

The Black Church Revisited: Toward a New Millennium DuBoisian Mode of Inquiry

Sandra L. Barnes*

Vanderbilt University

Despite predictions to the contrary, religion continues to play an integral role in the lives of Americans in general and African Americans in particular. This essay focuses on the place of the contemporary Black Church¹ and dynamics relative to relevance, semi-involuntariness, and consumerism as topics for continued sociological research on Black religious life in the spirit of scholarly inquiry by W. E. B. DuBois.

Key words: African Americans; culture; socialization; church growth and decline.

Contrary to predictions by academicians and mainstream pundits (Glaude 2010), religion continues to play an indelible role in the lives of Americans in general and African Americans in particular (Barnes 2004, 2012; Nelson 2005; Pew 2009, 2010; Tucker 2002). According to a 2009 Pew Research report, about 56 percent of U.S. adults consider religion to be very important in their lives; about 80 percent of African Americans espouse this sentiment. According to this same source, this pattern of importance is evident across most major religious traditions for African Americans. About 39 percent of all Americans report attending religious services at least once weekly; the majority of African Americans (53 percent) report such observances. About 58 percent of Americans pray at least once daily, a significantly higher percentage of African Americans (76 percent) do so. African American religious affiliation and commitment vary by gender (women more than men) and age (older persons more than younger ones) (Pew 2009). Lastly, the place and influence of the Black Church in the lives of adherents

*Direct correspondence to Sandra Barnes, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, USA. E-mail: sandra.l.barnes@vanderbilt.edu.

¹The term “the Black Church” is used to represent the institution as a collective and “Black church” when specific congregations are referenced. This decision is supported by existing literature that points to this overarching umbrella while also acknowledging the heterogeneity evident among Black churches.

has remained steady when compared with a decline in religious affiliation among White evangelicals and mainstream churches since 2007 ([Church Leader Gazette 2013](#)).

Although not definitive, these above statistics are informative when considered in the context of a global religious market and secular as well as para-religious alternatives that now compete for the time and resources of individuals ([Berger 1963, 1969](#); [Thumma and Travis 2007](#)). They also illustrate the importance of continued studies on religion in the lives of individuals in general and African Americans in particular. Beyond informing the extant literature, the study of religion, broadly defined, will enable sociologists to continue to illumine facets of the human condition and systemic forces that continue to influence persons' lives. The implications of such sustained inquiry have academic and applied import. In this essay, I position a *new millennium DuBoisian mode of inquiry* as a robust lens to better understand contemporary issues of relevance, voluntariness, and consumerism among Black Church adherents.

The above figures are not a surprise and date back to earlier research on Black religiosity ([Billingsley 1992](#); [DuBois 1903\[2003\]](#); [Lincoln and Mamiya 1990](#)). Given that Blacks were the most likely racial group to attend church on days other than Sunday, the latter scholars even referred to them as *super-churched*. The relatively consistent place of religion, particularly Christianity, for most Blacks as well as its contemporary manifestations for this same group suggest the need for more nuanced approaches for studying this phenomena. I posit that one such method reflects reorienting research to reflect a contemporary DuBoisian approach. This process provides potentially informative and intriguing lines of inquiry to examine how contemporary Black religiosity is manifesting to: turn the tide on issues such as church relevance ([Barnes 2012](#); [Tucker 2011](#)); call into question the historic semi-involuntary thesis often associated with Black Church involvement ([Ellison and Sherkat 1995](#); [Hunt and Hunt 1999](#)); and draw religious consumers such as males and younger Blacks in unexpected ways ([Barnes 2009, 2010](#); [Tucker 2002](#)). I posit that these queries are central to the continued examination of Black religiosity and the Black Church by sociologists. This essay is informed by an interdisciplinary, mixed-methodological focus.² Rather than romanticize these religious collectives, the current essay provides a framework for continued systematic inquiry and evaluation.

TOWARD A NEW MILLENNIUM DUBOISIAN MODE OF INQUIRY

I became interested in studying the Black Church and all its strengths and challenges after reading [DuBois's \(1903\[2003\]\)](#) *The Negro Church*. I as well as the

²I rely on the Faith Factor 2000 Project, the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, and the U.S. census as well as seminal studies by [DuBois \(1903\[2003\]\)](#), [Billingsley \(1992\)](#), and [Lincoln and Mamiya \(1990\)](#).

discipline of sociology are indebted to DuBois's theoretical and methodological rigor and transparency as well as his work, spirit, and legacy. Many subsequent queries are informed by his academic and applied scholarship. As such, I forward the need to revisit DuBois's approach for the contemporary study of religion. In a recent text, we framed this approach as a new millennium DuBoisian mode of inquiry, defined by scholarship that is multifaceted, multidisciplinary, and methodologically mixed and relevant to both the African American experience and other historically disenfranchised groups (Barnes *et al.* 2014). I detail this frame for consideration here;

