Spirituality and Struggle:

Religious and Spiritual Experiences of Black Men as it Relates to the Decline in Political Power for the Black Church

By Alissa Rae Funderburk

For presentation in the paper session
Identity & Citizenship in Religious Communities
at the 2020 Virtual Annual Meeting
of the Oral History Association
themed "The Quest for Democracy:
One Hundred Years of Struggle"

Jackson, Mississippi October 2020

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.. *2*
INTRODUCTION.. *4*
METHODOLOGY.. *6*
ORAL HISTORY.. *11*
CONCLUSION *34*
WORKS CITED & CONSULTED.. *36*
ENDNOTES... *35*

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore and examine the experiences and practices of Black men as regards their religion and spirituality and their relation to American democracy. As a religious person myself, my initial investigative question was what does it mean for one to consider themselves spiritual but not religious, particularly given the long history of the role of religion in the Black community in America. This evolved to include how Black men and the increasing popularity of a "spiritual" identity that diverges from the prototypical African American religious identity aka the Black Church, impacts not just the weekly attendance of these longstanding institutions but also their social influence and political power on the national stage. Compared to the Black religious institutions of previous generations, and the religious leaders that brought their message from the pulpit to the streets as protesters for civil rights, the Black Church today seems to lack the voice and/or support necessary to make an impact on the nation's politics or local government policy.

Gone are the days of leaders like MLK, Malcolm X, and Colin Powell. Instead, largely due to this rise of “spirituality” in place of organized religion, a more secular grassroots effort led through social media, like #BLM, is the modern day civil rights movement. The oral histories on which this paper are based include a small sample of politically active narrators who could speak to the subject of Black male spirituality and religion, as well as the archived oral histories of Mississippi natives who grew up attending Black churches during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Themes exposed in the interviews included but were not limited to politics, health and wellness, feelings of hypocrisy within the Christian church, the history of Black theology, the sway of prosperity gospel, the legacy of slavery, and memories of segregation and integration.

Introduction

Though both my parents grew up steeped in religion (my mother attending a Black Baptist church and my father attending Catholic school), during my early childhood neither my mother nor my father belonged to any particular church. Like many Black parents in America, they made sacrifices of their time and ambitions to give us a healthy and happy home. My parents spent their limited funds on taekwondo lessons, books, and cross country trips to teach my brother and me perseverance, logic, and acceptance of others. Though they were concerned with raising respectful, polite, intelligent, and kind kids, they did not rely solely on the bible or church to instill those values in us. I was about ten when my father found a church that he really liked, called Faith Fellowship Ministries led by David T. Demola. He had heard Pastor Demola on the radio and thinking he was Black, immediately took a liking to his style of teaching. Just at that time, this non-denominational church founded in our hometown of Staten Island, New York and led by an Italian American man, had grown large enough to move to a megachurch-sized facility in Sayreville, New Jersey.

My father, not dissuaded by any of these facts, would make the forty-five-minute drive to their 8:00 am service nearly every week. My mother, however, less dedicated to Faith Fellowship or attending church in general then, would often elect to stay behind whenever it was cold out, or raining, or if we had overslept and would need to attend the 10:00 am service instead. In those instances, during the still hours of the morning, my father would gently wake my brother and me to ask if we wanted to go to church. It was always a choice, and often a matter of consensus. I have never lived in a way where religion felt like it was forced upon me, like an obligation or responsibility. Sure, there have been some Sundays when I preferred to stay in bed (the case for almost all of my undergraduate years) but for the most part, being welcomed into a community

of church-goers has been a privilege. It is a constant reminder that I am a part of something larger than just myself, or my family.

In recent years, I've recognized more and more often a difference between the way I practiced my faith and that of others in my community. In particular, though we had been raised in the same household, I noticed a large difference between the beliefs of my own younger brother and myself. Whereas I have always found great comfort in things like the Lord's Prayer, my brother Aaron had undergone a phase of questioning both the church and all things spiritual. This phase probably began with his move at fourteen years old from living with us in Staten Island, to living with our grandparents in Decatur, Alabama. Forced to attend the same Black Baptist church my mother did as a youth with my grandmother every Sunday, his feelings on religion shifted and led him along a path of intellectual curiosity in which he sought to learn as much as he could about a variety of religious traditions and spiritual practices. Aaron took a great liking to the writings of Khalil Gibran[1] in particular and, though he came to the conclusion that God and Jesus Christ are an indelible part of him too, he decided that the church of our grandparents was not for him. Even now, it pains me to think about how delicate one's trust and faith can be, how easily damaged, even in something I believed to be as seemingly benign as Christian fellowship.

I empathize with the circumstances that led my brother to distance himself from the church. Aaron had felt like his trust had been broken by the hypocrisy he'd witnessed while working

[1] Khalil Gibran was a Lebanese-American author, poet, artist, and philosopher best known as the author of *The Prophet*, which was first published in the U.S. in 1923 and is one of the best-selling books of all time. His writing was influenced by his own religion, Christianity, as well as Islam, especially by the mysticism of the Sufis. His knowledge of Lebanon's bloody history strengthened his belief in the fundamental unity of religions, leading to a number of strong connections to the Bahá'í Faith.

with people who called themselves “Christians.” For him, it made sense to draw a proverbial line in the sand and, like many other Black men, decide to no longer consider himself “religious” but rather align himself and his beliefs with what seems a more innocuous term like “spiritual.” Though I’ve never personally felt a distinction between “religion” and “spirituality,” I realize that many Black people do for a variety of reasons. That distinction is directly related to a decline in not just their attendance of historically Black churches, but also those churches ability to affect change in the nation’s political landscape on behalf of the Black community. In comparison to the Black church involvement in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, Black churches today, without the membership and leadership of decades prior, take a back seat to political movements led instead by secular grassroots social media campaigns like Black Lives Matter.

Methodology

I have attended many churches over the years and, looking back I now wonder about the state of Christianity in America. As a Black woman especially, I wonder about Christianity and religion within my community. Black people in America have had a longstanding relationship with religion and Christianity in particular. Historically, churches were some of the first places slaves were able to exhibit some semblance of independence and, even after the Civil War, the Black churches served as community meeting places, banks, and even the driving force behind political movements like the fight for civil rights. Yet today, I have come across more and more Black young men who profess to be spiritual but not religious, who are unsure of what to believe or are uncomfortable putting their beliefs into words, who know God exists but deem church unimportant. When I review church attendance, whether checking census information or looking at the faces in the pews around me, I can’t help but notice the small percentage of Black men.

I wonder what changes have occurred to create this condition, what personal stories of broken trust have played a role. Where have all the young Black men (and their faith) gone? It is an important question given its repercussions for the strength of our community. For instance, what does this change mean in relation to the organizing power of the Black church? Where once, the Black church was the predominant source for community development, charity, and even education, now it is largely relegated to Sunday morning sermons and televised prosperity gospel with a declining rate of attendance. In the age of #BlackLivesMatter and a new wave of civil rights organizing sparked by the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, what role does faith play and why is there not more visible Black church involvement?

