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"Church" in Black and White: The Organizational Lives of Young Adults

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Abstract: The religious lives of young adults have generally been investigated by examining what young people believe and their self-reported religious practices. Far less is known about young adults' organizational involvement and its impact on religious identities and ideas about religious commitment. Using data from site visit observations of religious congregations and organizations, and individual and focus group interviews with college-age black and white Christians, we find differences in how black and white students talk about their religious involvement; and with how they are incorporated into the lives of their congregations. White students tended to offer "organizational biographies" chronicling the contours of belonging as well as disengagement, and emphasizing the importance of fulfilling personal needs as a criterion for maintaining involvement. On the other hand, black students used "family" and "home" language and metaphors to describe how their religious involvement, a voluntary choice, was tied to a sense of "calling" and community. We show that this variation is aligned with organizational differences in black and white congregations that situate white youth as separate and black youth as integrated into the larger church community.

Keywords: young adults; race; religious commitment; identity; congregations

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, studies of American religion have turned to youth to provide a new empirical context for some of the existing theoretical questions and debates within the subfield. While debates about whether American adults are becoming less religious have subsided as scholars have increasingly recognized more individualistic spiritual practices and shifts in patterns of institutional membership (e.g., [1–3]), research on religious youth and young adults has often continued to focus on just *how* religious young adults are by analyzing how often they attend religious services and comparing their beliefs to adults in their faith traditions [4–11]. This focus may stem from a paradox researchers have observed; that is, while attendance tends to decrease in adolescence and college, youth themselves often report that religious beliefs remain important and sometimes even increase during this period [12–14].

An underlying question within these studies is: How do we understand the differences in young adult religiosity? Do we conceptualize "young adults" from a life course perspective that emphasizes individual religious development and/or an intergenerational approach that explores unique differences in young adults' faith? In the present paper, rather than emphasizing points of difference between youth and their religious communities, we seek to place youth and young adults in their organizational contexts in order to understand dimensions of their religiosity. Towards this end, we build upon a smaller subset of studies that have explored how both the content of religious

beliefs and the meaning of religious practices are shaped by youth's religious context. For example, Petts [15,16] and Regnerus [17] focus explicitly on family socialization patterns, and what those mean for religious participation. Bengtson et al. [18] explicitly studied the intergenerational transmission of faith identity and practice, noting conditions of both continuity and change.

More organizationally, Snell [19] examined the impact of participation in church youth groups on "life outcomes" such as moral values and continued church connection. Myers [20] focused specifically on differences in the "styles of youth ministry" between one black and one white Protestant Christian congregation in order to glean some lessons regarding how congregations can more effectively hold on to their youth. While Myers found some differences in youth ministry between the two congregations that resonate with our observations, he was less interested in the dynamics and developments of religious identity and commitment. Flory and Miller [21] offer a set of four congregational types that represent the new religious orientation of post-boomer young adults. Christerson, Edwards, and Flory [22] examine adolescents' attitudes towards and actual involvements in congregational life and the extent to which they vary by race to investigate how the primary socializing institutions reproduce racial inequality (and in that regard examine the family, schools, and peer groups as well). Recognizing that both the content of religious beliefs and the meaning of religious practices are shaped by youth's religious context, particularly the organizational context, we examine the ways in which youth and young adults are incorporated into the lives of their congregations and the attendant ways in which their discourses about religious identity and commitment also vary.

To analyze the relationship between private religiosity and communities, we examine black and white young Christians who are living in an "identity moment"—a period where the taken-for-granted dimensions of life and the social networks that reinforce them are addressed and, thus, at times challenged and reformulated (e.g., [11,23]). By exploring the racialized ways that young adults make sense of their often previously ascribed religious identities, we contextualize their personal discourses of religiosity within divergent modes of religious belonging and organizational practices of young adult ministries among black and white churches. Among the churches we studied, we found that black and white congregations implicitly conceptualized "youth" differently, which in turn affected how they imagined integrating them into their communities and thus produced dissimilar organizational practices. Many of the white churches we observed treated young people as a distinct "generation" with unique experiences and perspectives that church leadership believed required an autonomous structure of peer groups for successful ministry. Comparatively, many of the black churches we observed treated youth more as a "phase" or "stage" in the life-cycle, during which youth certainly have particular needs but that these needs require integration within the congregation and a multi-generational membership as opposed to segregation. Highlighting the importance of communities, and their organizational manifestations, in shaping personal forms of religiosity, we find that this divergent organizational context for youth aligns with racialized patterns in their talk about their personal religiosity.

