# CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN RELIGION: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM THE NSBA?

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## Introduction

There is a long and illustrious tradition of social science research on African American religion. Leading scholars --including W.E.B. DuBois, Charles S. Johnson, E. Franklin Frazier, and others-- devoted considerable attention to the social role of black churches in various sociohistorical and community studies produced prior to the civil rights movement. Beginning in the 1950s, a number of studies focused on the roles of churches and pastors in civil rights activism. After the mid-1970s, however, research on African American religion waned for a time. Fortunately, we are now witnessing a resurgence of interest in this topic, and while valuable scholarship in the broad sociohistorical tradition continues (e.g., Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990), much of the renewed attention can be traced to the availability of data and studies from the 1979-80 National Survey of Black Americans (hereafter NSBA). Prior to the collection and subsequent public release of these data, the major sources of systematic data on African Americans were community surveys (e.g., the Detroit Area Survey) and general population surveys, which often contained small and unrepresentative samples of African Americans (e.g., the NORC General Social Survey). The NSBA has opened the door to a richer understanding of the prominence of religious institutions, practices, and beliefs in the individual and collective lives of African Americans.

Specifically, the NSBA data have been helpful for least three purposes: (1) providing new and systematic descriptive information on the religious affiliations, practices, and experiences of African Americans; (2) revisiting earlier theoretical and empirical works in this area, many of which are now quite dated; and (3) testing sociological theories that were based on the experiences of white Americans, to gauge their value in understanding contemporary African American religion. The remainder of this brief article summarizes some of the contributions to date of research based on the NSBA, focusing on four areas: (1) the social distribution of religiosity within the African American population; (2) patterns and correlates of denominational switching and apostasy; (3) religious variations in racial orientations and politics; and (4) the relationships between religious involvement and aspects of personal well-being.

## Patterns and Correlates of Religiosity

Accumulated wisdom in the social sciences and in popular culture suggests that African Americans are more religious, by conventional indicators, than whites of comparable social backgrounds (for review, see Levin, Taylor, & Chatters, 1994). The NSBA data have enabled investigators to confirm this in considerable detail. For instance, descriptive analyses indicate that large percentages of African Americans say that they are church members (62%), attend religious services at least weekly (36%), consider worshipping at church to be "very important" (63%), pray nearly every day (78%), read religious materials nearly every day (27%), watch or listen to religious media programs nearly every day (21%), and identify themselves as "very religious" people (34%). In addition, most African Americans, especially elders, receive material aid (i.e., goods and services) or socioemotional support from church members, and many also request prayers from associates on a regular basis (for reviews, see Taylor & Chatters, 1991; Taylor, 1993).

Several multivariate studies have analyzed the distribution of various dimensions of religiosity within the overall African American population, and among elderly blacks in particular (e.g., Taylor, 1986, 1988). While the results of these studies defy easy summary, several generalizations are possible. First, African American women report much higher levels of most forms of religiosity than black men. There are also considerable age/cohort

variations in religiosity. However, in contrast to studies of the general population, which often report a curvilinear association between age and religiosity, NSBA data show that religiosity increases monotonically with age (or diminishes consistently with youth) among African Americans. Southerners and residents of rural areas also tend to report higher levels of religiosity than other African Americans. While socioeconomic variables such as education and income bear a modest positive association with public religious involvement (e.g., church membership and frequency of attendance), they are generally unrelated to more private, non-institutionalized expressions of religiosity.

Recent work by Levin and colleagues analyzes NSBA data with the aid of more sophisticated statistical techniques --notably covariance-structure modelling-- and reveals three empirically distinct dimensions of African American religiosity: organizational (e.g., religious attendance and congregational participation), non-organizational (e.g., prayer, Bible study, religious media consumption), and subjective religiosity (e.g., strength of personal religious identity). These studies also help to clarify the sociodemographic covariates of each of these dimensions (Chatters, Levin, & Taylor, 1992; Levin, Taylor, & Chatters, 1995).