These questions can only begin to be answered by looking first and foremost into what individual Black men believe in and why. Thus the crux of my research has been interviewing young Black men about their experiences of religion and/or spirituality, in part to better understand the decline of the church as nerve center of the Black community. Through this research, I am seeking a broader understanding of what it means to be Black in America today. For this paper, I have also delved into the oral history archives of the Margaret Walker Center at Jackson State University in Mississippi and thrown myself into the realm of Black theology following in the inquiries of theologians and thinkers from the era of the civil rights movement to now. However, like the founder of Black liberation theology Dr. James. H. Cone, "I do not claim to have all the answers to our problems. I only hope that I can raise the right questions and point us in the direction where answers might be found."[2]

---

[2] Cone, James H. For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church *(Where Have We Been and Where Are We Going?)*.1984.

Though some might argue that the injustices Black people face living in America today are less physically violent and thus less overtly traumatic than terrorist attacks, genocide, a global pandemic, displacement, or torture, current events like the Black Lives Matter movement are only a small battle in a larger war that has been waged in the shadow of American democracy for generations. The race war of the United States of America is ongoing and its effects on African American people are embedded in every part of daily life, from birth to adulthood, including our religious and spiritual identity. It is an inherited and othering trauma that affects every Black person differently at different times throughout their lives, yet often goes unspoken. For this reason, an oral history project is the best way to give voice to just some of the thousands of people affected and the ways in which the community continues to cope as they strive towards justice and true democracy.

The existence of racism in the United States constitutes an oppressive system under which Black Americans live, and though not every oral history interview with a Black person would be considered political, most would certainly involve interesting power dynamics. As a Black woman in America, it is very rare that I have to consider my role in politics and power dynamics besides trying to reclaim my authority over my own self. After addressing my own subjectivity, combating the issues of racism and sexism, I also work against the overall assumption that because of my stature, demeanor, and the way I look, I hold less power in an interview setting.[3] I

[3] The Combahee River Collective Statement is a paper written by a group of Black feminists explaining the genesis of contemporary Black feminism; the specific province of their politics; the problems in organizing Black feminists; and Black feminist issues and practice. The paper was copyrighted in 1978 by Zillah Eisenstein and later published by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, Inc., New York, New York, in the book *Home Girls, A Black Feminist Anthology*, edited by Barbara Smith, 1983. Their statement serves as the foundation for the coining of the term “intersectionality” by American lawyer, civil rights advocate and

can typically use this to my advantage, however for this project, I feel an innate connection and relatability to the subject and my narrators (those friends I interviewed and archived voices with the ring of familiarity).

As noted in Hackett and Rolston's article *The burden of memory: Victims, storytelling and resistance in Northern Ireland,* many people don't like to discuss their personal experiences of the trauma of racism. In my experience, this is certainly true within the Black community of America. As Hackett and Rolston quote, "Part of our problem is that we have been brought up in a culture where we did not tell our stories." I have developed, in part because of this reluctance, a greater interest in what is left out of the historical record. Oral history as a method allows us to not just report the 'facts' of past events but the impact of such events on the people who have experienced them and their impacts. As Alessandro Portelli has uncovered, oral history "tells us less about events than about their meaning." According to Portelli, "interviews often reveal unknown events," or "cast new light on unexplored areas of the daily life of the non-hegemonic classes."[4]

It is these unexplored areas of daily life that most news articles or history books fail to capture. Our primary method, that of collecting life history as opposed to focusing on a single event, is especially beneficial in understanding how one conceives of and also acts upon their religious

---

leading scholar of critical race theory, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, in 1989 to explain the intersections of race, gender, sex and the various social dynamics like heterosexism, transphobia, xenophobia, ableism, etc. that marginalized people all face. Crenshaw has presented and written extensively on this theory, also called intersectional feminism, a branch of feminism asserting how different aspects of social and political identity discrimination overlap as published in her most recent work *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings of Kimberlé Crenshaw*, 2017.

[4] Portelli, Alessandro. "The Death of Luigi Trastulli: Memory and the Event." The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991.

and/or spiritual beliefs both individually and as a part of the larger Black community. Religious expression and even the act of discussing one's religious and/or spiritual beliefs is inherently political and democratic, an act of rebellion, self-preservation, and historical revisionism which, in the case of this oral history, gives Black Americans power to change the historical record to reflect their own known facts, evidence, and interpretation.

Interwoven amongst the stories of my narrators are the archived recollections of an earlier generation of African Americans related to the Black church and its political involvement. Coming from a 1994 partnership with Duke University, the Behind the Veil oral history project led by Dr. Alferdteen Harrison of the then Margaret Walker Alexander Research Foundation at Jackson State University, focuses on documenting African-American experiences during the era of Jim Crow segregation and disfranchisement in Mississippi and the South. The project consists of nearly eighty interviews conducted by Dr. Harrison and her oral history students, including interviews with teachers, professors, reverends, lawyers, senators and even a Mississippi Supreme Court Justice. These narrators recall their personal memories of growing up in Mississippi and living through the Civil Rights Movement. Some of the narrators talk about the specific roles their churches played either in the movement at large or their relationships to other politically active organizations at that time, like the NAACP.

All of these oral histories, including those I've collected, tell less about events than about their meaning and, as Portelli writes, they reveal often unknown events by casting "new light on unexplored areas of the daily life of the non-hegemonic classes."[5] These wrong tales which

---

[5] Portelli, Alessandro. "What Makes Oral History Different." The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991.

"allow us to recognize the interests of the tellers, and the dreams and desires beneath them," are the errors, inventions, and myths that lead us through and beyond facts to their meanings. For a community that has consistently undergone a state of violence and abuse over more than two centuries, oral history has the capacity to serve the function of recognition and the seeds of self-reflection.[6]

In my interviews I ask each narrator about the guiding principles, moral values, and faiths with which young Black men lead their daily lives because I want churches and other religious institutions/places of worship to recognize behaviors and/or rhetorics that are discouraging, unwelcoming, divisive or ostracizing. I want people within the community to feel more comfortable discussing these topics as a means of creating a more understanding and accepting environment in the socio-political climate of the Donald Trump presidency era. This paper is intended to encourage readers to reflect on their own relationship with the Black community and educate them on the historical significance of places of worship in the community's growth. I hope to use oral history to illustrate more of the nuance and complexity of our religious traditions and their relationship to American politics while creating a space for greater understanding and fellowship among people of different beliefs and backgrounds, a realization of unification within these United States of America.

Oral History

One of the first people I interviewed was a friend whose thoughts on religion differed greatly from my own. One of seven children from African American, Puerto Rican and Native American

[6] Fields, Karen. "What One Cannot Remember Mistakenly." Oral History. 17.1. (1989): 44-53.

heritage, Ashun Jackson values family, both immediate and extended, above all else. Having known Ashun for years, I knew that he'd visited his grandparents and great grandparents in Georgia every summer growing up and was therefore extremely familiar with the traditions of the South as well as life in New York City. He grew up moving between New York and New Jersey due in part to his dad's career as a cornerback in the NFL for the Jets. Like his father, Ashun exhibited exceptional athletic ability, excelling on every little league or school team he played for from baseball and hockey, to football.

