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Institutional Decline or Evolution?: An Intergenerational Analysis of African-American Religiosity

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Institutional Decline or Evolution?: An Intergenerational Analysis of African-
American Religiosity

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Dedication

For my grandmother Christine Fulmore Walker Allen

Daughter of Odis & Estell (Cox) Fulmore

Granddaughter of James (Jim) Fulmore & Sarah Margaret McCutcheon and Jeff & Cora Louise
(Strong) Cox

Living proof that there is a God

“No matter who say they love you, God love you most of all.”

1939 - 2021

Abstract

African American religion, born from the traumas of institutionalized slavery, has played a significant role in the religio-cultural development of enslaved Africans and their descendants. Forced to adapt to the tumultuousness of systematic mistreatment and dehumanization at the hands of oppressive European forces, African peoples managed to create faith-based safe spaces in which they could socialize freely amongst themselves, ultimately protecting their indigenous spiritual belief systems and negotiating them with a reinvention of Eurocentric Christianity into the Black Church. This hybridization of West African spirituality and the Christian faith cemented itself into the culture of Black Americans for generations. However, younger generations of African Americans - especially millennials - are no longer affiliating with traditional African American religious institutions in lieu of alternative spiritual practices. Drawing on resources from the fields of theology, sociology, and history, this project explores the increasing religious disaffiliation of Black millennials from the Black Church and thus aims to contribute to the interdisciplinary field of Black Church studies from an intergenerational perspective, with a focus on millennial religiosity and hybridity. Why has religiosity among African American millennials declined drastically? Does this decline mark an end of the Black Church? My hypothesis is that African American religiosity has declined due to millennial disillusionment with institutional organized religion. Nonetheless, the Black Church is simultaneously evolving into a new religio-spiritual space to meet the needs of younger African American generations.

Introduction

For generations, African peoples in America have fought their entire lives to be viewed wholeheartedly, with their humanities intact, in a eurocentric world where their presence is not necessarily valued nor desired. The forceful relocation of their ancestors from their homeland had ultimately discombobulated them through the horrific traumas experienced that disrupted the psychological mindset and overall physical well being of millions of people for generations to come. As dehumanization persisted through the catastrophic institution of slavery, enslaved Africans had no choice but to adapt in tumultuous times; safely navigating the treacherous environments involved keeping one's own culture alive in spite of the systematic oppression that brought them grave harm and fatal labor. While American society had sought to stifle the drive and will of Black people in America, African Americans were defying eurocentric expectations and progressing in the social and political confines that were designed for them to fail. Immediately upon their arrival to the New World, African people started to maintain a new culture developed during the stresses of their servitude as well as the ever-growing dangers of racial violence and injustice, challenging their oppressors while processing their unfamiliar surroundings simultaneously.

African American religion is a beautifully complicated phenomenon that merged indigenous practices with various religious traditions, a custom that began with and continues to thrive in sync with the Black Church, its breath relying heavily on that institutional heartbeat. It is W. E. B. Du Bois who points out the fact that the Black Church is the "social centre of Negro life in the United States," addressing the fact that - by analyzing African American religiosity - the curious mind can understand the perspectives of the enslaved for just as indigenous faiths adapt to the socio-political changes of an unfamiliar land so did Black lives in tandem (Du Bois

2003, 4-5). The Black Church, in its transition from being invisible to acquiring physicality, has evolved with the changing times, adapting seamlessly with the development of what is now considered the modern day.

While it has managed to survive thus far, there is question as to whether African American religiosity can continue to prosper. Several sociological studies recently have shown that despite being the most religious ethnic group in American history, younger generations of African Americans - specifically millennials - are less religious than the generations that came before them. Starting in 2010, social scientist Allison Pond analyzed the religiosity of the millennial generation in the United States, recognizing that millennials were considerably less religious & spiritual than other generations and are the least religiously inclined generation so far. In fact, one in four millennials are religiously unaffiliated and are “significantly more unaffiliated” than members of both Generation X and Baby Boomers as young adults (Pond 2010). Pond’s study continued in 2014 and it was discovered that Black Americans, despite being the most religious ethnic group in American history, were experiencing a similar juxtaposing phenomenon. The religious composition of non-Black millennials, Black millennials, and older generations of Black people was determined by conducting surveys, combining belief in God and personal importance of religion with prayer frequency in addition to attendance in religious services, concluding that Black Americans are still more religious than non-Black Americans while simultaneously recognizing an internal divide between younger and older African Americans, highlighting a spiritual commonality; while there does appear to be a growing gap between younger and older generations of Black Americans in terms of religious observance, their spiritual beliefs remain intact and relatively unchanged. A more recent study

was conducted in 2020 by the Pew Research Center and asserted that younger generations of African Americans are less connected to the church than older generations.

