

Why Do Sociologists Neglect Studying Sermons?

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Abstract: *A 2024 study on how US Catholic homilists treated references to Jews and Judaism found that sociologists rarely study contemporary sermons to learn what they may reveal about the practices and attitudes of religious communities. Scholars who do study sermons tend to be theologians or pastoral educators who are interested in preachers' biblical hermeneutics, theological perspectives, or rhetorical practices. Some scholars in practical theology have deftly used the social sciences to learn what might constitute effective preaching. The barriers that discourage sociological studies of sermons may be (1) resistance from religious communities, (2) the logistics of gathering sermon data, (3) methodological questions, and (4) an academic reluctance to study religious discourse. All of these obstacles, however, are readily surmountable, especially with emerging technologies that allow ready access to sermon information that would be valuable to a variety of research projects of interest to sociologists.*

Introduction

Recent research into the question of how contemporary Roman Catholic preachers in the US treat Jews and Judaism in their homilies,¹ uncovered a deeper methodological question: Why do so few sociologists, especially those who are concerned with studying contemporary religious movements, neglect studying sermons?² In an attempt to respond to this query, this essay surveys the relative lack of sociological interest in sermons and provides one example of how the use of a sociological method can be helpful in understanding the social implications of collected sermons;

¹ Some scholars make a distinction between a sermon, which is an address that a preacher—often an ordained person—delivers on a religious topic to the faithful, and a homily, which is an address that a preacher delivers in a liturgical setting to interpret a selected scriptural passage. This article, however, uses the terms interchangeably. The focus here is on Christian sermons, but sermons, or talks on core beliefs and practices in the context of an assembly, occur in many religious traditions (e.g., *derashot*, *khutbahs*, or Dharma talks). The questions raised in this essay about studying Christian sermons, however, may apply to other religious communities. See, for example, Mazen Hashem, *The Muslim Friday Khutba: Veiled and Unveiled Themes* (Institute for Social Policy Understanding, 2009).

² George Jacobs Mazza, “The Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Roman Catholic Preaching: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Selected Contemporary Homilies” (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 2024), ProQuest & Theses Global; George Jacobs Mazza, “Catholic Preaching on Jews and Judaism: The Challenge from Surveyed Good Friday Homilies,” *The International Journal of Evangelization and Catechetics* 4, no. 2 (2024): 141–63. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jec.2024.a939336>; George Jacobs Mazza and Kathryn Burrows, “The Neglected Study of Sermons in the Sociology of Religion: Catholic Homilies and References to Jews and Judaism” (paper presented at the 85th annual meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, Montreal, QC, August 11, 2024).

the essay then suggests reasons that have led scholars to neglect studying sermons and proposes an agenda for studying contemporary sermons as important data for sociologists.

Studying Sermons

An Overview

One might classify scholarly interest in sermons in two broad categories.³ There are those who study the collected sermons of well-known preachers, such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, to understand the development of a religious leader's thought and social activism.⁴ There are others, however, who are interested in studying collected sermons from ordinary preachers from a particular time period in a given geographic region. The purpose of the second type of study is to use sermons as important data to infer the social context in which preachers deliver them.⁵ The latter approach to sermons is the one that should draw the attention of sociologists, particularly sociologists of religion. Arthur Van Seters observed that even though "preaching is first and foremost a theological act," one must acknowledge that "[a]ll preaching is a social act."⁶

As one would expect, some studies have attempted to address social questions through the analysis of sermons. One of the most important studies of sermons in the US was a survey conducted by Rodney Stark and his colleagues in the late 1960s on the antisemitic attitudes of Protestant clergy.⁷ A prior study of the laity, in which Stark also participated, found that there was a strong correlation in the US between Christianity and antisemitism.⁸ This earlier study found, for example, that many US Christians believed that contemporary Jews still bore responsibility for the death of Jesus.⁹ To learn whether Protestant clergy shared similar negative attitudes toward Jews, Stark and his associates surveyed 1,580 Protestant ministers in California.¹⁰ The survey included detailed questions about the ministers' own sermons.¹¹ Stark and his team acknowledged that the better approach would have been a textual study of the actual sermons, but costs prevented undertaking such a project.¹² The analysis of the clergy's responses to the questionnaire revealed that they shared the same anti-Jewish prejudices as their congregations. The qualitative study by Stark and his colleagues tartly concluded that "when both sheep and shepherds are wayward in the same direction and to the same degree, it seems unrealistic to blame only the sheep."¹³

The study of sermons has usually drawn the attention of theologians or pastors rather than social scientists, meaning that the focus of such studies has often been the sermons' theological

³ David Millard Haskell, "The Theological Meaning of Jesus' Resurrection: A Content Analysis of Mainline and Conservative Protestant Easter Sunday Sermons," *Journal of Empirical Theology* 25 (2012): 215, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15709256-12341247>.

⁴ Haskell, 215; Nick Sharman, "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution: The Rhetorical Strategies of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Social Semiotics* 9, no. 1 (1999): 85-105, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350339909360423>; Hendrik Johannes Christoffel Pieterse, *Desmond Tutu's Message: A Qualitative Analysis* (Brill, 2001).

⁵ Haskell, "Meaning of Jesus' Resurrection," 215.

⁶ Arthur Van Seters, ed., introduction to *Preaching as a Social Act: Theology and Practice* (Abingdon, 1988), 17, 19.

⁷ Rodney Stark et al., *Wayward Shepherds: Prejudice and the Protestant Clergy* (Harper & Row, 1971).

⁸ Charles Young Glock and Rodney Stark, *Christian Beliefs and Anti-Semitism* (Harper & Row, 1966).

⁹ Stark et al., *Wayward Shepherds*, 44.

¹⁰ Stark et al., 5, 13.

¹¹ Stark et al., 88.

¹² Stark et al., 88.

¹³ Stark et al., 48, 57.

or pastoral significance rather than what they reveal about a religious community from a sociological perspective. Studies of Christian sermons have also tended to focus on Protestant rather than Catholic or other Christian preaching, which is not surprising, given the historically more prominent role preaching has played in Protestant churches.¹⁴

Beginning in the 1970s, one of the centers for studying sermons in the German language was at Heidelberg University under the direction of Rudolf Bohren.¹⁵ Aside from linguistic inquiries, the Heidelberg analytical method focused on questions related to four homiletic elements in a sermon: the reference to God, the use of a cited biblical text, the composition and needs of the listening assembly, and the person of the preacher.¹⁶ Using the Heidelberg analytical method, Johan Cilliers, for example, studied how English- and Afrikaans-speaking clergy from the Dutch Reformed Church framed references to God in their sermons as “God-for-us” during the apartheid period in South Africa.¹⁷ Among other studies of Protestant sermons available in English have been Joseph Falkner’s analysis of the elements of preaching in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ),¹⁸ Marsha Witten’s investigation into the encroachment of secularism in Presbyterian and Southern Baptist sermons,¹⁹ and Reid Thomas’s inquiry into how the gospel shapes the content and delivery in the sermons of five prominent preachers.²⁰ David Haskell and his colleagues examined how sermons in conservative and mainline churches in Canada referred to popular culture.²¹ Following this study, Haskell, using the same dataset of sermons, also tracked the differences between conservative and mainline Protestant preachers in their approaches to biblical hermeneutics.²² Hendrik J. C. Pieterse, perhaps the most prolific practitioner of analyzing sermons from the perspective of practical theology, has produced an extensive body of work on collected sermons in South Africa, examining, for example, how sermons should address the issue of poverty in a country where poverty is pervasive.²³ Marianne