This new millennium DuBoisian inquiry will reflect both the spirit and rigor of his original efforts—applied to a contemporary global context . . . [it] moves the best of past academic practice into uncharted territory. It requires us to broaden our queries to consider international correlates, unexpected implications . . . as well as subjects and sites that have been heretofore rarely investigated . . . [it must strive to] expand and extend the DuBoisian legacy beyond Black–White dynamics with academically robust studies that can be applied across a plethora of domains and for a myriad of social groups . . . in addition to revitalizing and re-appropriating historical Black inquiry . . . broad-based, traditional research should continue in order to compare and contrast quality of life indices of majority and minority groups; only by continuing to do so will scholars keep the larger society abreast of changes in the life chances of the populace, particularly for groups disproportionately affected by social problems such as poverty, classism, sexism, and health inequities. And just as large-scale studies can inform us about lived experiences, ethnographic work, theoretical projects, and other qualitative endeavors provide the singular ability to give voice to those who are often voiceless. (190–91)

Research that re-appropriates DuBois's scholarly lens in a multicultural, global society is challenged to consider the implications of: multiconsciousness; meaning making that informs spiritual and psychological contracts between members, clergy, and God; and the role of social media in religious expressions and proliferation. Furthermore, although comparative studies that include other demographic groups have value, the discipline is also charged to remember the continued importance of intragroup analyses that center the views and vantage points of minority groups and endeavor to provide holistic research on the human experience for diverse groups.

Furthermore, a new millennium DuBoisian approach requires re-commitment to and continual scrutiny of theoretical, methodological, and analytical ideals; it does not mean excising positivism, but cautions against both its unchecked usage and uncritical acceptance of its outcomes (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998). DuBois (1899) acknowledged its strengths and limitations;

The best available methods of sociological research are at present so liable to inaccuracies that the careful student discloses the results with diffidence. He knows that they are liable to error from the seemingly ineradicable faults of the statistical method, to even greater error from the methods of general observation, and, above all, he must ever tremble lest some personal bias, some moral conviction or some unconscious trend of thought due to previous training, has to a degree distorted the picture of his view. . . . Nevertheless, here are social problems before us demanding careful study, questions awaiting satisfactory answers. We must study, we must investigate, we

must attempt to solve; and the utmost that the world can demand is, not lack of human interest and moral conviction, but rather the heart-quality of fairness, and an earnest desire for the truth despite its possible unpleasantness. (2–3)

This challenge requires approaches that strive to comprehensively capture the phenomenon under investigation—while realizing the inability to do it justice. DuBois's assessment above candidly considers the dangers of the “human element” that can go unexamined, the possibility of ethnocentric influences, the need to disclose processes and couch results, the centrality of ethical work, and the incumbency of continued research on social problems. Applying this mode of inquiry today requires adherence to such guidelines within the often-difficult context of social settings that are increasingly complex and gradated. It also means; performing culturally sensitive research; considering counter-narratives as initial points of departure; and using project teams to capture emic and etic dynamics. Moreover, multidisciplinary, mixed-methodological, theoretically intersectional research would be the norm rather than the exception. And as DuBois suggests above, it would mean being comfortable both presenting our results and problematizing our research processes. Finally, research would reflect DuBois's fervor to examine social problems, their systemic features as well as links to micro-aggressions, everyday forms of resistance, and human resilience. Equally important, embracing a DuBoisian approach means considering innovative results from this line of inquiry viable for review, dissemination, and publication. The goal is to broadly engage in research that is “on the whole enough reliable matter to some as the scientific basis of further study, and of practical reform” (DuBois 1899:4).

This approach is not a panacea, but rather a set of tools to better capture and document the nuanced role of religion for adherents. In the case of African Americans, DuBois ([1948] 1980) critically assessed inequities and associated terrors, “it is clear that in 1900, American Negroes were an inferior caste, were frequently lynched and mobbed, widely disfranchised, and usually segregated in the main areas of life” (2), as well as adaptivity and resilience;

The Black Church institutionalizes the dialectical tensions and constant struggles that DuBois wrote about. The Black churches are not reified social institutions, but they represent the collective double-consciousness of the African American subculture expressing itself as a religious community in the uncertain shadow of an established tradition. (Lincoln and Mamiya (1990:16)

A new millennium DuBoisian approach provides a viable lens to assess features of Black religiosity such as church relevance, involvement, culture, and religious consumerism.