In particular, we found that white college students adopt more individualized approaches to their religious involvement that emphasize what they personally receive from their involvement in congregations (see also [22], p. 138). While this "client" orientation in some ways reflects the "tinkering" [11] or "moralistic therapeutic deism" [8] that other scholars have identified as characteristic of young adult religiosity, we argue that it can be seen as much as a sign of continuity with their religious communities as a break from it. In comparison, we note that the tendency for black students to use family and community language and metaphors to personalize their religious involvement also can be seen as a sign of continutiy within the black church. To understand the organizational differences in how black and white congregations implicitly understand young people and their needs and roles in the congregation, as well as the individual-level discourses of white and black students, it is important to understand the historical contexts from which these collective religious identities emerge.

2. Religious Belonging in Black and White Christian Churches

As Shelton and Emerson ([24], pp. 4–5) note, "The legacy of race-based oppression and privilege has helped to fuel differences in black and white Christians' *religious sensibilities*...[and that] blacks and whites not only approach faith matters differently, but faith *matters* differently to blacks and whites" (emphasis original). In particular, they note that unlike white Protestants, who tend be more doctrinalinally oriented, black Protestants' faith is more experiential and seen as critical to survival and coping with suffering from everyday tribulations. More specifically among the faith lives of young adults, Christerson et al. [22] found this manifested in a "personalistic absolutism" among African-American teenagers, who often remain quite committed to the authority of their religious communities, and a "therapeutic individualism" among white teenagers who use a more individualized assessment of benefits and costs. Building upon Smith and Denton's [8] conception of "moralistic therapeutic deism", they note the significance of racial variation. Whereas white teens continued to fit this idea with their general orientation to God as someone that helps them in their problems and make them happy, African-American teenagers more often envisioned God as someone demanding something of them and an authority they must listen to in their lives. To contextualize the organizational and discourse differences that appear in our data, we briefly review the divergent ways religious belonging has been conceputalized within black and white Christian churches, as well as highlight the racialized ways that the sociology of religion has tended to conceptualize religious choice.

During the twentieth century, leading theoretical paradigms in the sociology of religion emphasized Americans' ability to freely choose how to identify and enact their religious faith within a deregulated religious marketplace (see, for example, [2,3,25–27]. As Edgell ([1], p. 249) notes, "Market theorists argue that modernity creates the conditions that foster religious privatization, pluralism, and voluntarism, causing religion to thrive—and, ironically, to retain much of its public significance." Despite the tendency within studies of youth and religion to highlight generational differences between young adults and the older adults of their religious communities, Christerson et al.'s [22] "therapeutic individualism"reflects a similar mode of religious belonging that emphasizes the authority of individuals to freely and creatively construct a faith of their own. Likewise, Manglos-Weber et al. [13] contend that young people are more likely to be "bricoleurs" in their religious lives.

While the literature on denominational growth and decline has not been explicitly limited to white Protestant denominations, much of the religious market theorizing that has been developed to account for such trends, including the experiences of youth, has presupposed a religious individualism characteristic of the white Protestant experience. Notwithstanding the observation that solidary groups may be agents in religious markets ([28], p. 1052, Table 1; [29]), studies of African American religion have largely proceeded outside of the main theoretical debates about persistence and change in American religion.

