
ARE THEY TRULY NOT RELIGIOUS? A MULTI-METHOD ANALYSIS OF THE ATTITUDES OF RELIGIOUSLY NONINVOLVED AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

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Introduction

Religion plays a major role in the lives of African Americans. Data from the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) indicate that approximately 84% of African American men and women define themselves as being very or fairly religious. Seventy-seven percent of African American adults believe that attending church is very important and 68% are official members of churches. Further, approximately 97% of African American adults report that they pray and 78% report praying nearly every day (Taylor & Chatters, 1991). These data underscore the scope of African American religious involvement and reveal something of the passion with which African American adults embrace religious life. In addition, however, substantial empirical as well as historical evidence indicates that religion is a particularly significant factor in the lives of African American women. Indeed, relative to their male counterparts, and to men and women of other ethnic groups, African American women are more likely to be formal church members, report greater overall religious commitment, evidence a higher degree of involvement in church life, and indicate that they are religious (Levin & Taylor, 1998; Taylor & Chatters, 1991; Chatters, Levin, & Taylor, 1992; Levin, Taylor & Chatters, 1995; Taylor, Mattis, & Chatters, 1999).

Although the pulpits of African American churches historically have been the domain of men, African American women serve as the church's most active and consistent source of human capital. The public ministries that form the backbone of the Black church, and that have established the church as the central moral, economic, political and social force in the African American community, have been developed and sustained largely by women (Baer, 1993; Higginbotham, 1993). Further, African American women serve as the primary means by which religious and cultural values are informally transmitted and sustained within and across generations (Townsend-Gilkes,

1997). Mothers, in particular, play crucial roles in the religious socialization of children. The long-term impact of mothers' roles in socialization is evidenced, in part, by the fact that maternal religious affiliation is a strong predictor of the religious affiliation of African American adults (Taylor & Chatters, 1991).

Recent empirical work also demonstrates that religion has a profound impact on the relational lives and the psychological development of African American women. African American women's religious beliefs inform the ways in which they define and enact gender roles (McKay, 1989). Religion helps to structure the quality of women's relationships with their spouses and children. Among African American mothers, religiosity (as measured by involvement in organizational religious activities) is associated with greater family unity (McAdoo, 1995), more consistent parenting practices, lower levels of marital conflict, and more supportive interactions with their spouses regarding child-rearing and caregiving (Brody, Stoneman, Flor, & McCrary, 1994). Further, religion plays a central role in African American women's efforts to successfully endure and respond to the challenges of life. In particular, prayer provides a particularly powerful source of support for African American women. In fact, direct and intercessory prayer are key in African American women's efforts to cope with a wide array of problems including illness, psychological distress, death, problems associated with parenting, relationship stresses, and financial difficulties (Chatters & Taylor, 1989; Ellison & Taylor, 1996; McAdoo, 1995; Neighbors, Musick, & Williams, 1998; Neighbors, Jackson, Bowman, & Gurin, 1983).

The pervasiveness of findings regarding the importance of religion and church in the lives of African American women has unfortunately obscured the experiences of other African American women who report decidedly lower levels of religious involvement. We know very little about the attitudes and practices of African American women who do not attend church or participate in formal religious activities. It is unclear whether these women represent a genuinely irreligious group of African Americans who are completely estranged from religious institutions and practices. This study attempts to broaden the scope of our understanding of African American women's religious lives by focusing on the attitudes and practices of this group of women.

Focus of the Present Analysis

This investigation utilizes a mixed methodology approach combining qualitative and quantitative data. First, we report empirical findings from the National Survey of Black Americans regarding the prevalence of religious non-involvement among women. Here we focus attention on a variety of standard indices of organizational, non-organizational and subjective religiosity, and identify the extent to which women report low levels of involvement in each. Next we use qualitative data from a study of

African American women’s religious and spiritual experience to provide a context for the interpretation of findings from the analyses of the survey data. The qualitative data embodies a phenomenological perspective that is used to develop specific insights into the nature and functions of religion as described by respondents themselves.

Methods and Results

Quantitative Data

The quantitative portion of this study was conducted on the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) dataset. These data were collected by the Program for Research on Black Americans, Institute for Social Research (University of Michigan). The NSBA sample consists of 2,107 completed interviews collected in 1979 and 1980, representing a response rate of nearly 70 percent. A more detailed description of the sample is provided by Jackson (1991), and a demographic description of the NSBA sample and comparison with Census data are provided by Taylor (1986). James S. Jackson, M. Belinda Tucker and Gerald Gurin are the principal investigators of the National Survey of Black Americans.

