Black Youth Project
Religion

Paula Nicole Booke
University of Chicago

Introduction

Religion[1] is of central importance in the African American community. Christian Protestantism,[2] as well as other religions such as Islam and various forms of African spiritualism (while these latter forms have been subjects of less study), all have been important to cultural development in African American communities. There has been some disagreement among scholars as to whether the role religion has played in the development of African American consciousness, sexuality, and politics has been positive or negative. However, the importance of religion and its institutions in the perceptions of community members has been virtually unquestioned. Scholarship has shown that religion has a meaningful impact on the political and psychological consciousness of many African Americans, including young adults, with important consequences for their decision-making processes. This memo highlights some important periods in the development of Black religion, its effects on politics, and its impact on the decision-making of African American young adults[3] with regard to sexuality and sexual practice. Religion is an important part of the African American experience and has the potential to affect every aspect of life, including attitudes about politics, culture, and sexuality.

Many African Americans believe that religion has had a positive effect on the overall condition of Blacks in America (Pattillo-McCoy 1998, pg. 56; Taylor et al. 1987). African Americans experience higher rates of religiosity when compared to their Anglo-White

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[1] In this memorandum the concepts of religion and religious institutions are used interchangeably. There may indeed be important distinctions between the experience of Afro-Christianity and the Black Church; however, a vast majority of the literature conflates the two concepts. This is likely because of concerns over operationalization of the concept of religion itself as a variable for analysis. As a result, the review of the literature on African American religion will not seek to differentiate between the two concepts.

[2] The focus of this article is limited to the role of Afro-Christianity, although a brief presentation of some important moments in the history of African American Islam is presented. Along with this history, the impact of religion on the sexual decision-making of African American youth is discussed.

[3] Here the term "young adults" is used interchangeably with "adolescents" and refers to individuals predominantly between the ages of 15 and 24 years.

counterparts.[4] As a group, they express higher frequencies of church attendance and prayer and hold more conservative doctrines than other groups in society (Wilcox 1990). High rates of religiosity are also evident among Black youth, who are more likely to attend church frequently and participate in youth groups during their high-school years than their counterparts from other races and ethnicities (Smith et al. 2002). In addition, churches, through either implicit theological teaching or explicit exhortations, are able to influence parishioners' views about the social and political world in a way that may structure their preferences (Wald et al. 1988). Through these means, African American religion has come to influence the behavior of group members.

Religion may have important consequences for internal group structure and marginalization. Religion, through the value system implicit in its theology, can establish parameters for behavior (Wald et al. 1988). It offers a moral code prescribing which acts are and are not acceptable to community members (Murry 1994). While these prescriptions may not be internalized or embraced by all group members, religion may serve as a benchmark for understanding the appropriateness of the actions of individuals and subgroups. Furthermore, these evaluations may affect the larger group's response to its members.

Scholarship has been divided on the impact of religion on the African American community. Gary Marx (1967) has suggested that religion functions as an opiate within the African American community, as a source of quiescence, depressing the political potential of community members. Marx and scholars of his ilk (including: Mays and Nicholson 1969; Nelsen and Nelsen 1975; Frazier and Lincoln 1974) suggest that rather than providing resources for change, Afro-Christianity encourages believers to accept an inferior status in society. Later scholars still critical of a political-resource role for Christianity in the African American

[4] Religiosity refers to the condition of being pious or religious and may be expressed in, but is not limited to, activities such as church attendance, prayer, and personal devotions.

community have made distinctions between churches that have a sect-like position, which is *otherworldly*[5] oriented, and churches that have a church-like posture, which is *this-worldly* oriented. They suggest that churches with the former orientation are sources of political and social quiescence within the African American community (Hunt and Hunt 1977). Still other scholars have been critical of the Black Church's social role, suggesting that instead of providing social empowerment it may be for some a source of negative self-image. For example, Newman and Muzzonigro's (1993) work implies that religion may function as a source of tension for gay adolescents. Similarly, Woodyard, Peterson, and Stokes (2000) suggest that religion may inspire feelings of guilt among young adults with this sexual orientation.

Other scholars have shown a positive role for the Black Church in the political and psychological life of African Americans. Fredrick Harris (1999) has suggested that religion may provide the structure and resources that make African American participation possible in the face of factors that depress rates of participation. Similarly, Brady, Verba, and Schlozman (1995) suggest that the church may provide Blacks with civic training that they may not receive in other arenas, thus enabling political participation. St. George and McNamara (1984) have suggested that religion also promotes mental well being among African Americans. This may have important implications for the decision-making processes of youth who face psychosocial stressors because of their developmental state, stressors that are compounded by their community's comparatively low socioeconomic status. Ball et al. (2003) suggest that religion for African American adolescents, may serve as a buffer against these stressors, providing important protective resources. Scholars who believe that African American religion offers political and

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[5] The term *otherworldly* refers to a religious posture (often measured in terms of orthodoxy) focused on reward and fulfillment in a life after death. It is suggested by some (Hunt and Hunt 1977) that this orientation results in disengagement. By contrast, the term *this-worldly* refers to a religious posture in which secular participation is acceptable and at times appropriate.

psychological benefits suggest that for some it may function as a balm, providing resources, free spaces (Evans and Boyte 1986), and oppositional consciousness for community members.

There may be important consequences to the strict Judeo-Christian morality embraced by the Black Church for adolescent political participation and sexual attitudes/behaviors. In particular, Protestant Christian churches have an important role in transmitting the boundaries of appropriate sexual behavior to youth and do influence their sexual choices (Studer and Thornton 1987, pg. 118), as well as the normative socialization of community members (Wald et al. 1988), which may influence political preference. While little scholarly attention has been given to this relationship, religion may affect adolescent participation by providing resources, political knowledge and stimulation and building civic skills needed for political participation. Insofar as Black adolescents have been socialized within this tradition, it is likely that their behaviors will be strongly influenced by these norms. The moral prescriptions of churches may have serious consequences for young-adult attitudes about sexual activity and practices. Studer and Thornton (1987) suggest that engaging in nonmarital sexual practices may result in concerns about the discovered use of contraception, cognitive dissonance, as well as fear of the loss of standing both with parents and within the church community.

African American Religion

African American religion is a consequence of the history of negotiations among African religions (including Islam), European Christianity, and the realities of the Black enslaved experience in America. Africans enslaved in the Atlantic trade did not arrive on America's shores as blank slates. Rather, across the Atlantic, enslaved Africans brought with them religions as diverse as animism and Islam. In pursuing the religions of their choice, enslaved people in

America were forced to navigate a complex and difficult path between the restrictions of their servitude and the requirements of their gods.

Slavery was a harsh environment for religion. In many instances, Islamic laws regarding food and dress were violated, animism and African spiritual practices were suppressed, and during the first years of slavery many African Americans were prohibited from learning and practicing Christianity.[6] However, in spite of these difficult conditions, religion flourished among enslaved African Americans. Muslim slaves struggled to maintain their religious identity by abstaining from certain foods and continuing their tradition of Arabic literacy (Diouf 1998), while African spiritual practices such as the Ring Shout[7] were incorporated into Christian worship. In these ways, practices that ran far outside the mainstream of Anglo-White religious culture were preserved. However, these efforts were only marginally successful. The disruption of family life and the cultural diversity of the slave communities on plantations were nearly insurmountable obstacles to the successful transmission of African traditions from one generation to another (Diouf 1998).

Afro-Christianity

Afro-Christianity has been distinct from Anglo-White Christianity since its introduction to enslaved people in America. Some scholars have questioned whether African traditions were preserved in Afro-Christianity. Christensen (1894) suggests that African spiritual practices such as the Ring Shout, which she speculated originated in African idol worship and fetishism, were observed in post-slavery African American communities. Johnson (1997) suggests that the Ring

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[6] McKinney (1971) and Diouf (1998) suggest that Christianity and Islam, respectively, were active and important aspects of slave communities.

[7] The Ring Shout is a musically based religious group dance performed often as an extension of Christian worship. In the shout, participants form a circle and move in a counter-clockwise position, shuffling and stomping rhythmically, while some or all members sing in a call-and-response format. At first, the movement is slow and composed only of the feet; as the shout progresses, the entire body comes into play with the rhythm of the music (Floyd 2002; Johnson 1997; Christensen 1894).