Studies of African-American Christianity note that because of its origins in conversions during the era of slavery, the "black church" has always dialectically operated as accommodative to the racialized system as well as resistant to it by offering its own form of self and community expression [24,30,31]. As opposed to a social agent characterized by free-will individualism, making decisions about how to worship and practice religion from an open marketplace, scholars of black religion have emphasized social actors that are embedded within interconnected elements of religious life (e.g., [32–34]). Mirroring language of the domestic private sphere, Frazier [35] argued that African-American religion has served as a refuge in a hostile white world. Rather than presupposing autonomous individuals confronting a religious market, this scholarship more often uses the metaphor of families. Conceptually focusing on how black churches operate as a "semi-involuntary" institution where social ties, including kin, constrain individuals' possible choices and action [36,37], studies of African-American religion have offered a different theoretical model of religious actors that challenges the perspective of free-will individuals entering public religious markets unencumbered. In fact, Christerson et al. [22] note that African-American teenagers were among the least likely to approve of picking-and-choosing from within own's faith or across different religious traditions. Barnes [38] also notes that youth

programming has long been a standing feature within black churches and that they have often developed creative programming options, including in some cases dancing, drama, and gospel rap music.

By "shifting the center" [39] away from white Christians, towards theorizing from the experiences of black Christians, the more familial characteristics of religious identity, belonging, and commitment become apparent. Compared to religious marketplace conceptualizations of an individual that emphasizes their ability to autonomously and creatively choose from a religious market [2,3,40], Lincoln and Mamiya ([31], p. 5) observe a significant difference with how the black sacred cosmos conceptualizes "freedom".

> For whites, freedom has bolstered the value of American individualism: to be free to pursue one's destiny without political or bureaucratic interference of restraint. But for African Americans, freedom has always been communal in nature. In Africa, the destiny of the individual was linked to that of the tribe or the community in an intensely interconnected security system.

While the extent to which African-American religion maintains African elements is debated [30], Lincoln and Mamiya's observation highlights assumptions about autonomy that undergird theoretical accounts of religious choice. Whites' conceptualization of freedom emerges from what Feagin [41] calls the "liberty-and-justice frame" in which white Americans sought to gain their freedom during times that they oppressed and suppressed others. Furthermore, he argues the historical context of oppression, initially of slavery, formed a "home-culture" frame that resulted in the hybridization of African culture and North American experiences to create a distinct culture, including religion, which resisted oppression. Within this context, freedom is not about an individual but is about the collective (e.g., [32,33,42–44]). Furthermore, African Americans continue to occupy a precarious place in American society, in terms of economic and social security, and still face both explicit and implicit forces of marginalization. According to Shelton and Emerson ([24], p. 26), survival represents one of the five core building blocks in the Black theology. They write, "many African Americans Protestants believe that they as individuals and blacks as a group would not have made it in this country *but for the grace of God*" (emphasis original). Religion, thus, continues as a form of solidarity and a collective resource that can be both consoling and empowering.

Theorizing from the perspective of black religion also problematizes modernist assumptions of complete differentiation between religion and other public spheres [31]. On the one hand, studies of African-American religion demonstrate the interconnection between social institutions and how black churches and families exist in a "dynamic interactive relationship" in which "families constituted the building blocks for black churches and the churches through their preaching, teaching, symbols, belief system, morality, and rituals provided a unity—a glue that welded families and the community to each other" ([31], p. 311). Yet, on the other hand, black churches themselves offered an example of what Fraser ([45], p. 123) calls a "subaltern counterpublic" which consists of "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" . The collective and familial dimensions of personal religiosity in the black church importantly come to bear on how congregations organize ministries for youth, as well as how black students discuss religion in their life. Lincoln and Mamiya [31] observed as "enduring institutions," black families and black churches have together both been charged with the care of African American youth. In the following analysis, we explore these themes further by examining how black and white churches situate and organize youth within their ministries. Next, we consider the points of continuity in how black and white students discuss their personal religiosity and their organizational experiences within their collective religious communities. Reflecting the marketplace and culturally individualist orientations of white Protestant congregations, white young adults approached their churches more as clients interested in what services, meanings, and experiences they could obtain. Comparatively, black young adults discussed their churches as a

type of "home" or "family" that operated as an integral part of their self, even when they were not actively involved.