Once again, despite being the most religious ethnic group in America - a fact that is reflected by the numbers - there is a gradual decline in spiritual connection to institutional churches over the course of several generations. For example, the data collected from the survey had shown that 49% of Black American Millennials had reported that they seldom/never attended church in comparison to 39% of those in Generation X and 31% of Baby Boomers. In fact, the oldest generation surveyed - the Silent Generation, including a finite number of Black Americans belonging to the Greatest Generation - had the lowest percentage of those who also designated having a lack of connection to Black churches at 21%. However, from the Silent Generation to Generation Z, it appears that Black American involvement in the church congregation had gradually decreased by half: from 49% to 29% (Pew Research Center 2020).

Has the Black Church, by way of modernity, become irrelevant for young African Americans? If so, what does this mean for African American religion as a whole? Given that African American culture is so interwoven with its religion, will the Black American way of life see any sort of further development or is the culture doomed to collapse under the weight of its neglected religious roots? Drawing on resources from the fields of theology, sociology, and history, this phenomenon of increasing religious disaffiliation of younger African Americans from the Black Church is analyzed further and thus aims to contribute to the interdisciplinary field of Black Church studies from an intergenerational perspective, with a focus on millennial religiosity and hybridity. Why has religiosity among African American millennials declined drastically? Does this decline mark an end of the Black Church? My hypothesis is that African American religiosity has declined and that African American millennials are gravitating more

towards spirituality due to increasing trends towards disillusionment, particularly but not exclusively exemplified by millennials, with institutional organized religion. With that being said, in order to understand all of these questions and dive deeper into the idiosyncrasies of these several dilemmas, one must tackle the original problem and pinpoint exactly why younger Black Americans seem to stray from traditional religious institutions in the first place. To answer this question, I explored the history of African American religion and analyzed the idiosyncrasies of slave religion as well as the Black Church: both as an invisible institution and as a physical space. Additionally, I examined Black theological doctrine and the Black Power movement's impact on African American religion as a whole before considering the notion of the institutional Black Church as an oppressor to Black people.

Slave Religion and the Origins of the Black Church

The first Africans arrived in America in the year 1619, forcefully taken from their homelands and brought to the colony of Virginia as slaves, signifying the beginning of systemic brutality. As white landowners created an economic demand that fueled the institution of slavery, enslaved Africans had to adapt and be flexible in the midst of a series of horrific situations, a pattern that would be practiced by their descendants time and time again. African American religion, as a result, is a spiritual phenomenon that emerged from the realities of forced servitude and racial violence. It is within the violent economic and political context of American history “characterized by the ever-present need to account for one’s presence in the world in the face of white supremacy” that the complexities of African American religion emerges (Glaude 2014, 6). Such “forced relocation brought with them their ancient traditions that focused on maintaining harmonious relationships with nature and supernatural beings, including gods, spirits, and ancestors” (Weisenfeld 2015). Deeply rooted spiritual beliefs had messily paired with European

Christianity to formulate a creolized religious belief system that has permeated African American culture and directly impacted the African experience in America.

Like many other religious belief systems, African American religion provides answers to life's biggest questions and brings solace to adherents throughout several spiritual spectrums from the perspective of a traumatized collective trying desperately to process what can be described as "uncouth conditions" in a landscape that wasn't even completely constructed by those who settled the New World prior:

Black Americans labored rather under the burden of a triple crisis of self-recognition. Their cultural predicament was comprised of African appearance and unconscious cultural mores, involuntary displacement to America without American status, and American alienation from the European ethos complication through domination by incompletely European Americans. This predicament was qualitatively different from that of other Africans in the diaspora... The Black American struggle for self-identity has always contributed constructively to the American struggle for self-identity, though the latter has only exacerbated and complicated it in return. (West 2003, 80-81)

What is incredibly unique about African American religion is the fact that - in addition to those qualities - it also provides healing from the traumatic wounds that were acquired over time. This unique blend with theology and culture, patterns born from the adaptability of enslaved Africans, was born the moment African people were brought as slaves to the New World and matured naturally through the ever difficult political state of this unfamiliar landscape. African people did not arrive to the New World as spiritual tabula rasas; in fact, the enslaved Africans - through their treacherous journeys - "brought their gods and their cultural knowledge with them" (Glaude 2014, 24). Despite the traumas experienced through the Middle Passage, cultures and religions

adapted to the stifling of traditionally African linguistic, cultural, & religious conservancy (Weisenfeld 2015). These religio-cultural resources were as resilient & adaptable as the enslaved Africans that held them. All in all, this mass movement of people ultimately brought the ancient religious traditions that constituted African American spirituality. In an attempt to deliver large numbers of African people as if they were cargo, European Christians inadvertently introduced Afrocentric religion and spirituality to the New World; whether it came in the form of ancestral worship, Islam, and possibly forms of Catholicism, enslaved Africans originally arrived with a variety of religions and spiritual belief systems that were shared and had ultimately evolved in the midst of systematic oppression (Gates and Burke, 2021, Part 1, 07:17).