Shout was incorporated into Christian worship practices and thus preserved. Rosenbaum and Buis's (1998) work offers contemporary evidence of this practice in isolated parts of Georgia. The existence of these blatantly African rituals in African American religious practices demonstrates their resilience.

Historians suggest that there was some disagreement between slave owners and Christian missionaries regarding exposing enslaved Africans to the concept of Christianity (Pierre 1916). The disagreement centered on the antislavery positions of various denominational sects and on concerns about the status of slaves once converted. Some denominations held antislavery positions, which strongly discouraged slaveholders from allowing African Americans on their plantations access to missionary teaching (Posey 1956; Jackson 1931). The other major obstacle to the proselytization of enslaved African Americans came from concerns about the status of Blacks in slavery after conversion (Taylor 1926; Johnson 1997; Clark 1971). Slaveholders feared that acceptance of African Americans as *joint-heirs* of salvation (with the equality that this entailed) would also entitle them to full personhood and its attending rights. Some missionaries and denominations attempted to belay these fears by imposing restrictive terms under which African Americans would receive baptism and entrance into the church (Daniel 1973; Lambert 2002). These restrictions were intended to reinforce African American identity as slaves.

Other slave owners, however, disseminated Christian teaching among Blacks because they believed African American conversion to Christianity would give them social control. Supported by some pro-slavery denominations, slaveholders encouraged enslaved Blacks to attend classes in Christian instruction, which were intended to reinforce their status as slaves by suggesting that their salvation was linked to their performance and their obedience to their

“masters” (Johnson 1997). This pro-proselytization response grew in popularity, and by the mid-eighteenth century slave conversions were widespread (Vaughn 1997).

While African Americans of this period accepted the gospel taught by slave owners, some scholars suggest that they saw the message through a very different lens (Smith 1972). Prior research has suggested that many African Americans reinterpreted certain aspects of the message given to them, ultimately understanding the gospel as a message of equality and empowerment (Lambert 2002; Smith 1972; Mitchell 2004). Mitchell (2004) suggests that in the process of emphasizing and de-emphasizing particular aspects of Christianity, African Americans were creating a belief system that ran parallel to the ones they and their forbearers possessed in Africa.

Unfortunately, practicing Christianity brought neither freedom nor equality to African Americans in slavery. During this era, enslaved people endured segregated worship services, where they were either limited to a section of the church during Anglo-White services or made to attend supervised services after Anglo-White services were completed (Lambert 2002; Daniel 1973). African American preachers in this era also faced grave restrictions (Posey 1956). However, as early as the 1830s Luther Jackson (1931) reports the development of autonomous and semi-autonomous African American churches with little or no supervision by Anglo-Whites. In these cases, supervisory committees made up of Anglo-Whites were appointed by denominations to oversee Black Churches, choose their leaders, and hold any property in trust.

The earliest independent Black Churches belonged to the African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, and Baptist denominations. The African American church experienced rapid growth in the post–Civil War era, and after slavery was abolished it became instrumental in the education of African Americans (Mitchell 2004). The Black Church provided

a means of social cohesion for its community by serving as a platform to inform and organize group members in pursuit of broadly defined group interests. In this capacity, it provided informal education for Blacks, enabled them to participate in politics, and sponsored African American economic entrepreneurship (McKinney 1971).

The Great Migration was a period of rapid church growth in urban areas. Nelson and Nelson (1975) suggest that this resulted in the African American population being *overchurched*—having too few resources spread among too many churches to make collective action feasible. Furthermore, distinctions among African Americans played a role in church organization and churches were often segregated on the basis of class. Churches made up of Blacks from the lower socioeconomic classes received much of the influx of new worshipers from the South. However, in spite of these class distinctions, commitment to the Black Church was still very strong. In urban centers, less than 10 percent of Black congregants were affiliated with Anglo-White churches (Nelsen and Nelsen 1975).

Harris (1999) suggests that in the Jim Crow era the Black Church became a central element in the African American struggle for equal rights. The church was a forum to address the problems of racialized politics, using Michael Dawson's term, serving as a "Black counterpublic."[8] In spite of its precarious financial condition, the Black Church aided in this struggle by providing an important part of the organizational and psychological foundations upon which collective action could be based. This pursuit of social change was very much linked to the idea of the "social gospel." According to McKinney (1971), the social gospel brings the biblical narrative of the Black Church to bear on the social, economic, and political plight of the African American community.

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[8] The counterpublic is an alternative and oppositional forum to the mainstream public sphere. While this forum is neither static nor unified, it does provide a medium in which various issues can be vocalized.

Islam

Islam, while receiving less scholarly attention than Afro-Christianity among scholars who study Black religion in American history, has been an important part of the African American religious experience (Gomez 1994).[9] When the Atlantic slave trade began, Muslims were among the first slaves brought to the Americas (Diouf 1998). Unlike many African religious practices that were incorporated into Afro-Christianity, such as the Ring Shout, Muslims struggled to keep their traditions and practices separate. Diouf (1998) argues that these Islamic distinctions provided a strong support for the emerging Black community. Gomez (1994) concurs with Diouf's statement that Muslim slaves strove to preserve their Islamic cultural identity and values, including the centrality of literacy. As slaves, many Muslims continued to teach their children both girls and boys how to read and write Arabic (Diouf 1998). Literacy had a profound effect on the Islamic presence in the African American community. Arabic literacy, Diouf suggests, set enslaved Black Muslims apart not only from their fellow Blacks but also from many Anglo-White American colonists. Turner (1997) suggests that Muslim slaves played an important role in the Black enslaved community. He cites several examples of Muslims who rose to positions of prominence, including organizing resistance efforts in Brazil in 1835 (Turner 1997, pg. 23-24). Others, Turner notes, established themselves within the system of slavery by becoming plantation overseers, charged with governing the enslaved African American community.

The long-term growth of Islam from this population of enslaved Africans was, however, problematic. Diouf (1998) suggests that the very structure of the slave trade prevented the passage of Islam from believers to progeny. The ability of slave owners to separate families

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[9] For examples of recent scholarship on African American Islam and politics, see (Smith 1998; Harper 1971; Mazrui 1996). Gomez (1994) suggests that some reasons for the lack of scholarship on Islamic history in America may be lack of or ignorance of source material among colonial and antebellum observers. "The other factor contributing to the scarcity of data is the reluctance of the descendants of these early Muslims to be forthright in answering questions about their ancestors" (Gomez 1994, pg. 672).

through segregation or sale of parents and children and the forced mating of African American men and women resulted in the instability of African American family life on slave plantations. However, the practice of Islam continued after slavery. Some Muslims feigned conversion to Christianity in order to continue their practices without hindrance in the antebellum South (Turner 1997, pg. 38). Through various methods, Black Muslims maintained Islamic traditions in small pockets, sometimes in secret, until the first organized Muslim communities were founded in the early twentieth century.

Twentieth-Century African American Islamic Social Structure

McCloud (1995) suggests that by the early 1900s Black Muslims in America began to organize themselves into formal communities. One of the earliest and most important of these communities was the Moorish Science Temple, founded by Noble Drew Ali in Chicago in 1925. A central task of this organization was to create an African American national Islamic identity (McCloud 1995, pg. 12). For Ali, national identity was found in rejecting the European designation as "negro" and embracing an expressly African, particularly Moroccan, Islamic heritage. Drew R. Smith also notes a separatist intention behind the movement's rhetoric, in which the process of identity-building was to extend even to geographic separation (Smith 1998, pg. 537). The pan-Africanism of Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) was particularly appealing to many Islamic leaders of Garvey's day, including Ali, Mufti Muhammad Sadiq, and Elijah Muhammad (Turner 1997, pg. 80-81). The early stages of Islamic community development included the creation of organizations such as the First Muslim Mosque of Pittsburgh and the Islamic Mission of America. In addition, Muslim women were not

excluded from forming Islamic organizations of their own; the Red Crescent Club and the Young Muslim Women's Association were created in the mid-twentieth century.

