

SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGIOSITY IN THE LIVES OF BLACK WOMEN

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Many scholars have identified religion and the Christian Church as oppressive forces in the lives of women. The practices of patriarchal domination within Black religious institutions cannot be denied. However, this vision of patriarchy and oppression must be problematized by examining the complex ways in which Black women have positioned themselves, or are positioned, within both the church and the secular world.

Inarguably, women (e.g., women's guilds) have played a central role in the organization and maintenance of the outreach functions of the Black church. The disproportionate representation of Black women in service roles in the Black church may be the result of a number of factors. First, the concentration of women in service roles may be a consequence of exclusionary (i.e., sexist) practices which preclude women's participation in other positions of leadership within the church. A second explanation is that Black women may express their spiritual convictions in terms of tangible efforts to rectify social inequities-- i.e., by developing or participating in social service programs. This latter explanation is consistent both with theories which hold that women are socialized to nurture others, and with the fact that, historically, Black women have used the fundamental principles of Christianity as the basis for offering radical challenges to oppressive and dehumanizing social conditions (McKay, 1989; Cone, 1985).

Studies on the psychology and sociology of religion have consistently found that Black women score higher than Black men on conventional measures of organizational, non-organizational and subjective religiosity and spirituality (Chatters, Levin & Taylor, 1992;

Jagers, 1994). That is, Black women attend church more frequently, participate in more church-related activities, and score higher on measures of religious commitment and subjective religiosity than other groups. This pattern is consistent across the developmental span. As with their adult counterparts, Black girls and adolescents score higher on measures of religiosity than their male correlates (Moore & Gleib, 1995; Donahue and Benson, 1995). Further, among elderly Black adults women are more likely than Black males to engage in formal religious practices, and more likely to listen to religious programs, make use of such things as religious materials and private prayer.

Explanations of this greater sense of religiosity and spirituality among women, are not very cogent when applied to Black women. Some theorists have argued that women are predisposed to religiosity because they are socialized to feel guilty and because they use religion to alleviate this guilt (Suziendelis and Potvin, 1981; Gray 1971). Other theorists have suggested that women are socialized to assume roles which are consonant with the image of one who is spiritual. DeVaus and McAllister (1987) suggest that the greater religiosity of women can be explained, in part, by the "structural location" of women in society. They posit that participation in the workforce may provide women with sociopsychological benefits which may have been achieved primarily through church attendance.

While some attention has been paid to structural arguments about the nature of religious participation, there have been fewer rigorous efforts to theorize and empirically assess what Robert Jagers (1996) refers to as the "functional significance" of religion and spirituality in the lives of Black men and women. Lehmann & Myers (1989) make the point that one function of religion/spirituality is to help individuals to understand, construct explanations for and resolve adverse circumstances. Indeed, religiosity and spirituality

have invariably emerged as critical facets of Black women's efforts to understand and understand, interpret and cope with adversity (Mattis, 1995; Myers, 1980; McKay, 1989; McAdoo, 1992; Neighbors, Jackson, Bowman, & Gurin, 1983).

Prayer, and specific beliefs and cognitions about God and the meaning of life are particularly important in Black women's efforts to cope with difficult life events. Pargament and his colleagues (1990) found that belief in the benevolence of God was related to positive mental health outcomes. And, in a national study of Black Americans, Neighbors et al. (1983) found that Black women were likely than men to identify prayer as their most important coping strategy. The use of prayer is not dependent upon organizational affiliation or attendance (Chatters & Taylor, 1991). A significant number of Black women who do not attend church on a regular basis report that they tend to pray frequently (McAdoo, 1992).

These uses of religion and spirituality have been associated with positive well-being for Black female adolescents as well as for Black women. While the role of spirituality in the lives of Black adolescents has been virtually ignored in scholarly literatures, researchers have asserted that adolescents who hold strong religious and spiritual sentiments, there is a reduced risk of alcohol and substance abuse, premature involvement in sexual activity and juvenile delinquency. Black adolescents who have a strong religious or religious faith also are especially likely to espouse concerns with rectifying "social inequities." For older adults the church emerges as a particularly important source of social support, and older people report that they use prayer and faith in God in their efforts to cope and receive comfort (Koenig, 1995). Religiosity among adults has been associated with positive well-being as measured by decreased anxiety, fewer health problems, and fewer deleterious consequences as a result of stress (Williams, 1991).

While the positive ramifications of religion and spirituality in the lives of Black women has been established, there is little empirical research which elucidates the specific ways in which these positive aims are achieved. Some researchers assert that many of the efficacy of religion and spirituality derives from the cognitive strategies including causal attributions which are made by religious and spiritual adherents (Pargament and Hahn, 1986). However, few of these studies attend specifically to the experiences of Black women. Using a multi-method approach (quantitative and qualitative analyses), Mattis (1995) identified a range of strategies used by Black women in their efforts to render adverse experiences meaningful. Those strategies included accepting reality, confronting and transcending limitations, turning things over to a higher power, identifying existential questions and life lessons, recognizing purpose and destiny, and achieving growth. Using these strategies, Black women interpret the events which they experience, and make decisions about what constitutes an appropriate coping response.

There is a need in research on the psychology and sociology of religion for a multi-layered, multi-disciplinary approach to the study of Black female religiosity and spirituality. There is an organic link between the long tradition of Black secular activism, Black liberationist theologies, including Black feminist theologies, Black women's involvement in service roles within the Black community, and Black women's day to day efforts to use their spiritual and religious convictions to forge their own individual survival. A multi-dimensional approach to the study of Black women's religious and spiritual lives hold the promise of elucidating this link. Such an approach would allow researchers to shed light on the ways in which Black women use their religious and spiritual convictions to construct subjectively meaningful understandings of gender, femininity, family, community and community responsibility. Through the use of

increasingly complex approaches to the study of Black women's religiosity and spirituality we will be poised to understand and perhaps facilitate Black women's ongoing efforts to challenge social injustice, and to transform the political and relational landscapes of this nation.

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