Slow Conversion to Christianity and the Institutionalization of the Black Church

For many enslaved African peoples in America, Christianity was introduced to them on plantation land. Through a unique kind of communication held between enslaved peoples and the slaveholders themselves, the two - the disenfranchised and their oppressors alike - passively created a kind of world of their own that fostered an almost contradictory relationship in which the two shared enough closeness to perpetuate the spread of information, whether it be crucial socio-political context utilized by the enslaved to better navigate their treacherous circumstances or the Christian religion, in a phenomenon previously described as one being held by “intimate enemies.” Such a unique phenomenon allowed for a continuous transmission of knowledge that was described by religious studies scholar Charles Long as “eavesdropping:”

This eavesdropping was not, however, limited to the Gospel; it included the secret transmission of the entire American ideology of freedom, government, economics, etc.

And in this secret hearing a new and different understanding of modernity was being

transmitted. Thus there was forming not only a new American community among the slaves but another understanding and interpretation of America itself. (Long 2003, 14)

Just as God created humanity in a divine image, African Americans had formulated a unique worship of their own.

This, however, did very little to ease the concerns of European missionaries who wished to spread the Gospel amongst the enslaved population. There were several proclamations from white missionaries regarding a holy duty to properly evangelize to the enslaved, but these initial attempts to convert them to Christianity were continuously blocked by white landowners who deeply feared that, through allowing their slaves the opportunity to know a Christian God and accept Christ, they would then be morally obligated to emancipate them:

The notion that if slaves were baptized they should according to the laws of the British nation and the canons of its church be freed was legally vague but widely believed.

Repeatedly White missionaries to the slaves complain that slaveholders refused them permission to catechize slaves because baptism made it necessary to free them. Thus it seemed that the Christian commission to preach the gospel to all nations ran directly counter to the economic interest of the Christian slave owner. (Raboteau 2004, 98)

Colonial governments were quick to clarify this as a legal impossibility as several acts were passed in the year 1706, ultimately declaring that baptism could not modify the terms of enslavement.

This fact had eased the nerves of white landowners somewhat but there was still anxiety regarding the conversion of enslaved African people - specifically that Christianity would somehow result in "ungovernable" and "rebellious" slaves. However, missionaries continuously argued that the Christian faith would in fact result in more subservient slave labor; seeking to

appeal to the pockets of nervous white landowners, the Gospel was then advertised as an effective tool for slave control, a divinely mandated reason to uphold the institution of slavery through teaching African people a gross misinterpretation of doctrine that only sought to secure economic growth (Raboteau 2004, 103). Christian missionaries, by promoting Christianity as a religion that could pacify enslaved people and solidify the master-slave hierarchical structure, had some success with ministering to African people in the American south - especially with the insistence that masters and mistresses had a moral duty to catechize the slaves themselves (Raboteau 2004, 164). Whether it was through missionary work, attending white church services, or learning about it from fellow enslaved Africans, Black people in America were exposed to the goodness of Jesus Christ - especially in the context of the growth of both Baptist and Methodist denominations.

Evangelical revivals had first taken place in the year 1739 and African people in America - enslaved and free - were allowed to take active part in an animated series of sermons which were heavily reminiscent of the celebrations that had taken place in the Motherland; the high energy evoked in singing, dancing, and preaching enticed Black people to convert to a Christianity that felt familiar to them (Glaude 2014, 25). The Great Awakening especially had “created the conditions for large-scale conversion of the slaves” and peaked Black interest into the Christian faith by way of their individualist theological approach, ultimately paving the way for future brick-and-mortar Christian establishments for Black people:

By revitalizing the religious piety of the South, the Awakening(s) stirred an interest in conversion which was turned towards the slaves. By heavily emphasizing the inward conversion experience, the Awakening tended to de-emphasize the outward status of men, and to cause black and white alike to *feel* personally that Christ died for them as

individuals. Evangelical religion had a universalist dimension which encouraged preaching to all men, embracing rich and poor, free and slave. The emotionalism and plain doctrine of revivalist preaching appeal to the masses, including slaves. Black exhorters and ministers were licensed to preach and did preach the gospel of spiritual freedom to slaves, who were sometimes gathered into their own black churches. Negroes, slave and free, attended revival meetings or Sabbath services and joined Methodist and Baptist churches in numbers not seen before. (Raboteau 2004, 148)

As the Black Church finally began to take physical shape, secret meetings between enslaved Africans continued to take place and started to become safe spaces for a new kind of Christian worship that overtly defied the theological foundations that were force fed to them systematically. For the first time, Black people in America were being affirmed spiritually and theologically by Black pastors who wished to preach to them the Good News about a Messiah who sought to deliver His people from the oppressive white landowners that had continuously denied African descendents their humanity. By taking part in a communal spiritual worship in which they were free to express themselves openly - in a space that was independent from the watchful gaze of terrified slaveholders - Black people were able to congregate and provide crucial resources that ensured the success of their fellow African people, whether it be financial, intellectual, or political endeavors, and ultimately birthing the beginnings of Black society (Glaude 2003, xxii). More of these secret gatherings gradually began to take place outside of the woods in intimate physical spaces that were commonly referred to as praise houses, which were normally the cabins of enslaved elders; it was within these spaces that worship, fellowship, praise, and community took place - free from judgment. Many attempts were made by the white majority to stifle these meetings upon their discovery and catechism efforts increased.

