

Introduction

The nature, patterns, and functions of religious involvement among African Americans has been a topic of interest since the early 1900's (for example Du Bois, 1899). An extensive scholarly tradition in African American studies, anthropology, religious studies, and the sociology of religion all attest to the persistence of these themes. However, despite a rich legacy of scholarly work on the Black Church and African American religious traditions, relatively few of these substantive topics have received focused and systematic attention. Directed research on religious involvement among African Americans is invaluable for clarifying a variety of issues bearing on religious involvement in this group, as well as identifying the individual, social, and community functions of religion.

The importance of religion and religious institutions to individual African Americans and broader Black communities is documented in numerous research and scholarly efforts. This literature describes the impact of religion on the historical experiences of Blacks within American society, as well as its role in the development of independent Black institutions and communities (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Nelsen & Nelsen, 1975). An appreciation for the historical origins of these traditions, as well as the social, economic, and political experiences that define religious expression, is critical to discussions of religious involvement among African Americans. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) and other scholars (e.g. Frazier, 1974) argue that African American theological orientations and religious practices emerged from the unique social, political, and historical contexts that characterized the position of Blacks within American society. Further, because Black religious expression occurred within the context of a frequently hostile larger society, the aims and purposes of religious belief and expression were uniquely oriented and adapted towards the amelioration, buffering, and/or abolishment of conditions that were deleterious to the well-being of African Americans.

Similar to other religious traditions, Black religious expression addressed itself to questions of ultimate concern and existential meaning (e.g., illness, personal suffering, death). However, within the context of

American society, these questions of ultimate concern were framed within the context of the immediate life circumstances of African Americans, often characterized by racial prejudice and discrimination. As a consequence, African American religious traditions also reflected concern with issues of emancipation, enfranchisement, civil and human rights, and social and economic justice (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990). The enduring emphasis on the improvement of the tangible life circumstances of African Americans, suggests that spirituality, per se, was not the only pursuit of Black religious traditions. To varying degrees and across different traditions, the conditions of immediate physical existence, as well as questions of spiritual existence, have exerted powerful and complementary influences on the nature and functions of Black religious expression.

This article reviews current empirical research on religious involvement among African Americans, focusing on sociodemographic diversity in patterns of religious attitudes and behaviors, as well as distinctive features of religious concerns for Blacks. The article begins with a brief review of conceptual work by Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) addressing the nature of the Black church and religious traditions. Following this, an overview of research findings bearing on various aspects of religious involvement is presented.

Lincoln and Mamiya's Model of the Black Church

Several models of the Black Church and religious involvement have been proposed to characterize the form and functions of black religious expression. These models, however, are deficient in a number of respects. The principal issues concern an overemphasis on individual and discrete manifestations of black religious expression and insufficient appreciation for the impact of social and historical context and the processes of change. Consequently, traditional models of black religious involvement are, to a great degree, static and ahistorical in nature (Stump, 1987) and define Black religious expression in very limited ways. Lincoln and Mamiya's (1990) critique of traditional models notes their tendency to view the black church as a product of lower status black culture. Prominent in this literature is the view that black religious traditions have isolated black communities, impeded the assimilation of blacks within

broader society, promoted "other-worldly" religious orientations, and functioned to compensate for deprivations experienced within American society (e.g., Marx, 1967).

In contrast to traditional models of Black religious involvement, Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) propose a Dialectical Model of the Black Church, the principal elements of which include an appreciation for: 1) the historical origins of the institutional structures in Black religion, 2) a dynamic orientation emphasizing change and adaptation to both immediate circumstances and conditions and larger societal forces, and 3) a conceptualization of the Black Church that reflects its position along a number of dimensions. The Dialectical Model provides a comprehensive treatment of the Black Church incorporating notions of dynamic interaction with historical forces, ongoing change and adaptation in response to contemporaneous factors, and an inherent multidimensional character. This perspective provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding several features of Black churches and religious involvement (i.e., multiplicity of functions) and for the development of a comprehensive research agenda.