Dependent Measures

Three dependent variables were examined in this analysis: the frequency of prayer, the degree of subjective religiosity, and the importance of taking children to religious services. Frequency of prayer was measured by the question, “How often do you pray? Would you say nearly everyday, at least once per week, a few times a month, a few times a year, or never?” Subjective religiosity was measured by the question, “How religious would you say you are - very religious, fairly religious, not too religious, or not religious at all?” Importance of taking children to religious services was measured by the question, “How important is it for Black parents to send or take their children to religious services? Would you say that it is very important, fairly important, not too important or not important at all?” These three measures are of interest as they provide an assessment of respondents’ religious self-definitions, involvement in a private devotional practice and attitudes towards the importance of religion for children.

Quantitative Results

Overall, only a few black women indicate that they are not involved in churches. Only 7.3% of black women indicate that they do not have a current religious affiliation. Similarly, only 6.2% of black women indicate that they have not attended religious services since the age of 18, and another 7.3% attend religious services less

Table 1: Bivariate Analysis of Having a Current Religious Affiliation and Religious Service Attendance on the Frequency of Prayer

Frequency of Prayer	Nearly Everyday	Weekly	Few Times a Month	Few Times a Year	Never	Total	Chi Square
<u>Have Religious Affiliation</u>							
Yes	87.1	6.1	4.4	1.5	0.9	100% (1206)	118.86***
No	48.4	17.2	15.1	10.8	8.6	100% (93)	
<u>Attend Religious Services</u>							
Yes	87.7	6.4	4.5	0.7	0.7	100% (1118)	169.23***
Less Than Once Per Year	66.3	13.7	9.5	7.4	3.2	100% (95)	
Never Attend Since 18	56.8	6.2	11.1	16	9.9	100% (81)	

*p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

than once per year. Table 1 presents the bivariate analysis for current religious affiliation and religious service attendance on the frequency of prayer. Respondents who have a current religious affiliation and those who attend services pray on a more frequent basis than their counterparts. The most relevant data for this paper is that almost half of the black women (48.4%) who do not have a current religious affiliation, 66.3% of the women who attend religious services less than once per year, and 56.8% of the women who never attend religious services indicate that they *pray nearly everyday*. Only a small percentage of black women who are not involved in churches indicate that they never pray. Table 2 indicates that current religious affiliation and religious service attendance are also strongly associated with the level of subjective religiosity. Although respondents who have an affiliation and who attend religious services more frequently indicate being more religious, half of the black women that have no religious affiliation and 6 of 10 of the women who never attend services or who attend less than once a year, describe themselves as either very or fairly religious. Table 3 presents the bivariate analysis of having a current religious affiliation and religious service attendance on the expressed importance of taking black children to church. Consistent with the previous analysis, half of the black women who indicate that they have no religious affiliation and 6 of 10 of the women who never attend services or who attend less than once a year, indicate that it is very important to take black children to church.

These findings suggest that women who are relatively uninvolved in organized religious life may not, in fact, be irreligious. In the next section of this paper we return to the guiding question of this work: To what extent does a low level of self-reported religious involvement reflect genuine irreligiousness? In the effort to address this question we juxtapose women's responses to a close-ended question on religiosity against their narrative responses to an open-ended question regarding the functions of religion in their lives. Again, we pay particular attention to the attitudes and perspectives of women who self-identify as not particularly religious.

Qualitative Methods and Results

The qualitative portion of this study is based on the written narratives of a convenience sample of African American women (N=130) between the ages of 16 and 69 years of age (M=31.9 years, SD=12.9). The questions on subjective religiosity used in this analysis were asked as a part of a larger study of the role of religion in the lives of Black women. Participants were asked to respond to an open-ended question regarding the role of religion in their lives. Specifically, each participant provided a written narrative response to the question: "What does religion help you to do in your life?" Participants were also asked to respond to a close-ended measure of subjective religiousness: "How religious are you?" (1=not at all religious, 2=a little bit religious, 3=very religious, 4=extremely religious).

Table 2: Bivariate Analysis of Having a Current Religious Affiliation and Religious Service Attendance on the Degree of Subjective Religiosity

Degree of Subjective Religiosity	Very Religious	Fairly Religious	Not too Religious	Not Religious at All	Total	Chi Square
<u>Have Religious Affiliation</u>						
Yes	37.7	52.7	8.8	0.8	100% (1202)	132.59***
No	20.0	31.6	38.9	9.5	100% (95)	
<u>Attend Religious Services</u>						
Yes	38.9	51.6	8.7	0.9	100% (1117)	87.57***
Less Than Once Per Year	22.9	44.8	28.1	4.2	100% (96)	
Never Attend Since 18	14.8	53.1	24.7	7.4	100% (81)	

*p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

Table 3: Bivariate Analysis of Having a Current Religious Affiliation and Religious Service Attendance on the Importance of Taking Black Children to Church