Regardless, the African subversion of eurocentric Christianity spread rapidly throughout the plantation grounds with revolutionary results. In some cases, the hidden power of slave religion pushed African people in America to resist these oppressive structures that only ensured brutality by way of revolts, intending to use the scriptures to cleanse the American landscape of the horrific sins of hatred and oppression. In fact, in response to the Stono Rebellion, the South Carolina Legislature adopted an extremely restrictive law known as the Negro Act of 1740. Such a law officially prohibited enslaved peoples from learning how to read as well as limiting the ability for Black people to assemble and worship, encouraging slaveholders to whip or kill any enslaved person that may have been showing signs of rebellion (Raboteau 2004, 116). As numerous attempts were made to stifle Black religious participation and minimize spiritual gatherings, Blackness continued to be reaffirmed and appreciated by the African people who so desperately needed it to survive. Through the recollection of their African values, the enslaved refined and redesigned the mannerisms of their ancestors to perpetuate a solidified identity - a connection to Africa - that managed to be more powerful and lasting than the Eurocentric systems that held them in bondage (Bridges 2001, 9). From this incredibly tumultuous environment, the intellectual seeds were planted that would become known as Black theology.

Black Theology and Black Power's Impact on African American Religion

From the moment that enslaved Africans first recognized the theological excuses to support white supremacy, they sought to defy the expectations of those who had kidnapped their ancestors, denied them autonomy, and stripped them of their humanity; ironically, Christianity is known as a religion that uplifts, that heals and supports the disenfranchised and helpless. However, in response to a gross misinterpretation of holy scripture, Black people in America managed to utilize a traditional West African approach that helped them to reinterpret African

behavior for their own survival that was described by Raboteau as a “traditional African openness” to both familiar and unfamiliar religious ideas:

This characteristic African acceptance was particularly manifest in religion, where “both conquered and conquerors often took over the gods of their opponents.” The resilience of slaves’ attitudes toward new gods frequently led to “slightly modified African sanctions supporting forms of a given institution that are almost entirely European. (Raboteau 2004, 51)

The adoption of Christianity, and the ultimate infusion of West African culture as a result, wasn't just implemented as a way to process the unfamiliar surroundings that they were forced to contend with. In the context of the African-American experience, there is a continuous need to adapt and maneuver through a systematic and never-ending struggle for freedom ultimately perpetuated by a white supremacist society.

With that being said, Black theology was a way for black people living in America to yearn towards collective freedom and rise above their oppression. As pointed out by James Cone, Christian theology is - by default - a theology of liberation whose ultimate mission is "to explicate the meaning of God's liberating activity so that those who labor under enslaving powers will see that the forces of liberation are the very activity of God" (Cone 2020, 407). Additionally, when observed from a Black perspective, this exact same ideology ultimately implies that Jesus is an advocate for African people, a champion and proponent of Black liberation from white oppression in a similar way that Moses had advocated for the liberation of the Hebrews in Egypt. In other words, to speak out and fight for social justice is a holy action encouraged and even demanded by the existence of a loving and just God who seeks to support the disenfranchised and free the oppressed. Although it was the nightmare of the majority, by

defying the eurocentric Christian ideals that missionaries and slaveholders evangelized to them, Black people in America ultimately returned Christianity to its liberative roots. Black theology directly interprets the Good News in a way that supports and validates Black people in their daily struggles as an oppressed group; as is commonplace in other religio-spiritual theologies formulated by the disenfranchised, to perpetuate great change is to ultimately enact a divine plan in the name of justice:

Black and Third World theologians' concern for the oppressed forced us to establish links with communities of the poor, and we experienced in their ecclesial life something more than a routine gathering of like-minded persons... The liberating character of their spirituality can be seen in the way that their faith in God evolves out of their cultural and political aspirations. It can be observed in the basic Christian communities of Latin America, the black and Hispanic churches of North America, the indigenous churches and traditional religions of Africa, and in the religious life of Asia. In their worship, the God of grace and judgment meets the poor, transforms their personhood from nobody to somebody, and bestows upon them the power and courage to struggle for justice. (Cone 1984, 173-174)