The Nation of Islam, which has become a key focus of study and media attention, started to grow as an organization in 1930, when Wali Fard Muhammad began to teach African Americans in Detroit about Islam (Marsh 2000). Elijah Poole, who later became Elijah Muhammad, joined the movement in 1931, before the organizational structure was moved to Chicago in 1932. By 1933, the movement had amassed more than eight thousand followers (Marsh 2000, pg. 38). After 1933, Wali Fard Muhammad began to withdraw from the organization, which resulted in a mythologizing of his figure (Marsh 2000). After Wali Fard Muhammad left public life, the movement continued to grow, and motifs of education and activism continued to develop among organizers.

The Nation of Islam was focused on individual self-improvement, which included distinctive dress, social conduct, and dietary restrictions (McCloud 1995, pg. 28). These distinctions drew criticism even among other groups in the larger Islamic community. The Nation of Islam's goal was culture building, with important social and political implications. Afro-centric Islamic education was one component of this project. The University of Islam (later known as the Sister Clara Muhammad Schools) was an educational system that grew out of the Nation of Islam, and its stated goal was to teach young African American Muslims self-knowledge, self-love, and self-determination (Rashid and Muhammad 1992, pg. 179). Rashid and Muhammad (1992) suggest that the school system was a project of identity transformation by members of the Nation of Islam. The curriculum emphasized African American history and the Qur'an. At the time Rashid and Muhammad's article was written, there were thirty-eight Sister Clara Muhammad Schools.

The Nation of Islam activities also had a political penchant. While Islamic leadership did not play as central a role in the mainstream Civil Rights Movement as Christian clergy, leaders within the Nation of Islam had an important part in and embraced the rhetoric of the Black Power Movement (Turner 1997). Through their pan-Africanist and Black Nationalist stance, many African American Islamic communities were partaking in a political agenda. This commitment was seen in the ideological attention given to establishing cultural and historic connections to Africa, as well as a host of political and economic enterprises. Turner suggests that herein lay the appeal for many converts (Turner 1997, pg. 159). Following in this vein, the ideology of the Nation of Islam under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad was separatist (McCloud 1995; Marsh 2000). Under Malcolm X's leadership, however, the Nation of Islam sought to broker more alliances (Marsh 2000). He was able to recruit African Americans from upper socioeconomic classes, where previously success had been limited to the working class. Under his leadership, the Nation of Islam also took on an active political agenda. Marsh (2000) suggests that Malcolm X took the organization to the forefront of the Black Nationalism movement in the 1960s. After his travels to other countries, Marsh suggests that Malcolm X attempted to temper the racially aggressive tone of the organization and shift the emphasis from Black Nationalism to pan-Africanism.

African American Islam and Afro-Christianity

During much of the mid-twentieth century, the Nation of Islam was in contention with Afro-Christianity. McCloud suggests that Muslims in the Nation of Islam often felt disdain for Christianity, and she speculates that their lack of involvement in the mainstream Civil Rights Movement may have been a consequence of the Christian element at its base (McCloud 1995, pg. 51). Harper (1971) goes a step further, suggesting that Malcolm X as an Islamic leader

served as a source of inspiration for Black militants. While objecting to Turner and McCloud's characterization of groups such as the Nation of Islam as authentically Islamic, Nance (2002) suggests that this movement spoke to a desire for a spiritual alternative among African Americans.

In spite of these differences, African American Islamic teachings ran parallel to conservative Afro-Christianity's strict interpretation of the Judeo-Christian tradition, particularly as it relates to sex practices and the institution of marriage. The Western courtship practice of dating, which often includes sexual contact, falls outside Islamic ethics as they are commonly understood (McCloud 1995, pg. 97). Family life is quintessential to the view of the African American Muslim world that McCloud provides. Children in a traditional Muslim home, she suggests, are acculturated to Islamic doctrine, and when they enter adolescence, they undertake full participation in the community with its attending restrictions and obligations (McCloud 1995, pg. 110-111). These restrictions and obligations include the separation of girls from boys at public events, fasting at Ramadan, and for girls, wearing *adab*. McCloud's (1995) view of Islamic child-rearing practices in the Black Muslim community is one of relative homogeneity. It does not take into account both moderated practices and differences in commitment to the form of Islam she describes. These variations may cause differences in observing these traditions and rituals, especially among young people.

Politics and Religion

While much research has been dedicated to understanding religion's role in influencing political participation among African Americans, unfortunately, comparatively little work has been done on the relationship between youth and political participation more generally and the

role of religion in influencing political participation among African American youth more specifically. A large segment of the youth population, those younger than age 18, is not eligible to vote (the type of participation that has dominated the literature). And those who are able to participate (those 18 and older) are, as a consequence of their position in the conventional life-cycle (age, marital status, mobility, income, education, etc.), less likely to participate in conventional politics (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Religion may serve to counteract some of these factors, by providing information, stimulus, and skills needed for participation. With regard to nonvoting participation, McVeigh and Smith (1999) suggest that African Americans are more likely than their Anglo-White counterparts to engage in protest rather than not take action (McVeigh and Smith 1999, pg. 695). Frequent church attendance (more than once a week) has a significant positive impact on the likelihood of participating in protest relative to institutional politics (such as voting: McVeigh and Smith 1999, pg. 696). The section below examines the relationship between religion and political participation among African Americans and adolescents specifically. While these studies do not deal specifically with the political tendencies of adolescents, they are informative insofar as adolescents interact with religion and religious institutions in the same way as adults.

African American Religion as Opiate or Balm

There has been some disagreement among scholars about the role of religion, and particularly Afro-Christianity, as an agent of social change in the African American community. One school of thought (including scholars such as, Frazier and Lincoln 1974; Hunt and Hunt 1977; Marx 1967; Nelsen and Nelsen 1975; Mays and Nicholson 1969) suggests that religion functions as an opiate, a source of quiescence, or a suppressant of African American political

participation. These scholars suggest that Afro-Christianity's otherworldly orientation prevents adherents from focusing on the social concerns of the present in favor of the afterlife. This, they suggest, results in a sectarian escapism and promotes the status quo. Another school of thought (McKinney 1971; McKenzie 2004; Harris 1999; Brady et al. 1995) suggests that religion provides political resources and compensates for those deficiencies in civic skills that result from the marginalization of African Americans. These scholars suggest that religion enables the Black community to be socially efficacious by providing psychological engagement, civic resources, and mobilization.

Religion as Opiate

Mays and Nicholson, in their seminal work *The Negro's Church* (1969), first published in 1933, were among the most influential scholars to suggest the opiate interpretation of African American religion. They suggested that Afro-Christianity was otherworldly in its focus and consequently passive in its stance toward social life and change in world affairs. Similarly, Frazier and Lincoln (1974), as well as Gary T. Marx in his (1967) article "Religion: Opiate or Inspiration of Civil Rights Militancy Among Negroes?" suggest that for African Americans, religion is either mutually exclusive with or a severe impediment to the radicalization of African American politics. He suggests that variance in African American militancy is a consequence of denominational affiliation and that levels of personal orthodoxy are expressions of varying degrees of otherworldliness.

Larry L. Hunt and Janet G. Hunt (1977) expand on Marx's (1967) work by providing further empirical tests of Marx's theory about religion as a pacifying force. These works, along with those of Frazier and Lincoln (1974), represent important foundations of the canon of

African American religion. Hunt and Hunt's (1977) findings moderate Marx's findings that Afro-Christianity suppresses political action. They suggest that religion suppresses political activism only when the denomination is highly sectarian—that is, when the denomination possesses an otherworldly and somewhat isolationist orientation. This orientation is in opposition to a churchlike stance, which is more this-worldly oriented and takes more progressive positions on social issues.

In their analysis, Hunt and Hunt (1977) determine the sectlike orientation (that is, an otherworldly and disinterested stance) using a series of variables that include belief in the existence of the devil, salvation through Jesus only, prohibition of nonbelievers from teaching in public high schools, and a wrathful God who punishes Jews for not accepting Jesus (Hunt and Hunt 1977, pg. 5). In contrast, churchlike, or this-worldly, orientation is determined by more moderate doctrinal tenets that require belief in the Judeo-Christian heritage of the Ten Commandments, an afterlife, Jews as God's chosen people, and the existence of God (Hunt and Hunt 1977, pg. 5). There may be room to question how the sectlike orientation measurements capture the concepts of otherworldly escapism. However, their work represents an advance over previous research on this question. Equally as important, their findings bring into question Marx's other conclusions. A more recent study (Jacobson 1992) confirms Hunt and Hunt's findings in a midsized Midwestern city, suggesting that religion may have an opiate effect in sectlike churches. Jacobson (1999) also suggests that for African Americans, religion may inspire a fatalistic or opiate response. Jacobson found that among a sample of individuals in Muncie, Indiana, religiosity was positively associated with fatalism for both Blacks and Anglo-Whites; that is, individuals who claimed religious affiliation were more likely to be fatalistic in

their outlook.