After high school he received a scholarship to play football for Hofstra University and transferred after his junior year to receive his B.A. from Alabama's historically Black[7] Tuskegee University.[8] Since college, Ashun has used his degree and the lessons he's learned as an athlete to become a successful entrepreneur and small business owner. For years Ashun has worked as a high school football coach and personal trainer, using his profession to encourage healthier lifestyles and accessible exercise practices for his clientele. He's also active in his community, attending various pow-wows in the tri-state area and volunteering with his local Meals on Wheels program in Long Island. Community is the key to how he finds success and fulfillment in life and he is inspired by the positive energy he gives and receives from others. However, in the current socio-political climate of America, Ashun sees a huge difference between the way community existed in his childhood and what exists now.

---

[7] . Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are institutions of higher education established in the United States before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 with the intention of serving the African American community that was shut out of most colleges and universities or subjected to strict quotas. There are 101 HBCUs in the U.S., including both public and private institutions, most having been founded in the years after the American Civil War, during the period of segregation, and concentrated in Southern states.

[8] Tuskegee University is a private, HBCU located in Tuskegee, Al established by Lewis Adams and Booker T. Washington. Designated as the Tuskegee Institute National Historic Site by the National Park Service, the campus was home to scientist George Washington Carver and to World War II's Tuskegee Airmen.

One of Ashun's favorite films, Nate Parker's *The Birth of a Nation*, based on the confession of an enslaved Black American who led one of the most effective, sustained slave rebellions in U.S. history[9]. In the midst of the antebellum South, a literate Black preacher named Nat Turner, is ordered by his financially strained owner, Samuel Turner, to use his preaching to suppress the supposed unruly enslaved people of plantations across the South for a profit. In his travels he witnesses countless atrocities against himself and those like him by the various white slave-owning southerners he meets. Over time he gathers trusted followers believing that God has selected him as a chosen instrument of freedom and orchestrates a bloody uprising in the hopes of leading his people to their freedom.

Prior to our interview Ashun insisted we see the film together and watching this movie as a Black person, with its ironically chosen title[10] and controversial press coverage in 2016, just after the election of Donald Trump, left me speechless. According to Ashun, both the film and the true story of Nat Turner, were proof positive of the efficacy of Christianity in promoting white supremacy. For Ashun, belief in the same bible that was once used to control and suppress enslaved Africans is the antithesis of an empowered Black community today. He, and many like him, say that Christianity is "the white man's religion," that was forced onto a group of people stripped of their homes, languages, families, traditions, and spiritual beliefs by the middle crossing.

[9] *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the leader of the late insurrection in Southampton, Va., as fully and voluntarily made to Thomas R. Gray* is a pamphlet published after Turner's trial and execution in 1831.

[10] *The Birth of a Nation* is a 1915 American silent epic drama film directed by D. W. Griffith and adapted from the 1905 novel and play *The Clansman*, by Thomas Dixon Jr. It was the first 12-reel film ever made, the longest up to that point, and the first American motion picture to be screened in the White House by President Woodrow Wilson. The film has been called "the most controversial film ever made in the United States".

But, contrary to what's been taught, the history of Black people and Christianity doesn't begin with American colonialism in the antebellum South. In the second chapter of Portelli's, *The Order Has Been Carried Out*, he quotes Israeli author Amos Oz: "Is there, after all, a truly appropriate incipit for a story? Or isn't there always—latent, but always there—a beginning before the beginning?" The beginning before the beginning of the Black church in America is the Christian church in Africa. "In the first Christian centuries, northern Africa provided some of the keenest intellects and most influential apologists in Christendom," and "at the end of the third century AD, the eastern Maghrib was one of perhaps three places in the world where Christians were in a majority."[11]

Yet the history of slavery in America, especially as it is depicted in film, leads many Black people to conclusions similar to Ashun's: that to continue in these seemingly antithetical beliefs does a disservice to the African heritage that African Americans should be trying to reclaim. In Ashun's mind, African Americans should strive to recognize and venerate the history and traditions of the Kingdom of Kush and Mansa Musa rather than strengthening our attachments to the Christian ideologies found on slave ships, another commodity of the transatlantic slave trade.

As a former college football player, Ashun sees a clear relation between this legacy of slavery to the monetization of Black talent today. "You know, I loved my teammates. I love this. It was just fun, you know, just having fun and that's what I did. But it's not fun when you're really good at it and it turns into money for other people and you like a meal ticket and it's another side of sports that people don't really get to see. And I got a chance to see it and I was in it." The evolution

[11] Isichei, Elizabeth. A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present.1995.

from middle school football to high school and college then potentially the NFL was eye opening for Ashun, who had seen the hardships his father and father's friends experienced in the league. Commonly referred to as the new plantation, both the NCAA and NFL with its majority white owners, very closely resembles the system of sharecropping that replaced slavery after the Civil War. Players (most of whom are Black) are being paid for their efforts, but are largely excluded from the immense profits built on their labor and injuries.[12]

"So just coming up through high school is pure, you with your friends. You want to win games, you want to compete, you in the school, you wearing your jersey, you want your jacket, it's fun, you know." But Ashun's full ride athletic scholarship to Hofstra University meant having to play on a different level. From being a kid and playing for fun, he quickly learned "you gotta be a grown man. You got to. With people who've been there for four years and are fully developed and, it's like training to go to battle and actually battling everyday on the weekends you play a game." He calls it a battle, "you can get hurt. You go out there as a war mentality and so you know, going to school and college, I don't care what nobody says, that scholarship is not equivalent to what you're giving into the school."

Though he played ball all four years to make it through college, he didn't want that kind of backbreaking lifestyle going into adulthood, to participate in such a vicious cycle. "You trying to tell me the next level, they gonna give me millions of dollars to wear a logo?" He asks, "what do I have to give other than my body and, and potentially my health in the future. You have to give

[12] Hawkins, B. The New Plantation: Black Athletes, College Sports, and Predominantly White NCAA Institutions

up your right to speak out: Colin Kaepernick."[13] This is something Ashun can't abide, "you gotta be quiet. You gotta play football and when they're done with you, they gonna move you. They going to get rid of you and then, then you won't have a voice." As an active member of his community, Ashun refuses to be voiceless. It would be a step in the wrong direction, comparable to Nat Turner's enslavement, forced to be the mouthpiece of a system that demeans and devalues you while profiting from the labor of your body and talent.

This suppression of one's voice due to the threat to financial security and the fear of a loss of employment was also prominent during the Civil Rights Movement as expressed by Reverend Barron Banks. He explained in his 2014 oral history interview what it was like for religious leaders in the sixties who wanted to support the movement, "Yeah, let me just say—and sometimes people don't say this but not only black clergy, but you had white clergy, especially in cities like Jackson and Chula. If you had any white they wouldn't be known to sing, but here in Jackson you had priests, you had rabbis and others who were very much involved. Of course, you had more black, but even in the black community with the clergy the fear of jobs, and the fear of life, very few showed themselves. But yet and still, we still had the Civil Rights Movement and civil rights meetings in churches. SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] was started by Dr. King in churches."