Black Church Relevance and Semi-Involuntariness

The study of religion and congregational life continues to enrich the discipline of sociology as we consider the unique and ever-changing influence that religion and spirituality have on the human condition. Intragroup comparisons

are invaluable to center the experiences of persons outside the main. My work centers the role and relevance of religion for African Americans. In *The Negro Church*, the first empirical report on Black congregations, [DuBois \(1903\[2003\]\)](#) reminds readers that “we easily forget that in the United States today there is a Church organization for every sixty Negro families” (5). For the estimated 9,000,000 Blacks in the United States at the time, he continues, “there were in the United States in 1890, 23,462 Negro churches” (37). Table 1 includes DuBois’s documentation of the major Black denominations at that time. Almost 100 years later, [Billingsley \(1992\)](#) estimates over 75,000 U.S. Black churches; almost 60 percent is Baptist. Furthermore, about 40 percent are affiliated with the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. Figures compiled by the U.S. Department of Commerce (Bureau of the Census), show that there were 69,738 Black churches in 2001. According to these two latter sources, as of 2001, there were over 69,000 Black churches in the United States.

Findings in table 2 show a decline in the number of Black churches across the two time periods. Yet we note similar representation for the denominations most frequented by Blacks as well as greatest presence for Baptist, COGIC, and AME churches in each period. However, a comparison that excludes “Other” nondesignated churches suggests that the reported number of Black churches appears to have remained relatively static over the 12-year period. Furthermore, a comparison of [DuBois’s \(1903\[2003\]\)](#) figures in table 1 to [Billingsley’s \(1992\)](#) figures in table 2 suggests similar relative representation by Baptist, AME, and AMEZ traditions since the early 1900s. Yet a review of the denominational patterns between 1989 and 2001 in table 2 shows a substantial decrease in churches affiliated with the AMEZ and NBC: America traditions. And substantial

TABLE 1 Black Church Participation by Denomination in 1890

Denomination	Number (%) of churches
Baptists ^a	12,946 (55.2)
Methodist Episcopal	2,984 (12.7)
African Methodist Episcopal (AME)	2,481 (10.6)
Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME)	1,759 (7.5)
African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ)	1,704 (7.3)
Other	1,033 (4.4)
Disciples of Christ	277 (1.2)
Presbyterian	278 (1.2)
Total	23,462

Key: Taken from *The Negro Church* ([DuBois 1903\[2003\]](#)). His table includes additional denominations (included here as “Other”). The current analysis focuses on denominations most commonly used in research on Black religiosity. DuBois estimated 9,000,000 Blacks in the United States during this same period. ^aDuBois refers to this group as “Regular Baptists.”

TABLE 2 Black Church Presence by Major Denominations in 1989 and 2001

Denomination	Number (%) of churches	
	1989	2001
National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. (NBC USA)	30,000 (40.0)	33,000 (47.3)
National Baptist Convention of America (NBC America)	11,398 (15.0)	2,500 (3.6)
Church of God in Christ (COGIC)	9,982 (13.2)	15,300 (21.9)
African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME)	6,200 (8.2)	8,000 (11.5)
African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ)	6,060 (8.0)	3,098 (4.4)
United Methodist Church (UMC)	2,455 (3.2)	3,500 (5.0)
Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME)	2,340 (3.1)	2,340 (3.3)
Progressive National Baptist Association (PNBA)	775 (1.0)	2,000 (2.9)
National Missionary Baptist Convention (NMBC)	N/A	N/A
Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship (FGBC)	N/A	N/A
Sub-Total for Major Denominations	69,210	69,738
Other	6,571 (8.3)	N/A
Total	75,781	69,738

Key: 1989 figures taken from Billingsley (1992). “Other” includes Black churches that are not part of the above major denominations. 2001 Figures are taken from the Statistical Abstract of the U.S., prepared for the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census for the 2001 edition of the Statistical Abstract of the United States (61) <http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/statab/sec01.pdf>. N/A, not available.

increases are evident for churches associated with the AME, NB: USA, and PNBA traditions as well as an almost two-fold increase in COGIC presence.

These congregational shifts illustrate the continued heterogeneity of Black Church profiles, the decline in several traditional denominations, and rise in independent, more charismatic/Neo-Pentecostal churches predicted by Lincoln and Mamiya (1990). However, I posit that the general *relative pattern* of denominational affiliations in 2001 is not dramatically different from DuBois’s (1903[2003]) findings. Finally, a broad comparison of results from table 1, overall church statistics in table 2, and census figures that estimate about 35.4 million Blacks in the United States in 2001, suggest that there has been a roughly four-fold increase³ in the number of Blacks and a three-fold increase in the number of Black churches since DuBois’s study. The relatively greater number of Black persons per church suggests in-migration and out-migration patterns in a global religious market. Although it is difficult to determine the actual number of Black churches without reconciling source definitions, time periods, and exclusions,⁴

³If 2010 figures are used (i.e., 39 million Blacks or 12.6 percent), the result would still be a four-fold increase.