Religion as a Political Resource

In sharp contrast to Hunt and Hunt (1977), Calhoun-Brown (1998) affirms the otherworldly orientation of African American religion. However, rather than standing in concord with scholars such as Mays and Nicholson (1969) or Marx (1967), she suggests that this worldview can provide the context for separatist-oriented racial empowerment (Calhoun-Brown 1998). Her work draws a novel contrast between the concept of integrationist (churchlike) and separatist (sectlike) oriented political and social empowerment. The former mode of empowerment uses system-based tools such as the electoral process to bring about change, while the latter mode focuses on the promotion of community cohesion and self-control of institutions in order to affect social and political change. Calhoun-Brown suggests that there is a central role for the "political" Black Church in African American political mobilization. She suggests that "it offers a mechanism by which identification may be politicized into consciousness and political efficacy may be developed for action" (Calhoun-Brown 1996, pg. 952). Brian McKenzie (2004), while not embracing her position on the otherworldly orientation of Afro-Christianity, builds on Calhoun-Brown's (1996) work and suggests that congregant interactions in African American context promote nonvoting political activism.

Other scholars have suggested that African American religion does not have an otherworldly orientation (For examples see: Glenn and Gotard 1977; Harris 1999; Wald et al. 1988). Fredrick Harris (1999) suggests that African American religion supports political liberation and activism by means of its institutions, empowerment, and culture. For Harris, one important element of the political strength of Afro-Christianity can be found in the indigenous

leadership at its disposal. Clergy and other religious leaders serve as organizers and recruiters, informing other elites and Black communities about important political issues and sensitizing them to which candidates can best serve the needs of the group. According to Harris (1999), by participating, parishioners gain social capital[10] through the dense and interconnected networks that characterize the Black Church. In addition, while their roles may be contested, women can and do hold important positions in the Black Church, including the pastorate. In this way, the church provides opportunities for parishioners—men, women, and young adults—to practice organizational and speaking skills.

Harris also recognizes the complexity of the psychological impact of religion when he suggests that strength of attachment may lead to low rates of participation in community-based activism while at the same time encouraging social change through acts such as voting. Harris (1999) suggests that there are two types of church participation with divergent consequences for political action. Frequent church attendance, Harris suggests, discourages community-based activism but encourages individual acts such as voting, while church activism encourages collective action (Harris 1999, pg. 132). In addition, the religious culture of the African American church may serve as a symbol under which to unite and may cast political issues in moral terms, thereby encouraging political action.

Brady, Verba, and Schlozman (1995) share Harris's (1999) views concerning the impact of church participation on civic skills. They suggest that congregational churches serve as the "training ground" for skills needed in political participation. The congregational church organization characterizes African American church structure and allows laypeople to perfect

[10] The term "social capital" refers to the value (evidenced in trust, reciprocity, information, and cooperation) that the individual receives from social networks (e.g., social groups and churches) in which he or she is embedded (Putnam 2000).

public speaking, organizational skills, and other civic skills. This venue compensates for the lack of skill development in other environments such as school or the workplace.

Allen, Dawson, and Brown (1989) suggest that religiosity may play an important role in inspiring Black political participation as a key element in the African American racial belief system. This belief system, which also includes exposure to Black media (television and print), functions as an information and organizational shortcut or heuristic that allows the individual to draw conclusions about the world (Allen et al. 1989, pg. 422). Allen et al. (1989) suggest that the African American racial belief system is composed of multiple schemas: (1) Black autonomy, (2) closeness to Black mass, (3) closeness to Black elites, (4) propensity to adopt positive stereotypical beliefs about African Americans, and (5) propensity to adopt negative stereotypical beliefs about African Americans.

Religiosity is important to the racial belief system in that, as Allen et al. posit, religion leads to integration into social networks within the Black community, resulting in a sense of racial identity and consciousness. Religion can inspire belief in both positive (God identifies with the poor and oppressed, a situation in which many Blacks find themselves) and negative (humanity is sinful) stereotypes and has a positive effect on exposure to Black media and all the racial belief-system schemas (Allen et al. 1989, pg. 425). Allen et al. argue that religiosity does not result in an uncritical attitude toward the community and can inspire belief in negative stereotypes. This aspect of African American religiosity may have important consequences for group responses to community members who deviate from Judeo-Christian precepts.

Church communities have a political culture that provides both the mechanism for communicating political information and a means of encouraging adherents to be responsive to this message (Wald et al. 1988). In this understanding, religious leaders are particularly

important for social change. Wald, Owen, and Hill Jr. (1988) suggest that clerics provide a source of direct or indirect political messages to parishioners. Similarly, Reese and Brown (1995) suggest that religious messages may have a political impact by increasing the tendency toward system blame among African Americans. Study findings suggest that increasing exposure to civic-awareness messages is correlated with increasing levels of racial identity and sensitivity to power imbalances. These factors are essential to feelings of system blame.[11] In turn, congregations are able not only to act on these messages but also to encourage others to do so. The social interactions of congregants in religious institutions provide a means of reinforcing these social and political messages by withdrawing approval from those who deviate from church prescriptions.

Adolescent Political Participation

Unfortunately, little work has been directed toward understanding the impact of religious participation on the political attitudes and behaviors of adolescents and young adults. Hanks (1981) suggests that participation in a voluntary organization may predict participation in politics. Voluntary organizations took two forms in this analysis: instrumental (student council, honorary societies, yearbook, etc.) and expressive (athletic teams, drama, hobby clubs, etc.). Hanks concluded that participation in both instrumental and expressive voluntary organizations is related to political participation in adulthood. It is important to note that churches are voluntary organizations, and participation in youth groups and youth choirs (as well as a host of other youth-focused church activities) may affect adolescents in much the same way as

[11] System blame is "the degree to which members of a disadvantaged group believe their socioeconomic status is a result of societal problems and not the action of individuals in the group" (Reese and Brown 1995).

participation in student councils or drama club. Thus, Hanks' findings may have important implications for understanding adolescent religiosity and later participation.

Beck and Jennings (1982) examine four models of pre-adult precursors to participation: socioeconomic status, political activity, civic orientations, and high-school activities. Study findings suggest that each model affected later participation. When all the models were combined, each model or pathway was still shown to have an impact on the likelihood of political participation in adulthood. Importantly, Beck and Jennings singled out the parental civic-orientation model as a key instrument of political learning in adolescents.

While these articles do not directly examine this relationship, they do offer some avenues for future research. Hanks' work can be expanded to include the impact of participation in religious organizations (such as youth groups) on later political activity. Similarly, Beck and Jennings' work could be revised to include the impact of parent religious orientation separately or as mediated through civic orientation as a model of political socialization. They may suggest an important role for religion, which may influence civic orientation, given the findings of Wald et al. (1988) and Reese and Brown (1995), which suggest that church communities play an important role in the development of civic awareness and political culture.

Using data from the National Education Longitudinal (NEL) survey, Smith (1999) examines more directly the relationship between adolescent religiosity and civic participation, which is a precursor to political participation. Smith's analysis suggests that the age at which adolescents participate in religious activities matters for participation in civic activities. There was no relationship between religious and civic participation among eighth-grade respondents. However, by tenth grade, religious participation has an important impact on political-participation precursors: "participation in religious activities is positively related to greater civic

virtue in student" (Smith 1999, pg. 568). Smith also notes that past religious participation is an indicator of future religious participation. Furthermore, religious participation was unrelated to participation in extracurricular activities, suggesting that it functions in a separate and specific way to foster social capital.