Instead of a church or career that could potentially leave him feeling stifled, Ashun seeks a system of beliefs that affirms his intentions. With technology, social media, and greater access to

[13] Former NFL quarterback of the San Francisco 49 who suffered public criticism and unemployment for exercising his second amendment rights by kneeling during the national anthem at the start of NFL games in protest of police brutality and racial inequality in the United States. He remains unsigned.

[14] Banks, Barron. Interview by Hondo Olatunde. 20 November 2014. OH# 94.47b, Oral History Project, Jackson State University Margaret Walker Center Archives, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pY6hgc6pFbU Accessed 27 July 2020.

world travel, the trend of free thought along with eastern cultural practices like yoga and religions like Buddhism continues to grow in popularity among Americans. Acupuncture, herbal remedies, chakras and crystals have spread beyond Chinatown to become part of the health and spiritual practices of a growing number of people throughout the country, including Black people. Ashun's spirituality helps to fuel his socio-political beliefs, health practices, work ethic and the way he relates to others:

> "I'm really into chakras and working on my chakras every day. And you know, it's different levels of self-consciousness and just understanding where you are and understanding why other people act the way they act. And because we're always functioning on a low frequency. The ultimate goal is to vibrate on a high frequency and to be able to manifest your thoughts into actual reality. And so you have a lot of successful people, you know, they say, you have to be persistent and you have to think and you have to want it all the time. You know, people who are positive and they see the glass half full, people who are vibrating on a different frequency and see someone who says, 'well, I don't have enough money' or 'my car is really bad, even though I have a car' or 'you know, I don't have enough' or 'I'm not good enough,' you know that's people vibrating on a low frequency. And it starts with our interactions with each other and starts with the foods that you eat. It starts with a lot of different things. And so that's spiritual and if you can conquer that battle within yourself as far as understanding your frequencies and understanding why this person is acting like this and understanding fight or flight reflexes and understanding all those different things, then it'll help you maneuver and help you vibrate on a higher frequency."

Whether in adherence with more recent exposure to East Asian customs or an existing relationship to African traditions preserved through the diaspora, these practices tend to offer an alternative to the dominant Abrahamic religions, seemingly more in line with Ashun's personal beliefs. "I believe in the universe," Ashun explains, "the sun, and the wind, and the water." Ashun says "Mother Nature is, is, you know, our god, you know, the sun is the god" in his opinion. "It's just evident when you look at plants and the importance of trees and how flowers interact with water and light and all these different things. Simple things you go look at to see

what really controls everything and balances out everything. So that's what I believe in, you know. I believe in elements. I believe in balance and um, that's what sustains us."

The necessity of balance is something, no matter their professed religious or spiritual beliefs, most people find agreeable. Balance is something espoused by the Torah, Bible, and the Koran as well as being a primary tenet of such faiths as Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, and a myriad of others. Lucumí, a Yoruba religion from present-day Benin and Nigeria, and the religions that stem from it, like Brazil's Condomble, Haiti's Vodun and Cuba's Santería, also teach a concept of balance. By worshipping and making offerings to orishas, the deities of Lucumí religions, santeros like Andrew Viñales strive to create a life of balance.

Andrew, a Bronx born Puerto Rican and Dominican, began practicing Santería as a child under his father's guidance. In fact, Andrew's whole family, along with his twin brother and younger sister, are not just individual practitioners of this faith but part of a community of people who worship together, a "religious family." Andrew grew up seeing altars in the homes of his grandmothers and the windows of their neighbors in the Bronx, surrounded by storytellers in his family and religious community. Their stories highlighted ongoing systemic oppression as well as the struggle for survival faced by those with marginalized identities, such as Queer, Afro-Latinx, and practitioners of the Lucumí/Santería tradition. After earning his B.A. in Latin American and Caribbean Studies from Union College in Schenectady, Andrew pursued his master's degree from Columbia University's oral history program intent on recording those stories.

For most of his adult life, Andrew has been focused on the ways he can give back both inside and outside of academia. Having worked as an oral historian for an academic institution in New York City, Andrew has been able to collect the stories of Puerto Ricans who have made an impact in their professional fields and in their communities. “I am able to sit with people who mostly I admire, right. So folks who have been organizers or activists, um, people who are educators.” Even now, as he continues his studies at the CUNY graduate center for a PhD in anthropology, Andrew is still deeply invested in his culture and heritage as evidenced in his travels, studies, and advocating for the visibility of Afro-Latinxs. For instance, after graduating from Union, Andrew was awarded the Minerva Fellowship to live and work promoting sustainable development in a small, impoverished community on the coast of Ecuador.

Andrew is so passionate about his culture and faith that he was the only one of my narrators to actually approach me about being interviewed. After our two sessions together, there was still so much more to learn about his beliefs, practices, and life that Andrew invited me to his home and to attend a drumming so that I could experience his religious practice for myself. The day of the drumming I dressed in proper attire: the color white, comfortable shoes for dancing, and (as a woman) a skirt. He greeted me at his door in Harlem and a small tour revealed the entire apartment had an airy feeling with a considerable amount of light, and a multitude of green plants thriving in every window. Andrew told me the names of each plant, where they came from and what they were used for most often. Andrew’s family had lived in the apartment since he was a teen and now it was home to him and his girlfriend Diana. I don’t know if it was the blue and green color scheme, the soulful music playing or just Andrew’s general positive energy but

their home had an air of peacefulness that made me think of something he had said in one of our interview sessions:

> "Peace is funny because, you know, to me I feel like I don't know what peace looks like because I've never experienced it, but I know peace requires a lot of work. Peace to me, if I had to create peace, means being able to live freely, not the Kanye West "free-thinking" peace, but thinking and being able to do and act and just be, without any sort of pressure to behave in a certain type of way. I think peace also looks like, the world. And I mean *the* world, right? Not just *my* world, but the whole world being able to see themselves as connected with each other, with nature, with themselves. Right. Because I do feel like in that connection and being able to connect on those levels, we're able to be and exist in a way where racism doesn't exist, where gender based violence doesn't exist, where the ways that we strip the world of its natural resources don't exist. Right. Because as a religious and spiritual person, I understand the world, that everything and everything is sacred. Right? I'm sacred. You're sacred. You know, animals are sacred, nature is sacred, water is sacred. And having this understanding that everything and we're all connected to it because we all share ashe—energy, that kind of life force: rocks are sacred because they have ashe, they mean and do things—having that understanding about the world is peace because it causes us to behave in certain ways. I wouldn't have to talk about, you know, I wouldn't be distracted as Toni Morrison says, 'the work of racism is a distraction.' I'm misquoting her, but something like that. I wouldn't have to spend my life trying to eradicate anti-Blackness, right? Because it wouldn't exist and I can do something else. I can spend my time doing something else."

Something about Andrew's home felt like the kind of place one could seek not just a refuge from the world, but the knowledge and energy necessary to combat the troubles of the world. It was a sacred space filled with sacred things, like the offerings of coffee and water in the corner of the dining area that needed to be refreshed and the altar on the long blue sideboard with its white cloth, glasses of water, framed photo, small collection of crystals and beads, and a framed list of names belonging to Diana's ancestors. Everything in the apartment pointed to the notion that the space and the people in it belonged to something greater. Even the very plants (offshoots given by friends or family members) were part of a larger connectivity of people, ideas, and beliefs, spread across time and space.