¹⁴ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 4th ed. (Beacon, 1993), 75; Wilfried Engemann, *Homiletics: Principles and Patterns of Reasoning* (Walter de Gruyter, 2019), 307; Theo Pleizier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons* (Eburon Academic, 2010), 26. Following the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) (1962–65), the Catholic Church has arguably placed a greater emphasis on the significance of preaching. See *Dogmatic Constitution on Sacred Revelation—Dei Verbum* § 21 and the *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests—Presbyterorum Ordinis* § 4, in *The Sixteen Documents of Vatican II and the Instruction on the Liturgy with Commentaries by Council Fathers*, comp. J. L. Gonzales (Daughters of St. Paul, 1967); see also Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, *Homiletic Directory* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2014), § I.4.

¹⁵ Hendrik Johannes Christoffel Pieterse, “A Short History of Empirical Homiletics in South Africa,” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 6, no. 2 (2020): 345–64, <https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2020.v6n2.a15>; Rudolf Bohren, *Predigtlehre* (Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1974).

¹⁶ Pieterse, “A Short History,” 350–51; Johan Cilliers, *God for Us? An Analysis and Assessment of Dutch Reformed Preaching During the Apartheid Years* (Sun Press, 2006), 11.

¹⁷ Cilliers, *God for Us?*, 5.

¹⁸ Joseph Edward Faulkner, “What Are They Saying? A Content Analysis of 206 Sermons Preached in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) during 1988,” in *A Case Study of Mainstream Protestantism: The Disciples’ Relation to American Culture, 1880–1989*, ed. D. Newell Williams (Eerdmans, 1991).

¹⁹ Marsha Grace Witten, *All Is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism* (Princeton University Press, 1993).

²⁰ Reid S. Thomas Jr., “Evidence of the Gospel Preaching to Postmoderns: A Study of the Sermons of Leading Preachers” (DMin diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2005), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

²¹ David Millard Haskell et al., “Defending the Faith: Easter Sermon Reaction to Pop Culture Discourses,” *Review of Religious Research* 50, no. 2 (2008): 139–56, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20447558>.

²² David Millard Haskell, “Meaning of Jesus’ Resurrection,” 205–35.

²³ Hendrik Johannes Christoffel Pieterse, “An Emerging Grounded Theory for Preaching on Poverty in South Africa with Matthew 25:31–46 as Sermon Text,” *Acta Theologica* 33, no. 1 (2013): 175–95,

Gaarden and Marlene Lorensen interviewed pastors and congregants in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark to learn how people who hear sermons actually integrate them into their thought processes.²⁴ André Verweij studied the Lenten sermons of Protestant pastors in the Netherlands to learn how they referred to the suffering of Jesus.²⁵ Darin Freeburg and Daniel Roland studied sermons to show how they attempted to persuade listeners and how they disseminated information.²⁶ Miriam Perkins studied the rhetoric that Evangelical preachers used to describe the terrorist attack on the US on September 11, 2001.²⁷ Matthew Hastings examined the preaching of three of the fastest growing churches in the Southern Baptist Convention to identify the elements that comprise effective preaching to millennials, defined as people born between 1981 and 1998,²⁸ and using the Heidelberg analytical method, Jima Seo studied how prominent Protestant pastors in South Korea preached on suffering.²⁹

As to Catholic homilies, many of the sermon studies examined whether contemporary Catholic preaching adhered to the homiletic reforms promoted by Vatican II. Leo Sands' dissertation analyzed Catholic homilies in the US in 1973 to see whether they reflected Vatican II's renewed emphasis on preaching.³⁰ Fred Baumer studied post-conciliar Catholic homilies in terms of theories of communication.³¹ Bede Peay produced an historical account of Catholic preaching in the US, finding that the reform movement in preaching that Vatican II initially promised had stalled by the 1980s.³² Stephen DeLeers presented a scheme for evaluating student homilies, but he neither derived nor applied his assessment method to a dataset of actual liturgical homilies.³³ Thomas Gaughan advanced the theory that an appeal to the emotions is an essential component of effective homiletics, especially when preaching to college-age young

<https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v33i1.9>; Hendrik Johannes Christoffel Pieterse, *Preaching in a Context of Poverty* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 2001).

²⁴ Marianne Gaarden and Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, "Listeners as Authors in Preaching: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives." *Homiletic* 38, no. 1 (2013): 28-45, <https://doi.org/10.15695/hmltc.v38i1.3832>.

²⁵ André Verweij, *Positioning Jesus' Suffering: A Grounded Theory of Lenten Preaching in Local Parishes* (Delft, The Netherlands: Eburon, 2014).

²⁶ Darin Freeburg and Daniel Roland, "Goals and Information Behavior in Religious Sermons," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 11 (2015): 1-19, http://works.bepress.com/darin_freeburg/6/.

²⁷ Miriam Yvonne Perkins, "Preaching and Rhetorical Responses to Terror: American Evangelical Sermons Delivered in Reaction to September 11 Terrorist Attacks, 2001" (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America 2008), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

²⁸ Matthew Joel Hastings, "Preaching to Millennials: A Content Analysis of Preachers' Communication as It Relates to Millennial Congregants" (EdD diss., Liberty University, 2021), <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3848&context=doctoral>.

²⁹ Jima Seo, "A Homiletical Strategy for Preaching on Suffering: Redemptive-Historical Narrative Preaching" (PhD diss., University of Pretoria, 2021), https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/86918/Seo_Homiletical_2021.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

³⁰ Leo Richard Sands, "Contemporary Roman Catholic Preaching: Its Inventional Characteristics" (PhD diss., The Pennsylvania State University, 1975), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

³¹ Fred A. Baumer, "Toward the Development of Homiletic as Rhetorical Genre: A Critical Study of Roman Catholic Preaching in the United States since Vatican Council II" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1985), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

³² Bede Steven Peay, "Change in the Theology and Practice of Preaching in the Roman Catholic Church in the United States, 1928-1983" (PhD diss., St. Louis University, 1990), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

³³ Stephen Vincent DeLeers, "A Process for the Assessment of Liturgical Preaching Reflecting Official Roman Catholic Understanding of the Homily" (DMin diss., Aquinas Institute of Theology, 1996), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

people.³⁴ Stephen Bosso conducted a survey of the homiletics programs in six major US theologates, highlighting best practices,³⁵ and Peter Hill, a Redemptorist, surveyed a dozen members of his order, asking them to reflect on whether their homilies were in keeping with their order's charism of prophetic preaching.³⁶

