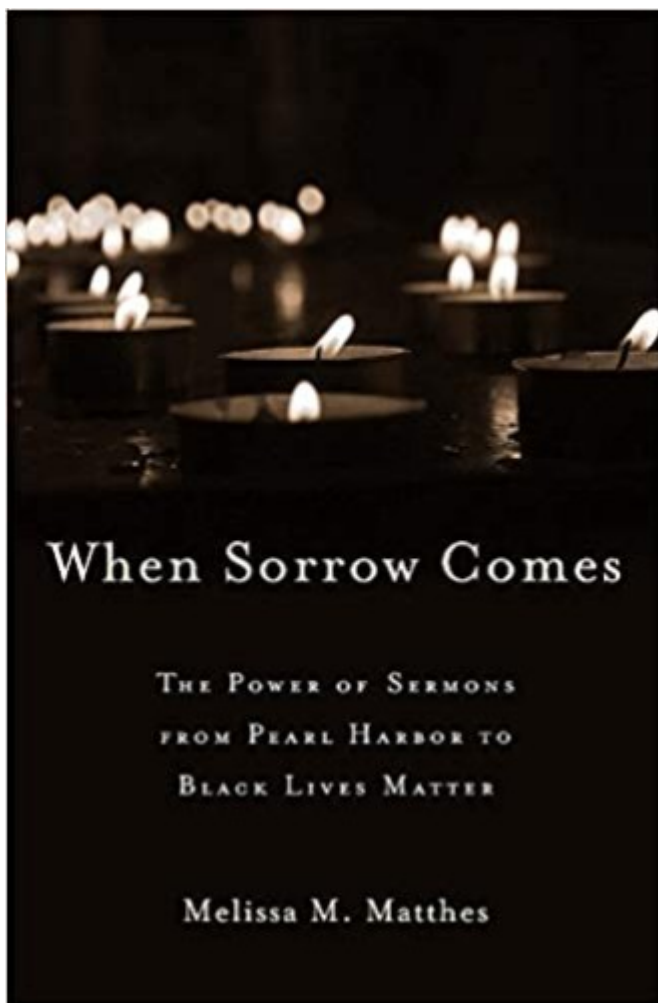


What preachers have said in times of national crisis

Melissa Matthes well understands both the political and the religious power of mourning.

by [Richard Lischer](#) in the [December 1, 2021](#) issue

In Review



When Sorrow Comes

The Power of Sermons from Pearl Harbor to Black Lives Matter

By Melissa M. Matthes
Harvard University Press,
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America may no longer be a nation with the soul of a church, as G. K. Chesterton famously claimed, but there is something in this “one nation under God” that continues to infatuate theologians, historians, and cultural commentators. How and under what circumstances does this God influence the nation as a whole? Well, just about every one of the nearly 400,000 churches, mosques, and synagogues in America has a pulpit or an appointed place from which a leader may speak of the Lord.

Political scientist Melissa Matthes, who teaches at the United States Coast Guard Academy, is not the first to identify the sermon as the key measurement of the church’s cultural and political influence. Like Harry Stout, who in *The New England Soul* combed through more than 2,000 unpublished pulpit manuscripts ranging across 150 years of colonial life, Matthes has surveyed the sermons of “ordinary ministers from rather unremarkable congregations” in order to examine the state of America’s soul. She doesn’t pursue a homiletical or quantitative analysis or distinguish between the theological traditions that inform the sermons. Hers is a portrait-like cultural study fueled by the aggregated raw material of mainline Protestant sermons, with some evangelical and fundamentalist sermons “also considered.”

The prism through which she reads these sermons is not arbitrarily chosen. She well understands both the political and the religious power of mourning, how it strips away our pretenses and leaves us naked before ourselves and God. Matthes finds points of contact between the preached word and the national psyche in sermons preached on nine occasions of national tragedy: Pearl Harbor, the internment of Japanese citizens, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the Los Angeles riots of 1992 following the Rodney King verdict, the Oklahoma City bombing, 9/11, the Newtown school shooting, and the killing that fueled Black Lives Matter protests.

