

***Claiming the Call to Preach: Four Female Pioneers of Preaching in Nineteenth-Century America.* By Donna Giver-Johnston. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. xv + 321 pp. \$99.00 hardcover.**

This book focuses on four nineteenth-century women—Jarena Lee, Frances Willard, Louisa Woolsey, and Florence Spearing Randolph—who crafted forceful and convincing defenses of women’s call to preach. As a scholar of homiletics and a minister, Donna Giver-Johnston is particularly interested in recovering their rhetorical strategies, which she hopes will demonstrate how contemporary women ministers can claim their own calls to preach. As she explains in her first chapter, “I do not want to limit my scope to the discovery *that* women have claimed their call to preach, or that they *should*, but more precisely in order to learn *how* they did so, and therefore, to imaginatively project a horizon in which we today might do the same” (40). Her interest is less historical than homiletical, and she hopes that her study will be “generative for reframing contemporary homiletics and how it is taught” (241). She has chosen these four women because of their rhetorical as well as racial and regional diversity. Each woman defended her call in a distinctive way: Lee, by appealing to her experience of divine inspiration; Willard, by appealing to “the authority of cultural conventions of a woman’s place” (39); Woolsey, by appealing to scriptural authority; and Randolph, by appealing to “the authority of the church office” (40). In an appendix, Giver-Johnston uses their examples to create a list of “best practices” for claiming the call to preach.

In the first chapter, “The Call to Preach,” Giver-Johnston introduces her main category, the “call,” and then situates her feminist methodology in relationship to a “hermeneutics of experience,” a “hermeneutics of domination and social location,” a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” a “hermeneutics of critical evaluation,” a “hermeneutics of re-membering and reconstruction,” a “hermeneutics of creative imagination,” and, finally, a “hermeneutics of transformative action for change.” Her discussion of each “hermeneutics” has further subheadings. Under “experience,” for example, she discusses Pierre Bourdieu’s work on doxa, and under “domination and social location,” she discusses Michel Foucault’s theory of power. The point of this chapter is to demonstrate that any critical study of the call to preach must reckon with the power of a “dominant narrative” (12) that privileges the calls of men.

In Chapter 2, “History and Theology of Call,” Giver-Johnston offers a sweeping overview of the history of the call to preach that begins with the Hebrew Bible and ends in the nineteenth century. Given its scope, the chapter necessarily simplifies the rich history of women’s preaching, but its main argument is important: “the dominant narrative that shapes the tradition of prohibiting female preachers was not one spoken by Jesus or even practiced by Jesus throughout much of history; rather it is a recent practice that seems less shaped by theology and more influenced by social convention” (98).

It is not until Chapter 3, which begins on p. 113, that Giver-Johnston begins writing about the “female pioneers” of the book’s title. In four separate chapters about each “pioneer,” she offers brief accounts of their lives, describes their “inward” calls to preach and the “outward” responses of their churches, places them in their historical contexts, and then examines their rhetorical strategies. In her chapter on Randolph, for example, she offers an insightful close reading of Randolph’s 1930 sermon, “Antipathy to Women Preachers.”

Giver-Johnston is at her best when writing about rhetoric, but she is less successful when writing about the historical events and ideas that shaped these women's narrative strategies. On one hand, she should be commended for trying to make history accessible to contemporary women ministers, who seem to be her primary audience. On the other hand, her desire to simplify sometimes leads her to make blanket statements that verge on historical caricature. For example, in her chapter on Jarena Lee, we learn that "Calvin Puritanism" emphasized "formal education," but this changed during "the revivals of the nineteenth-century." As she explains, "Rather than thinking about faith, worshipers experienced divine outpourings of the Holy Spirit and personal conversions" (119). This sentence leaves the unfortunate impression that Jarena Lee and other converts failed to think about their beliefs. As Giver-Johnston reveals later in the chapter, however, Lee was in fact a sophisticated thinker who crafted a strong biblical defense of women's preaching. In other sections of the book, Giver-Johnston's broad generalizations lead her to make misleading or false assertions. In her chapter on Randolph, she claims that in the "religious culture of nineteenth-century America," converts believed that "there was nothing that could be done to save oneself from eternal damnation and earn salvation" (205). As a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, however, Randolph was taught to believe in the doctrine of free will. In general, Giver-Johnston's interest in mining the past for "best practices" leads her to overlook historical complexity.

It is clear that Giver-Johnston admires these four women, but they never fully come to life on the page. In her first chapter, she explains that she views them as historical "types": "Each of these four women represents a typical woman of the nineteenth century who occupied a specific cultural context: together they typify the cohorts of their generation" (39). She discusses their biographies only briefly in order to highlight their rhetorical strategies. This means that we do not learn about crucial features of their personal histories. In her chapter on Frances Willard, for example, Giver-Johnston does not write about Willard's romantic relationships with women or her reluctance to denounce lynching, two issues that almost certainly shaped her rhetoric.

Despite these criticisms, this book makes an important case for the inclusion of women preachers in the study of homiletics. Aspiring ministers deserve to know more about the pioneering women whose expert narrative strategies enabled them to claim the call to preach.

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First Chaplain of the Confederacy: Father Darius Hubert, S.J. By Katherine Bentley Jeffrey. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020. xix + 192 pp. \$45.00 cloth.

Over the past twenty-plus years, scholars have been discovering and presenting stories of Catholics in the American South, especially during the American Civil War, and in various degrees assessing the extent to which, if at all, matters of faith and fealty to the