> "Being in communication with folks who practice different African religious traditions is understanding that being in one, doesn't negate the other. I think it's more of a western concept that one is 'right' and one is 'wrong,' and I think that has a lot to do with the way colonization works. And the way colonization has worked has been like, 'I win therefore I'm better and stronger and right.' The way indigenous practices have been both in Africa and even Latin America, and I want to say like all over the world, is that yes, you know, colonization exists. But for example, in Latin America, when you know, indigenous Mexicans, say Aztecs, Incans, colonizers, right? They colonize a whole bunch of folks in South America before it was called South America. And so they had their deities and they use the justification that they were able to win to say that their religion was right. But also saying, okay, what are their deities? What are their gods and what can I use from them? So the way Lukumí works, and the way it has worked for as long as it's been in this hemisphere, is that they set up a system that borrows, you know, indigenous practices from Cuba that borrows Catholic symbolism--what's the word, iconography, is that the word?"

Andrew's explanation of this syncretism of religions speaks to the nature of people, the history of colonialism, and the legacy of slavery that still exists today. Part of what drives the growing trend for the spiritual is the knowledge that so much of what we believe in is shared across religions.

> "The way Elegua has manifestations in different communities in Africa be it in Congo region be it in, you know, Elegua in Fang and Bantu communities and Yoruba communities like they have different manifestations. But how did that happen? Because colonization and they still exist. So for me, how I navigate that is, you know, they have spirits and beings have been elevated to a place where they're able to work with you based on what they were called to do in this plane. And so me, whenever or if ever I become initiated in Dominican Voodoo, um, doesn't take away me being initiated and participating in Lukumí. There are lots of people who do that. I, um, on top of being in the Lukumí system. I'm also an espiritista, which is a very different religious system, right? Espiritismo, um, some would argue is not even a religion. It's just a tool to communicate with spirits. Sure there are, you know, cultural norms and so there's arguments both for and against, why it's religion or not, but people come to espiritismo from all over. There's Catholic espiritistas, and Buddhist espiritistas, Lukumí espiritistas, and really is just being able to tap into your own spiritual power and saying, I can communicate with a spirit. Then you use your tools that you have to interpret. So I know that I want to, part of it is because I inherit these traditions from my grandparents. And a lot of the times the way religion and spirituality is works is location based, right? I don't think I'm ever going to be part of a Garifuna religious system because I'm not Garifuna, but I am open to, if need be, finding healing in Garifuna system. Because

> in my head they all come from the same source, although they come from different locations, they were also in communication with each other in Africa."

I was interested to see for myself, the ideas and notions Andrew had described in his interviews in practice. When we arrived, Andrew greeted his friends and family members in a mixture of English and Spanish, introducing me around. The sense of family from that moment on was profound, each person I met displaying kindness in every gesture. There was an ornately designed throne for the two orishas being honored, decorated with fresh fruits, baked goods, flowers, mirrors, fans, colorful fabrics and other symbols related to their power. Just as Andrew had promised there was live music, a small band of percussionists who led the singing and dancing of all those in attendance. Though I didn't know the steps and the songs seemed to last an indeterminate amount of time because I could not understand the lyrics, it didn't feel particularly strange or foreign. I was at first surprised but then reassured that the experience reminded me of both attending a Buddhist wedding ceremony and being in Alabama at a family cookout, doing the electric slide. It was being in community and worship, just like any church.

I am aware, however, that not every church exhibits these same welcoming feelings of community and worship. People who grow up attending church can attest to this fact, whether they personally don't feel welcomed or just have experienced a change in their relationship the church community over time. My friend Gabriel Kerr, spoke on this topic in our second interview. Gabriel grew up in the mostly Black and Latino community of Harlem being raised by his mother and maternal grandmother of Afro-Caribbean descent. Though he had cousins and other extended family members, as an only child, Gabriel grew up heavily involved in the Catholic Church, which often acted as a second family.

While attending an all-boys Catholic high school, Gabriel worked after school and on weekends as a receptionist at his local parish church. He even received a small scholarship from the Archdiocese to aid in his attending college at Columbia University. However, since that time Gabriel admits his relationship with the church has been limited. “I did enjoy going and serving and doing all that and then there came a point where I just wasn't getting anything from it.” During his four years studying film at Columbia, Gabriel instead explored other passions, like singing, acting, Latin dance and travel, having studied abroad for a semester at Queen Mary University of London.

Embracing his identity as both African American and Latino, Gabriel had no trouble finding a welcoming community as a member of Sabor, Columbia’s Latin dance team. Thanks to that club, Gabriel found friends and a lasting community that would remain intact long after graduating college. After receiving his bachelor’s degree, Gabriel pursued a professional career in the entertainment industry, starting out as a production assistant at ABC and becoming an Associate Producer at Rock’n Robin Productions. When not working, Gabriel dedicates much of his time to leisure travel, running, and charitable causes such as Memorial Sloan Kettering’s Cycle for Survival, an annual event in which he participates in honor of his recently deceased grandmother who immigrated to the US from Cuba in 1939. Just prior to our interview, Gabriel travelled to Cuba with a group of close friends in an effort to reconnect with his roots and the cultural heritage of the island. Yet over the years, Gabriel’s relationship to his old church and Catholicism as a whole, has weakened to the point where he only ever attends services on special occasions for the benefit of his mother.

“The church community was very much a part of me and helping me in being successful in getting to college and all that.

In a way, and I think my high school did it too, like you were put on a pedestal in a way for your community. It was like, ‘Gabe's going to Columbia.” Like I was a poster boy for All Hollows and for St. Charles. And that can be a lot of pressure. But I kind of liked it, it felt like a sense of accomplishment. So I didn't get the call about, I didn't, I wasn't in church when it was announced that the pastor got removed, I was at Columbia. Then just from the people I spoke to, my god-sisters, and they were crying and you're like, ‘I can't believe it.’ And a lot of times I compartmentalize. I kinda just was like, ‘this sucks’ and I pushed it, ‘I got other things I gotta worry about.’ And sure, I go back to church for special occasions, but I don't think I was really an active member since college.

I got a scholarship. I was a scholarship recipient of cash—I mean, yeah, that's what scholarships are—it's called the Office of Black Ministry and it's part of the archdiocese of New York and I'm still actually very active with them today. I actually produced some videos for them for their annual dinner. I've been their tech director for the dinner. And I also read, actually I have applications, like 50 applications. So I actually help choose the next class of scholars. So it’s become a whole program. They do a retreat every year so I'm still very involved with that. They provide mentors and workshops for students, the only criteria is you have to be a student of faith within the archdiocese. And you know, that money actually helped a lot because while some grant money you get goes directly to the school, this was a check that went straight in my hand and to the bank and I could use it right away and it helped a lot. And it also, as a young adult, it was good to be around more young adults. And I think that's another factor in which, in a way, the church helped me when I needed them and they did what they could and it was now time for me to fly off and be ME and that kind of meant I had to leave some things behind. And that's always going to be my home parish. But I don't know. I don't think, I don't plan to go to church. I don't see myself going to church on a regular basis. I am actually gonna go for Easter. My mother and I said we will go, which is going to be the first time she has been in the church also in a while. So it's like certain things change over time. And my church in particular, as I said, I wasn't feeling anything and I've always gotten joy out of the music. I like to think of myself as a musical person anyway. So gospel music has always been great and can bring anyone's spirits up. I swear. It can push you through work and it can bring your spirits up and the messages are usually really good. They're always good. Like I've never heard a bad gospel song. Some of them are more pointed than others, but yeah, just didn't become as much of a, I don't know what word I'm looking for. It, it had planted its roots, but it didn't feel like I needed to, I wasn't letting it grow like it was growing inside me, but I don't need to physically be there.”

