bolstered. These questions (what causes the world's problems? will my action make a difference?) are difficult ones to answer. Houses of worship are one place people turn for help in answering them. In highly religious places, houses of worship are a very common place for people to go to answer

these questions. And, as with any training or instructional endeavor (physical, mental, spiritual), although individuals may choose to attend based on their prior expectations about what they will develop there, engaging in the training itself can still have an independent effect.⁴ As with exposure to other forms of cultural and media communication, exposure to religious messages might prime predispositions or change underlying opinions, even though there is a process of self-selection into exposure (Tesler, 2015). Untangling the independent influence of religious teachings on behavior from the influence of preexisting views is thus challenging, but it is an empirical problem, not a theoretical impossibility. We grapple with this challenge methodologically in later parts of the book.

Indeed, sermons may have the strongest effects on the people who are inclined to self-select into hearing those messages. In contexts where social boundaries between houses of worship are fluid,⁵ religious listeners may be open to and intrigued by sermons no matter their primary affiliation, and exposure to less familiar religious teachings may influence all listeners' understandings of the world to some degree.⁶ But communications research generally finds that people are more likely to pay attention to and absorb elite communication that is in line with their prior views than communication that is not as familiar or conforming (Kunda, 1990; Taber and Lodge, 2006; Leeper, 2016; Adida et al., 2017). Thus, people who have already chosen a particular place of worship because they find its messages appealing or credible may be the most likely to listen carefully. Listening to a familiar type of sermon may also revive memories of previous sermons, generating a cumulative influence on a person's metaphysical understanding of the world. That is, those who are inclined to

⁴ We thank Rich Nielsen for this point. In a study of young men listening to sermons in Egypt, Hirschkind (2001) notes that the words used by his informants to describe listening to sermons conveyed much more than passive hearing – they talked about “inclining one’s ear,” “being silent in order to listen” (p. 633). A preacher explained to him, “A sermon must lead an audience beyond mere hearing to where they pay close attention, such that the words actually turn over their behavior” (p. 634).

⁵ By socially fluid, we mean that it is common for people of different congregations and denominations to socialize with and marry members of others congregations and denominations, as well as to attend worship services in congregations and denominations other than their primary one. We also mean that a person’s sense of political and social identity is not threatened by socializing with people from other congregations and denominations or by attending worship services in other congregations or denominations.

⁶ By contrast, in places where social identity boundaries firmly divide some houses of worship from others (*not* characteristic of the context in which we work), people may ignore or even defy religious teachings from the out-group in order to affirm their affinities with the in-group (Djupe and Calfano, 2013a).

8 *Religion as Metaphysical Instruction, and Its Influence*

a particular type of sermon, like David and Leon, may be most likely to listen carefully and to weave that message together with previous religious teachings they have heard.

We also propose that the influence of sermons on political behavior is recurrent: activated and reactivated. Many scholarly discussions of religion assume that the connections between religious world views and political attitudes are deep-seated and relatively unmoveable.⁷ But we argue that the effects of exposure to sermons, like the effects of exposure to other forms of elite communication, are subject to decay and then reactivation. Religious messages are susceptible to memory failures, and they may be diminished by encounters with countervailing experiences and arguments if not recharged.⁸ Scholars have made many arguments about why belief in divine beings may be part of our cognitive infrastructure as human beings (see Norenzayan, 2013, for a review), but any “naturalness” (McCauley, 2015b) in religious world views does not mean that human beings are able to hold an understanding of the spiritual world at the forefront of their minds at all times (Luhmann, 2012).⁹ Doing so takes repetitions and reinforcement (Luhmann, 2012). Because religious teachings rely on claims that cannot be based on, and may seem to contradict, empirical patterns (Grzymala-Busse, 2016), their resonance may quickly decay when listeners return to everyday life. Absent reinforcement (frequent reexposure to the metaphysical ideas communicated in a sermon), it is plausible that religious beliefs would recede as individuals engage in quotidian activities during the course of the week. And in pluralistic religious settings, the metaphysical ideas communicated in a particular sermon are likely quickly to encounter countervailing arguments,

⁷ Tesler (2015) gives religious world views as one example of a deep-seated predisposition. Inglehart and Norris (2011) argue that religious world views constrain attitude changes caused by economic development.

⁸ Scholars of other types of elite–citizen communication have made similar arguments about those forms of elite communication. For instance, a literature on campaign advertisements finds that the persuasive influence of those political attempts at persuasion decays rapidly (Gerber et al., 2011; Hill et al., 2013). In one large study focused on campaign advertising, the average half-life of attitude change after exposure was four days (Hill et al., 2013). In a study conducted on the duration of campaign advertisements by Gerber et al. (2011), “only trace effects of the ads survived as long as a week” (Tesler and Zaller, 2017). In other words, the influence of these other forms of communication decays in a matter of days.