The Pew Research Center (Pew) conducted two recent studies of Christian sermons downloaded from the Internet. The first study, which Pew described as a "computational analysis," focused on describing the parameters of its sermons database, noting the average sermon length across various Christian traditions, the distinctive words preachers used within particular faith communities, and the biblical texts homilists most frequently cited.³⁷ The second study, based on sermons collected from the Internet immediately prior to the 2020 US presidential election in 2020, examined how preachers referred to the upcoming election and some of the issues that were central to voters at the time.³⁸ Mathew Boedy also examined sermons during a US presidential election, but his focus was on how preachers framed the 2016 election results in both political and religious terms.³⁹

As noted here, the body of research on contemporary sermons is relatively small, and many studies are dated. Scholars have not only had a variety of goals in analyzing sermons, but they have also used a variety of methods to evaluate them, ranging from rhetoric to historiography. There have, however, been only a handful of studies that have analyzed sermons from a sociological perspective, defined as using the tools of sociology to make sense of the data. Moreover, even among sociological studies of sermons, it is rare for studies to rely on the actual texts of collected sermons as delivered in liturgical settings.⁴⁰

A survey of the relevant academic literature shows that sociological studies based on an analysis of sermons *in situ*, meaning the actual spoken words of a liturgical sermon as preached along with the response of the listening congregation, are, for the most part, nonexistent. There are a number of studies that have used sociological methods to analyze how congregants respond to sermons, but the focus has often been on the experience of listeners rather than on the sermonic texts.⁴¹

In the previously cited studies of sermons, it is worth noting the gap between the data that scholars analyzed and the optimal communications data for analyzing sermons, which would

³⁴ Thomas E. Gaughan, "Preaching to Catholic College Students: Issues and Strategies in Developing a Homiletic for Roman Catholic Preachers in the United States" (DMin diss., Aquinas Institute of Theology, 2009), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

³⁵ Stephen C. Bosso, "Best Preaching Practices in Homiletic Programs in Roman Catholic Theologates in the United States" (DMin diss., Aquinas Institute of Theology, 2018), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global; cf. George Jacobs Mazza, "Teaching on Jews and Judaism in Selected US Catholic Seminaries," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 19, no. 1 (2024): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.6017/scjr.v19i1.17605>.

³⁶ Peter Davidson Hill, "Preaching the Gospel Anew: Forming Redemptorist Students for the Ministry of Prophetic Preaching" (DMin diss., Aquinas Institute of Theology, 2020), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

³⁷ Dennis Quinn, *The Digital Pulpit: A Nationwide Analysis of Online Sermons*, The Pew Research Center, December 16, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2019/12/PF.12.16.19_sermons.analysis.report.pdf.

³⁸ Dennis Quinn and Aaron Smith, *Pastors Often Discussed Election, Pandemic and Racism in Fall of 2020*, Pew Research Center, July 8, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2021/07/PDL_07.08.21.Sermons.pdf.

³⁹ Matthew Boedy, "The Sunday After Tuesday: The 2016 Presidential Election in the Pulpit," *Sermon Studies: Essays on the Preaching of the Abrahamic Faiths* 2, no. 1 (2018): 1–17, <https://mds.marshall.edu/sermonstudies/vol2/iss1/1>.

⁴⁰ Mazza, "Jews and Judaism in Roman Catholic Preaching," 121–50.

⁴¹ See, for example, Pleizer, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons*.

have ideally included a reliable, independent rendering of the preacher's spoken words along with an experiential assessment of the listeners' reception of them.⁴² As already noted, Stark and his team relied on clergy responses to questionnaires about their sermons.⁴³ Cilliers chose the sermons for his study from those that appeared in *Die Kerkbode*, the official paper of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa.⁴⁴ Faulkner wrote to a representative sample of clergy, asking for the submission of consecutively preached sermons for review.⁴⁵ Witten based her study on the homilies she collected by writing to Presbyterian and Southern Baptist preachers, requesting sermons based on the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32).⁴⁶ Gaarden and Lorensen relied on interviews of both preachers and congregants, using an initial questionnaire to obtain the listeners' immediate responses to sermons and then following up with the listeners through in-depth interviews.⁴⁷ Verweij's analysis of Protestant sermons included both transcriptions of recorded homilies and texts posted on the Internet.⁴⁸ For his study on preaching on poverty, Pieterse used his former doctoral students to collect homilies based on the biblical text Matt 25:31-46.⁴⁹ Freeberg and Roland worked from sermons' transcripts in a database, but since the database no longer exists, it is unclear how these sermons were initially obtained.⁵⁰ For his two studies based on the same pool of sermons, Haskell obtained the texts by either emailing denominational offices or calling individual churches in a set geographic area for clergy contact information. He then requested that the clergy submit their Easter Sunday sermons for review.⁵¹ Based on data from the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Perkins selected for her study publicly available sermons from pastors at the three largest Evangelical congregations in nine regions of the US, using both audio and video recordings and sermon transcripts.⁵² Seo based his research on a selection of sermons from the "sermon books" of five senior pastors, each serving the largest congregation within a different Protestant denomination in South Korea.⁵³ Hastings's study relied on analyzing sermons from three leading Southern Baptist pastors, obtaining audio or video recordings of the sermons posted on the pastors' churches' websites.⁵⁴ Sands' study of post-conciliar Catholic homilies used a mix of manuscripts and recordings that he and his friends collected.⁵⁵ The studies by Pew and Boedy relied solely on sermons collected from the Internet,

⁴² See the discussion in Teemu Taira, "Making Space for Discursive Study in Religious Studies." *Religion* 43, no. 1 (2013): 29, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2013.742744>.

⁴³ Stark et al., *Wayward Shepherds*, 5, 13.

⁴⁴ Cilliers, *God for Us?*, 6.

⁴⁵ Faulkner, "What Are They Saying?" 417-18.

⁴⁶ Witten, *All Is Forgiven*, 13.

⁴⁷ Gaarden and Lorensen, *Listeners as Authors in Preaching*, 28, 28n3.

⁴⁸ Verweij, *Positioning Jesus' Suffering*, 55.

⁴⁹ Pieterse, "Preaching on Poverty in South Africa," 176; Hendrik Johannes Christoffel Pieterse, "Grounded Theory Approach in Sermon Analysis of Sermons on Poverty and Directed at the Poor as Listeners," *Acta Theologica* 30, no. 2 (2010): 119, <https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v30i2.67265>.

⁵⁰ Freeburg and Roland, "Goals and Information," 14. Freeburg and Roland analyzed sermons from a database of Protestant sermons collected and maintained by the Center for the Study of Information and Religion at Kent State University (KSU) in Kent, OH. KSU no longer retains this database, so the relevant information about the process used for collecting the cited sermons is no longer accessible.

⁵¹ Haskell et al., "Defending the Faith," 146.

⁵² Perkins, "Preaching and Rhetorical Responses to Terror," 3, 250.