Much of the early NSBA research on this topic focused on descriptive tasks that now are largely completed. At this stage, the NSBA data are probably most useful for addressing substantive concerns regarding contemporary African American religious life. One contribution in this vein is the recent study by Ellison and Sherkat (1995), which seeks to account for the widely-observed regional variations in church participation among African Americans. Building on a rich tradition of sociohistorical studies and ethnographies (e.g., Johnson 1941; Lewis 1955; Frazier 1964), Ellison and Sherkat contrast the sociocultural environments that have traditionally prevailed in the rural South and the urban non-South, respectively, with particular attention to: (1) the social role of religious institutions, (2) the availability of alternative lifestyles and secular opportunities for social status and social and political resources, and (3) the social norms and community expectations regarding church involvement.

Following the lead of an earlier generation of scholars (e.g., Nelsen, Yokley, & Nelsen, 1971), Ellison and Sherkat (1995) suggest that because of its symbolic centrality and multifunctionality, the rural southern church has developed as a "semi-involuntary" institution. In this view, the comparatively high level of church involvement in these areas partly reflects the impact of community norms and expectations. because cities --especially those outside the South-- have traditionally nurtured diverse lifestyles, various religious options, and greater secular outlets for status-seeking and social participation, informal social pressures to participate in congregational life have often been less evident in (though not absent from) non-southern cities and suburbs. Although the NSBA dataset lacks direct measures of social expectations and pressures for church participation, taken together the information on the levels, patterns, and correlates of church participation suggests that vestiges of traditional regional differences in African American religion persist in the contemporary period. Moreover, Ellison and Sherkat use this study to argue that careful consideration of the African American experience can illuminate more general theoretical debates in the sociology of religion.

Future research should probe other sociodemographic covariates of black religiosity, such as the substantial "gender gap" (e.g., Levin & Taylor, 1993) and the striking age/cohort differences. These patterns have important and potentially unsettling implications for the future of African American religious bodies. Such research might profitably test competing explanations for these variations (e.g., in the case of the gender gap, socialization vs. structural location accounts), assessing the relevance of prevailing theories for the contemporary African American experience, and revising the dominant perspectives so that they are more sensitive to the distinctive features of that experience.

## Denominational Switching and Apostasy

Although the study of denominational switching and apostasy (or leaving

organized religion) has received considerable attention from scholars, the dearth of large-scale data on blacks has meant that virtually all research in this area has been geared toward white Americans. The NSBA questionnaire items on religious preferences (i.e., denomination during upbringing, and at the time of the interview) have permitted researchers to investigate this issue for the first time, and to test several hypotheses on African American religious change developed during the 1950s and 1960s. Briefly, drawing on the arguments of Frazier and others, Glenn (1964) observed that although churches were the traditional cornerstone of black communities, by the 1960s many academic observers, and some African American laypersons, criticized churches for their "otherworldly" theologies, political quiescence, and undemocratic organizational styles. Without rapid adaptation on the part of churches and their leaders, Glenn anticipated large-scale defections from historically black Baptist and Methodist churches (the "black mainline" churches), which have traditionally claimed the allegiance of a large majority of African Americans. He predicted that assimilationist blacks would join predominantly white Protestant and Catholic churches, while politically militant blacks would reject Christianity in favor of Islam, or would abandon organized religion altogether.