Religious Involvement Among African Americans: Research Findings

Until recently, the research literature suffered a lack of rudimentary information concerning the patterns and structural antecedents of religiosity among African Americans. This is unfortunate given a tradition of qualitative work indicating that African Americans are invested in religious pursuits, have positive regard for Black churches, and acknowledge and value the various roles (e.g., social, religious, material support) they perform within black communities (Taylor, Thornton, and Chatters, 1987). Empirical investigations based on the National Survey of Black Americans have documented the nature and extent of sociodemographic differences in religious involvement among Black adults (e.g., age, gender, and education). This work includes several studies involving the entire adult age range (Chatters & Taylor, 1989; Ellison & Sherkat, In press; Levin & Taylor, 1993; Taylor, 1988b, 1988c; Taylor & Chatters, 1991b), as well as investigations that focus on older persons (Chatters, Levin & Taylor, 1992; Levin, Taylor & Chatters, 1994; Taylor, 1986; Taylor & Chatters, 1991a).

Religious Affiliation

A profile of religious affiliation among African Americans (Taylor and Chatters, 1991b) found that respondents reported a total of forty different religious affiliations. Although respondents largely identified with the Baptist tradition (52.1%), 11.7% reported being Methodist, 6.3% were Roman Catholic, 3.2% indicated that they were Holiness, and 2.1% reported being Jehovah's Witnesses. Fifteen percent indicated an affiliation with one of 35 other religious groups, one out of ten indicated that they had no religious preference, and only 8 respondents were atheist or agnostic. Ellison and Sherkat (1990) examined religious affiliation patterns and change between 1972 and 1988, using data from the General Social Survey and the NSBA. Overall, religious affiliation was relatively stable with only small declines in the numbers of persons who were either Baptist, Methodist, Catholic or were affiliated with predominantly white organizations.

Taylor (1988b) investigated respondents who had no current religious affiliation and who had not attended religious services since adulthood (10% of the total NSBA sample). Religious non-involvement was associated with being male, younger, never married, having low levels of income and education, and residing outside the South. Even though respondents did not participate in these specific religious pursuits, a substantial number of respondents characterized themselves as being fairly religious and indicated that they prayed on a frequent basis. Sherkat and Ellison's (1991) study of religious affiliation and denominational switching found that, in comparison to persons remaining in Black mainline religious denominations (i.e., Baptists, Methodists), religious apostates (persons raised in Black mainline denominations, but now unaffiliated) were more likely to be male, younger, and reside outside of the South. Further, apostates tended to have negative opinions about Black churches, had lower levels of racial group identification, less frequent contact with family members, and were less likely to be a member of a national or neighborhood organization. Religious switchers (persons raised in a Black mainline denomination, but with a different current religious affiliation) were more likely than denominational mainstays to be married, reside in urban areas, and endorse political protest to gain equal rights, but they had lower levels of racial group identity.

Structural Determinants of Religious Involvement

Findings from several studies indicate that, in comparison to the general population, African Americans exhibit high levels of religious involvement. In particular, Blacks attend religious services on a frequent basis, have high rates of church membership, characterize themselves as being religious, and are extensively involved in private religious activities (e.g., prayer, reading religious materials, watching or listening to religious programs) (Taylor, 1986, 1988; Taylor & Chatters, 1991). Despite the acknowledged importance of religion and religious institutions to black Americans, few quantitative studies examine race differences in religious participation. Recent analyses among a general sample of adults (Taylor, Chatters, Jayakody & Levin, in press) and among older persons (Levin, Taylor & Chatters, 1994) verified consistent racial differences in religious involvement, across several national datasets conducted at different points in time. As compared to whites, black adults demonstrated higher levels of both public (e.g., religious attendance) and private (e.g., reading religious materials) religious behaviors. These differences persisted despite controls for demographic (e.g., socioeconomic status, region) and religious (i.e., religious affiliation) factors that are differentially distributed within black and white populations and are known to be of consequence for religious involvement.

Despite overall high levels of religiosity, considerable heterogeneity in religious involvement is noted. Age (Chatters and Taylor, 1989), gender (Levin and Taylor, 1993), and region (Ellison and Sherkat, 1995) exert pervasive influences, while marital status, socioeconomic status, and urbanicity also have important effects on religious involvement. In general, the direction and patterns of sociodemographic effects are largely comparable to those observed for the general population, suggesting that baseline rates of religious involvement are elevated for African Americans (Levin, Taylor, and Chatters, 1994; Taylor et al., in press) and, in particular, among discrete subgroups of the Black population (i.e., older persons, women).