Regnerus' et al. (2003) report from the National Society of Youth and Religion offers a brief review of the literature on adolescent religiosity and civic/political participation (some of the articles from this review are listed below), which suggests that religious activity is generally thought to be positively related to civic engagement. Using NEL data, Trusty and Watts (1999) also found a positive relationship between religion and volunteer work. Similarly, Youniss et al. (1999) found a positive relationship between volunteerism and the perception of religion as important. However, there are some caveats to these findings. Sundeen and Raskoff (1995) found no difference between religious and nonreligious youth with regard to volunteerism, and Trusty and Watts (1999) suggest that religion serves as a proxy for the adolescent's attachment to society. Importantly, these studies do not directly address African Americans adolescents, but they do offer some insight into the process that might be at work. Given the centrality of religion in the lives of African Americans generally and Black youth in particular (see the section entitled "Adolescent Religiosity"), including religious variables in any discussion of youth and politics may add valuable insight.

Religion as Psychological Resource

Some scholarship (Ross 1990; Ellison 1991; Pearce et al. 2003) has suggested that religion plays an important role in psychological well being for Americans. African American religion and Afro-Christianity more specifically, is said to have important implications for

African Americans' psychological well being. Scholarship on the African American church suggests that it may engender feelings of self-respect and self-worth, serve as a buffer against stresses (Ellison 1995), and offer members the opportunity to occupy positions of leadership from which they are barred in larger society. However, for those who fall outside its values system the Black Church may become a source of cognitive dissonance, creating feelings of guilt and lowering self-esteem (Woodyard et al. 2000). Given the complex psychological impact of the Black Church, it seems likely to have an important impact on the decision-making of African American youth, especially those decisions complicated by concerns about self-image and peer pressure.

Christopher Ellison (1993) suggests that involvement in church communities, through interpersonal contexts and private devotional experiences, positively affects self-esteem. Church communities serve to reinforce shared beliefs and validate the individual's moral perceptions, while devotional experiences, such as prayer, are intended to establish a relationship between the participant and God. Ellison argues that this connection to the divine establishes a sense of self-worth. Moreover, his findings also suggest that religion may, in the long term, serve as a buffer against environmental stressors and negative self-perception.

Moorhead's (1984) as well as Mays and Nicholson's (1969) landmark work findings suggest a relationship between religion and mental well being that is similar to Ellison's view. Morehead argues that the Black Church was intended to teach congregants self-respect and self-esteem (Moorhead 1984).[12] A more recent study suggests that for African American women, church membership may be correlated with good mental health (van Olphen et al. 2003).

[12] Mays and Nicholson (1969) reach a similar conclusion in spite of their generally negative view of the political veracity of Afro-Christianity. The church, in this view, is significant for African Americans because it offers the chance for ownership, a social condition rarely experienced by those African Americans observed in their study. Blacks were unhindered from attaining positions of power and controlling the organizational structure and (with more difficulty) financial condition of their church.

Specifically, van Olphen et al. suggest that prayer was associated with fewer reports of depressive symptoms and that higher frequency of church attendance corresponded positively with social support.[13] Nelson and Nelson (1975) agree with this assessment when they suggest that the Black Church plays an important psychological role in its community because it allows for the creation of self-respect, empowerment and full personhood. Clark (1971) describes the psychological impact of the Black Church in slightly different terms. He sums up the centrality of this organization to African American social change by saying, "For the Negro, his church is his instrument of escape, his weapon of protest, his protective fortress behind which he seeks to withstand the assaults of a hostile world and within which he plans his strategies of defiance, harassment, and, at his frontal attacks against racial barriers" (Clark 1971, pg. 145). Clark suggests that Black Church membership offers parishioners the opportunity to vent their frustration with a society that does not value them. In his understanding, the church is a "haven" and an opportunity for autonomy in a world where Black had little socioeconomic independence. In church, African Americans can fully actualize their potential through modes from which they are excluded in wider society. Thus, the African American church offers members a wealth of psychological resources that may surmount the impediments they face.

Ellison's (1995) article notes, however, that the psychological benefits of church attendance may not be a universal phenomenon. Ellison's work points to a complicated role for religion in mental well being. His study findings suggest that among African Americans in the southeastern United States, there is no clear relationship between religious attendance and depressive symptoms, while individuals who practice personal devotions such as prayer and

[13] Importantly, van Olphen et al. note that religiosity was correlated with reports of poor physical health—"membership in a religious organization was negatively associated with health in other instances (worse self-reported general health, higher reports of chronic conditions)"—while positively correlated with other factors (van Olphen et al. 2003, pg. 554).

Bible reading report higher instances of depressive symptoms. Bowie et al. (2006) also point to a complex relationship between religion and mental health. In their longitudinal study of alcohol use among Black youth, they found that African Americans with higher rates of church attendance were less likely to be depressed and, as a consequence, less likely to have alcohol problems. However, those who were depressed and attended church frequently were more likely to have alcohol problems.

Much the same case has been made in research dedicated to adolescent religiosity. Steinman and Zimmerman (2004) and Wallace Jr. and Forman (1998) have suggested that religion may serve as a protective agent, reducing expressions of risky behavior in adolescents. Some studies suggest that religious participation among adolescents may increase the age of first intercourse, decrease the frequency of sexual encounters, and increase the use of protection against pregnancy and STDs, through increasing self-esteem, fostering friendships with peers who have restrictive sexual activities, and instilling sexually conservative values (Thornton and Camburn 1989; Smith et al. 2002; Ball et al. 2003). According to other scholars (Herek and Capitanio 1995; Newman and Muzzonigro 1993; Woodyard et al. 2000), however, religion may have negative effects on those who stray too far outside the bounds of religion's normative prescriptions.

Unfortunately, much less research has been done—and none is presented here—regarding the influence of Islamic religious practices on the psychological resources provided for congregants. However, insofar as the African American mosque functions similarly to the African American church, providing the same opportunities and benefits, it is likely that the resources gained will be the same.

Adolescent Religiosity

Any understanding of adolescent religiosity must take into account the complexity of the religious/ethnic contexts in which these youth live and the realities of their lives in the United States. Using three surveys, Monitoring the Future (1996), Survey of Adolescent Health (1995), and The Survey of Parents and Youth (1998), Smith et al. (2002) examine the nature of adolescent religion as measured through religious affiliation, frequency of attendance at religious services, and youth-group participation. Smith et al.'s (2002) findings suggest six important conclusions about young-adult religiosity in America: (1) the majority of American youth do claim religious affiliation; (2) the Christian tradition is in decline among American adolescents; (3) about half of adolescents participate in religious organizations; (4) religious activity declines with age; (5) female adolescents have slightly higher rates of religiosity than do boys; and (6) among adolescents, religiosity varies by region as well as race..

African American young adults are significantly different from their counterparts with respect to religion, exhibiting higher rates of religiosity based on all the measures used in this study. When compared to their Anglo-White and Latino counterparts as well as other ethnic groups, African American adolescents have the highest rates of church attendance (Smith et al. 2002, pg. 607). African American youth are more likely than Anglo-White youth, and also twice as likely as "other" ethnic groups, to participate in religious youth groups throughout their four years of high school (Smith et al. 2002, pg. 607). Moreover, these youth tend to be concentrated in African Methodist, Holiness, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Baptist (most predominantly conservative) Christian denominations as well as in the Islamic community. This study suggests that religion is an important part of the lives of American adolescents.

Using nationally representative data from the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), Schwadel and Smith's (2005) report offers a descriptive account of the religiosity of teens in the United States. The report suggests that a large number (47 percent) of Protestant adolescents are involved in religious youth groups (Schwadel and Smith 2005, pg. 16). For African American youth, Schwadel and Smith's report offers a mixed portrait of teen church participation. Teens whose parents are associated with Black Protestant denominations are more likely to participate in activities such as attending Sunday school (Schwadel and Smith 2005, pg. 17) but less likely to attend religious summer camps (Schwadel and Smith 2005, pg. 18). These teens have a slightly higher than average (92 percent) likelihood of reporting belief in God (Schwadel and Smith 2005, pg. 21) and are more likely to report feeling close to God (Schwadel and Smith 2005, pg. 24) and to believe in a Judgment Day (Schwadel and Smith 2005, pg 28). They are also more likely to report that "faith is important in shaping their daily lives" (Schwadel and Smith 2005, pg. 29).

