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Black Religious Skeptics and Non-Theists:

A Call To Research

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Abstract: Keeping pace with the growing visibility of secularism in American society, we call for a particularistic look at the small but increasing number of African Americans who self-identify as non-theists and religious skeptics. In this work, we first expose early and mid-20th century Black civil rights activists' questionable regard for religion in African American life, particularly in the areas of social and political advancement. Second, and concomitant with the literature on Blacks and the rise of religious "nones," we follow the public emergence, critiques, and activism of 21st century Black secularists. Last, we offer suggestions on how to advance the research agenda regarding Blacks, religious doubt, and disbelief. Research recommendations on the study of Black theists, in particular their attitudes and conduct toward Black religious skeptics and non-theists, also are provided.

Keywords: Race, Areligiosity, Atheist

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INTRODUCTION

In reference to its Religious Landscape Study, the Pew Research Center says of African Americans that “no group of men or women from any other racial or ethnic background exhibits comparably high levels of religious observance” (Sahgal and Smith, 2009). The survey further revealed that Blacks are more likely to believe in God with absolute certainty (88% vs. 71% of the total adult United States population), to interpret scriptures as the literal word of God (55% vs. 33%), and to say that they are absolutely convinced of life after death (58% vs. 50%). Eighty-seven percent of Blacks describe themselves as belonging to one religious group or another and are among the most likely to report a formal religious affiliation. Having longstanding roots in Black Protestant denominations (i.e., the National Baptist Convention, American Methodist Episcopal Church), Blacks are the most Protestant racial/ethnic group in America (Sahgal and Smith, 2009).

The frequency of religious observation among African Americans suggests that the collective of Protestant churches in the United States that minister to predominantly Black congregants, commonly regarded as the Black Church, is alive. However, an increasing number of Blacks suggest that not all is well. A recent Pew Research Center study on religious shifting in the United States shows that 18% of Blacks identify as “religiously unaffiliated,” a group the survey identifies as “atheists,” “agnostics,” and those of “no particular” religious association (Pew Research Center, 2015). While a remarkable 82% of Blacks in the 2015 Pew study report as belonging to one religious group or another (Pew Research Center, 2015), the share is 5% less than the center’s study conducted in 2007 (Sahgal and Smith, 2009).

The American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) reports that the number religious “nones” – Americans who claim “no religion” or identify as “atheist,” “agnostic,” “secular,” or “humanist”—doubled from 8% to 15% between 1990 and 2008 (Kosmin, et al., 2008). The increase was nearly double among African Americans, who as religious “nones” grew from 6% to 11% during the ARIS study’s 18-year period. The study exposed a variety of beliefs in God, including theism (belief in a personal God) and atheism (a rejection of the existence of God), but found that 59% of all nonreligious Americans are agnostic (uncertain of the existence of God) or deist (belief in a non-intervening God) (Kosmin, et al., 2008).

Social and behavioral scientists who study African American belief systems often point out the ubiquity of the religious establishment in Black America, whether its galvanization of social reform (Barnes, 2005), group or individual social psychological effects (Taylor, Chatters, and Levin, 2004), or the denominational mobility of Black congregants (Ellison and Sherkat, 1990). The preponderance of works by theologians, televangelists, philosophers, historians, educators, counselors, and laity whose focus is Black audiences – too many to specify here – also suggest a steeped interest in how religion affects African American life and vice versa. Meanwhile, the everyday experiences and views of Blacks who either doubt or deny a belief in God or reject the veracity of faith-based claims seldom reach academic or public scrutiny. A group rarely observed, Black religious skeptics and non-theists comprise a gap in the study of the Black religious experience in full.