The image of a Black Jesus, an African savior, has been crucial to shaping the theological mindset of generations of African Americans seeking both spiritual and physical salvation. Slave religion, through a close relationship with this image of a Black Jesus, cemented this bond between Him and the disenfranchised African populace as people who were treated unjustly and oppressed through their lives to the point where their traumatic experiences had converged. Jesus' death on the cross proved to enslaved Africans that "they were one with Jesus, and more importantly, that Jesus was one with them" (Douglas 2019, 22). Such a close bond with this

African depiction of the Messiah also radicalized enslaved Africans and encouraged them to fight for their own freedoms. Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey, two notable enslaved Black clergymen, had rebelled against a racist society by using a uniquely African take on Christianity - including a Black Christ - to insist that holding human beings into bondage was a horrible sin and demand a collective freedom for all Black people. The rebellious activities carried out by both Vesey and Turner caused white landowners to believe that their initial fears were confirmed, that teaching enslaved Africans about the Christian faith would only incite insubordination and would ultimately threaten the institution of slavery that they had held so dear to them (Weisenfeld 2015). In 1826, as an attempt to counter the effects of the Nat Turner rebellion specifically, a sexton - "presumably a white man" - was granted the authority to "watch over the Negroes of the church and was encouraged to hold special meetings for them" instead of allowing the enslaved to partake in their praise house gatherings; additionally, enslaved African people were required by law to have the permission of their slaveholder before they could be baptized (Mays 2003, 17).

Due to the restrictive nature of the lands that Black people were required to navigate through, the very definition of freedom to the Black life at this time was heavily impacted by the liberative stories that were written in the Old Testament and many thought that, as if He was another version of Moses, a Black Savior - Jesus Christ - was meant to free the slave from their plights:

In general, slave Christianity focused on the Old Testament stories of God's liberating acts in Israelite history. This focus provided slaves with the basis for interpreting the freedom Jesus offered. It was a freedom that could be achieved in this world. The Jesus that empowered the Black slaves to fight for their emancipation from the chains of White

slavery, was the Black Christ. This Christ was the center of slave Christianity. (Douglas 27)

In the Black Jesus, many African people in America found hope in a brighter future, one in which they and their descendants will be freed from the grips of institutional racism and travel on to the land of milk & honey that was promised to them. By believing in a deity that looks like them and has gone through their exact same struggles, Black people unconsciously find *themselves*, rediscover the self-esteem that had been stolen from them by trauma and tragedy, and acquire the stubborn might needed to charge forward and demand the recognition of their humanity.

As influential as this heavenly mandated drive for social justice has been for Black people, there still remains the issue at hand regarding this spiritual mission and the unfortunate reality of its transition into something tangible, especially when this righteous undertaking is then maintained by those that are guilty of suppression in the first place:

From the very beginning to the present day, American white theological thought has been “patriotic,” either by defining the theological task independently of black suffering (the liberal northern approach) or by defining Christianity as compatible with white racism (the conservative southern approach). In both cases theology becomes a servant of the state, and that can only mean death to blacks. It is little wonder that an increasing number of black religionists are finding it difficult to be black and be identified with traditional theological thought forms. (Cone 2020, 432)

Cone points out the bleak fact that Black people are having this struggle, both internal and external, surrounding their religious and spiritual identities, and brings up the possibility that this may stem from an appropriation of pain that coincides with the white supremacist rhetoric that

sought to ensure their systemic abuse in the first place. From this comes a question surrounding the reality of other hierarchies that may also negatively impact African American people despite seeming to come from good intentions.

After emancipation, Black ministers continued to play a gigantic role in the gathering and community building of African peoples, uplifting and reaffirming their humanity through Black theological messages that filled their souls with the hope and strength to carry on and prosper in spite of oppressive opposing forces. After recruiting the enslaved to fight for the Union in the Civil War - and against all odds - Black clergy set up African American denominations beyond the states south of the Mason-Dixon line and took advantage of the opportunity to fertilize the soil that effectively helped Black people to grow and flourish in this country in the aftermath of Pres. Abraham Lincoln's assassination in 1865. Even with the knowledge that Lincoln had emancipated enslaved peoples more so as a war strategy than an ethical standpoint, Black people in America had admired Lincoln, seeing him as a man who acted on racial injustice; that adoration transmogrified into an "unyielding gratitude and a sense of interconnectedness" with the President, resulting in an undying dedication to the "party of Lincoln" even after its politics had changed post-Reconstruction to the detriment of Black people (Harris-Lacewell 2008, 211-212). After his death, Black America had "plunged into a nadir" as the election race of 1876 between Rutherford B. Hayes and Samuel Tilden resulted in a compromise between the northern and southern states, who conceded to Hayes' presidency upon the agreement that they be released from Union occupation, creating the opportunity for Jim Crow laws to be established throughout the South:

Freed from the oversight of the federal government, the South used the rhetoric of state's rights to strip black men of their right to vote, to segregate public accommodations, to

provide inferior education to black citizens, and to allow and promote the terrorist rule of lynch-mob violence... In this context, lynching came to symbolize the position of blacks in American. In the one hundred years following the end of the Civil War, more than five thousand African Americans were lynched and not a single president denounced the atrocities. (Harris-Lacewell, 213)

The Black Church, as the foundation of African American life, was able to provide the necessary education, food, and moral support to Black people in order for them to survive upon its official institutionalization, affirming the souls of every African American that walked through its doors and participated in its services. The Church then asserted itself an invaluable center of “social and organizational life as well as an interpreter of world affairs and national events” as they simultaneously created and perpetuated “distinct biblical understandings...that suggested God related to his people as nations called to special missions” as opposed to individual believers and, as such, the theological framework “focused on God in relationship to his people as a collective,” subverting any individualistic ideations of holiness for the good of the African American population as a whole (Harris-Lacewell 213). From the 19th Century onward, African Americans heavily relied on the Black Church to navigate life in a country that doomed them to fail on a systematic level as it was collectively understood that individual salvation could only be achieved within the collective. Such attitudes could be easily recognized throughout the Civil Rights Movement through influential ministers like Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who wished to seek liberation for not only himself and his children but for several generations of African Americans, recognizing that such social justice work is divinely mandated by God.

The Black Church itself as a firm and organized institution had succeeded previously as a support system for African people - both enslaved and free. With that being said, the Black

Church is not perfect and has flaws; in fact, the brick-and-mortar space did not provide a safe space for all of its members. The formerly invisible institution has had issues with rampant sexism within not only their worship but also their organizational makeup as well. But had this transformation from heavy spirituality to a more religious base largely affected the cultural revolution previously contained within the depths of Black theological thought? Had the oppressed accidentally become the oppressor?

The Black Church as an Oppressor

Even after enslaved Africans were emancipated, the Black Church still flourished and was maintained in the midst of technological advancements, gigantic industrial innovations, and legal attempts to deprive them of their needs. Black Christianity had spread to the northern states in antebellum times and independent African American denominations grew rapidly in the new and fertile soil of a reunified United States. Brick-and-mortar Black churches had begun to pop up around the country during the Great Migration, whether they were rural or storefront, and the Black Church had become set in its institutionalization. Through social justice methods propagated by religious leaders, African Americans were still supporting their communities through self-help organizations implemented from the pulpit that managed to stabilize the Black family and ensure a firm political, economic, and social foundation for African Americans - especially when Congress had effectively stripped Black southerners of their right to vote. Social gospel spread throughout Black congregations, seeking to address social and economic issues through Biblical tenets and doctrines, while sparking the invention of the megachurch (The Black Church: This Is Our Story, Part 2, 06:19, 2021). Black folks were ultimately “expected to make their own way in a legally separate world.” To survive once again, Black Americans turned

towards the community for assistance, relying on the Black Church to help them with their education, politics, and other crucial needs.

When Black migrants moved to the north and the west in the approximately seventy years known as the Great Migration, they once again leaned on the Black Church to provide the minimal services they needed whether it was health care or job employment help; simultaneously, African American churches started building upon the Social Gospel, which was a Christian attempt to address social & economic issues through Biblical doctrine. Created and molded by Black liberation theology, the Black Church was generally confident in its abilities to ensure the success of Black people in America and continue the fight against systemic racism; the idea of religious nonviolence began to gain traction and influential figures such as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., began implementing them throughout the Civil Rights movement to fight against injustices in peaceful ways.

Tensions had continued to rise in the presence of modernism as classist and sexist attitudes persisted through the Church in the midst of outside threats from societal racist adaptation. In the midst of such a struggle, Dr. King's assassination brought the Black Church at a spiritual and political crossroads. Can the Black Church still be a strong force for transformation? A dramatic transition from a secret woodland hideaway to a series of sprawling cathedrals and opulent churches seemed to emphasize its influential impact on the Black life and the Black Church had quickly solidified itself as the center of the African American community in spite of nationwide disillusionment. However, the institution felt an emerging secular threat to their consistently secure operation, a threat that had a much deeper stronghold on young African Americans of that time period: the Black Power movement.

This great disenchantment was ever present in the 1960s and everyone - including African Americans - felt the anxieties regarding this shift towards modernity. As young Americans were questioning the world around them, they began to deny and abandon the institutional hierarchies that they were accustomed to and searched for a purpose outside of societal expectations; for the Black Baby Boomers, this translated into disregarding the idea of integration perpetuated by the Black Church in favor of more radical philosophies instead as many Black people were abandoning church-led organizations and movements for the secular alternatives that most closely aligned with what they felt were the most pervasive issues in society in comparison to those of their parents & grandparents. The Black Church was decidedly conservative and unresponsive to the real issues that had pervaded the nation - and young African Americans of that time had begun to see their ancestral institution as traitorous, a physical manifestation of an 'Uncle Tom' that was continuously propagated brick by brick (Chapman 2006, 70).