Religion and Adolescent Sexual Decision-Making

This section examines the relationship between adolescent religion and sexuality, the mechanisms through which adolescents' sexuality may be mediated by their religious beliefs, as well as the relationship between adolescents' religiosity and age of first intercourse, number of sexual encounters, both contraception and STD/AIDS preventive behaviors, and the experience of homosexual youth when relating to their familiar and ethnic communities. Research on the relationship between religion and sexuality has garnered attention within scholarly circles as a potential limiting agent for adolescent sexuality. One motivation behind research that seeks to limit adolescent sexuality is tied to sexual activity's potential for negative consequences in this

population. Pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, are outcomes associated with adolescent sexuality which are thought to be particularly deleterious (Hardy and Raffaelli 2003, pg. 731). African American women are 3.4 times more likely to have nonmarital births when compared to their Anglo-White counterparts (Trent and Crowder 1997, pg. 530). These occurrences are thought to be linked to poor life outcomes. Ball, Armistead, and Austin (2003) suggest that religion may function as a protective resource, improving life-outcomes for African American young women who are more likely to suffer from "poverty, violence, drug abuse, and premarital pregnancy than are other adolescent populations" (Ball et al. 2003, pg. 431). Delaying age of first intercourse is seen as one way of forestalling negative outcomes such as HIV-positive status (Murry 1994). Similarly, religion is thought to reduce the number of sexual encounters among adolescents and, according to McCree et al. (2003), increases feelings of self-efficacy in adolescent communication with partners about prevention of pregnancy, STDs, and HIV. Moreover, McCree et al. suggest that while religion is generally thought to discourage contraceptive use, sexually active adolescents with higher levels of religiosity were more likely to have reported using a condom in the past six months and held more positive attitudes toward condom use in general.

Sex and Religion in Adolescent Decision making

As children emerge into young adulthood, they find themselves in positions of greater autonomy with regard to decision-making. Scholars have suggested that in the face of limited decision-making resources, young adults use different models or heuristics to arrive at a decision.[14] Judith G. Smetana (2000) suggests that the African American church is seen by both parents and adolescents as a legitimate source of authority regarding "conventional" and "moral"

[14] Schvaneveldt and Adams (1983) summarize the major models of adolescent decision-making. These models range from checklists to styles dependent on intuition.

issues because of its importance in the African American community. Billy, Brewster, and Grady (1994) suggest that community context plays an important part in the sexual decision-making of young women. The communities in which these women live may serve to structure and constrain their choices, by influencing the cost-benefit analysis young women undergo and by determining both the normative structure of their environment and what constitutes acceptable behavior in that environment (Billy et al. 1994, pg. 388). Billy et al. also suggest that religion may serve as just such a context.

Billy, Brewster, and Grady (1994) list three types of opportunity structures that may be relevant to sexual decision-making. The first is the availability of paths to social mobility. With a greater opportunity for social mobility, Billy et al. hypothesize that young girls would choose to delay sexual activity. The second opportunity structure is the adolescent's knowledge of reproductive services. The third structure deals with the availability of suitable partnerships. Both opportunity structures and normative environments may be affected by the individual's religiosity. Billy et al. (1994) hypothesize that conservative religious communities are one context that may influence young women's sexual decision-making, particularly discouraging nonmarital sex. As a member of a religious community, a young woman would internalize the community's attitude, resulting in limited sexual behavior. Similarly, community environment may effectively constrain the individual's behavior, regardless of her own religious commitment, by reducing the amount of willing partners to whom she has access.

Billy et al. (1994) test their hypothesis using data from Cycle III of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG-III) from 1982 and aggregate-level data describing the communities in which respondents to the NSFG-III live. The respondents' community context was measured in terms of socioeconomic status (income, educational attainment, poverty, and housing values) and

religiosity (orthodoxy of the community's religious organizations and pervasiveness of religious attendance). Study findings suggest that religiosity is one element of the community context that affects likelihood of premarital sexual intercourse. Other important factors include the educational attainment of the respondent and of the respondent's mother.

Social Control

Religion may have important consequences for young-adult sexual attitudes and behaviors (Woodroof 1985). Through effects on the decision-making cost-benefit calculus that young adults undergo and through the apparatus of social control, religious institutions may influence the behavior and attitudes of young people (Hardy and Raffaelli 2003). The church, along with family, friends, and media, is a primary instrument of adolescent socialization (Rostosky et al. 2003; Studer and Thornton 1987). Religious institutions often make claims about which sexual acts, contexts, and partners are acceptable. In this way, they prescribe the appropriate bounds of sexuality and establish norms of sexual conduct for those socialized within a given tradition (Studer and Thornton 1987).

In addition to establishing the bounds and norms of sexual activity, religious institutions also may provide sanctions for individuals who violate these prescriptions. These sanctions may include community disapproval, rejection, and the claim of loss of place in the afterlife (Studer and Thornton 1987, pg. 118-119). For young adults who internalize this religious culture, engaging in prohibited sexual activity may result in cognitive dissonance as well as feelings of guilt, shame, and unworthiness (Hardy and Raffaelli 2003, pg. 732). In the African American community, where the Black Church has a central role, the influence of religion may be particularly important for understanding the sexual choices of adolescents. The far-reaching influence of religion can cause feelings of alienation among teens and may affect young-adult

choices regarding the gender, age, sex, and number of partners, frequency of sexual activity, and STD and pregnancy prevention.

Reciprocity in Religion and Sexuality

Many scholars have been interested in the effects of religion on adolescent sexuality. But does sexuality have an effect on adolescent religiosity? Hardy and Raffaelli (2003) examine whether choices about sexuality affect the subsequent religiosity of young adults. Indeed, Hardy and Raffaelli found that religion does have a significant impact on the sexual decision-making of African American young adults. However, their study showed no significant reciprocal relationship. That is, changes in sexual behavior (e.g., experiencing first intercourse during the course of the study) did not significantly affect the individual's religiosity (e.g., self-identification as religious or levels of the importance of religion to the individual; (Hardy and Raffaelli 2003, pg. 737). These findings ran counter to expectations, as Hardy and Raffaelli hypothesized that increased sexual activity would negatively affect religiosity because of the cognitive dissonance produced when the individual's actions run counter to the religious social structure in which he or she is embedded.

Thornton and Camburn (1989) suggest that premarital sexual behavior may negatively influence religious participation. However, the relationship observed in their study did not rise to the level of statistical significance. Here, Thornton and Camburn agree with Hardy and Raffaelli in hypothesizing that there is a reciprocal relationship between religious participation and sexual behavior. However, both studies were unable to prove their assertions with the data available to them. In addition, Hardy and Raffaelli (2003) and Meier (2003) both found that there was no reciprocal effect between religion and sexual activity; that is, levels of sexual activity had no effect on levels of religious activity.

One study did, however, provide a counterpoint to the findings noted above. Steinman and Zimmerman's (2004) study, which examined the likelihood of sexual intercourse among Black youth, suggests that there may be a reciprocal relationship between religion and sexuality among women. While in the sample as a whole, initial levels of religiosity were not shown to have bearing on changes in sexual intercourse, for African American young-adult women greater than average decreases in religion resulted in greater than average increases in sexual intercourse (Steinman and Zimmerman 2004, pg. 158). However, this effect was not evident among other groups in the sample and at other levels of sexual intercourse.

Sexual Patterns among African American Youth

When compared to their Anglo-White counterparts (Mott et al. 1996), and even when religion is controlled (Casper 1990), African American youth are more likely than other young adults to engage in sexual activity. Using data from the 1976 National Survey of Young Women, Brown (1985) examined the perception that a culture of sexual permissiveness exists within the Black adolescent community. Among a sample of women ranging in age from 15 to 19 years, study findings suggest that there is no uniform sexually permissive culture in the African American community. Frequency of church attendance was one of the factors related to adolescent sexual activity, while the sexual attitudes of respondents' peers is another (Brown 1985, pg. 385). Attitudes about sexual permissiveness among adolescents may be important in understanding this variance. Indeed, Murry (1994) suggests that Black female adolescents with high rates of church attendance are less likely to approve of sexually permissive behavior.

Increasing Age of First Intercourse

Many scholars have suggested that for African American adolescents, religion is associated with a later age of first sexual intercourse (McCree et al. 2003; Hardy and Raffaelli

2003). Meier (2003) employs the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to examine the relationship between religiosity and attitudes about first intercourse. The study sample included adolescent, female virgins ages 15 to 18 years at the first interview, in 1995, who had neither married nor experienced forced sexual encounters by the second interview, in 1996. In this study, attitudes about sex are the central indicator of age of sexual activity for both men and women (Meier 2003, pg. 1047). Meier suggests that there is a significant effect of religion on age of first sex among women. Religion's function in this context is to mediate attitudes about sex.