Instead of church, Gabriel's life now revolves around commitments and relationships of his own making rather than those insisted upon by family or circumstance. Gabriel is a prime example of the hustle culture that predominates in the successful corporate conditions of New York City. Now living in the Prospect Lefferts Gardens area of Brooklyn, Gabriel continues to have an active way of life that includes balancing a demanding work schedule, social commitments, and self-care. However his sustained level of self-sufficiency since college is evidence of not just his own personal growth but also of an independence from the community in which he grew up. His professional success has provided him the means and opportunity to seek a stronger connection to his ancestry, while simultaneously resulting in lowered necessity for the church.

If one were to try to pinpoint the moment his relationship with the church shifted, it would probably be his going to college. Education seems to have been a pivotal factor in dividing Black people from reliance on the church, something one of the archived Mississippian narrators mentions in her interview. Esther Ainsworth, back in 1994, recalled this change in her interview, saying "Well I think what has happened with the churches is that during that particular time—you know the church was so affected during the segregation period because many black people did not have any other outlet to church, other than the church and once we overcame the um segregation in education facilities I think the people started branching out more, the more educated they became the less emphasis was placed on the church so I don't think the church had an effect on the people now as it did then."

This relationship between faith and success is an interesting one that exists in different ways for each of my narrators. A stark comparison can be found between Gabriel and one of my later

narrators, Donal Cogdell, who, because of something called “prosperity gospel” grew up thinking there was a direct correlation between his belief in God and his financial success.[14] A bit senior to Gabriel, at about 35 years Donal has a slim build and youthful energy that could allow him to easily pass for a man in his twenties. In my years of knowing Donal through his position in church, his demeanor has always seemed cool and collected. Donal has been interviewed before as an artist and is quite comfortable with public speaking, but oral history was a new and different experience, making him unsure of what exactly to expect. Yet, even with this obvious tension, his voice doesn’t waver and his history as a Christian rapper and preacher unfolded naturally.

Donal sees his own trajectory quite linearly. He is passionate about what he does, what he believes in and his goals for the future, trusting that “if you want to really do something, you can't look at the alternative, you have to go all in.” It’s amazing how much life he’s lived in such a short amount of time thanks to, in large part, his childhood travels as a part of a military family. Clearly influenced by male family members (both present and absent), the way he speaks of those he cares about proves he is loving and appreciative of his responsibility as a role model. He considers himself a New Yorker by way of Wyandanch, Long Island and feels very connected to that community of Christians and Black people largely due to his father’s family in that area.

[15] A religious belief among some Protestant Christians, who hold that their financial and physical well-being is the will of God and that faith, positive speech, and donations to religious causes will increase one's material wealth. This belief views the Bible as a contract between God and mankind: that if people have faith in God, he will deliver prosperity. The doctrine is professed by charismatic church leaders like Joel Osteen, Creflo Dollar, Jesse Duplantis, and Kenneth Copeland, who propose that it is God's will for his people to be blessed and their reconciliation with him includes the alleviation of sickness and poverty, achieved through donations of money, visualization, and positive confession.

This connection has much to do with the influence of his closest family members growing up, like his grandmother. “Her name is Viola Cogdell, she's probably about 91 years old now and she is the matriarch of our family.” She was born and raised in New Bern, North Carolina before eventually migrating to New York. “Yeah, she's still moving and still sharp,” he describes with a smile remembering how she “loved on” him especially as his father’s first son. She's famous for biscuits, remembered by friends and family for her cooking and her pies. “Yeah. She, she just, she did it all, you know,” Donal explains “it was a very warm place for me growing up.”

Donal fondly remembers from his visits the novelty of carpet when sleeping in her room, a luxury Donal’s family rarely had while living on various air force bases. “So my grandmother would have this carpet and I remember her room feeling just like sacred and warm.” With her lamp and the huge Bible she kept beside her bed, it exists in his memory as a safe space. “So when I would go home to New York, sometimes I would, uh, sleep like right on the floor, comfortably next to her bed. You know, she's listening to sermons or, or maybe writing her numbers down and stuff like that. And then she smokes, you know, but, um, yeah, it's my grandmother.”

To have a “sacred” place and a loving relationship that supports and nurtures you is a valuable thing that doesn’t exist for everyone and can be especially rare for a Black man. It also sparked within him the importance of access to information because it serves as a reminder of the prosperity gospel teachings he grew up with but had to let go of in the process of attaining his master’s of divinity degree.

> "I had to let go of some things that I believed or that I was taught growing up, [professors] gave me clarity on the Prosperity Gospel, gave me clarity because they would just go at TVN. And these are all like the channels and things that my mom and family would watch growing up, but they didn't have access to this information that I was getting. So, you know, if somebody builds a $2 million building and people are singing and praising the Lord, how can you not say this is of God? How can you not say this is forward moving? And now I was hearing pastors from Brazil say, 'yeah, the American church is off.' And so I fought it a little bit, then I came to understand and didn't want to protect my bias. So then I just came to more of a measured space where there are good things in the church and there are things that need to improve and the things that I need to improve are different then, because nobody sees their churches perfect no matter where you're at. But the things that needed to be improved were major. Major.
>
> So then I saw my professor used to say, 'the white church needs a revival.' And he said, 'the Black church needs reform.' Meaning the white church might be more connected to stronger doctrine, this implies that the white church is connected to maybe healthier doctrine as far as grace and salvation and the sovereignty of God, but they lack the spirit and the conviction to carry through and take a lot of liberty to do things. I got stories about that. But then on the Black church side, he's implying that the theology is underdeveloped and the spirit and conviction may be there, but it needs to be harnessed the right way. So that was the implication. And then I understood, you know, I understood some of my battles and things that I've gone through and it became a goal for me to help the church, help our church get healthier, help my community have a greater understanding of what the Gospel is, a greater understanding of what we're called to do.
>
> I think the Black church in America and the white church in America have different issues, but I think what has happened is that the Black church, being oppressed, responds and ends up parroting things from the white church that do not apply to them. And so I understood why there's mercy for why the Prosperity Gospel came, because our people didn't have anything. And so it became a hope and a faith to actually be a part of something and to have something. We weren't really trying to change or taint the Gospel, we were just trying to say, we want to have a life where we don't have to suffer the same. And so it was easier for the white church who had resources and money to say, 'Oh, the Prosperity Gospel is way off,' because you're not in need of anything."