⁴For example, the independent nature of Baptist churches precludes one national record. Thus, it is very likely that not all Baptist churches are included in tables 1 or 2. Moreover, it is

these results point to their continued presence, the relatively greater Baptist influence, and the potential beneficence of a national survey on predominately Black churches in the future. These broad trends challenge a “semi-involuntary” thesis that attributes Black Church involvement largely to segregation and limited social options, particularly in the South (Ellison and Sherkat 1995).

These church figures become even more informative when contrasted with involvement by African Americans in secular and para-religious organizations. For example, African Americans participate in the over 6,400 chapters of historically Black fraternities and sororities while in college and later in graduate chapters. The “Divine Nine” include: Alpha Kappa Alpha (950+ chapters); Alpha Phi Alpha (850+); Delta Sigma Theta (950+); Iota Phi Theta (200+); Kappa Alpha Psi (700+); Omega Psi Phi (750+); Phi Beta Sigma (700+); Zeta Phi Beta (800+); and Sigma Gamma Rho (500+) (*University of El Paso Online Newsletter* 2012). And for many African Americans, involvement in such organizations appears to compliment rather than compete with church involvement (Brown et al. 2005). Given alternative organizations and their involvement in groups such as fraternities and sororities, why do substantial numbers of African Americans continue to consider religion important, acknowledge the importance of church involvement, and participate regularly? Is their evidence that a semi-involuntary motivation was valid for the specific time, but is no longer applicable (Ellison and Sherkat 1995)? How does church presence inform relevance (Glaude 2010)?

A Dubosian approach means revisiting and problematizing the “semi-involuntary” thesis. For example, much of the prevailing sociological research on the topic is informed by an etic approach. Emic-based counter-frames suggest that religiosity is more immutably embedded in the lives of many Blacks (DuBois 1903[2003]; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Wilmore 1994). Yet such work is often dismissed as anecdotal or questionable due to sample sizes. However, such narratives suggest that, although ties to religiosity and churches for Blacks have been affected by social structures such as racism, segregation, and poverty, they are not defined or solely shaped by these forces, but rather reflect more agentic, intrinsic decisions linked to cultural awareness and appreciation. Lincoln and Mamiya’s (1990) conceptualization of the Black sacred cosmos provides a succinct illustration of the continued relevance and voluntary nature of Black religiosity;

The religious dimensions of Black churches is found in the Black sacred cosmos, a unique Afro-Christian worldview that was forged among Black people from both the African and Euro-American traditions. . . . [It] permeates all of the social institutions and cultural traditions of Black people . . . the Black sacred cosmos also reflects the deepest values of African Americans, given primal consideration to the necessity of freedom as an expression of complete belonging and allegiance to God. (17)

likely that these tallies underestimate the number of Black storefront churches, and, as noted in table 2, smaller Black denominations that do not currently compile and/or provide such information. Increased counts may also denote improved record keeping.

While conceding the influence of exclusionary dynamics and intragroup tensions, these scholars suggest that the Black sacred cosmos as a religious worldview and its appropriation in Black Church culture also resonate with adherents for other reasons correlated with: symbol systems and expressions considered more germane to the Black experience; ontological understandings of God and their relationship to the Deity; the instrumental and expressive beneficence of community- and relationship-building; and a variety of other reasons endemic to the *souls of Black folk* yet to be discovered by scholarly inquiry (DuBois 1953[1996]).

Acknowledging the critical analyses and valuable findings that can emerge from an emic perspective, insights of researchers with *insider knowledge* in general, and the possibility of inaccessible knowledge also reflect a DuBoisian frame of reference. Thus, it is important to recognize that semi-involuntariness does not capture certain dynamics that continue to engender church involvement and religious relevance for African Americans—despite the alternatives in their lives. Thus as, illustrated in Nelson's (2005) ethnography on an African American AME church, scholars much examine "Black religion as *religion* (emphasis is his) [without being] . . . preoccupied, one might say even obsessed, with one issue regarding African American religion: the relation between Black Christianity and political consciousness and/or social activism" (8). Such inquiry warrants a culturally sensitive approach that considers the possible intrinsic role of religion in everyday life.