These choices are not exactly equivalents, but each represents a genuine crisis, which Matthes defines as a broken paradigm when, as Hannah Arendt noted, “the past ceases to throw its light upon the future,” when the “reigning theoretical banisters no longer support a ruptured reality.” When the unchurched temporarily

return to church and the sanctuary is filled with need.

There is an argument to this book, and I will get to it. But before I do, let me say what a fascinating read it is. The pleasure is derived from the quintessentially American scrum of politics, media, and religion. It is a reminder of how wafer-thin is Jefferson's wall dividing church and state. Open any chapter and (if you have a little age on you), there is much to remember. Remember George Bush in the National Cathedral after 9/11. Remember Barack Obama in Charleston, South Carolina, after the Mother Emanuel murders. I don't remember Pearl Harbor, but I shall never forget the awe with which my parents remembered their Lutheran pastor peering over his monocle on the Sunday after the attack and declaiming from the pulpit: "Be still and know that I am God."

It's not possible to recap the author's dense commentary on each of the crises. But as she unfolds them, arguments take shape and point to conclusions. Matthes concludes that the church's preachers have failed their calling in the face of national tragedy. In the broadest of terms, she suggests two interrelated reasons for this failure.

The first is a failure of analysis. Most of the preachers settled for generalities, such as "evil," "hate," or "sin," without daring to analyze the historic or social nature of the crisis. For example, after the Kennedy assassination, a common theme in the pulpit was the danger of hate. Preachers focused on the general cultural climate, but seldom did our sermons adequately define *hate* or mention the racism and anti-Catholicism that caused many in the South to hate Kennedy. Soon after the killing, apocryphal stories of grade school children in the South cheering the announcement began circulating. The great majority of sermons relied on a collective and therefore fuzzy responsibility for social evil.

After 9/11, the preachers who suggested that American political adventures in the Middle East and elsewhere had some bearing on the attack were angrily dismissed. Right-wingers who linked the attack to tolerance of homosexuality in America were also condemned. The same reaction occurred after the Newtown school shootings 12 years later, when a governor-turned-pundit blamed the godlessness of public schools for the children's murder.

Race has a large influence on religious reactions to national tragedy, Matthes finds. By and large, Black pastors have been less likely to identify with the government

than their White counterparts. While many White preachers have tacitly relied on the state to remedy our losses, Black preachers have been more likely to remember the sins of the state.

After 9/11, White preachers looked to the state to restore America, whereas Black preachers remembered that the state—in the guise of sheriffs, courts, and governors—had helped kill Martin Luther King Jr. and failed to do justice for Rodney King. Several preachers remarked that the terror unleashed in Oklahoma and New York City were instances of the historic and ongoing terror experienced by Black Americans at the hands of White racists.

In Los Angeles, the police officers who struck Rodney King with batons more than 50 times were acquitted. In the aftermath of the trial, most White preachers did not address this savage mistreatment of King, focusing instead on the rioting and looting that followed the verdict. They used “Rodney King” as a code word to evoke George Bush’s condemnation of lawlessness (an irony, considering the jury’s verdict). They focused on Black anger, ignoring the causes of that anger. They didn’t delve into the fraught relationships in the neighborhood between Black and Korean residents or mention the huge losses suffered by Korean businesses after the riots.

After the Oklahoma City bombing a few years later, the murderer Timothy McVeigh’s Whiteness was not interrogated in pulpits in the same manner as King’s Blackness had been. Overlooking McVeigh’s reported racism, his superb record in the US military, his anger at the debacle in Waco, and the bullying he had undergone as a child, White preachers portrayed a tragedy we had not brought upon ourselves. The implied racial identity of the victims was White. Very few preachers attempted to get behind the “evil” to address what was lurking in the American heartland: the smoldering insurgency among Americans like McVeigh. It was Bill Clinton, rather than the preachers, who condemned those who “appropriate our sacred symbols for paranoid purposes.”