Keeping pace with the growing visibility of secularism in American society, we call for a particularistic look at the small

but increasing number of African Americans who self-identify as non-theists and religious skeptics. In this work, we first expose early and mid-20th century Black civil rights activists' questionable regard for the religion in African American life, particularly in the areas of social and political advancement. Second, and concomitant with the literature on Blacks and the rise of religious "nones," we follow the public emergence, critiques, and activism of 21st Black secularists. Last, we offer suggestions on how to advance the research agenda regarding Blacks, religious doubt, and disbelief. Research recommendations on the study of Black theists, in particular their attitudes and conduct toward Black religious skeptics and non-theists, also are provided.

A Past Unrecognized

It is not surprising that the Black Church constituency has doubled as an activist base in America. Black religious discourse not only pulls together religious convictions but also secular concerns that are often daunting (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990). Distraught by sermons that urged subjugation to their masters, African slaves in America secretly nurtured communal support during their own religious meetings, where they prayed for a future that they sought to attain in their lifetime (Roboteau, 1978). During the Civil Rights Movement, protestors summoned the shared meanings and symbolism of Negro spirituals to organize a vision of redress, to conceptualize pending milestones, and to remind themselves of the inherent value of people of African descent (Barnes, 2005).

Subversive practices such as these forged an enduring ethos over time: the principal belief that the Christian church or theism in general has undergirded the ethics, incentives, rationale, and outcomes of Black progressive engagement (Allen, 1991,

2001). However, some researchers suggest a rethinking of the historical record. They argue that alongside Black theists, who were dedicated Black social activism and reform, were Black secularists, who rejected faith-based explanations for the conditions obstructing advancement. Rather than religious solutions or truth-claims, researchers add, these secular scholar-activists tethered social change to reason and human agency (Allen, 1991; Pinn, 2001, 2012).

The diversity of beliefs about religion, particularly those of noted Black civil rights activists, is largely unfamiliar to most African Americans today (Allen, 1991). Harvard-trained historian and sociologist, W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963) is an example. Du Bois' pioneering study of the urban Black community (*The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, 1899), in addition to his co-founding of the N.A.A.C.P. and the literary stylings of his critique of Black culture (*The Souls of Black Folks*, 1903), has preserved his reputation as a significant scholar, polemicist, and one-time political force. However, Du Bois' distaste for religious orthodoxy, disapproval of teaching religion to schoolchildren, and the ways in which he disentangled religion from his ethical views are far less disclosed or a subject of public discussion (Howard-Pitney, 1991; Hutchinson, 2011). Nor are many African Americans acquainted with principal 1963 March on Washington organizer and labor activist, A. Phillip Randolph's (1889-1979) rejection of prayer as conduit for social change or his honors from secularist organizations. Moreover, the ways in which Randolph's atheism informed his activism are seldom unacknowledged or widely unknown (Allen 1991, 2001).

Whether religion had any practical relevance to problems in Black communities was an apparent public concern during the first half of the 20th century. Believing the

Black Church “exerts a more powerful influence on anything else in the spheres of ideas,” radical labor organizer and anti-segregation activist, Hubert Henry Harrison (1883-1927) added, “Show me a population that is deeply religious, and I will show you a servile population, content . . . to eat the bread of sorrow and drink the waters of affliction” (Perry, 2008, p.233). Urban Depression-era Blacks attended church by the millions while leveling disparagements against it. Among the criticisms were that churches are “too emotional,” “a waste of time and money,” and that “Negros are too religious” (Wilmore, 1972, p.223). More than seventy years later, secular humanist Patrick Inniss’ essay, “Are Black People too Religious?” revisited the fervor of Black religious devotion and regarded its histrionics as injurious to the public’s perceptions of Black Americans (Barbera, 2003). (For arguments on Black atheists’ rejection of a Black religious essentialism, see Lackey, 2007).