⁵³ Seo, "Homiletic Strategy for Preaching on Suffering," 21.

⁵⁴ Hastings, "Preaching to Millennials," 74.

⁵⁵ Sands, "Contemporary Roman Catholic Preaching," 49.

which they acknowledged were not representative of US Christian communities.⁵⁶ Significantly, some of the scholarship on sermons did not even use textual transcriptions.⁵⁷

In reviewing how scholars have approached the analysis of collected sermons, it is important to note at the outset that many studies have had to rely on sermons that clergy submitted or posted online, risking the distortions of self-selected content and brushing past the significant differences between a speech event and a polished written essay in the form of a sermon that a preacher knew in advance would be the subject of academic analysis. For the sake of acknowledging the studies of sermons with the highest standards of reliability, one should give priority to work based on collected sermons from the field captured in independent audiovisual recordings, sound recordings, or accurate transcriptions of the recordings.

An Example of the Use of a Sociological Method in Studying Sermons

Although some of the scholars studying sermons have acknowledged the benefits of using the tools of the social sciences to analyze sermons, except for the few research projects with a descriptive or a partially political perspective, most sermon studies have dealt with theological, pastoral, or rhetorical issues. Many scholars who have emphasized the significance of the social sciences in the study of sermons have used inductive qualitative content analysis, particularly Kathy Charmaz's grounded theory approach, to analyze texts.⁵⁸

Charmaz's constructivist approach to Grounded Theory, which acknowledges the researcher's role in interpreting data and constructing meaning, provides a useful framework for analyzing the complex interplay between religious discourse and social context.⁵⁹ The application of Grounded Theory to sermon analysis typically involves three stages. Initial coding begins with a line-by-line analysis of sermon transcripts, identifying key concepts and patterns without imposing predetermined categories. This process helps researchers remain open to unexpected themes and avoid being constrained by existing theoretical assumptions about religious discourse. The second stage, focused coding, involves synthesizing and explaining larger segments of data, identifying the most significant or frequent codes that emerged during initial coding. Finally, theoretical coding examines possible relationships between categories developed during focused coding, leading to the development of theoretical propositions about how sermons function within religious communities.

The work of Pieterse in South Africa is especially worth noting as an example of how sociological research informed an analysis of collected sermons, with the stated practical goal of developing an approach to preaching that reaches a particular audience.⁶⁰ It is a quandary why his work is not better known among scholars outside the Christian Reformed tradition, especially in the US. Building on his work in post-apartheid South Africa, in which he identified preaching

⁵⁶ Quinn and Smith, "Pastors Often Discussed Election;" Quinn, "The Digital Pulpit;" Boedy, "The Sunday after Tuesday."

⁵⁷ Mazza, "Jews and Judaism in Roman Catholic Preaching," 143-49.

⁵⁸ Hendrik Johannes Christoffel Pieterse, "The Grounded Theory Methodology to Conduct Content Analysis of Sermons and Interviews: Critique and Response," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 1 (2020): 1-5, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.5851>; Verweij, *Positioning Jesus' Suffering*, 16; Haskell, "Meaning of Jesus' Resurrection," 219; see Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2014); cf. Titus Hjelm, "Religion, Discourse and Power: A Contribution towards a Critical Sociology of Religion," *Critical Sociology* 40, no. 1 (2014): 855-72, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920513477664>.

⁵⁹ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*.

⁶⁰ Pieterse, "Grounded Theory Methodology," Pieterse, "A Short History."

on poverty as a formidable challenge for the Church in a country where poverty is extensive,⁶¹ Pieterse designed a study of sermons that clergy from the Dutch Reformed Church and the Uniting Reformed Church preached in South Africa on the text of Matt 25:31-46.⁶²

Following Grounded Theory methodology, Pieterse analyzed the sermons in three cycles. The first cycle involved open coding 12 sermons collected from all provinces in South Africa.⁶³ The second cycle involved selected coding, adding 14 new sermons to the original 12.⁶⁴ The third cycle of theoretical coding analyzed the same twenty-six sermons.⁶⁵ In the first cycle, Pieterse identified the main variable as an appeal to those who were listening to the sermon.⁶⁶ In the second cycle, Pieterse found that the key variable was “an invitation... to participate in the congregation’s projects concerning the poor.”⁶⁷ In the third cycle, the key theoretical variable was the call to become involved in the Church’s social-action projects to help those in need.⁶⁸

Based on the third cycle of sermon analysis, Pieterse identified emerging concepts from all the data.⁶⁹ He recognized that preparing and delivering a sermon relied on three broad concepts: scriptural exegesis, the rhetorical structure of the sermon, and a catalog of all church-sponsored projects that serve the poor.⁷⁰ Pieterse argued that all three concepts are at the heart of calling listeners to respond to sermons on Matt 25:31-46 by participating in congregational social-justice projects that benefit those in need.⁷¹ Pieterse saw all three concepts as interrelated: exegesis informed the rhetorical structure of the sermon, which called listeners to engage in congregational services provided to the poor.⁷²

Regardless of whether one finds merit in the use of Grounded Theory to analyze sermons or whether one regards Pieterse’s particular treatment of the sermons he collected as an accurate application of the methodology, his work provides an example of how sociology’s qualitative content analysis may inform the field of practical theology, which he defines as “the study of communicative acts in the service of the gospel within the context of modern society.”⁷³ Sociologists might use a similar approach or other sociological methods to analyze sermons collected from a particular time, geographic region, or religious tradition, in order to understand the religious communities in which they were delivered. The topics for sociological research based on sermon analysis are unlimited, reaching far beyond theological or pastoral interests.

⁶¹ Pieterse, *Preaching in a Context of Poverty*.

⁶² Pieterse, “Preaching on Poverty in South Africa.” The text of Matt 25:31-46 is a teaching attributed to Jesus, who refers to a day of reckoning. Those who have recognized and cared for those in the greatest need (i.e., “the least of my brethren” who are hungry, thirsty, naked, displaced, sick, or in prison) will receive their eternal reward, while those who have failed to do so face condemnation.

⁶³ Pieterse, “Preaching on Poverty in South Africa;” Hendrik Johannes Christoffel Pieterse, “An Open Coding Analytical Model of Sermons on Poverty with Mathew 25:31-46 as Sermon Text,” *Acta Theologica* 31, no. 1 (2011): 95-112, <https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v31i1.6>.

⁶⁴ Pieterse, “Preaching on Poverty in South Africa,” 176.

⁶⁵ Pieterse, “Preaching on Poverty in South Africa,” 177.

⁶⁶ Pieterse, “Preaching on Poverty in South Africa,” 178.

⁶⁷ Pieterse, “Preaching on Poverty in South Africa,” 178; see also Hendrik Johannes Christoffel Pieterse, “A Grounded Theory Approach to the Analysis of Sermons on Poverty: Congregational Projects as Social Capital,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 33, no. 1 (2012): 95-112, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v33i1.689>.

⁶⁸ Pieterse, “Preaching on Poverty in South Africa,” 178-79.