Importance of Taking Children to Church	Very Important	Fairly Important	Not too Important	Not Important at All	Total	Chi Square
<u>Have Religious Affiliation</u>						
Yes	85.1	13.0	1.7	0.2	100% (1198)	117.76***
No	48.4	33.7	14.7	3.2	100% (95)	
<u>Attend Religious Services</u>						
Yes	85.6	13.0	1.3	0.1	100% (1118)	124.72***
Less Than Once Per Year	62.1	21.1	11.6	5.3	100% (95)	
Never Attend Since 18	63.0	28.4	8.6	0.0	100% (81)	

*p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

Participants in this qualitative study were recruited through a variety of means, including: 1) responses to messages disseminated through electronic mail networks, 2) fliers, and 3) personal recruitment involving study participants and their friends, acquaintances, and family. This recruitment strategy led to the inclusion of participants from Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti (Michigan), Detroit, New York City, and Washington DC. Participants received no monetary compensation for their participation in the study.

The sample was well-educated with 54% reporting that they had a college or graduate professional degree and 28% indicating that they had some college. The majority of women were never married (65%) and 17% indicated being presently married. Forty-two percent of the sample reported a personal income of less than \$10,000, 24% reported \$10,000-20,000, 10% indicated a personal income of \$20,000-30,000, 15% reported \$30,000-50,000, and 9% reported a personal income in excess of \$50,000. The relatively low personal income given fairly high educational attainment is likely accounted for by the number of women who are currently pursuing educational degrees. The majority of the women (92%) identified their religious affiliation as Christian; eight percent reported their religious affiliation as "other."

Analysis Strategy

Narrative data were coded using an open-coding approach. In keeping with the tenets of open-coding, no a priori categories were imposed on the data. Instead, thematic categories developed out of close study of the narratives of the study participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This approach allows us to privilege the lived experiences and beliefs of the participants. Given that any group of individuals yield an unwieldy large number of individual responses, the narrative responses were organized into themes relating to the central concepts reflected in participants' responses regarding the role of religion. Responses to the close-ended measure of subjective religiosity are provided in conjunction with the qualitative information. Particular attention is paid to the narrative responses of women who define themselves as "a little bit religious" or "not at all religious."

Qualitative Findings

The overall mean response to the question, "How religious are you" indicates that, as a whole, this sample of women is somewhat religious ($M=2.4$, $SD=.83$). However, twenty-four percent of the women report that they do not hold memberships in churches or religious institutions, and thirty-four percent report attending religious services once per month or less. Thirteen percent report that they pray only "0-1 times per week" and twenty-four percent report that they pray only "2-4 times per week."

An analysis of the written responses for the entire sample of qualitative study partici-

pants revealed several themes regarding the function of religion in women's lives (due to multiple mentions, percentages do not add to 100). Forty-seven percent of the women reported that religion provides emotional support. Responses also revealed that thirty-seven percent of the respondents indicate that religion provides life direction and twenty-five percent suggest that religion provides them with a sense of purpose. Another twenty-five percent report that religion influences their relationships with others and twenty-one percent indicate that it provides them with a sense of peace and calm. Nineteen percent of respondents indicate that religion leads to positive outcomes and/or inspires them to maintain a positive outlook, eighteen percent indicate that religion gives them a sense of clarity, and almost eighteen percent of the women report that religion provides a connection to a higher external power. Seventeen percent of the women reported that religion promotes self-acceptance, while approximately six percent believed that religion provides an awareness of or connection to the metaphysical world. Six percent of the women see religion as having no function in their lives.

An interesting pattern of results emerge when we examined the narrative responses of women who describe themselves as "a little bit" or "not at all religious" (n=44). Forty-one percent of these women report that religion helps them to cope and twenty-five percent report that religion positively influences their relationships with others. Forty-one percent indicate that religion provides them with a sense of guidance and life direction, while twenty-five percent report that religion provides a sense of purpose. Twenty-three percent indicate that religion helps them to be more accepting of themselves and eighteen percent report that religion inspires positive feelings (e.g., hope and joy) in them. Only eleven percent of the women who self-describe themselves as "a little bit" or "not at all religious" state that religion has no role in their lives whatsoever.

The varied roles of religion in the lives of these less religious respondents are evident in the full text of their narrative responses. One woman who defined herself as "not at all religious" wrote the following response to the question of what role, if any, religion plays in her life:

"Although I do not attend religious services regularly, I do feel connected with others on a spiritual level... This sense of connectedness keeps me from feeling lonely and allows me to explore my personal goals and beliefs with others in a way that helps me grow and mature."

Another wrote:

"[Religion] gives me direction. Assists in making choices. Helps me treat others better. Reminds me of the Golden Rule. Puts important things in perspective."

These responses are instructive. Although these women describe themselves as “not at all religious,” their narrative responses suggest that religion has a number of integral functions in their lives. Importantly, it appears that some women may interpret religiousness to mean involvement in organized religious activities. By defining themselves as “not at all religious” or “a little bit religious” these women may be explicitly voicing their rejection or wariness of institutional religion, rather than their lack of belief in God.