Research based on the NSBA has generally disconfirmed these hypotheses. In one study, Ellison and Sherkat (1990) analyze both NSBA data and data from the 1980-88 General Social Surveys to examine patterns of African American religious mobility. Overall, their findings are consistent with a "steady-state" perspective which emphasizes the importance of social network ties and family relationships, personal spiritual concerns, and cultural traditions in preserving African American religious allegiances. Indeed, rates of switching and apostasy appear significantly lower among blacks than in the general population. Ellison and Sherkat report only modest declines in Baptist and Methodist preferences, with minimal switching to predominantly white groups (i.e., liberal Protestant and Catholic) and limited movement into Islam and other non-Christian faiths. Consistent with the arguments of Frazier and Glenn, however, they report that a growing percentage of African Americans are abandoning organized religion; this tendency is especially evident among younger cohorts. At the same time, NSBA data indicate that a non-trivial proportion of persons leaving black mainline churches are converting to smaller conservative groups (e.g., the Church of God in Christ, Jehovah's Witnesses), a pattern unanticipated by earlier observers.

In a companion study, Sherkat and Ellison (1991) examine individual-level correlates of switching and apostasy. They focus on NSBA respondents who were raised in black mainline (i.e., Baptist and Methodist-related) denominations, comparing "stayers" (persons who remained in these groups) with three other groups: (a) those who switched to conservative Protestant churches; (b) those who joined other liberal or radical faiths (e.g., predominantly white Protestant, Catholic, and Islam and other non-Christian groups); and (c) those who dropped out of organized religion (i.e., apostates). Sherkat and Ellison (1991) find only partial support for the notion that departures from black mainline churches, and especially the rising levels of apostasy, result from racial or political disaffection. Indeed, NSBA data show that African Americans overwhelmingly respect the sociohistorical role of churches and their contributions to African American life (Taylor, Thornton, & Chatters, 1987). Moreover, Sherkat and Ellison (1991) find that, compared to "stayers," apostates are typically younger, non-southern and male, and they tend to be relatively isolated from family and community networks. These patterns are consistent with Nelsen's (1988) suggestion that burgeoning black apostasy may have resulted from the economic and social disruption of urban communities, and perhaps from the emergence of alternative secular subcultures within these contexts.

## Racial Orientations and Politics

As noted above, prior to the civil rights movement the Black Church was criticized for allegedly promoting otherworldliness and political passivity among African American laity, instead of pressing for racial and economic justice. For many observers, the 1950s and 1960s brought evidence of a sea change in the spirit of African American religion. Churches and clergy

provided leadership, resources, and legitimation for civil rights struggles through emerging theologies of black liberation. Religious institutions often served as organizing and information centers that fueled grassroots activism (Morris, 1984; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Because most available evidence was collected in the politically-charged environment of the 1960s (for review, see Ellison, 1991), these studies leave open the important question of whether African American religion encourages or hinders racial solidarity and political mobilization in the post-civil rights era.

Using NSBA data, Ellison (1991) examines the relationships between various aspects of religious involvement and two racial orientations: racial identification, or feelings of closeness to diverse segments of the black community, and racial separatism, or desires for cultural and institutional distance from whites. Ellison finds that several indicators of religious involvement (public religious participation, private devotional activity, black mainline [i.e., Baptist or Methodist] denominational ties) are positively associated with racial identification. However, the positive relationship between religious devotion and racial identification is reversed among African Americans born prior to 1920, who probably underwent their formative religious socialization well before the onset of civil rights activism in the churches. This pattern seems consistent with the view that the ethos of African American religion underwent fundamental and lasting transformation during the civil rights movement. In addition, Ellison (1991) finds only weak and inconsistent links between religious involvement and support for separatist ideology, which suggests that mainstream (i.e., Christian) religious institutions promote inclusive, but not exclusive, forms of African American racial solidarity.

Additional work using NSBA data associates public religious involvement with other aspects of racial ideology, including racial self-esteem, or the inclination to accept positive racial group images and to reject unflattering group images (Demo & Hughes, 1990). Further, analyses based on the NSBA link various aspects of religious involvement with electoral participation (Wilcox & Gomez, 1990; Taylor & Thornton, 1993). At least one study suggests that the tendency of churchgoing blacks to vote more often than others stems partly from their stronger feelings of psychological closeness and shared interests with other African Americans (Wilcox & Gomez, 1990).