Black Church Culture and Religious Consumerism

In prior work, I adopted and adapted cultural theory (Swidler 1986, 1995) to illumine nuances in Black Church culture and distinguish it from other religious collectives (Barnes 2005). According to this theory, culture can provide meaning and motivation as well as an impetus for strategies of action. The use of this paradigm is not new; Black Church culture was a less studied topic. Findings correlate Black Church cultural tools such as scripture, song, prayers, and sermons with activism and/or social services (Barnes 2005, 2006; Pattillo 1998); religious conservatism and vacillating activism (DuBois 1903[2003]); and priestly and prophetic tenets that both can engender social action (Barnes 2004; Cavendish 2001; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Wilmore 1994).⁵ Sociologists should be interested in contemporary appropriations of Black Church culture and its implications. For example, studies suggest a decline in the number of smaller Black churches and fewer mainstay programs associated with youth (Wimberly *et al.* 2013). A DuBoisian approach suggests that, when the rules of supply and demand are applied, *fewer* does not necessarily mean *worse* and competition is not necessarily

⁵Other reasons for this dialectical tension include: the desire to be part of the mainstream versus prudence to be independent; strong evangelicalism that results in conservative religious views, coupled with continued racism that fosters liberal political views.

negative. Fewer organizations in a given market over time may infer a leaner more efficient space where, in this instance, the decisions of *religious consumers* weed out those congregations that fail to respond to their needs (Barnes 2010; Berger 1963, 1969; Thumma and Travis 2007). More competitors in the market also typically translate to smaller shares of the local religious market (Olson and Perl 2000). Transitions in the Black religious terrain have been correlated with: class-crossing denominational shifts (Costen 1993); increased Neo-Pentecostalism (Billingsley 1992; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990); increased non-denominationalism (Tucker 2002); and growing megachurch participation. The implications of this latter dynamic represent an exciting avenue for sociological inquiry (Barnes 2010, 2012; Tucker 2002, 2011).

Megachurches are not recent phenomena. Moreover, early Black megachurches⁶ were exceeding the growth of their White counterparts. Vaughan (1993) posits that in the mid- to late-1800s, Black congregations such as Olivet Baptist Church in Chicago, Illinois, and AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, had memberships in the thousands. By the mid-1960s, Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York was listed as one of the top eight world's largest churches. He further notes, "from 1988 to 1989, eight of the twelve fastest growing churches in the nation were Black congregations" (23). More recent research suggests that about 10.5 percent of megachurch attendees are Black and about 6.7 percent of megachurches have over 50 percent Black adult participants. Based on their continued growth since the mid-1900s (Ellingson 2007; Schaller 2000; Thumma 1996), it is estimated that 10–12 percent or 120–150 of contemporary megachurches are Black (Hartford Institute of Religious Research 2005; Thumma and Travis 2007).

However, African American involvement in White megachurches is an understudied dynamic. For example, a description of the demographics of Saddleback Church, the well-known White evangelical megachurch pastored by Rick Warren and described as a haven for growing numbers of Blacks (Glaude 2010), was described in a case study as, "forty-five thousand people . . . of all ages, most of them white, some Asian, a few African-American" (Putnam *et al.* 2004:120, 122). Thumma and Travis (2007) confirm that the majority of megachurches are predominately White. Yet they contend that "the average megachurch had 14 percent of the congregation not representing the majority race" (140). However, this racial diversity consists of Hispanics, Asians, Koreans, as well as African Americans. And although Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church has a large Hispanic ministry that includes two weekly services in Spanish for over 6,000 persons, the number of African Americans that attend is unclear. Religious studies would benefit from continued investigations of the presence of racial and

⁶Black megachurches are distinguished from their White counterparts because the former churches have predominately Black memberships, Black pastors, and worship that includes historic Black Church cultural tools (Barnes 2010, 2012; Tucker 2002, 2011).

ethnic diversity in large congregations in general as well as the church cultural traditions that attract and retain them (Thumma and Travis 2007). I also contend that considering intersections between intrinsic aspects of religiosity and more pragmatic decisions around needs may provide valuable insights indicative of a DuBoisian tradition.

Megachurches in general and Black megachurches in particular are accused of siphoning off members from their smaller counterparts (Barnes 2010; Thumma and Travis 2007; Tucker 2011). However, recent work on the latter churches describes a noticeable presence of charismatic, prophetic, and racially informed congregations that sponsor cafeteria-styled programs distinct from their large White peers. Rather than merely exiting Black churches considered irrelevant for the times, I suggest that increasing numbers of African Americans have opted to transition to Black megachurches (Barnes 2010; Lee 2005; Tucker 2002; Walton 2011) and, to a lesser degree, their White peers (Thumma and Travis 2007). Many Black megachurch attendees appear to be attracted to: denominational independence; charismatic leaders; enlivened worship; niche programs; and ideologies linked to godly favor, temporal expectations, personal empowerment, and social action (Barnes 2012; Lee 2005; Tucker 2002, 2011; Walton 2011). Moreover, racially and culturally informed church spaces are also a draw (Barnes 2010). The combined result of innovative contemporary cultural tools and historic Black Church cultural tools, such as prayer, gospel music, and call-and-response, result in potentially formidable draws for many savvy African American religious consumers. Yet large churches are theologically, programmatically, and politically diverse and also open to critique about routinization, prosperity theology, and pastoral power (Associated Press 2006; Barber 2011; Barnes 2012; Harrison 2005; Lee 2005; Tucker 2011; Walton 2009).