From the Kennedy assassination to 9/11 to Newtown, preachers explained American tragedy as the loss of innocence. But they rarely defined *innocence*. Apparently, what they meant by it was not our purity but our shocking inability to atone for our own sins and master our own destiny. Yet, if there is a single word to describe a nation that has wiped out its indigenous inhabitants, embraced slavery and segregation, and placed its own people in detention camps, *innocence* is not that word.

The second failure of American preachers is a failure of theological analysis. Matthes finds that we did not draw sufficiently on the resources of scripture and the gospel. Instead of claiming its identity as the “prow” of the whole world, as Herman Melville describes the pulpit in an early chapter of *Moby-Dick*, the pulpit has become a dinghy taking on the flotsam and jetsam of American culture. (This allusion is mine, but it in no way overstates Matthes’s indictment of the pulpit.)

How did this happen? Crisis by crisis, the church ceded its interpretive authority to the state. Already in November 1941, the Roosevelt administration went so far as to circulate a sermon outline in support of the undeclared war effort for clergy to deliver in their pulpits. Among the many outraged clergy, Century editor Charles Clayton Morrison compared it to a gambit worthy of Goebbels and Hitler. In response to Pearl Harbor the following month, preachers did not eulogize the victims, exegete their own feelings about the attack, or attempt a theological explanation of the event or its motives. They spoke of the coming war as a matter of obvious fact. In their rush to associate the church with the US war effort, mainline preachers, despite Reinhold Niebuhr’s *Christianity and Crisis* editorial to the contrary, were largely silent about the subsequent internment of Japanese citizens in fenced “exclusion zones.”

A few days after 9/11, I was startled to see a sign in front of a Baptist church in North Carolina. Instead of the expected “God bless America,” it read “God bless the whole world.” According to Matthes’s research, most preachers instead borrowed the state’s interpretation of events and incorporated its agenda into their sermons. We preachers made out of each tragedy a crime against freedom: 9/11 proved, once again, how desperately our enemies envied the American way of life. With notable exceptions, Christians accepted the inevitability of all-out war and placed implicit trust in American power to right the wrongs. We stressed our own innocence and, with the media’s help, gave faces to the mass of human suffering. Beginning with the Oklahoma bombing, we set up makeshift memorials to the lost.

Our pulpits suppressed biblical lament, which is the voice of anguished believers hurled into the very heart of God, and replaced it with gratitude for the courage of our first responders. We shared the intimate details of our own grief in the pulpit, but our expressions of sorrow lacked an object. Jesus too experienced despair, but he addressed it to a receiver, “my God.” Matthes quotes sociologist Philip Rieff and accepts his diagnosis: “this hardly means that the modern individual has abandoned spiritual concerns, but rather that [these concerns] have been recast purely as

enhancing personal well-being, instead of serving as a source of love or awe before the great mysteries.”

Matthes is not entirely clear or consistent on what constitutes a genuine use of the Christian message. When delivered from the pulpit, must every admission of one’s own grief only be self-therapeutic? Doesn’t the title “pastor” imply the preacher’s obligation to merge his or her humanity with that of the congregation? Didn’t Ezekiel first “sit where they sat” before climbing on to his prophetic soapbox?

Nor was I convinced by Matthes’s criticism of the preachers who called for gun control or safety measures after the massacre of children at Sandy Hook Elementary School. She is not against gun control, but she distrusts political appeals that aren’t grounded in scripture. Yet she offers no guidance on how that can be done. I confess, my visceral reaction to a sermon that calls for gun control is applause. If our politicians are too timid, who will speak up for the fifth commandment if not the preacher?

On occasion, Matthes criticizes preachers for not engaging in theodicy in the pulpit. If by “theodicy” she means the rational justification of God’s judgments, surely the fraught aftermath of trauma is not the time to do it. She does highlight those exceptional preachers who enfold our sorrow in the sorrow of God or who ground our hope in God’s victory over death instead of military revenge.

Matthes wants what we all want: a broader and yet more specific theological context for our expressions of loss. Perhaps like that church sign I saw: God bless the *whole* world. The whole world belongs to God, and Christ died for all of it. One day its reconciliation to God will be complete.