The responses of women who defined themselves as “a little bit religious” also suggest that for these women religion plays a number of important roles. One woman who defined herself as “a little bit religious” wrote:

“My relationship with the Lord keeps me in tune with who I am. He helps me to rise above the circumstances to see into the world of the spirit. I know this might sound very mystical, but it’s actually quite practical. Through Him I experience life and peace, joy, satisfaction, enjoyment, love, fulfillment, purpose.”

Another woman who identified herself as only “a little bit religious” wrote:

“[Religion] helps me to know I am never alone and to realize that I am protected, guided and loved at all times.”

Taken together these responses demonstrate that religion fulfills a range of psychosocial functions for this group of women including providing comfort, peace, and purpose. Religion also positively shapes the way that they relate to others and to God. In short, although their self-reported level of religiosity would suggest that they are not religious, it is clear from their narratives that religion serves important functions in the lives of these women.

Discussion

Women in this study who do not have a religious affiliation and who never attend church, nonetheless pray on a fairly frequent basis and self-identify as religious. Consequently, lack of involvement in church services likely reflects dissatisfaction with organized religion, as opposed to a complete absence of religious sentiments and beliefs. Similarly, the apparent absence of manifestations of formal religious involvement did not prevent these women from engaging in certain religious activities such as private prayer (Taylor, 1988). It is also important to note that it is likely that some of the black women who attend church less than once a year do so because of severe health problems. In short, they may not have any ideological objections to organized religion, but may be unable to attend church services because of physical limitations.

Women in the qualitative study were clearly different in the extent to which they thought of themselves as “religious people.” However, even these women who described themselves as being “not at all religious” or only “a little bit religious” provided narratives indicating a deep personal commitment to religious concerns. These narratives revealed that religious experiences provided comfort, a closer relationship with God, and comprised an important dimension of their daily lives. Overall, religion is described as a pervasive, foundation-providing force that plays a crucial role in defining personal identity, as well as in constructing meaning and delineating the purpose of one’s life. Beyond its role in giving meaning to life, religion is central to respondents’ efforts to cope with and survive adverse personal and social circumstances. These findings corroborate other research indicating that, historically and contemporaneously, religion and religious institutions play significant and varied roles in the lives of African Americans (Lincoln & Mayima, 1990; Wilmore, 1998; Grant, 1990; Taylor, Thornton, & Chatters, 1987).

The contrast between women’s self-reported levels of religious involvement and their narrative responses regarding the function of religion in their lives should not be interpreted to mean that empirical measures of organizational and subjective religiosity are unreliable or without value. Instead, this pattern of findings suggests that for a small subset of women, these indices of religiosity may not adequately or accurately capture the depth of their religiousness. Women who are at the lower extreme of the spectrum of organizational and subjective religiosity may have religious histories and experiences that complicate their ways of thinking of what it means to be “religious.” Mattis (2000) suggests that African American women assign multiple, complex meanings to the term “religiosity.” In general, religiosity tends to refer to an individual’s adherence to the rules, traditions and doctrines of a prescribed system of religious beliefs (e.g., Judaism or Christianity). Women who are ambivalent about or ideologically opposed to such doctrines or traditions may define themselves as “not religious,” despite the fact that they maintain a deeply rooted faith in God and in the fundamental values of particular faith traditions. Many of these women may come to describe themselves as “spiritual” rather than religious. Further research is needed to critically and systematically examine the complex ways in which seemingly irreligious individuals construct the meaning of religiousness.

The findings of this exploratory study underscore the value of multi-method approaches for the study of religious life. The quantitative analyses clearly demonstrated that women who seemingly eschewed organizational religious involvement, nonetheless described themselves as religious, engaged in regular prayer, and viewed religious socialization as important for black children. Information from the qualitative study suggested that, in comparison, these women were somewhat less religiously inclined than those in the national sample. Caution should be exercised in comparisons of findings from these two studies due to differences in the samples themselves, the

specific items used, and the timeframes during which they were conducted. However, similar to the findings from the quantitative study, the narrative responses of the subgroup of women who indicated that they were “a little bit” or “not at all religious,” revealed a deep connection with fundamental religious beliefs and sentiments.

Taken together, these findings suggest two important points. First, that low levels of formal religious behaviors are, nonetheless, associated with substantial levels of subjective religiosity and private prayer. Second, qualitative research can and does enhance our understanding of the meanings and practices that are associated with religiousness. This is particularly the case for persons who describe themselves as marginally religious with respect to formal behaviors. Standard survey measures of the various dimensions of religiosity have significantly advanced our understanding of the nature of religious experience. Future research that integrates qualitative and quantitative findings will, without doubt, broaden our understanding of the complex religious lives of African American people.

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