This is the kind of memory that acts as the driving force behind Donal's social justice and youth work with Hope Church as well as his role with K.I.N.G.[15] Having grown out of his initial

---

[16] K.I.N.G. is a national non-denominational Christian men's movement whose goal is to help men across racial, denominational, generational and political lines in their personal relationship with Jesus by providing brotherhood, encouragement, accountability, knowledge and fellowship.

understanding of religion based on the prosperity gospel of the television preachers and megachurches that were popularized when he was growing up, Donal sees the importance of moving past minor doctrinal differences to work together in the expansion of the Kingdom of God.

Like my final narrator, Donal has spent much of his life seeking the more personal relationship with God reminiscent of that sacred place he holds in his mind's eye. Whether through prayer, his studies, community work, or other talents and business ventures, Donal and very similarly Reverend Reginald Lee Bachus, both endeavor to teach others the ways in which they too can develop their own personal relationship with God to the betterment of the church and, through the church, the community.

Named after his father, Reverend Reginald E. Bachus, when he was born on April 2, 1983 in Topeka, Kansas, Reginald told me he grew up with a strong understanding of the importance of family. While his parents and grandparents all instilled in him the values of having religious faith as well as pursuing education, he is only too candid about his years of rebellion as a young child and a college student. I first assumed that he had been more or less groomed for the public eye and his role as a reverend because his father and grandfather shared the profession. While religion is, in a way, the family business, Reginald has taken a surprisingly nonlinear path to his current position as Associate Reverend for the Abyssinian Baptist Church of Harlem.[16]

---

[17] The Abyssinian Baptist Church is located at 132 West 138th Street between Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard and Lenox Avenue in Harlem, New York. The church is currently led by Reverend Calvin O. Butts but previous prominent ministers of the church included Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. The church was originally founded in 1809, when free seamen from Ethiopia (then Abyssinia) and African American parishioners left the First Baptist Church in protest over racially segregated seating. By 1930 it had become the largest African American church in New York City, and the largest Baptist congregation in the

Though he has worked in a pastoral capacity for eight years, his career interests are rather disparate, leading to a degree in electrical engineering, his current studies in law school, and his ongoing involvement with the Abyssinian Development Corporation. His passions for entrepreneurship and the importance of real estate investment and property ownership as an act of political capital within the Black community are guiding principles for how he operate and leads within the Black community, both now in Harlem and previously in Brooklyn. Though not a New York native, Reginald has endeavored to be deeply rooted in the Black community of every place he has lived and worked.

After our interview, Reginald invited me back to Abyssinian to attend his 9:00am Palm Sunday sermon. I was reticent at first, imagining how early I would have to wake up to make the commute to Harlem. However, inspired by Zora Neale Hurston and her effort to honor the wishes of her narrator, Oluale Kussola, I decided that attending the service was an invitation I couldn't pass up.[17] After the choir, clad in adire, kente, and other traditional African prints, sang a rousing rendition of Kirk Franklin's "Let Me Touch You," Reginald preached a sermon about the need to reinvigorate the church. He encouraged congregants to go beyond dedicating their time, talent, and treasure, to sharing their testimony as well. [18] He preached that, just like the disciples who witnessed with their own eyes the miracles of Jesus, so too must those of us who

---

world. Today, with its non-profit arm, the Abyssinian Development Corporation (ADC), the church continues to serve as a place for African American spirituality, politics and community.

[18] A.k.a. Cudjo Lewis as noted in Zora Neale Hurston's Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"

[19] The bible speaks of the ways Christians are meant to use their gifts toward the glory of the church in many instances, such as in the book of Romans 12:3-8. Giving one's "time, talent and treasure" is a common teaching that refers to serving God by dedicating one's time, wealth (by means of tithes and offerings), and skills (such as preaching, teaching, healing, and prophesying).

have experienced God's work in our lives, testify it to others. In his assessment there are two types of Christians, those with experience and those with energy, and it is up to the former to inspire the latter so that their energy can be put to good use.

Having so recently interviewed Reginald, I couldn't help but think his sermon was about more than Christians. Rather, I believe he was talking about the Black community outside of the church as well. He spoke about the Black Lives Matter movement and the tragic death of rapper and entrepreneur Nipsey Hussle. He also spoke of unifying the Black community by welcoming non-church goers into the house of God with love rather than guilt. At the time, while perched on a balcony pew, I was convinced that the sermon was inspired by the Reverend's own testimony and the questions he had answered for me just a few days prior. He had explained his thoughts on the rise of a spiritual awareness among non-church goers:

> "...the trend in spirituality is because it is an inner awareness that we are but a grain of salt in an ocean of existence, right? And you can look up into the Black expanses of the sky at night and know that there's something bigger out there. But this is now the second generation of people who haven't grown up in church. The Bible says "train up a child in the way they should go when they're old, they will not depart." So what you have is the Bible talks about there what Karl Rahner talks about, anonymous Christians, people who are Christians, they just don't know they're Christians because they don't know what name to call, therefore anonymous. That they feel an awareness of longing, the presence of God, but they don't know what name to place on it or how to get it. And it's simply because you can pick up on phrases, you know, learning a new language by immersion. But unless somebody teaches you and starts talking to you, for you to pick it up and develop the vocabulary to exchange in that dialogue, it sound good, it looked good, but there's no real connection. I think that the absence of this generation in church and people bringing them to church and put them in church, that there's an awareness of God and spirituality and the need, but they don't have the vocabulary and the connection."

Reginald also spoke about what he viewed to be the reasons behind diminished attendance of Black churches:

> "…we have lost sight of the church as a hospital. Like everybody messed up here. We're just trying to get better. We're just the only ones smart enough to come to the hospital to get what we need, rather than suffering and dying in the confines of our own home. So I think there has to be a radical shift about the church. So the desire for people to say that they're spiritual thing, part one is an awareness that there is a god and something out there, but not knowing how to really label it, identify, talk to it, connect with it. I think the second thing is that it is an intentional design by the world to disconnect Black people in particular from the power source and our power base, which has always been a church and the ties to real estate. If they can disrupt and discredit the church, you disrupt, discredit the power base of the communities. The church was the only gathering place that we had. The pastor was the individual who had to be well versed in an array of disciplines from finance, to the law, to mortuary science, to the Bible, to everything.
>
> So I think it has been an intentional design because if you can disrupt the churches and get the people out of the churches. You can people out of churches through gentrification, through housing crisis. So then they can't come. They got to relocate. You diminish the numbers in the church, diminish, the finances of the church. So you have a lot of churches that are asset rich and cash poor. So then they got a sell out or buy out. And then when you buy out in a public way, the way they structure finance now you can't even have a cross on your church. You can have your name, but you can't have a cross. And when you have a cross-less church, the church has lost its power. And what we've seen is, is that, and this is a byproduct of other media culture, intentional design, uh, that for people who study the spiritual, a lot of people have been hurt by the church have been turned off by the church, have been, you know, I've heard so many stories to where they don't even want to go find out for themselves."