Present and Perceptible

In recent years, African Americans who are disillusioned with the Black Church or who profess a disbelief or skepticism of religious claims have been reaching out to each other. As a result, the group has become more organized and less imperceptible. In 2010, for example, about 50 men and women gathered in Washington, D. C. for a conference on African American humanism. Considered by sponsors as the largest meeting of its kind, one university student attendee observed that she would “expect it from White people, but it’s rare for African-American people to talk critically about religion.” “It is extremely important to get these people in one room and say, ‘Hey, you’re not crazy,’” added a male attendee, also a university student (Oduah and Bohn, 2010). Later that year, Howard University, a historically Black

university, hosted a conference on science, reason, and the Black community. The event featured atheist activist and author, Richard Dawkins, in addition to professor and noted humanist scholar, Anthony Pinn, and a panel of Black atheists.

In 2011, the Humanist Chaplaincy of Harvard University hosted a public discussion on women and people of color in the humanist, atheist, and secular movements. African American atheist activist and journalist, Jamila Bey facilitated the event (Harvard Humanist, 2011). In 2011, the African American atheist community-based alliance, Black Skeptics Los Angeles, conducted a discussion on notable Black humanists and Black social thought with congregants of a predominantly Black Baptist Church in South Los Angeles. Atheist activist and scholar, Sikivu Hutchinson, founded the organization (Hutchinson, 2011b).

In 2012, events recognizing the second annual National Day of Solidarity for Black Non-Believers were scheduled in over a dozen American cities. African American atheist and author Donald Wright (Winston, 2012) founded the event to promote fellowship among Blacks who identify as atheists, agnostics, and freethinkers and to pursue problem solving in the Black community via a secular humanist approach. That same year, the secular-based advocacy and education initiative, African Americans for Humanism, sponsored commercial billboards in several metropolitan cities that read, “Doubts about religion? You’re one of many.” Each advertisement featured a local Black secularist alongside a historical Black non-believer, including Harlem Renaissance writers, Langston Hughes and Zora Neal Hurston (Hudson, 2012). In addition, Hutchinson, Wright, and members of Black Skeptics Los Angeles collaborated with a South Los Angeles Baptist Church for a

second dialogue (Black Skeptics Group, 2015).

In 2013, the *Huffington Post* produced the live webcast, “The Growing Number of Secular Minorities.” Black secular community activists and scholars discussed “coming out” as atheists and the growth of secularism in the African American community (Redd, 2013). Black Skeptics Los Angeles also spearheaded its First in the Family Humanist Scholarship initiative in 2013. The program seeks to provide resources to undocumented, foster care, homeless and LGBTQ youth, who are the first in their families to attend a college or university (Black Skeptics Los Angeles, 2015).

In 2014 and 2015, the National Day of Solidarity for Black Non-Believers continued its annual observances on the last Sunday of February. Organizers and attendees customized events nationwide, which took place in public venues in local communities. Participants discussed historical non-theists of color, shared life experiences, and were encouraged to become activists in the secular community (African Americans for Humanism, 2014). Meanwhile, the internet hosts a plethora of radio programs, podcasts, blogs, biographical archives, and social networking venues devoted to debate, protest, knowledge-production, and community among Blacks who negotiate religious claims or acknowledge disbelief.

Determining the perspectives, attitudes, life course, and concerns of African American religious skeptics and non-theists may pose a challenge for researchers, given the dearth of studies on Blacks and non-religiosity. Journalist Don Barbera’s (2003) study offers one of the few descriptive profiles of present-day Black skeptics and non-believers as a group (Also see Allen, 2003; Hutchinson 2011, and Wright, 2010 for a biographical account).

Rather than an act of rebellion, Barbera’s (2003) convenience sample of thirty Black atheists, agnostics, and deists appealed to a “lack of proof” as their primary incentive for doubt or disbelief in faith-based claims (p. 112). Religious observers’ persistent dissuasion of inquiry and free thought compounded the respondents’ frustration, as did observers’ insistence that faith in God transcends all cognitive dissonance. In fact, some Christians’ personal conduct was a source of religious disillusionment for the respondents and a contradiction of the theistic values that they were urged to accept.