Mott et al. (1996) examined the likelihood for first intercourse by age 14 for African American, Anglo-White, and Latino individuals. The sample was composed of individuals ages 14 to 21 and included oversampling of both African Americans and Hispanics. The analysis included the role of religion and religious peer groups in early ages of first intercourse. The study found that being African American was correlated with younger age of first intercourse. Indeed, Black adolescents were 2.78 times more likely to have had sex by age 14 than their Anglo-White counterparts (Mott et al. 1996, pg. 17). Among African American men in the sample, the likelihood of first intercourse by age 14 was eight times that of their Anglo-White male counterparts (Mott et al. 1996). In their overall analysis, Mott et al. suggested that religious activity functioned to delay sexual activity. This effect was strongest when individuals and their peers attended the same church.

Billy, Brewster, and Grady's (1994) paper entitled "Contextual Effects in the Sexual Behavior of Adolescent Women" offers a comprehensive look at women's sexual behavior. Among the factors that increased the age of first intercourse were mother's level of education, family income, respondent's educational attainment, and religiosity. For Brewster et al. (1998), denomination affiliation may play an important explanatory role in the ages of first intercourse

for both African American and Anglo-White adolescents. Black fundamentalist Protestant teens in this study were 50 percent more likely than their Catholic and other-religious-group counterparts to remain virgins throughout the course of the study (Brewster et al. 1998, pg. 500).

Velma McBride Murry (1994) describes the demographic and social differences between African American women who have an early age of first intercourse (age 15 and younger) and those who have a late age of first intercourse (age 18 and older). Using the 1998 National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle IV (with an oversampling of African Americans), Murry examined the responses of 582 women. Higher frequency of church attendance was one of the descriptors of young women who had later ages of first intercourse; indeed, it was the second strongest predictor (Murry 1994, pg. 345). Other descriptors of late age of sexual intercourse included slightly higher family income, mother's education, mother's age at birth of her first child, and later age of puberty.

Fewer Sexual Encounters

In addition to its effects on age of first intercourse, participating in religious activity may reduce the likelihood of sexual activity for African American adolescents (Steinman and Zimmerman 2004). Steinman and Zimmerman (2004) examine the relationship between adolescent religiosity and risky behavior. Using a sample of 705 African American high-school students from a Midwestern city, they questioned these students about their religiosity (church attendance), frequency of sexual activity, and alcohol, cigarette, and marijuana use. In regard to sexual behavior, the study found that there was a strong negative relationship between frequency of church attendance and sexual intercourse; that is, as levels of church attendance increased, the likelihood of having sexual intercourse decreased (Steinman and Zimmerman 2004, pg. 157).

Contraception and STD/AIDS Preventive Behaviors[15]

McCree et al. (2003) examine the relationship between religiosity and conduct aimed at preventing sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). The study sample was composed of 522 sexually active African American females between the ages of 14 and 18 years, who were questioned about preventive practices in their sexual behaviors. McCree et al. (2003) hypothesized that risk-aversive sexual practices were an extension of the protective resources that religion is said to possess. The study found a positive relationship between religion and use of sexual protection. The authors suggest, “Greater religious involvement was associated with less sexual risk-taking, greater self-efficacy, and more positive attitudes toward using condoms” (McCree et al. 2003, pg. 6). When compared to their less religious counterparts, individuals who identified as more religious were more likely to practice risk-aversive behaviors and to hold risk-aversive attitudes, including willingness to communicate with partners about STDs/AIDS and pregnancy prevention, willingness to refuse unsafe sexual encounters, and positive views toward condom use. Indeed, 88.2 percent of more religious individuals reported condom use in the last six months compared to 11.7 percent of their less religious counterparts (McCree et al. 2003, pg. 6).

Using data pooled from NSFG national surveys conducted in 1982 and 1988, Brewster et al. (1998) compared the relationship between religiosity and the contraceptive behavior of Black and Anglo-White young adults ages 15 to 23 in the early and then later part of the 1980s. Brewster et al. (1998) suggest that this period is of particular research interest because of the political activity of church-based groups in the public debate over reproductive rights.

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[15] Struder and Thornton’s (1987) study suggests that religion is important to adolescent decision-making about contraception. While this study does not directly address African American adolescents, it is a seminal work in the field of religion and adolescent sexuality. The study’s findings suggest that increasing levels of church attendance are correlated with a decreasing likelihood of using medical methods of contraception (those obtained through medical professionals), such as the pill.

Fundamentalist denominations exhibited higher percentages of Black adolescents who remained virgins in both cycles of the survey; they were 50 percent more likely to remain virgins than their Catholic and other-religious-group counterparts (Brewster et al. 1998, pg. 500).

Regarding contraceptive use, Brewster et al. (1998) noted that among Black adolescents contraceptive use at first intercourse was extremely low (Brewster et al. 1998, pg. 500). African American fundamentalists were the least likely to use contraception at this stage, while their Catholic counterparts were only slightly more likely to use methods such as the pill and condoms. Forty-six percent of African American adolescents stated that they use some form of contraception at first intercourse (Brewster et al. 1998, pg. 500). Study findings suggest marked differences between contraceptive use at first intercourse and at most recent intercourse. In response to the question of contraceptive use during sexual activity in the past four weeks, 60 percent of African Americans and 62 percent of whites ages 15–19 answered that they had used some type of contraception (Brewster et al. 1998, pg. 500). This represents a 2 percent increase for Anglo-Whites and a 14 percent increase for African Americans in contraceptive use between their first intercourse and the period of the most recent panel cycle. At this latter stage, the most preferred method of contraception was the pill, which does not prevent transmission of STDs and AIDS.

The relationship between religion and sexual activity among African American adolescents may seem quite paradoxical. African Americans exhibit concurrently both higher rates of sexual activity and religiosity. Schwadel and Smith's (2005) report suggests that Black teens are more likely to suggest that faith is important in their daily lives and more likely than their conservative and mainline Protestant counterparts to report having sexual intercourse in the last year. A number of factors have been shown to be determinants of adolescent sexuality, such

as age of first intercourse, contraception use, and frequency of sexual activity. In addition, among them are economic opportunities, community context, family income, mother's level of education, and mother's age at first intercourse. African Americans are more likely to have lower family incomes, and their mothers are more likely to have had lower levels of education and first sexual encounter at an early age. Religion can be understood as mitigating these risk factors among members of this group.

Anderson (1989) points to the importance of socioeconomic factors in explaining sexual behavior and its attending outcomes, such as teen pregnancy. Similarly, Furstenberg et al. (1987) also suggest that socioeconomic variables (such as mother's level of education) and social isolation may affect the timing for first intercourse. They suggest that the racial gap between timing of first intercourse for Anglo-Whites and Blacks may be affected by segregation, which may influence youth decisions to have intercourse at an early age. Billy et al. (1994) suggest that the community may be another important element in the story of adolescent sexuality. They argue, "Communities characterized by a paucity of economic resources, racial segregation, and social disorganization seem to provide young people with little motivation to avoid behaviors with potentially deleterious consequences, such as unprotected intercourse and consequent nonmarital birth" (Billy et al. 1994, pg. 338). Billy et al. suggest that religion helps shape sexual behaviors and counteract these contexts by providing adolescents with normative constraints and structures.

Norms also play an important role in adolescent sexuality (Anderson 1989; Billy et al. 1994; Furstenberg et al. 1987). Furstenberg et al. (1987) point to normative causal sources of sexual intercourse in adolescents. They suggest that peer sexual activity is the best indicator of

individual sexual activity.[16] Their study findings suggest that students who attended predominantly Black schools (80 percent or more) were more likely to report having sexual intercourse than those in racially mixed schools. However, Brown (1985) and Murry (1994) contest the notion that there is a uniform norm of sexual permissiveness in the African American community. High rates of sexual activity among African American adolescents may be a consequence of their marginalized status, mediated by such phenomena as low income and limited economic opportunities. As mentioned above, the scholarship on religion and youth sexuality suggests that religion may serve to mitigate these factors.