Patterns and Dimensions of Religious Involvement

Conceptual models of religious involvement focus on different dimensions or components of religiosity typically including both formal and informal practices, as well as religious beliefs, sentiments, and attitudes (Ainlay and Smith, 1984; Chatters and Taylor, 1989a; Hunsberger, 1985; Jacobson et al., 1990; Levin, 1989; Mindel and Vaughan, 1978). Chatters, Levin, and Taylor (1992) proposed and tested a measurement model of religiosity among older adults incorporating three dimensions of religious involvement-- formal or organizational religious behavior, informal or non-organizational religious behavior, and intrinsic or subjective religiosity. The proposed model provided a good fit to the data, was preferable to other alternative models of these relationships, and was acceptable with regard to convergent validity. Exogenous factors (i.e., sociodemographic factors) performed largely as expected as predictors of religious involvement and were differentially predictive of the three latent religiosity constructs. Status group differences were thought to reflect socialization experiences (e.g., gender roles), contemporaneous experiences (e.g., age differences), and social environment factors (i.e., region effects) that might promote a religious worldview. The findings were subsequently confirmed within the entire adult age range of the NSBA sample (Levin, Taylor, and Chatters, 1995). Levin, Chatters, and Taylor's analysis (1995) tested a structural-equation model linking religiosity to health status and life satisfaction among black adults and found that aspects of religious involvement, notably organizational religious participation, exerted significant effects on life satisfaction net of both health and several important exogenous variables.

Church-Based Informal Support Networks

Given the prominence of Black churches in providing material and spiritual assistance, these studies examine the determinants and functional attributes of religious-based social networks. Church members provide a variety of informal social support to elderly Black adults (Taylor & Chatters, 1986a). Frequency of church attendance and the presence of an adult child emerged as important factors for receiving church assistance and the amount of aid provided to elders. Taylor and Chatters (1986b) found that older Black adults received concomitant support from family, friends, and church members. Eight of 10 received support from either a best or close friend, about six in 10 received aid from church members, and over half received support from extended family members. Advice, encouragement, and help during illnesses were the most frequently reported forms of assistance. In analyses among adults of all ages,

Taylor and Chatters (1988) found that two-thirds of respondents received some level of support from church members. Church attendance, church membership, subjective religiosity, and religious affiliation were all significantly related to receiving support, suggesting that assistance is related to participation and integration in church networks.

Religion and Psychosocial Functioning

Interest in the relationships between religion and psychological well-being has been a persistent theme in social science research. There are several reasons why religious involvement would be associated with both positive and negative well-being. Among the primary features of religion is its ability to impart a sense of coherence, cohesion, and control to one's life. Religious involvement with respect to formal activities (e.g., church attendance) can increase one's social network and interactions, thereby enhancing a sense of belonging and religious identity. Religious communities are also effective in regulating a range of individual behaviors so as to encourage activities that directly promote physical and mental health and interpersonal harmony, as well as curtailing activities and lifestyles that increase the risk of stressors (e.g., drug use). Finally, religious frames of reference may be important in deriving meaning from life and personal events, both blessings and misfortunes.

Although comparing findings across studies is often complicated because of the variety of measures of religious involvement and psychological well-being that are employed, overall the literature supports a positive association between religion and well-being. However, important questions remain regarding the specific processes involved (e.g., social support, stress and coping), discrete outcomes (e.g., self-esteem, general affect, psychiatric symptoms), and causal order. Several recent reviews describe research linking religious involvement and well-being (Chatters & Ellison, 1996; Ellison, 1993; Levin, in press, 1994a,b). Work exploring various psychosocial functions of religion indicates that: 1) prayer is an important means of coping with serious personal problems (Ellison & Taylor, in press; Neighbors et al., 1983), 2) religious participation has a significant impact on perceptions of mastery and self-esteem (Krause & Tran, 1989),

and 3) religious involvement is a predictor of life satisfaction evaluations (Ellison & Gay, 1990; Levin, Chatters, & Taylor, 1995).

Conclusion

Over the past several years, the knowledge base with respect to religious involvement among African Americans has grown immensely. Emergent theories and models of African American religiosity reflect an appreciation for the multifaceted and dynamic nature of these phenomena and institutions. Although this review focused on studies employing quantitative methods, research and scholarship in other fields and employing different approaches, all provide important insights on African American religious traditions. The diverse perspectives on the religious experiences of African Americans suggests that the range of issues cannot be elaborated or addressed by a single discipline, method, or approach. The emerging research agenda provides the opportunity to systematically explore the patterns, antecedents, and consequences of religious involvement among African Americans and contributes to an enriched understanding of religious phenomena across time, place, and social circumstance.

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