Most of Barbera’s (2003) respondents came from Christian families, once regularly attended church, and either never believed in God or “outgrew” their belief in God by young adulthood (p. 112). The sample did not perceive the Bible as divinely inspired. Rather, they perceived supernatural accounts as stories by human writers, who had lacked scientific acuity or a means of rational explanation. Deists especially were troubled by biblical stories of violent, divine reprisal and, subsequently, framed their belief in God apart from religious precepts. All viewed the concept of a benevolent God as incongruous with the unfairness and suffering they observed in the current state of global and community affairs. Absolution was regarded as a loophole of sorts that permits wrongdoing and impedes moral growth.

Expanding Research

African Americans are not in total agreement in their philosophical views on theological doctrine, practices, and institutional codes. Nor are African Americans monolithic in their reactions to events motivated or engineered by religious thought or demonstration. Historic discourse critical of religion’s social and political reach in African American life, along with

evidence of increasing numbers of non-religious Blacks, suggest that some find religion more problematic or less relevant to Black social reform than commonly presumed. Below, we pull together the few existing data on areligiosity among African Americans as well as other non-majority groups. In so doing, we offer questions and recommendations that may advance the research agenda regarding Blacks, religious doubt, and disbelief.

What do Black religious skeptics and non-believers believe?

The ARIS (2008) study did not acknowledge the increase in American religious “nones” as a social movement; however, it describes religious “nones” as no longer a fringe faction and an often-misunderstood population. Instead of an overt antagonism toward religion, the American non-religious demonstrates skepticism similar to the tradition of late 18th century American Enlightenment discourse. As a group, religious “nones” are not particularly superstitious, more accepting of human evolution than the general population, and assert the importance of reason and science in understanding the natural world.

Blacks who reject or doubt religious truth claims or find religion irrelevant may resist efforts to codify their principles (Allen, 1991). Those that do tend to self-identify independently and through language as nuanced as their conceptual treatment of religious beliefs and institutions. More familiarly, some identify as “atheists,” “agnostics,” “secularists,” or “deists.” Others identify as “rationalists,” “Brights,” “freethinkers,” and “humanists” (Allen, 1991). Perhaps the most frequently cited classification of African American religious skeptics and non-believers is “humanist” (Allen, 1991, 2003; Pinn, 2001).

Rather than a direct reference to the Renaissance or the Enlightenment, humanist scholarship pertaining to Blacks emphasizes moralities aligned with the larger American secular humanist community (Pinn, 2001). Humanist principles endorse individual development and social transformation and attribute the human condition, including its improvement, to human acts and accountability. Humanity is viewed a part of nature and not a consequence of divine creation. There is a rejection or suspicion of supernatural explanations, and science and reason have precedence over superstition and institutional dogma (Allen, 1991; Hutchinson, 2011; Pinn, 2001). However, Black humanism differs insofar that scholars position African American social justice work and cultural production as human-derived and a collective action guided by principles untied to religious precepts or cosmic authorities. Consequently, Black humanism is presented as a life ethic, whose moralities are framed in terms of fairness and equality, and whose practice has implications for Blacks, women (especially women of color), and other socially marginalized groups (Hutchinson, 2011; Pinn, 2001). Whether humanism is a secular philosophy or an alternative to religion has been a topic of discussion among scholars (Lackey, 2007; Pinn, 2012).

The language Black religious skeptics and non-believers use to self-identify may shed light on how they position themselves within the strata of religious questioning. Further, how individuals self-codify — “rationalist” vs. “freethinker” or “Bright,” for example — may inform how they interpret morality and exercise ethical and intellectual practice outside of religious precepts. One key to this knowledge involves the qualitative views and interpretive journeys of Black religious skeptics and non-theists themselves.

What are Black religious skeptics and non-theists' views of religion and the Black Church?