Admittedly, this is not what a nation that is both pluralist and distraught wants to hear when its children have been slaughtered and its towers destroyed. But it is the church’s distinctive language, and preachers have a duty to speak it, even when their words risk being overwhelmed by other heartfelt sentiments or by the global power of heartbreaking images: the riderless horse cantering behind the funeral caisson, the fireman in Oklahoma cradling a child’s body in his arms, the agonized faces of parents whose children were killed at school, the twisted cross at Ground Zero.

Over the decades, the church’s submission to the state became evident not only in what was said (or left unsaid) but in who was appointed to say it. Beginning with

Clinton and followed by Bush and Obama, the leadership of American mourning shifted from church to state, from preacher to president. After Pearl Harbor, Franklin Roosevelt did not lead the nation in mourning, nor did he eulogize the dead. Though he was a serious Episcopalian, he never led a worship service or preached from a pulpit. Similar observations may be made of Lyndon Johnson, who did not eulogize his predecessor or give spiritual counsel to the nation at the death of Martin Luther King.

Matthes doesn't imply that the Roosevelt-era response was the gold standard from which succeeding generations have fallen short. But she does suggest a sea change in church-state spirituality. Following the Oklahoma City bombing, Bill Clinton spoke movingly of his faith. After 9/11, George Bush organized a memorial in the National Cathedral and from its pulpit preached a memorable sermon. In response to a surge of mass shootings, Barack Obama performed heroic service in vigils and church services across the country, notably after Newtown and Charleston. It was our first Black president who broke the White pulpit's silence and publicly mourned Trayvon Martin. His mourning became one of the hallmarks of his moral leadership. One prominent Atlanta evangelical went so far as to dub Obama America's "pastor in chief."

Matthes doesn't criticize what these presidents said about faith, but she dwells on the public absence of church leadership during crisis situations. There was no Harry Emerson Fosdick, who from the platform of Riverside Church preached the greatest anti-war sermon of the 20th century, "The Unknown Soldier." There was no King to shatter the church's silence on race, income inequality, and Vietnam. More often than not, Matthes argues, pastors took their cues from a president's playbook. In the end, she counts Obama's spiritual counsel, including his evocations of grace, as a net loss for the church's integrity.

I believe most Americans welcomed the religious expressions of the presidents during these times of crisis (as much as they have sorely missed them in the long months of COVID-19) and took pleasure in hearing echoes of faith in the public arena. I agree that it's not the best idea for presidents or judges to lead civil worship services, but must this necessitate a spiritual vacuum at the governing center of our polis? "This thing was not done in a corner," Paul said to Agrippa regarding the crucifixion of Jesus. The public nature of Jesus' ministry and the foundational events celebrated in other religions should not be privatized. The muzzling of public officials will not lead to what we really need: greater theological depth on the part of local

preachers, priests, and imams.

The word *daunting* doesn't begin to do justice to the scope of Matthes's project. It is an impressive achievement.

My guess is that a sociologist might notice some methodological fissures in her work, such as the undifferentiated nature of her samples. Preachers will question the very possibility of synthesizing parochial and pastoral messages uttered in hundreds of thousands of churches into anything like a theory of American culture.

Protestantism isn't set up to produce a single coherent statement on anything. "Out of many, one" is no truer of religion in America than it is of American society as a whole.

In pursuing a comprehensive thesis regarding the usurpation of religious authority by the state, Matthes makes several overstatements. And while she hits the salient themes of modern Protestantism and accurately charts the government's growing influence in the church, she doesn't do justice to the minority reports of Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim preachers—the last three largely excluded by her book—who have striven to maintain the integrity of their respective traditions.

She quotes approvingly alternative voices, especially those preachers who were willing to wrestle with the "hard" passages in scripture and to "linger with the inexplicable," but the relative few are subsumed beneath the many. In a qualitative study, prophecy and truthfulness deserve greater weighting, even if one's carefully wrought thesis is thrown out of balance. The quality of their message and the courage of their voices demand it.

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