There is some credence to Edmond's assertion that "the [Black] church still serves the primary social, political, and psychic needs of African Americans while white evangelicals have turned to other organizations to respond to these needs" (quoted in Church Leader Gazette 2013). However, the spiritual and nonspiritual needs of African Americans are varied and complicated (Barnes 2012; Tucker 2011). This finding is particularly germane given the plethora of other options individuals have for their time, funds, and interests. What cultural dynamics are offered at Black megachurches to intentionally and proactively attract and retain individuals? Specifically, why are attendees choosing to participate in certain megachurches as opposed to others? What more can we learn about these hidden populations not provided in the cadre of existing studies (Barnes 2010, 2012; Gilkes 1998; Harrison 2005; Lee 2005; Tucker 2011; Walton 2009, 2011)? I contend that many Black megachurches reflect hybrids of the historic Black Church strategically informed by secularism, the White evangelical tradition, and aspects of popular culture. Whether one considers such collectives prophetic, politically complacent, culturally relevant, or prosperity-driven, they represent a form of religious life worthy of continued inquiry. A DuBoisian lens can enable us to re-consider the profiles, experiences, and expectations of modern-day

African American religious consumers as well as possible class-based differences. Other important lines of inquiry include the role of women in large Black churches as religious consumers in general as well as appropriations of secular culture by large churches as the Black community and society become more differentiated and pluralistic.

DISCUSSION: THE NEXT CHAPTER FOR THE BLACK CHURCH

This essay examined several broad themes associated with contemporary Black religiosity in general and the Black Church in particular that can inform readers about congregational relevance, semi-involuntariness, and the growing place of large Black churches as contemporary exemplars of religious consumerism. I consider these dynamics and the possibility to illumine them further using a process that reflects a contemporary reimagining of a DuBoisian scholarly tradition. Despite increased competition in the religious marketplace, research suggests continued Black Church presence and growing presence of Black megachurches. Moreover, there appears to be similar patterns of denominational differentiation today when compared with late nineteenth-century reports (DuBois 1903[2003]; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Yet increased presence of COGIC and Baptist traditions and nondenominational large churches suggest transitions to more independent, charismatic/Neo-Pentecostal spaces, or churches considered more relevant (Barnes 2012; Tucker 2011).

Although African Americans continue to espouse the importance of religion in their lives and are involved in church at higher relative rates than Whites (Pew 2009, 2010), I posit that participation in smaller denominations appears to be declining due, in part, to an inability to proactively attract and retain youth, young adults, and their families and challenges associated with itinerancy (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Although not dead, these latter traditions may be described as ecclesiastically anemic (Glaude 2010). Without becoming more relevant, many may go the way of other volunteer organizations that fail to alter their nature and scope in response to changing constituencies. Prudent responses will be based on whether and how congregational culture adapts to adherents' needs and interests. Continued queries on such subjects will enhance the discipline of sociology and provide crucial academic and applied information on how religion continues to impact lived experiences and quality of life.

The Black Church has always been complicated, the Black community more heterogeneous than described in academic and mainstream sources, and its prophetic witness more dynamic than not. Moreover, evaluations of and predictions about the Black Church are not new—DuBois (1903[2003]) predicted that Black clerical influence would be supplanted by economically stable Blacks; Gary Marx (1971) contended that Black religion is an opiate that quells civil rights activism; and (Reed 1986) critiqued its apolitical nature. Thus, it is important to continue to investigate whether and how such churches will adapt to an ever-changing

religious terrain. Society is now more tolerant. De jure discrimination has been replaced by de facto acts as well as more covert forms of inequality (Bonilla Silva 2010; Feagin 2010). These systemic changes suggest that responses by the Black community and the Black Church should change as well. Black churches could do more to address social problems; so could non-Black churches and secular organizations (Barnes 2004, 2005). Whether and how religious and nonreligious groups unite to arrest chronic and contemporary social problems in the twenty-first century should be central to sociological inquiry.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A NEW MILLENNIUM DUBOISIAN MODE OF INQUIRY

A new millennium DuBoisian mode of inquiry involves predicting social phenomena as much as describing and explaining it. As quoted earlier from DuBois, a myriad of social questions remain unanswered. For example, what are the implications of the capture and death of Bin Laden for meaning making among Muslims and Christians in the United States and abroad? Are vestiges of civil religion evident in the Occupy Wall Street or Tea Party Movements? What are the implications of religiosity and race on political decision-making in the last two national elections—and how might they inform future elections (Barnes and Nwosu 2013)? How should scholars understand the place of unchurched African Americans in explaining a semi-involuntary premise (West 1993)? Furthermore, do theses exist that help explain religious and/or spiritual dictates of disenfranchised Whites, newly arrived immigrants, undocumented individuals, or other groups experiencing forms of exclusion today? These types of enriching inquiries help correlate meaning making that is central to understanding outcomes such as congregational involvement, relevance, and consumerism.