⁶⁹ Pieterse, “Preaching on Poverty in South Africa,” 179.

⁷⁰ Pieterse, “Preaching on Poverty in South Africa,” 179, 184-85.

⁷¹ Pieterse, “Preaching on Poverty in South Africa,” 191.

⁷² Pieterse, “Preaching on Poverty in South Africa,” 191.

⁷³ Pieterse, *Preaching in a Context of Poverty*, 8.

Why Sociologists Do Not Study Sermons

One can speculate that the relative understudying of sermons in sociology may stem from four interconnected challenges: (1) the resistance of religious communities, (2) the logistics of gathering data, (3) methodological questions, and (4) academic reluctance to study religious discourse.

The Resistance of Religious Communities

Faith-based communities may be wary of granting access to sociological research. For example, conservative Protestantism has been linked to a general distrust of science as a whole.⁷⁴ Religious communities may be hesitant to welcome outside observers, particularly when discussing sensitive topics such as interfaith relationships, core theological beliefs, or controversial social and political issues. This barrier becomes especially problematic when one considers how crucial it is to understand how religious institutions shape perspectives not only about other faiths but also about broader societal debates and moral questions.

The reluctance to grant access often stems from concerns about potential misrepresentation or criticism. Religious leaders may worry that their words will be taken out of context, that nuanced theological positions will be oversimplified, or that their communities will be portrayed in an unfavorable light by researchers who may not fully understand or respect their traditions. This wariness can be particularly acute in smaller or more traditional communities that have historically faced discrimination or misunderstanding from mainstream society.

The access challenge extends beyond just the initial permission to observe or record services. Religious communities might also be concerned with how sermon recordings or transcripts will be stored, shared, and used in the future. Questions about intellectual property rights, privacy concerns for congregation members, and the potential for sermons to be reused in ways not initially intended can all contribute to hesitancy to participate in research studies.

There is also the matter of selection bias in terms of which religious communities might be willing to participate in sociological research. More progressive or mainstream congregations might be more open to academic study, while more conservative, marginal, or traditional communities might be more hesitant.

The Logistics of Gathering Sermon Data

Studying sermons presents significant logistical challenges that have historically deterred comprehensive sociological research. The few academic studies based on actual texts of sermons delivered in liturgical settings attest to the complexity of collecting sound data. These logistical challenges can be broken down into several key areas: recording and documentation, transcription accuracy, data volume management, and integration of contextual information.

Recording and documentation pose the first major hurdle. Researchers must consider both technical and ethical aspects of sermon capture. From a technical standpoint, achieving high-quality audio recordings in worship spaces requires careful equipment selection and placement to account for varying acoustics, speaker movement, and ambient noise. Video recording adds complexity, requiring multiple camera angles to capture both verbal and nonverbal communication and the congregation's reactions. Furthermore, recording equipment

⁷⁴ Jennifer Glass, "Why Aren't We Paying Attention? Religion and Politics in Everyday Life," *Sociology of Religion* 80, no. 1 (2019): 9-27, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/sry041>.

must be unobtrusive enough not to disturb the natural worship environment or make participants self-conscious.

The ethical dimensions of recording include obtaining appropriate permissions not only from religious leaders but also potentially from congregation members who might appear in recordings. Privacy concerns become particularly acute when services include personal testimonies, prayer requests, or other sensitive information. Religious communities may also have specific rules or traditions that deserve respect when recording in sacred spaces.

Transcription accuracy represents another significant challenge. Sermon delivery often includes contextual elements that are difficult to capture in written form—tonal variations, emphasis, pauses, gestures, and audience responses all contribute to the sermon’s full meaning.⁷⁵ While automated transcription services have improved, they still struggle with religious terminology, biblical references, and the informal speaking style common in many sermons.⁷⁶ Manual transcription, while more accurate, is time-intensive and expensive, particularly for large-scale studies requiring hundreds of sermons.

The sheer volume of data presents another logistical hurdle. The transcription of even a single sermon generates substantial text for analysis, with longer sermons producing significant volumes of data, not including contextual notes or congregational responses. For longitudinal studies or those comparing multiple congregations, the data volume quickly becomes substantial. Studying sermons requires robust systems for data storage, organization, and retrieval that can handle both text transcripts and associated audio/video files while maintaining appropriate security measures for sensitive religious content.

Integration of contextual information adds another layer of complexity. Sermons do not exist in isolation but are part of a larger worship service and community context. Researchers must develop systems to document and correlate the order of service and liturgical elements surrounding the sermon, scriptural readings and other texts referenced, musical selections and their relationship to sermon themes, physical setting and use of visual aids or technology, congregation size and demographic composition, special occasions or events that might influence sermon content, local or national events that provide broader context, and the historical and denominational background of the congregation.

Furthermore, researchers interested in sermon reception must devise methods to gather data about how congregants understand and respond to sermons.⁷⁷ This might involve post-sermon surveys or interviews, observation of informal discussions among congregants, analysis of social media responses when sermons are shared online, tracking of behavioral changes or community actions prompted by sermon content, and documentation of how sermon themes are referenced in other church activities.

The emergence of digital platforms has somewhat eased these logistical burdens, as many congregations now routinely record and archive their services. The COVID-19 Pandemic prompted most US churches to expand significantly their capacity to make sermons available

⁷⁵ Witten, *All Is Forgiven*, 4.

⁷⁶ Mazza, “Jews and Judaism in Roman Catholic Preaching,” 368, 371-72.

⁷⁷ Engemann, *Homiletics*, 410-25; Gaarden and Lorensen, “Listeners as Authors in Preaching,” Pleizier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons*; John S. McClure et al., *Listening to Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004); Lori Carrell, *The Great American Sermon Survey* (Wheaton, IL: Mainstay Church Resources, 2000), 81-104.

online.⁷⁸ Reviewing electronically gathered sermons, however, brings its own challenges. Researchers must ensure consistent quality across different recording setups, manage multiple digital formats and platforms, deal with incomplete or interrupted recordings, address copyright and usage rights for digitally shared content, account for how digital delivery might affect sermon content and style, and develop protocols for archiving and accessing digital materials.

Methodological Questions

The challenge of studying sermons from a sociological perspective extends beyond mere data collection to fundamental questions about methodological approaches. While various methodologies have been employed in sermon studies, from rhetorical analysis to historical investigation, sociological approaches offer unique opportunities for understanding how sermons function within and influence religious communities.⁷⁹

Even prior to selecting a method for evaluating sermons, there are a number of important questions that sociologists may want to consider prior to engaging in research. Whether implicitly or explicitly, scholars may need to acknowledge a working definition of religion or discourse.⁸⁰ Do they acknowledge that their analysis of sermons relies on an understanding of religion as being *sui generis*, or is it one of many other social constructs?⁸¹ Do researchers make a distinction between discourse as the construction of the research topic, defined as “a coherent set of statements . . . which produce a particular version of events” within a particular socio-cultural context, and discourse as a theme, which means the topic that is being discussed?⁸² Consequently, scholars may need to pay close attention to their foundational assumptions prior to designing any practical research projects involving sermons.⁸³

Any sociological method used to analyze sermons, however, will have to address at least four methodological concerns. First is the question of representativeness. Researchers must consider how to construct sermon samples that meaningfully represent the diversity of religious discourse within a particular tradition or geographic area. This challenge is complicated by variations in preaching styles, theological orientations, and social conditions across different congregations.