In Barbera's (2003) work, respondents were forthcoming about the instrumental importance of the Black Church in the lives of African slaves and Blacks in America. Many characterized Black religious spaces during slavery as ones where ideas and actions coalesced. Some viewed the modern Black Church as a buffer against racism and a social service resource that they did not want to "go away" completely (Barbera, 2003, p.120). Even so, most were disgruntled with organized religion in general and saw religious ideology as anti-science, anti-intellectual, and siding with forms of human atrocities (e.g., slavery, White supremacy, wars, etc.). Further, the respondents expressed deep concerns over the kinds of coping defenses they saw routinized in many mainline Black religious traditions. Principal among them was the belief that the Black Church assists in adherents' accommodation of "intolerable conditions" and promotes mythologies and superstition as unquestionable truth-claims (Barbera, 2003, p.121). The belief of sin also drew apprehension. The respondents were concerned that the concept of sin facilitated unnecessary guilt, and many were unsettled about introducing God to children at an early age (Barbera, 2003).

We emphasize that faith in divine intercession is not uncommon among the general population. For many, petitioning God is a proactive means to control a situational outcome (Pargament, 1997). What is important here – and problematic to the sample – is aligning human initiative and tangible actions with divine intent and intercessory acts (e.g., prayer, proselytizing, etc.). The respondents commented that such conceptions encourage a sense of confrontation or resolve but actually prolong social and individual suffering.

Conceivably, Black religious skeptics and non-theists could add a layer of diversity to discourse in support of social improvement and reform. If so, what secularist strategies do group members envision in assisting the social, economic, and political problems affecting the Black community? Moreover, are their views and social concerns aligned with those of the present-day secular movement? Alternatively, is full integration into established, predominantly White secular alliances at all relevant to Black non-theist and skeptics who target reform in the African American community? Politically, studies show that 21% of Independents in the United States are religious "nones," as are 16% of Democrats and only 8% of Republicans (Kosmin, et al., 2008). With this said, might African Americans' general disapproval of issues such as abortion and gay marriage suggest that Black religious skeptics and non-theists comprise a socially conservative faction within the American areligious camp?

How do Black theists view religious doubt and non-belief in religion?

Public attitudes towards religious disbelief reverberate in deep and disapproving ways. In Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann's (2006) study, atheists were the least trusted segment of the American population. The authors attribute their findings to the belief that atheists reject the bases of moral solidarity and good citizenship in American society. While we do not suggest that these data are directly apply to Black areligionists, they do illuminate how group and cultural particularities could obstruct the disclosure of theistic suspicion or disbelief.

The interlocking of religion, cultural caste, and personal identity in the Black community is one such particularity with which some Black religious skeptics and

non-theists must contend. Philosopher and African American humanist, William Jones (2001) writes that theism is “the normative perspective and the yardstick by which one identifies the authentic Black consciousness” (p. 38). In her personal account as a Black atheist, Jamila Bey notes the costs of deviating from Black community norms: “You renounce your blackness, [if you claim atheism]. You almost denigrate your heritage and history of the people, if you claim atheism” (Oduah and Bond, 2010). Certainly, religious disbelief, religious skepticism, or the rejection of Black religious traditions do not change or revoke one’s race or ethnic category. Rather, Jones and Bey’s statements suggest that religious belief and commitment are indicative of an “exact” or “appropriate” group identity for many Black Americans. Their statements also suggest the importance of learning how African Americans, including theists, make sense of Blacks who question or terminate their faith traditions and how that understanding may influence Blacks who negotiate secular disclosure.

In step with Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann (2006), an important question regarding Black religious skeptics and non-theists has to do with Black believers. That is, what is it about Black religious skeptics and non-believers and their views that some Black theists may find confounding or difficult to accept? Moreover, do Black theists have an equal opinion of Blacks who do doubt religious thought or cosmologies compared to those who do not believe in God?