Suddenly, Black Christianity was put under a microscopic lens to be examined and critiqued in a way that it hadn't been previously; the Black Church - through Black theological discourse - had to be analyzed and critiqued itself to truly ensure that it was perpetuating the holiness evident not only in their prayers and other religious practices but also in the name of Black Jesus Himself. However, as James Cone had examined, there were indeed several shortcomings viewed in a National Council of Churches (NCC) conference held in the late 1960s:

...they were even more critical of black churches and of themselves as ministers for failing to be more creatively involved in the struggle for black liberation. They admitted that "as black churchmen we find ourselves in the unenviable role of the oppressor," and

thus "we are in real danger of losing our existence and our reason for being, if indeed we have not already lost them." (Cone 1984, 121)

They immediately issued a statement with several solutions that they had intended for Black churches to commit towards, most of them concerned with more Afrocentric images of God as well as massive efforts towards establishing schools to offset the negative effects of a eurocentric educational system. However diligent the Black Church was in recognizing that there was damage done and repent of their theological sins, it still continued to overlook those major internal issues - some of which are still pervading in its institutional makeup to this very day; unfortunately, until the Black Church re-examines its conservative views and tackles its unapologetic homophobia and sexism head on, young African Americans will probably continue to be heavily disillusioned with it as an institution.

Long after the widespread self-criticism was completed by the NCC, the Black Church became infamously known by modern-day Black Americans to perpetuate heterosexism and misogyny from the pulpit. The role of African American women in the Black Church setting has historically been instrumental not just to the growth of Black Christianity but the fight for civil rights as well. Black women would risk their lives time and time again, by organizing against white supremacy and managing to protect Black men, while simultaneously being disrespected in their congregations, being barred from preaching and being leaders in the Black Church. In this way, Black women in America were dealt with a double-edged sword in which they experienced not only racial trauma but gender exploitation as well (Douglas 88). Conversations around sexuality also excluded queer people of color from the religious space and blocked them from comfortably taking part in institutional religion. Judgment comes from both clergymen and

congregation members alike and can have devastating consequences as Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas pointed out:

...a socio-political analysis of wholeness challenges womanist scholars to forthrightly confront heterosexism within the Black church and community. With the exception of a woman's full ordination, no issue has caused more discussion in the Black church than that of sexuality. With AIDS rising to epidemic proportions in the Black community, this discussion has been unavoidable. Some Black church ministers routinely preach from their pulpits that AIDS is a "disease visited by God upon homosexuals because of their sinful lifestyle..." They stridently argued that homosexual practices...were unnatural and went "against the way and will of God." They were even more passionate in their claims that gay and lesbian lifestyles were a threat to the stability of the Black family. (99)

By systematically demonizing and dehumanizing women and queer folks within their own church structure, Black preachers ultimately perpetuate the same level and intensity of oppression that had been implemented and reinforced against them in American society, allowing hatred and intolerance to spread unchecked; in many cases, these incredibly marginalized groups come to church seeking help and refuge, unfortunately internalizing these horrific ideas and preserving them into the foundations of Black Christian rhetoric.

Whether it came from the conservative ideas of evangelicalism or was violently born from traumas experienced by their enslaved ancestors, the prejudice that circulates throughout these Black churches ultimately poisons the very core of Black liberation within a theological context. How can Black people support an institution that is supposedly capable of providing undying support in the name of a liberating God when judgment can be felt from the pews? Additionally, why is such an influential institution not responding to these gigantic issues?

Where, in the Black Church then, is social justice? Such inactivity is being felt by Black millennials in a pattern familiar to their parents & grandparents and - as they turn towards secular spaces for support, such as #BlackLivesMatter, for example - they gradually enter a very tense conflict, producing a large disconnect between them and the religious institutions their ancestors held dear.

A Duke University doctoral candidate analyzed this internal dilemma at length in her dissertation, asserting that the Black Church's inability to resolve these issues and "integrate millennials in Church life" not only widens the gap between the Christian faith and African American young adults but ultimately leads to them being pushed out of the Church altogether (Challenger 2016, 203). Although the Black Church did come about from a need for a holistic alternative to eurocentric Christian ideas and operated as the pinnacle of African American socialization & education, Challenger pointed out that that the modern-day Black Church no longer suffices for younger generations as religious conservatism rose and church attendance stabilized.