Second is the challenge of context. Sermons are embedded within specific liturgical, theological, and social environments that shape their meaning and impact. Methodological approaches must account for these surrounding circumstances while still allowing for meaningful comparison across different settings.

Third is the question of reception. Understanding how congregants interpret and respond to sermons requires methodological approaches that can capture both immediate reactions and

⁷⁸ Aaron Earls, “Online Services Expanded Reach of Churches During Pandemic,” Lifeway Research, October 14, 2021, <https://research.lifeway.com/2021/10/14/online-services-expanded-reach-of-churches-during-pandemic/>.

⁷⁹ See the discussion below on *Deciding on Sociological Methods*.

⁸⁰ Kocku von Stuckrad, “Discursive Study of Religion: Approaches, Definitions, Implications,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 25, no. 1 (2013): 5-25. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341253>; Taira, “Discursive Study in Religious Studies.”

⁸¹ von Stuckrad, “Discursive Study of Religion,” 17; Robert Neelly Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 250.

⁸² Taira, “Discursive Study in Religious Studies,” 28-29.

⁸³ Marcus Moberg, “First-, Second-, and Third-Level Discourse Analytic Approaches to the Study of Religion: Moving from Meta-Theoretical Reflection to Implementation Practice,” *Religion* 43, no. 1 (2013): 4-25, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2013.742742>.

longer-term impacts on beliefs and behavior. This might involve combining sermon analysis with surveys, interviews, or ethnographic observation of the congregation.⁸⁴

A fourth challenge concerns the relationship between spoken and written discourse. While sermon transcripts provide valuable data for analysis, they may not capture important aspects of oral delivery, such as tone, gesture, and audience response. Methodological approaches must account for these performative elements of preaching.

Academic Reluctance to Study Religious Discourse

The historical secularization of academic sociology may have led to an undervaluation of religious discourse as an object of study.⁸⁵ The influence of secularization theory within sociology, particularly during the mid-twentieth century, may have contributed to certain assumptions about religion's declining significance, which long predicted its inevitable decline in modern societies.⁸⁶ This theoretical orientation may have created an implicit bias against viewing religious discourse as worthy of serious academic attention. However, as Peter Berger points out, modernity is proving not to be defined by the declining importance of religion as early thinkers such as Émile Durkheim and Max Weber predicted.⁸⁷

As the history of American sociology demonstrates, the relationship between academic sociology and religious studies has been marked by increasing distance and disconnection.⁸⁸ While early American sociology had strong ties to Christian social reform, with many leading sociologists having backgrounds as Protestant ministers, the discipline quickly moved toward secularization as it professionalized in the early twentieth century. This historical trajectory helps explain the relative lack of interest among sociologists in studying sermons.⁸⁹

The roots of this potential reluctance can be traced to sociology's emergence as a distinct discipline in the nineteenth century. Early sociological theorists such as Auguste Comte and Durkheim, while recognizing religion's historical importance, generally viewed it as a phenomenon that would diminish in significance as societies became more rational.⁹⁰ This foundational perspective may have created an enduring bias within the discipline against treating

⁸⁴ See, for example, Pleizier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons*.

⁸⁵ Samuel L. Perry, "Religion Matters (And Doesn't Go Away When Sociologists Ignore It)," *Sociological Forum* 38, no. 4 (2023): 1456–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12960>; Matthew Blanton and Daniel Krasnicki, "'Value-Conditioned Interest': Secularity, Institutional Support, and the Sociology of Religion in Graduate Departments," *The Sociology Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (2023): 401–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2023.2293966>; James Arthur Beckford, "The Insulation and Isolation of the Sociology of Religion," *Sociological Analysis* 46, no. 4 (1985): 347–54, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3711150>; Bellah, *Beyond Belief*, 250.

⁸⁶ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).

⁸⁷ Peter Ludwig Berger, "Secularization Falsified," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* 180 (2008): 23–27, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/02/secularization-falsified>.

⁸⁸ John David Brewer, "Sociology and Theology Reconsidered: Religious Sociology and the Sociology of Religion in Britain," *History of the Human Sciences* 20, no. 2 (2007): 7–28, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695107076196>.

⁸⁹ William H. Swatos Jr., "Religious Sociology and the Sociology of Religion in America at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: Divergences from a Common Theme," *Sociology of Religion* 50, no. 4 (1989): 363–75, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3710767>.

⁹⁰ Anuli Blessing Okoli and Favour Chukwuemeka Uroko, "Critique of Auguste Comte's Ideology on the Death of Religion," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2018): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i1.4810>; Giovanni Paoletti, "Two Turning Points or Religion in Durkheim's Oeuvre before *The Elementary Forms*," *L'Année sociologique* 62, no. 2 (2012): 289–311, <https://doi.org/10.3917/anso.122.0289>.

religious discourse as a primary object of study. By contrast, Christian Smith and his colleagues, who are also sociologists of religion, argue that sociologists need to take religious discourse more seriously as a distinct and meaningful area of study.⁹¹ They contend that religious discourse cannot simply be reduced to or subsumed under other categories, such as ideology, power, insecurity, or material interests.

Evidence for the academic reluctance to study religion can be found in several patterns within contemporary sociology. Religious studies departments, rather than sociology departments, tend to house scholars who study religious discourse.⁹² When sociologists do study religion, they often focus on institutional structures, demographic patterns, or social movements rather than analyzing religious discourse itself. This division of academic labor suggests an implicit assumption that the analysis of religious texts and speech belongs more properly to theology or religious studies than to sociology.

The potential hesitation to study sermons may also reflect broader tensions within academia regarding the relationship between scientific inquiry and religious belief. Despite sociology's theoretical commitment to value-neutral observation, scholars may worry that analyzing religious discourse too closely could be interpreted as either endorsing or criticizing religious beliefs. This concern may be particularly acute when studying contemporary rather than historical sermons.

Academic reluctance to study religious discourse represents a significant missed opportunity for sociological research. Sermons and other forms of religious speech serve as crucial interfaces between religious institutions and broader society, particularly in how they interpret and respond to social issues. Understanding how sermons communicate values about other religious traditions, social issues, and moral frameworks is essential for comprehending both religious influence and social change.

Why Sociologists Should Study Sermons

The barriers that sociologists have historically encountered in studying sermons can be readily overcome by (1) obtaining access to religious communities, (2) managing logistics, (3) deciding on sociological methods, and (4) recognizing the academic bias against analyzing religious discourse. The principal obstacle, however, may be acknowledging that sermons provide important data that inform sociological studies.