Moving forward, it will also be important to examine whether and how religiosity is influenced as church cultural dynamics become more complex. A strong argument can be made that *double consciousness* is being supplanted by *multiconsciousness* for many people of color in the United States (Nwosu and Barnes 2014). I further posit that African Americans' views about identity, worldview, expectations, perspectives on race, and the requisite tools to negotiate society are in continual flux such that past explanations for their religious proclivities are now circumscribed. This means that the Black Church cultural tool kit is also in flux as well as its influence on the attitudes and actions of adherents (and vice versa). New tools should be expected to emerge. Just as DuBois's work originated in this country and extended internationally, more research on religious relevance, semi-involuntariness, and large church growth for the global religious terrain is needed. A DuBoisian framework requires prophetic research that: asks complex questions; challenges the status quo; is culturally sensitive and comprehensive; considers the impact of both structural forces and human agency; and necessitates self-reflection on the part of researchers. Modeling DuBois, this

approach will foster research that is, by definition, more relevant inside and outside congregational walls as well as in the broader society.

REFERENCES

- Ainsworth-Darnell, James, and Douglas Downey. 1998. "Assessing the Oppositional Culture Explanation for Racial/Ethnic Differences in School Performance." *American Sociological Review* 63:536–53.
- Associated Press. 2006. "Black Leaders Blast Mega Churches, Say They Ignore Social Justice." (June 29, 2006). Retrieved December 27, 2007. <http://www.christianpost.com/article/20060629/19533>.
- Barber, Kendra. 2011. "'What Happened to All the Protests?' Black Megachurches' Responses to Racism in a Colorblind Era." *Journal of African American Studies* (January 22):118–28.
- Barnes, Sandra. 2004. "Priestly and Prophetic Influences on Black Church Social Services." *Social Problems* 51, no. 2:202–21.
- . 2005. "Black Church Culture and Community Action." *Social Forces* 84, no. 2:967–94.
- . 2006. "Whosoever Will Let Her Come: Gender Inclusivity in the Black Church." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45(3):371–87.
- . 2009. "Religion and Rap Music: An Analysis of Black Church Usage." *Review of Religious Research* 49, no. 3:319–38.
- . 2010. *Black Megachurch Culture: Models for Education and Empowerment*. New York: Peter Lang Press.
- . 2012. *Live Long and Prosper: How Black Megachurches Address HIV/AIDS and Poverty in the Age of Prosperity Theology*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Barnes, Sandra, and Oluchi Nwosu. 2013. "Black Church Electoral and Protest Politics from 2002–2012: A Social Media Analysis of the Resistance versus Accommodation Dialectic." *Journal of African American Studies*, doi:10.1007/s12111-013-9263-4.
- Barnes, S., Zandria Robinson, and Earl Wright III, eds. 2014. *Re-Positioning Race: Prophetic Research in a Post-Racial Obama Age*. New York: State University Press of New York.
- Berger, Peter. 1963. "A Market Model for the Analysis of Ecumenicity." *Social Research* 30:77–93.
- . 1969. *The Sacred Canopy*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Billingsley, Andrew. 1992. *Climbing Jacob's Ladder: The Enduring Legacy of African-American Families*. New York: A Touchstone Book.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2010. *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. Lanham, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Brown, T., Gregory Parks, and Clarendia M. Phillips, eds. 2005. *African American Fraternities and Sororities: The Legacy and the Vision*. KY: The University Press of Kentucky.
- Cavendish, James. 2001. "To March or Not to March: Clergy Mobilization Strategies and Grassroots Antidrug Activism." In *Christian Clergy in American Politics*, edited by S. CrawfordL. Olson, 203–23. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Church Leader Gazette*. 2013. "Pew Research Report Says Loyalty to Black Protestant Churches Remains Strong." (May 8, 2013). Retrieved May 9, 2013. <http://churchleadergazette.com/clg/2013/05/pew-research-report-says-loyal.html>.
- Costen, Melva Wilson. 1993. *African-American Christian Worship*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- DuBois, W. E. B. 1899. *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.
- DuBois, W. E. B. 1903 [2003]. *The Negro Church*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altimira Press.
- . [1948] 1980. "The Talented Tenth." *The Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois*. Sanford, NC: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1980–1981.