## Religion and Well-Being

One of the major contributions of NSBA-based research has been to clarify the importance of religious institutions, practices, and values for the personal well-being of African Americans. Because this body of literature has grown so rapidly, it will be the focus of a separate review, to be published in a future issue of African American Research Perspectives. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to provide a brief summary here.

Studies based on the NSBA associate aspects of religious involvement with an array of positive psychosocial outcomes --e.g., friendliness and interpersonal congeniality, as rated by NSBA interviewers (Ellison 1992), and satisfaction with family life (Ellison, in press). However, the bulk of the work in this area has examined standard indicators of psychological well-being. For instance, several studies indicate that religious involvement --most notably public religious participation, or organizational religiosity-- is positively related to the overall life satisfaction of African Americans. On closer inspection, Ellison and Gay (1990) find that these apparent benefits are restricted primarily to older, non-southern African Americans, a pattern consistent with the view that the rural southern Black church retains vestiges of its earlier "semi-involuntary" character. Further, among elderly African Americans, the apparently felicitous effects of religion on life satisfaction are not due solely to the confounding of religious involvement and functional health (Levin, Chatters, & Taylor, 1995).

In addition, several studies examine the relationships between religious involvement and two important dimensions of self-perception: self-esteem, or the general sense of moral self-worth, and personal mastery, or the perceived ability to control one's affairs. Among elderly NSBA respondents, Krause and Tran (1989) report that aspects of religious involvement are positively associated with both esteem and mastery. In the total NSBA sample, Ellison

(1993) finds that such beneficial estimated effects are confined mainly to models of self-esteem. Further, he reports interesting interactive relationships involving religious involvement, stressors, and self-perception; public religious participation buffers the deleterious effects of physical unattractiveness on self-esteem, while private devotional activity mitigates the negative impact of chronic illnesses on self-esteem. These contingent patterns do not surface in models of personal mastery.

A number of works have used NSBA data to investigate the intervening mechanisms linking religion and African American well-being. For instance, informal social support from church members is clearly important in this context, particularly for black elders; thus, patterns and correlates of church-based support have received considerable attention from researchers in the NSBA community (e.g., Taylor & Chatters, 1988). Future studies might profitably explore: (1) the correlates of receiving various types of informal support (e.g., goods and services vs. prayers vs. companionship); (2) the intersection of church-based, familial, and friendship-based networks (and the interchangeability or functional complementarity of the support they provide); and (3) the correlates of participation in formal church-based support activities (e.g., programs, pastoral counseling), and the effects of such participation on individual well-being.

In addition, NSBA data have shed new light on the use of prayer in coping with stressful circumstances. Preliminary findings from the NSBA showed that African Americans turn to prayer frequently when confronting serious personal problems, and that they perceive these religious coping strategies to be satisfying and helpful (Neighbors, Jackson, Bowman, & Gurin, 1983). More recent multivariate analyses by Ellison and Taylor (in press) indicate that prayer is especially likely to be used by African Americans who are dealing with bereavement or health problems (their own illnesses, or those of loved ones). Persons reporting high levels of general religiosity, females, and individuals who lack feelings of mastery are also particularly likely to turn to prayer when coping with personal problems.

## Concluding Comment

This brief review has discussed some of the ways in which the NSBA data have enhanced our understanding of the richness and diversity of contemporary African American religious life. To be sure, many of the basic descriptive questions have now been resolved, and because they are more than 15 years old, the baseline (1979-80) NSBA data are of diminishing usefulness for this purpose. However, these data may still be valuable for researchers seeking to revisit (and perhaps revise) earlier treatments of African American religion, and for those wishing to engage a host of theoretical and substantive debates in the social scientific study of religion. Further, the impending public release of three additional panels of NSBA data opens up exciting new possibilities for tracing patterns of change and persistence in religiosity, and for documenting the long-term influence of religious involvement in the lives of individual African Americans.

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