Obtaining Access to Religious Communities

The access challenges to religious communities, while significant, are surmountable. Building trust through long-term relationships with religious communities, ensuring transparent research protocols, and demonstrating genuine respect for religious traditions can help overcome initial reluctance. Additionally, as more religious institutions embrace digital platforms for sharing their messages, new opportunities for studying sermons may emerge that do not require the same level of direct access to physical worship spaces.

Managing Logistics

⁹¹ Christian Smith et al., "Roundtable on the Sociology of Religion: Twenty-Three Theses on the Status of Religion in American Sociology—A Mellon Working-Group Reflection," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 4 (2013): 903–38, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lft052>.

⁹² Smith et al., "Roundtable on the Sociology of Religion," 912–13.

Contemporary technology has made the task of gathering sermon data considerably easier. With many religious services now livestreamed, recorded, or available as podcasts, there is unprecedented access to sermon content across denominations and geographic areas. This technological shift makes this an opportune moment for sociologists to examine how religious leaders communicate values, shape worldviews, and influence their congregations' understanding of both religious and secular issues.

An important example illustrating the significance of collecting and analyzing sermon data is the relationship between religious beliefs and political views in the 2024 US presidential election, where, according to the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University (ACU), Christians played a decisive role.⁹³ Among self-identified Christians, Donald Trump won 56 percent of their vote, and as Christians represented 72 percent of the voters who turned out to vote, their support played a key role in his victory.⁹⁴ Of the nearly seventy-five million votes for Trump, 78 percent came from people who self-identified as members of the Christian community.⁹⁵

According to the ACU report, Christian churches played a substantial role in mobilizing their congregations, with 54 percent preaching sermons about biblical positions on election issues and 53 percent actively encouraging their congregants to vote.⁹⁶ Further demonstrating their political engagement, 30 percent of churches invited or hosted candidates to speak at their services, while 23 percent took the additional step of explicitly endorsing or recommending particular candidates to their congregations.⁹⁷ This multi-faceted approach to electoral engagement by Christian churches appeared to have contributed significantly to voter mobilization and support patterns among religious voters.

The ACU report's findings about Christian voting patterns in the 2024 election highlight a compelling but as yet missed opportunity for sermon analysis. While the report indicates that the majority of surveyed preachers addressed election-related matters in their sermons, there is no systematic analysis of the content of these sermons. A comprehensive dataset of sermons from these communities would allow researchers to examine how religious leaders framed electoral participation, interpreted biblical teachings in relation to contemporary political issues, and potentially influenced voting behavior.

Pew's incipient analysis of sermons from the 2020 election cycle demonstrates both the feasibility and value of large-scale sermon studies that this paper advocates.⁹⁸ The finding that different Christian traditions employed distinctly different language and approaches when discussing the 2020 election, such as Evangelical preachers using more apocalyptic terminology, historically Black Protestant preachers emphasizing voting rights, and Mainline Protestant preachers focusing on social complexity, provides invaluable insight that sermon analysis can reveal about how religious communities frame political participation. The fact that Pew researchers were able to review over 12,000 sermons from more than 2,000 congregations in the 2020 election also challenges the assumption that gathering comprehensive sermon data is

⁹³ George Barna, "2024 Election Results —Report #2: Decisive Christian Vote Carries Trump to Historic Victory, Post Election Research Shows," Cultural Research Center, Arizona Christian University, November 13, 2024, <https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/CRC-Release-Post-Election-Nov-13-2024-Christian-Vote-Hands-Trump-Victory.pdf>.

⁹⁴ Barna, "2024 Election Results," 1.

⁹⁵ Barna, "2024 Election Results," 3.

⁹⁶ Barna, "2024 Election Results," 8.

⁹⁷ Barna, "2024 Election Results," 8-9.

⁹⁸ Quinn and Smith, *Pastors Often Discussed Election*.

prohibitively difficult. Unfortunately, for sociologists and other scholars who wish to study the political content of sermons, Pew did not repeat the same data-collection process for the 2024 election cycle.

The increasing political polarization between religious and non-religious groups demands greater scholarly attention to the collection and analysis of sermonic discourse, as it is a key mechanism through which religious beliefs shape political behavior.⁹⁹ Religious institutions play a crucial role in forming and reinforcing political worldviews, with sermons serving as a primary channel through which congregants receive guidance, not only on matters of faith but also on pressing social and political issues. The relationship between religious affiliation and political orientation has become increasingly apparent, with many Americans differing not only in their voting patterns but also in their fundamental views of society and governance. The controversy surrounding Episcopal Bishop Marianne Budde's appeal to Trump for mercy at the prayer service at Washington's National Cathedral after his 2025 inauguration highlights how religious and political views converge, with some sermons expressing the concerns of one sector of society while alienating others.¹⁰⁰ Understanding how religious leaders frame and interpret political issues through sermons is, therefore, essential for comprehending the deepening divides in contemporary American society. While Pew's analysis demonstrates the feasibility of large-scale sermon studies, much more systematic research is needed to understand how religious discourse contributes to and potentially reinforces political polarization.

The digital accessibility of sermons allows researchers to conduct comparative analyses across different denominations, regions, and timeframes. This broader perspective can help identify patterns in how different religious communities respond to similar social issues, how their messaging evolves over time, and how they adapt their communication strategies to address changing social conditions. Moreover, the ability to study sermons systematically through digital archives enables researchers to track the evolution of religious discourse on social issues over time. This longitudinal perspective can provide valuable insights into how religious institutions adapt their messaging in response to changing social norms and political landscapes, while also maintaining their core theological principles.

This rich data source can help sociologists better understand the complex relationship between religious institutions and social change, particularly in how religious communities both respond to and shape broader societal debates. The study of sermons can reveal how religious leaders navigate the challenge of addressing contemporary issues while maintaining theological consistency, and how they translate abstract religious principles into concrete social and political positions.

Deciding on Sociological Methods

The methodological complexity of sermon analysis remains challenging but ultimately worthwhile. Sermons operate on multiple levels simultaneously. They are theological, performative, educational, and social events that serve as critical venues for the transmission of both religious and cultural values. While this complexity makes analysis demanding, it is precisely this multi-layered nature that makes sermons crucial for understanding how values, beliefs, and social perspectives are communicated and transformed within religious communities.

⁹⁹ Glass, "Why Aren't We Paying Attention?"

¹⁰⁰ Elizabeth Dias, "The Bishop Who Pleaded with Trump: 'Was Anyone Going to Say Anything?'" *New York Times*, January 22, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/22/us/trump-bishop-plea.html>.

Grounded Theory, as developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss¹⁰¹ and later refined by scholars such as Charmaz,¹⁰² offers a particularly promising approach for sermon analysis. The method's emphasis on allowing theoretical insights to emerge from systematic analysis of data, rather than imposing preexisting theoretical frameworks, makes it well-suited for understanding how sermons operate within religious communities. Pieterse's work in South Africa, discussed earlier in this paper, demonstrates the potential of Grounded Theory for sermon analysis.¹⁰³ His three-cycle approach to coding sermons on poverty revealed not only their theological content but also their social function in mobilizing congregational responses to social issues. Pieterse's work exemplifies how Grounded Theory can illuminate both the content and social impact of religious discourse.