This idea of an intentional design for the disruption of the Black church is not new and was mentioned by Bonnie Gardner in 1994 when she described the fires that consumed Black churches in her part of Mississippi during the sixties. She said "They ask all of the larger churches to host meetings for the NAACP, try to get people to come out, and register to vote. I think our church was burned in 1967. I think it was in 1967 or 1968 because they rebuilt the church. They had had a meeting out there on that Sunday afternoon. Usually, the churches would have the meetings on a Sunday afternoon. They would never have them at night. On that Tuesday, we were told that the church had burned. It was a wood and brick framed church. The

entire church was destroyed. They find a couple of gasoline containers out there. They never found out who did it. Not only our church, but churches in that area."

The reverend's explanation of this downward trajectory, supported by what we know of intimidation tactics previously used against Black churches, was especially compelling for me because of how closely it seemed to align with the narrative shared by Ashun, a self-proclaimed non-believer. He too saw the diminished financial power of the Black community as a threat to its political power and unity. However, Ashun and the reverend, had very differing understandings on how that connected to the legacy of slavery and the ways in which the church could be a useful tool. According to Reginald, Christianity was then and can still be today, a tool of political liberation for Black people in this country:

> "When you look at the origins of the churches we know that grew out of slavery, it had to be a spiritual connection. What else would make you want to believe in a god that this white man who took you from your country beating you upside your head, raping your woman, tells you is the God if it hadn't had been some truth there because there's other cultures in history that had been taken over by, by oppressors, by colonialists, by imperialists who did not adopt the religion if there wasn't something real, there. Now my, my stance is that's where the slave master messed up when he gave us the Bible, cause when he gave us the Bible, he gave us the Liberation Story. He gave us a story about equality. He gave us a story about opportunity. He gave us a story how to tap into our power and yeah, hope, joy, love all of those. You know, those virtues that are there that have been lost because of, you know, the, the politicalization of the church, the, the lies lobbed at the church. I think it's just a lot of things. But for me, you know what? I'm always frustrated with the church. I think we do a lot of backwards things, but for me I just was convinced I, I'm convinced in God more than I, more than I am in the church and because of how I grew up, I have a loyalty and allegiance to the church. "

At the conclusion of my interview with Reginald, much like my other interviewees, he told me how thought-provoking the process had been, how valuable an opportunity it was to recall the journey he had been on and the many ways his faith had played a role in his life. He reminded

me that giving one's testimony has a significant meaning and a long history of value within the Black community and throughout the Christian context.[19] Something I was honored to learn he felt important enough to not just share in his sermon that week, but encourage an entire congregation to do for themselves.

Conclusion

My investigation into the history of Black theology and the personal stories of African American men has been just a small step on the greater trajectory of understanding the roles of religion and spirituality in the lives of all Black people. I began this work wondering if the Black church was broken, thinking that more transformative experiences could potentially bring Black men back into the Christian community. Thus far, I have learned that with or without a church, the impact of religion and spirituality on the culture is undeniable even for those who disbelieve or choose not to practice themselves. Also impactful throughout the diaspora, is the power of storytelling and testimony as exhibited by Reginald.

I look forward to more opportunities to use oral history and the setting of the interview to reinvigorate this tradition within Black communities beyond New York City, to prompt us to speak more candidly about what we believe in and why. To create a space for unity, as the Black church was created in America hundreds of years ago, and as places of worship have functioned for millennia. I hope it may be a revolution, a continuation of the work of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., Zora Neale Hurston, Dr. James Cone, Angela Davis, James Baldwin, Toni

[19] 1 John 5:6-12

Morrison, and others like them who saw the beauty in the perseverance of Black people and used their time, talent and treasure to share it with the world, to testify.

Endnotes

The following oral histories are the result of recorded interviews with five select narrators conducted by Alissa Rae Funderburk in eight sessions over the course of two years. The narrators selected for this project were chosen based on their race and identity; their professional knowledge and/or personal experience with the subject matter of religion and spirituality; their relation to New York City; and their willingness to participate.

The interviews were conducted with Ashun Jackson (on March 30, 2018), Andrew Viñales (on March 26, 2018 and May 16, 2018), Gabriel Kerr (on March 24, 2018 and May 5, 2018), Donal Cogdell (on April 7, 2019 and May 26, 2019), and Reginald Bachus (on April 10, 2019). These interviews are part of the Spectrum of Spirituality Oral History Project and will eventually be archived as such upon further review, editing, and approval by the narrator. Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading transcripts of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Works Cited & Consulted

Banks, Barron. Interview by Hondo Olatunde. 20 November 2014. OH# 94.47b, Oral History Project, Jackson State University Margaret Walker Center Archives, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pY6hgc6pFbU Accessed 27 July 2020

Borland, Katherine. "That's Not What I Said: A Reprise 25 Years On." Beyond Women's Words: Feminisms and the Practices of Oral History in the Twenty-First Century, by Stacey Zembrzycki et al., Routledge, 2018, pp. 31–37.

Borland, Katherine. "'That's Not What I Said': Interpretative Conflict in Oral History Narrative Research ." The Oral History Reader, by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, Routledge, 2016, pp. 310–321.

Browne, Simone. Dark Matters: on the Surveillance of Blackness. Duke University Press, 2015.

Cone, James H. For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church (Where Have We Been and Where Are We Going?). Orbis Books, 1984.

Cone, James H. The Spirituals and the Blues: an Interpretation. Orbis Books, 1972.

Douglas, Kelly Brown. Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God. Orbis, 2015.

Fields, Karen. "What One Cannot Remember Mistakenly." Memory and History: Essays on Recalling and Interpreting Experience, by Jaclyn Jeffrey and Paul Thompson, Univ. Press of America U.a., 1994, pp. 89–106.

Freedman, Samuel G. Upon This Rock: the Miracles of a Black Church. HarperCollins, 1994.

Hackett, Claire, and Bill Rolston. "The Burden of Memory: Victims, Storytelling and Resistance in Northern Ireland." Memory Studies, vol. 2, no. 3, 2009, pp. 355–376., doi:10.1177/1750698008337560.

Hawkins, Billy Joe. The New Plantation: Black Athletes, College Sports, and Predominantly White NCAA Institutions. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Hurston, Zora Neale. Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo". Harper Collins UK, 2018.

Isichei, Elizabeth Allo. "North African Christianity in Antiquity." A History of Christianity in Africa: from Antiquity to the Present, by Elizabeth Allo. Isichei, W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1995, pp. 13–44.

Liu, Joseph. "A Religious Portrait of African Americans." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, 19 Mar. 2014, www.pewforum.org/2009/01/30/a-religious-portrait-of-african-americans/.

Portelli, Alessandro. The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History. State University of New York Press, 1991.

Sheftel, A., and S. Zembrzycki. "Only Human: A Reflection on the Ethical and Methodological Challenges of Working with 'Difficult' Stories." Oral History Review, vol. 37, no. 2, 2010, pp. 191–214., doi:10.1093/ohr/ohq050. Sorett, Josef. Spirit in the Dark: A Religious History of Racial Aesthetics. Oxford University Press, 2016.

Winters, Joseph Richard. "Figures of the Postracial: Race, Nation, and Violence in the Age of Obama and Morrison." Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress, by Joseph Richard Winters, Duke University Press, 2016, pp. 187–236.