Identifying and understanding Black theists’ dissatisfaction, in particular, requires that researchers perforate cultural boundaries. For example, do Black religionists view religious skepticism or non-belief as a coarse dismissal from that which is historically known to unify African

Americans? To revisit Bey, is the rejection of theism tantamount to a rejection of enduring cultural traditions (e.g., coping and survival paradigms, conceptual scripts, parentage, etc.)? Do some African American theists observe the rejection or questioning of religious claims as irrelevance towards one’s racial/ethnic group or distinction? Further, how might Black theists’ acceptance, tolerance, or disapproval of secular views affect their treatment or interactions with Black religious skeptics and non-theists?

What are factors and effects of secular conversion and secular disclosure?

Studies suggest that the decision to disclose one’s secular orientation may be especially intimidating for non-majority religious apostates. For example, Jewish religious apostates who reject their faith of origin are reluctant to discuss their disbelief in public. Members of the Jewish community expect non-believers to present the appearance of belief despite their faith position (Herzbrun, 1999). Black non-believers who once belonged to organized religion report a constant questioning of faith claims followed by second thoughts on their evolving suspicions (Barbera, 2003). Once religious disbelief or doubt has been determined, they are generally quiet about their conversion and perhaps more isolated than their White counterparts (Allen, 1991), who have greater visibility in organized secular alliances. The process of secular disclosure among African Americans and the toll and isolation of the religious “closet” warrant further research. Studies that examine the effects of religious routinization in African American life and its arguably “determinate” role in cultural membership are equally meaningful. Given the risk of group estrangement, for example, is African American areligiosity less stable than that of the general population? Does religion’s

social currency in the Black community persuade a retooling one's cultural and self-identity, if Black, atheist, or doubtful of religious claims? Research on how and why secular conversion develops over the life course may help answer these questions, as would examining the relationships between secular onset and factors such as age, majority integration, orientation in problem solving, social stigma, and education.

Studies involving the distribution of education among the African American non-religious show an unexpected result. For Blacks, higher income and higher education level is associated with more religious affiliation and not less. Fifty-three percent of Black religious "nones" have a high school education and 32% some college education, followed by 11% and 4% with a college and post-baccalaureate degree (Pew Research Center, 2015). These findings differ from college graduates as a group, who are nearly twice as likely as those with less education to identify as "atheist" or "agnostic." Roughly a quarter of college graduates describe themselves as having no particular religious affiliation, as do 22% of those with less than a college education (Pew Research Center, 2015). The question of why Black skeptical tradition is not associated with access or exposure to higher education merits further study.

Whether gender is a factor in secular conversion and secular disclosure, in particular their postponement, has equal heuristic value. Some suggest that African American men and women who deviate from religious social scripts risk backlash in dissimilar ways. Hutchinson (2011) observes that while Black male atheists are permitted a greater margin of religious dissidence, ". . . Black women who openly profess non-theist views are deemed especially traitorous, having abandoned their

primary role as purveyors of cultural and religious tradition If being Black and being Christian are synonymous, then being Black, female, and religious . . . is practically compulsory" (p. 20).

It is perhaps not surprising that Black men (56%) outnumber Black women (44%) in religious non-affiliation (Pew Research Center, 2015). Black churchwomen have been present in every aspect of African American cultural production, mobilization, and social change. While traditionally blocked from formal positions of power in the Black Church, many have developed a sense of self, place, and responsibility to cultural preservation within Black Church culture (Townsend-Gilkes, 2000). To be sure, it is worth exploring if Black women who identify as religious skeptics or non-believers experience a unique sense of exclusion in comparison to Black men. Altogether, the social, emotional, and personal consequences of the religious "closet" and secular disclosure is an unexplored area in the study of religion in African American life.

CONCLUSION

Black religious skeptics and non-theists do not neatly fit within most perceptions of faith and African Americans. Arguably, the scarcity of scholarship on areligious Blacks strengthens this paradox, as it leaves unexamined or further obscured the attitudes, identities, cultural conceptions, systems of ethics, isolation, and existence of this group. By including Black religious skeptics and non-theists in the discursive and scientific agenda, researchers add to the knowledge base on religion and the Black experience, the details of which could differ sharply from anything we have yet to imagine.

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