While Grounded Theory has shown promise, other methodological approaches also offer valuable perspectives for sermon analysis. Content analysis, both quantitative and qualitative, can provide insights into patterns of language use, theological themes, and social messaging across large collections of sermons.¹⁰⁴ This approach is particularly useful for tracking changes in religious discourse over time or comparing sermonic treatment of specific issues across different religious traditions or geographical regions.

Some scholars claim that discourse analysis is a perspective rather than a methodology.¹⁰⁵ "Generally speaking, discourse analysis focuses on identifying patterns and recurring key elements in a given body of material or collection of material which appear to be central to how particular meanings are produced."¹⁰⁶ From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, the goal of discourse analysis is to understand the processes that legitimate knowledge within a particular social context.¹⁰⁷ Arguably, one might use a range of methods from the perspective of discourse analysis to analyze the texts of sermons to understand how they disclose the internal dynamics and worldview of a particular religious community. Other scholars, referring to critical discourse analysis, which is explicitly concerned with the power dynamics and inequalities inherent in speech, use this approach to examine how power relations are established, maintained, or challenged through religious discourse.¹⁰⁸ The method can reveal how sermons contribute to the construction of religious identity, reinforce or challenge social hierarchies, and mediate between religious tradition and contemporary social issues.¹⁰⁹

Mixed methods approaches may be particularly valuable for sermon analysis. Combining qualitative analysis of sermon content with quantitative measures of congregational response, for example, can provide a more complete picture of how sermons influence religious communities. Similarly, integrating textual analysis with ethnographic observation can help researchers understand how sermonic discourse relates to broader patterns of religious practice and community life.

¹⁰¹ Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Routledge, 1999).

¹⁰² Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*.

¹⁰³ Pieterse, "Preaching on Poverty in South Africa."

¹⁰⁴ Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018).

¹⁰⁵ von Stuckrad, "Discursive Study of Religion," 14.

¹⁰⁶ Moberg, "Approaches to the Study of Religion," 11.

¹⁰⁷ von Stuckrad, "Discursive Study of Religion," 12.

¹⁰⁸ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2010).

¹⁰⁹ See Hjelm, "Religion, Discourse and Power."

Whatever sociological method one adopts for studying sermons, the research should take into account the performative aspect of sermons, which makes them particularly powerful tools for social influence. Unlike written texts, sermons combine verbal and non-verbal communication, emotional appeals, storytelling, and community participation. These elements work together to create experiences that can shape not only religious beliefs but also social attitudes, political perspectives, and cultural values.

Research methods should also recognize that the educational function of sermons extends far beyond religious doctrine. Religious leaders often use sermons to help their congregations interpret and respond to contemporary social issues, from economic inequality and racial justice to environmental stewardship and technological change.¹¹⁰ Sermons, moreover, serve as significant indicators of social change within religious communities themselves. How religious leaders address evolving social norms around gender roles, sexual orientation, family structures, and other cultural shifts reveals much about the dynamic relationship between religious traditions and social transformation. The social impact of sermons reaches beyond the immediate congregation to influence broader community dynamics and public policy. Religious leaders often use their pulpits to mobilize community action on social issues, encourage civic engagement, and shape public opinion on legislation and policy matters.

Recognizing the Academic Bias against Analyzing Religious Discourse

The most important step in addressing potential academic bias against studying religious discourse is acknowledging that such bias may exist while recognizing that it stems from historical and institutional factors rather than sound methodological reasons. Three countervailing factors that address outdated assumptions about both religious discourse and sociological methods may contribute to overcoming academic reluctance to study sermons.

First, contemporary sociological theory has largely moved beyond simple secularization narratives to recognize religion's continuing significance in modern societies. The persistent and often increasing influence of religious institutions in public life challenges any assumption that religious discourse is becoming less relevant to social analysis.¹¹¹

Second, recent developments in sociological methods, particularly in discourse analysis and mixed-methods approaches, provide sophisticated tools for analyzing religious speech without necessarily engaging with theological truth claims. These methodological advances make it possible to study how religious discourse functions socially while maintaining appropriate academic distance from questions of religious belief.

Third, the growing recognition of religion's role in social movements, political behavior, and cultural change makes the analysis of religious discourse increasingly relevant to core sociological concerns. Religious institutions continue to shape public debates on issues ranging from economic policy¹¹² to environmental protection,¹¹³ making religious discourse an important factor in understanding contemporary social dynamics.

¹¹⁰ See, for example, Perkins, "Preaching and Rhetorical Responses to Terror."

¹¹¹ Glass, "Why Aren't We Paying Attention?"

¹¹² See, for example, Presbyterian Church (USA), *Hope for a Global Future: Toward Just and Sustainable Human Development* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 1996), <https://pcusa.org/sites/default/files/hope-for-a-global-future1.pdf>.

¹¹³ See, for example, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice* (1993), <https://elcamediaresources.blob.core.windows.net/cdn/wp-content/uploads/EnvironmentSS.pdf>.

Sociology departments can also take practical steps to integrate the analysis of religious discourse into their research agendas by developing collaborations with religious studies departments, supporting dissertations that examine religious speech, and ensuring that graduate methods courses include training in discourse analysis that can be applied to religious texts. Building bridges between sociology and religious studies need not compromise sociological methods or perspectives; rather, it can enrich both fields by combining sociology's analytical frameworks with the deep understanding of religious traditions that scholars of religion possess. The success of studies like Pieterse's work on poverty in South African churches demonstrates how sociological methods can effectively analyze sermons while maintaining appropriate academic distance from theological truth claims.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, departments can actively recruit scholars working at the intersection of sociology and religious studies, thereby creating intellectual communities that support this kind of cross-disciplinary research. Professional organizations can play a role by establishing sections or special interest groups focused on the analysis of religious discourse, organizing conference sessions that highlight innovative methodological approaches to studying religious speech, and developing publication venues that welcome this scholarship. Journal editors can encourage submissions that examine religious discourse from a sociological perspective by organizing special issues that demonstrate the value of such analysis for understanding contemporary social phenomena. Funding agencies can also help overcome institutional resistance by supporting research projects that analyze religious discourse, particularly those that employ innovative methodological approaches or address pressing social issues. The goal should be to create an academic environment that recognizes religious discourse as a legitimate and valuable object of sociological inquiry while maintaining rigorous methodological standards and theoretical sophistication.

Conclusion

The time has come for sociologists to develop a systematic agenda for studying sermons and for preachers to welcome such studies. The historical barriers that may have discouraged such research, whether they were data access, methodological challenges, or academic reluctance, are increasingly surmountable. Digital technology has made sermon content more accessible than ever before, while developments in qualitative and quantitative methods have provided sophisticated analytical tools. Sociologists should seize this opportunity by developing research agendas that examine how sermons reflect and influence social attitudes, political behavior, and cultural change.

For Further Reading

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