- DuBois, W. E. B. 1953[1996]. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Random House.
- Ellingson, Stephen. 2007. *The Megachurch and the Mainline: Remaking Religious Tradition in the Twenty-First Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ellison, Christopher, and Darren Sherkat. 1995. "The 'Semi-Involuntary Institution' Revisited: Regional Variations in Church Participation among Black Americans." *Social Forces* 73, no. 4:1415–37.
- Feagin, Joe R. 2010. *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*. New York: Routledge.
- Frazier, E. Franklin. 1964. *The Negro Church in America*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Gilkes, Cheryl Townsend. 1998. "Plenty Good Room: Adaptation in a Changing Black Church." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 558:101–21.
- Glaude, Eddie Jr. 2010. "The Black Church Is Dead." *Huffington Post*, February 24. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eddie-glaude-jr-phd/the-black-church-is-dead_b_473815.html.
- Harrison, Milmon. 2005. *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hartford Institute of Religious Research. 2005. *Mega Churches Today: Summary of Data from the Faith Communities Today Project*, 1–16.
- Hunt, Larry, and Matthew Hunt. 1999. "Regional Patterns in African American Church Attendance: Revisiting the Semi-Involuntary Thesis." *Social Forces* 78, no. 2:779–91.
- Lee, Shayne. 2005. *T.D. Jakes: America's New Preacher*. New York: New York University Press.
- Lincoln, C. Eric, and Lawrence H. Mamiya. 1990. *The Black Church in the African-American Experience*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Marx, Gary. 1971. "Religion: Opiate or Inspiration of Civil Rights Militancy?" In *The Black Church in America*, edited by Hart Nelsen, Raytha Yokley, and Anne Nelsen, 150–60. New York: Basic Books.
- Mays, Benjamin, and Joseph Nicholson. 1933. *The Negro's Church*. New York: Institute of Social and Religious Research.
- Nelson, Timothy. 2005. *Every Time I Feel the Spirit: Religious Experience and Ritual in an African American Church*. New York: New York University Press.
- Nwosu, Oluchi, and Sandra Barnes. 2014. "'Where Difference Is the Norm': Exploring Refugee Student Ethnic Identity Development, Acculturation, and Agency at Shaw Academy." *Journal of Refugee Studies*. doi: 10.1093/jrs/fet050.
- Olson, Daniel, and Paul Perl. 2000. "Religious Market Share and Intensity of Church Involvement in Five Denominations." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39, no. 1:12–31.
- Pattillo-McCoy, Mary. 1998. Church Culture as a Strategy of Action in the Black Community. *American Sociological Review* 63:767–84.
- Pew Research. 2009. "A Religious Portrait of African-Americans" (January 30, 2009). <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/01/30/a-religious-portrait-of-african-americans/>.
- Putnam, R., L. Feldstein, and D. Cohen. 2004. *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Reed, Adolph. 1986. *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon: The Crisis of Purpose in Afro-American Politics*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Schaller, Lyle. 2000. *The Very Large Church*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Swidler, Ann. 1986. "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies." *American Sociological Review* 51:273–86.
- . 1995. "Cultural Power and Social Movements." In *Social Movements and Culture*, Vol. 4, edited by Hank Johnston, and Bert Klandermans, 25–40. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. 2010. "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey." <http://religions.pewforum.org/affiliations>.
- Thumma, Scott. 1996. "Megachurches of Atlanta." In *Religions of Atlanta: Religious Diversity in the Centennial Olympic City*, edited by Gary Laderman, 199–213. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press.
- Thumma, Scott, and Dave Travis. 2007. *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Tucker, Tamelyn. 2002. "Get on Board, Little Children, There's Room for Many More: The Black Mega Church Phenomenon." *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* XXIX, no. 1–2:177–203.
- . 2011. *The Black Megachurch: Theology, Gender, and the Politics of Public Engagement*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.
- Vaughan, John. 1993. *Megachurches & America's Cities: How Churches Grow*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
- Walton, Jonathan. 2009. *Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism*. New York: New York University Press.
- . 2011. "For Where Two or Three (Thousand) Are Gathered in My Name! A Cultural History and Ethical Analysis of African American Megachurches." *Journal of African American Studies* (February 22):1–22.
- West, Cornel. 1993. *Race Matters*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Wilmore, Gayraud S. 1994. *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*. New York: Orbis Books.
- Wimberly, Anne Streaty, Sandra Barnes, and Karma Johnson. 2013. *Claiming Hope: Youth Ministry in the Black Church*. New York: Judson Press.