Religion and Homosexuality

While many of the studies addressing heterosexual adolescents noted the protective and self-esteem–building properties of African American religion, these protective properties may not always be in play for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) adolescents. Adolescence can be a tentative time for youth who do not conform to sexual and gender norms, as they must navigate a coming-out period during which they come to terms with their sexual identity (Newman and Muzzonigro 1993). As with their heterosexual counterparts, religion may have important consequences for the sexual choices and experiences of gay and lesbian African American adolescents (Newman and Muzzonigro 1993). The centrality of the Black Church in the African American community may have important consequences for gay and lesbian young adults, as they wrestle with issues surrounding their orientation and its perceptions in their communities.

[16] However, it is important to note that Furstenberg et al. acknowledge a problem in their reliance on peer sexual behavior and individual sexual behavior because they were unable to discern how the variable is at work in their sample. They acknowledge that the responses they received may be a result of misperception (individuals perceiving that their friends are like them in sexual behavior) or self-selection into a group that is similar in sexual behavior.

Within the African American community, homosexuality and same-sex attractions, sexual encounters, and relationships have traditionally met with public resistance. These attractions and their attending sexual activities run against the community's professed cultural grain and theological penchant. Most African American congregations have traditionally understood their conservative anti–same-sex intercourse position as being part of biblical canon. Scholars have noted a negative relationship between religiosity and attitudes toward homosexuality. In particular, African American religiosity has been thought to support homophobia and homonegativity[17] (Herek and Capitanio 1995; Marsiglio 1993). Indeed, increasing levels of religiosity have been shown to correlate with increasing levels of homonegativity (Herek and Capitanio 1995). While some churches deviate from this pattern, accepting openly or secretly gay and lesbian members into the fold, most African American churches openly decry homosexuality (Woodyard et al. 2000).

Battle et al. (2000) report the findings of the "Black Pride Survey 2000," which surveyed 2,645 Black respondents identifying as GLBT on a wide range of social and political issues. A majority of respondents—54 percent—reported negative views of homosexuality in their church or religious group, while only 24 percent reported that their church was accepting of homosexuality (Battle et al. 2000, pg. 48-49). Younger respondents were more likely than their older counterparts to indicate that their churches held negative views about homosexuality. Only 16 percent of respondents ages 24 and younger reported that their church was accepting of homosexuality (Battle et al. 2000, pg. 49). Furthermore, the data suggest that there is a relationship among respondents between church acceptance of homosexuality and religion's influence on daily lives. Younger respondents were less likely to express religion as influential in

[17] Homonegativity is defined as a negative attitude or affect toward homosexuality.

their daily lives. Individuals who reported that their church accepted homosexuality were more likely to report that religion had a greater influence on their daily lives.

Woodyard, Peterson, and Stokes (2000) examine the relationship between religious participation and same-sex intercourse among African American men. In this study, researchers examined the frequency of attendance and religious affiliation of men who have sex with men (MSM).[18] The study sample consisted of sixty-five interviews with individuals who had formal or informal relationships with African American MSM. These interviews were followed by key participant interviews with seventy-six African American men, ages 18–29 years, who had sex with men in the six months prior to the interview. The men were questioned about their sexuality and religiosity during in-depth, semistructured interviews. The study findings suggest that African American men who engaged in same-sex intercourse, both those who were "less masculine than their heterosexual church-going males" and "those who conform to masculine roles," felt that neither they nor their counterparts were deterred from religious affiliation (Woodyard et al. 2000, pg. 454).

Woodyard et al. suggest that MSM may be divided into two groups based on their sexual/gender roles: one "less masculine" than heterosexuals[19] and the other indistinguishable from heterosexuals in terms of masculinity (Woodyard et al. 2000, pg. 454). For "less masculine" MSM, Woodyard et al. suggest that the church may provide a place within the African American community where their "less masculine" behavior is accepted. The more masculine MSM were described as being present in church with heterosexual partners or absent

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[18] In their study, Woodyard, Peterson, and Stokes (2000) do not use the terms homosexuals, bisexuals, or individuals who are curious about bisexuals; rather, they use "men who have sex with men" (MSM). This term collapses notions of the above-mentioned terms without making distinctions among male respondents or asking them to categorize themselves.

[19] Woodyard's terminology here belays the variance in levels of "masculinity" among heterosexuals. Indeed, no comprehensive definition of masculinity is offered, without which any understanding of variations in levels of masculinity is difficult.

from church. Study participants described the African American church as a place where they could find other same-sex partners and where their identities as African American men (separate from their sexual preferences) were affirmed (Woodyard et al. 2000, pg. 455).

The study, however, does acknowledge that same-sex intercourse is counter to the theological culture of African American churches, and respondents noted numerous instances of African American pastors disavowing the practices of MSM. The researchers noted that these negative messages were incorporated into respondents' conception of self, negatively affecting their self-esteem. Study respondents expressed feelings of guilt, condemnation, embarrassment, and alienation as consequences of their church involvement and the anti–same-sex messages they receive there. In spite of some respondents' reports that the church served as a meeting place for MSM, Woodyard, Peterson, and Stokes (2000) suggest that study participants who were active in African American churches were affected by the anti–same-sex theology, of the Black Church resulting in more secretive and fewer same-sex encounters (Woodyard et al. 2000, pg. 458).

Negy and Eisenman (2005) compare the attitudes of African American and Anglo-White college students toward gay, lesbian, and bisexual (LGB) individuals. The study participants were composed of seventy African American and one hundred and forty-three Caucasian students in the southeastern United States. The study's findings suggest that African Americans were more likely to have negative feelings toward LGBs than their Anglo-White counterparts (Negy and Eisenman 2005, pg. 295). However, when other factors such as frequency of church attendance, religious commitment, and socioeconomic status were controlled, the difference in Anglo-White and Black negative affect for LGB individuals dissipated. Negy and Eisenman (2005) suggest that for both Anglo-White and African American young adults, religious commitment is a major factor in homonegativity. Indeed, particularly for African Americans in

the data presented, religious commitment was the instrument most correlated with respondents' affective response to LGBs. Ultimately, Negy and Eisenman (2005) speculate that as the frequency of church attendance increases, so does reinforcement of homonegative conceptions.

Conclusion

Religion is an important part of the African American community and the lives of Black adolescents. Much of the history of the African American community has been told through the lens of its religious institutions. Enslaved Africans fought to keep their religious traditions alive in the New World and even in embracing Christianity they forged a new path that was different from Anglo-White Christianity. Similarly, Islam in the Black community strove to create an identity separate from slavery. Religion has important consequences for African Americans at every stage of their development. African American religion has played a central role in determining the bounds of appropriate behavior for community members and has also served as a socializing agent. Whether in complying or deviating from its normative prescriptions, African Americans view themselves and each other in its light. Consequently, we may be able to understand much of adolescent sexual and political behavior by understanding the role religion plays in their decision-making process.

Defining religiosity has been a key factor in the studies on adolescent sexuality examined in this paper. Frequency of church attendance and the importance of religion are two of the measures most frequently used in studies that examine the role of religion in the life of adolescents and its impact on their decision-making. While these measures often yield statistically significant results, it is not clear what concepts of religion and its impact these studies are measuring. Combining theological measures that directly access the parts of religious

tradition and exposure in which scholars are interested may yield more explanatory power in their investigation of the influence of religion on young-adult decision-making.

What scholars in this field are most likely trying to capture is whether the youth in their studies have internalized the theological messages about sexuality within the religious tradition to which they have been exposed. They then wish to compare levels of internalization with the behaviors of interest. Unfortunately, frequency of church attendance and importance of religion may not be good proxies for the internalization of religious measures. These measures do not make explicit notions of belief and internalization, which are very likely the sources of behavioral change. For example, a person who willingly attends religious services once a week and someone who attends three times a week because of cohesion may have different rates of internalization, even though repeated exposure may dispose anyone to a particular viewpoint.

Similarly, the issue of the importance of religion may not capture the specific areas of religious practice intended. Individuals may define religion differently, and affirming the importance of religion may not mean the same thing for each individual. For example, an individual may in response to these questions intend to affirm a particular church but not a particular theological tenet. Without directly addressing the theological tenet, it is difficult to understand these measures as they relate to issues of sexuality. More explanatory power may be gained by examining the relationship between levels of belief in a particular theological tenet and participation in certain activities or likelihood of exhibiting particular attitudes.

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