⁹ In fact, through fascinating ethnographic research in two churches, Luhmann (2012) shows how much consistent and regular practice is required before congregants develop a stable feeling of a relationship with God.

as worshippers are exposed to contrasting metaphysical ideas in other religious practices, either incidentally (through radio or TV programming, or preaching on public transportation) or purposefully (through attending services in other houses of worship or having conversations with friends and family who worship elsewhere). These countervailing messages might make the original one recede from the forefront of the mind and lose its influence over a short period of time.¹⁰

The short duration of a sermon's influence does not mean that influence is unimportant. Opportunities for political action often occur in close proximity to religious services. For instance, it is quite common for political rallies in Kenya to be held on Sundays, and (recently) for street protests to be organized on Mondays (Munro, 2010; Manson, 2014). Likewise, in the Muslim world, as mentioned, calls to political action are frequently delivered immediately after Friday sermons (Chhibber and Sekhon, 2015). Other types of elite communication (ad campaigns, media spin) also exhibit vulnerability to decay (Gerber et al., 2011; Hill et al., 2013), and so we try to understand how short-term influences are exploited and sustained (Tesler and Zaller, 2017). The duration patterns yield additional implications for understanding how religious messages – and other types of metaphysical instruction – work. Instead of viewing religion as a force that constantly exerts behavioral influence, we should study the *work* that churches, parishioners, and other ideological institutions have to do in order to sustain the influence of their world views. The patterns give us insight into why houses of worship expend effort seeking ways to encourage frequent, fervent religious practice (and thus frequent, repeated exposure to their messages), especially in places and times when they are surrounded by countervailing evidence and messages (Iannaccone, 1990).¹¹ In the current era, such efforts take the form of organizing worship and prayer services throughout the week, and creating television and digital resources that parishioners can rely on for repeated message exposure in between worship service attendance. The short duration of religious messages' effects also gives insight into how religious cultures change and new movements arise. If religions had only static, long-lasting

¹⁰ However, as we discuss in the conclusion, in places where strong identity boundaries coincide with the circulation of particular religious messages, we might instead expect backlash against countervailing messages – that is, a reinforcement of the influence of religious teachings to which people were previously exposed, rather than a decay, in response to the countervailing perspectives (Bechtel et al., 2015).

¹¹ Iannaccone (1990) built on the insights of Adam Smith to argue that places with higher religious competition would be the places with more fervent and demanding faiths.

10 *Religion as Metaphysical Instruction, and Its Influence*

influences, there would be little room for such change absent major demographic shifts. Instead, the short duration of religious teachings could level the playing field between incumbent and newer faiths.

Notably, these arguments about sermons' political influence through metaphysical instruction and about charging/recharging are not unique to sermons. Other forms of elite communication can provide metaphysical instruction as well. Educational courses, popular media, works of literature, and the like all provide narratives and cognitive understandings of the way the world works and of individuals' place in it (Martin, 2018). People self-select into these forms of communication, too, seeking guidance, and may be more susceptible to their influence if the messages align with their existing views. The influence of such secular communication may also be vulnerable to decay when not reinforced as the messages recede from memory or are confronted with conflicting observations or countervailing arguments in everyday life. In a larger sense, then, we argue that religious teachings can be understood as a case of ideological communication, or of culture, as we discuss later. Many secular ideological forces share a family resemblance with sermons, even though they typically do not deal as directly in discussions of the spiritual and the occult. The sermons we describe "hang together" because of the ways they link the spiritual with the physical, and because they address the extent and nature of God's role in the world. But the contours of our main arguments are more general. Learning about the political influence of religious teachings should help us understand more about the broader subjects of culture and ideology as well.

FOCUSING ON CHRISTIAN SERMONS IN AFRICA

Our contention that sermons can influence political participation through their metaphysical instruction is general. So why focus the empirical analyses in sub-Saharan Africa? To start, most people living in sub-Saharan Africa are highly religious and are frequently exposed to sermon content. In the 2014–2015 Afrobarometer survey wave, only 3 percent of respondents said they have no religion. Fewer than 10 percent reported either not having a religion or never attending religious services. In the 2011–2013 wave, 84.5 percent of all sub-Saharan African respondents said that religion is "very important" in their lives.¹² Most people regularly go to a house of worship.

¹² The same could be said of many parts of the world outside of Western Europe and parts of the United States.