For example, the Boomer generation - born between 1941 and 1964 - emphasized the idea that Blackness is beautiful and built upon the Civil Rights Movement by deepening the collective understanding of the African diaspora to promote Black empowerment, highlighting systemic racism and understanding the importance of the connection between the Church, politics, and economic development in the face of rising theological disillusionment; as time progressed in the face of modernization, however, millennials - who were referred to as the "Hip Hop Generation" - had a completely different upbringing in the contemporary world that differed greatly from that of past generations:

In speaking of the Hip Hop Generation, Otis Moss III proclaims the Black Church is now in the Post Soul Generation—the first generation that does not have all its roots in the Church. Therefore, for some, religion is not necessary for socialization or even meaning making. Over time, dropouts from previous generations will raise their children totally separated from religious indoctrination. For those young adults who remain connected to the church, they often wrestle with staying connected and living lives on their terms in the world. (64-65)

Despite being raised in her pews, more than a few African American youth are disillusioned with the Black Church. This discontent has been quietly rumbling for over thirty years, and is now approaching a roar. The result is undeniable; this silent protest is evidenced in our pews and is blaringly clear to all who would hear the sound of their absence... They report that young persons' impressions of Christians as being hypocritical, anti-homosexual, and judgmental are particularly germane for the Black Church. Their inquiry into dropouts is also helpful—they note that millennials... claim their disconnections from church are due to the church's overprotectiveness, shallow teaching that does not provide a comprehensive way of life and faith, sexual repressiveness, etc. (68-69)

Where are these young folks supposed to go when their safe space proves not to be so nurturing or when they feel like the Black Church is no longer meeting the needs of the modern African American?

In this case, the widespread choice for African American millennials to abandon the Church and turn towards spirituality instead seems to echo an eerily similar survival tactic practiced by their enslaved ancestors long ago - except the oppression now seems to come from

their own people. However, for younger Black Americans, “belief in God is no longer equated with participation in a religious praxis via a faith community” (Challenger 75). Even with waning levels of fervent religiosity and participation in Black Church hierarchies, there are many who still see themselves as followers of Christ as Black American millennials still make up 40% of the Black Church congregation (Challenger 59). Why are people still attending services in lieu of widespread disillusionment? Due to the deeply intertwined nature of African American culture and the creolized belief systems that shaped it, African American identities are directly impacted by their relationship to religion and spirituality.

For example, undergraduate students who religiously disaffiliate with religious institutions still utilized religious practices and spiritual ideas “to cope with institutional & individual racism and academic stresses.” In fact, many Black male-identifying undergraduates cannot comprehend as someone who wasn’t created in the image of God; to these Black college students in general, their entire identity is informed and formulated by their spiritual identities, understanding them as “outward manifestations of an inward spiritual essence” in which everything they accomplish and even their post-graduate career planning is viewed as an extension of their spirituality (McGuire 2018, 310-311). It seems apparent that even in contemporary academic settings that are disconnected from traditional church hierarchies, young African Americans are relating to the spiritualist ideas that they inherited from their religious-cultural backgrounds.

In summation, these studies note an overt lack of religiosity, Black American millennials utilize their spiritual background to maintain a sense of identity and belonging while simultaneously experiencing a healthy disillusionment that doesn’t disregard their religious-spiritual culture. Are younger Black Americans creating their own spaces for community and

self-affirmation? If Black Americans are distancing themselves from the religious institutions they grew up in while still adhering to spiritual ideas, is it true that the Black Church gradually became the problem over time instead of the solution? If so, does it have the potential to evolve over time once again into something greater?

Conclusion

The question I sought to ask was why are African American millennials deviating from traditional religious hierarchies, specifically the Black Church? The research has shown that upon its institutionalization, the Black Church failed to resolve internal issues that are negatively impacting African American millennials. Black Americans have successfully continued to adapt and work towards freedom in methods that aren't incredibly different from the way their ancestors did. The Africanization of European religious dogma ultimately formulated a required road to the emancipation of the mind, body, and soul that was forged with assistance from the unofficial institution that not only kept African American culture alive but helped to create it in the first place. Once a social center where African Americans could take part in community and culture without fear and opposition from their oppressors, the Black Church is no longer a faith-based safe space for the very people it is supposed to protect & is no longer accommodating to their needs. The blending of the secular with the divine that is overtly evident by way of spiritual practices is not a sign of the dissolution of the Black Church but is instead a perpetuation of it, an adaptation of the intangible in order to fit the needs of Black Americans that are not being met in the physical. To this very day, young African Americans are creating community, processing their realities, and fighting for social change in the same way their ancestors once were; the only difference is that it isn't necessarily being done from the pulpit. The metaphysical properties of the Black Church are still nourishing and strengthening Black lives even if its corporeal

physicality proves to be less effective in its goal. As descendants of the enslaved, African American millennials have managed this far to keep alive that which is beneficial for them on their journeys and reverently put away the aspects that might've been detrimental to their growth. A secular ministry seems to be prominently in place amongst young Black Americans instead of the spirituality that permeated the Civil Rights Movement, which brings about a startling conclusion. African Americans are becoming flexible to a tumultuous environment once again, gravitating towards spiritual movements and carving out their own spaces for community. Neither the Black Church nor religion is dying for young African Americans; they have just simply evolved and adapted to uncertain times so that they can survive for future generations to revere and admire.

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