3. Data and Method

Our data come from interviews, organizational ethnographic observations within religious congregations, and ethnographic observations with families, all gathered within the general area of a large Midwestern metropolitan area. The data in this paper are drawn from a larger study that includes Muslims, Hindus, and Latino/a Christians, but we focus here on black Protestants and white Christians (both Protestant and Catholic). We studied young people in two general categories—"youth", who were basically in the 13–17 years old range, and "young adults" who were generally 18 years old up to about 24. More significantly, the "youth" we engaged were living at home and we interacted with them as parts of their families, whereas the "young adults" were college students and generally living away from home. Both sets of young people were involved with religious organizations or interested in being interviewed about their religious involvements and their engagement with religious organizations that were run by, or seemed particularly attractive to, young people. There is a range of levels of involvement among the individuals in our study. We recruited interviewees through public advertisements, announcements in sociology classes, and announcements at religious groups on two college campus that largely draw their students from the metro area. We recognize that we were more likely to get student participants who were involved with religious groups than not, but are not troubled by that "bias" in the samples; we wanted to explore the various meanings and practices of organizational involvement. Thus, we do not have the ability to assess what makes some youth religiously involved and others not, and we do not have a collection of young adults who are completely uninterested in or disengaged from religion. However, we can examine some of the organizational and familial dynamics in which young people are involved, how they articulate religious commitment, and how that aligns with the religious identities they come to claim and how they conceptualize religious commitment. Our ethnographic and interview data reveal the important role that religious institutions can play in how young adults formulate senses of who they are, what they believe, and the languages they use to articulate those connections.

Using a variety of methods, we gathered four types of data on a number of different populations of youth and young adults, religious organizations that serve them, and families who are involved with congregations. First, we have data from 14 focus groups of college students—students from two public universities that draw most of their student bodies from the metropolitan area. The groups were recruited through public advertising on the college campuses, and through campus-based religious organizations. The groups were organized by gender and by race/ethnicity/religion. Three groups were composed of black Christians (one with six black men, one with seven black women, one with six black women) and three groups were composed of white Christians (one with seven white men, one with three white men, and one with six white women). The participants in the black focus groups were all Protestant, except for one person; the white groups had Catholics and Protestants, with a slender majority being Catholic. Second, we conducted formal, one-on-one, in-depth interviews with 52 young adults (mostly college students), of which 13 were white men, 19 were white women, six were black men, and 11 were black women (there were also two Hispanic women and one Asian-American man). A small number of the interviewees had been in the focus groups, but most had not; most interview recruitment occurred through campus, non-religious, channels.

Third, we did institutional ethnographic work through multiple site visits with religious organizations. Specifically, we attended worship services, classes, and youth activities at religious organizations that catered to, or were run by, or seemed to attract, youth. This meant, in practice, primarily congregations and their youth programs, but it also included campus ministries and some young adult-organized voluntary organizations. We located these sites in two phases; first, we canvassed the metropolitan area with the help of graduate assistants and undergraduate interns for a wide variety of organizations that we or our student assistants had heard about. We visited a total

of 40 Christian congregations or organizations and did at least one field observation at each of them. After finding some institutions that particularly seemed to fit our needs in terms of their vibrant youth activities and membership (and that were happy to have us study them in more depth), we chose a sample for extended study. Thus, we focused on seven particularly vibrant organizations, of which one was white Protestant, one was black Protestant, and two were multi-ethnic Protestant (the remaining three were Hindu or Muslim). We did multiple visits to these organizations and often individual interviews with their youth ministry leadership.

Finally, we have what we call "family" data, gathered by spending entire days with families, participating with them in their religious involvements, but also sharing meals and informal relaxing time. Understanding how the main "religious" day is organized, at both the congregation and the home, importantly helped us obtain a clearer sense of how religious faith is transmitted to children. Further, the time spent in church also complemented our ethnographic observations about the ways in which youth and young adults were incorporated into, and in turn used, the church. We contacted the families through references from their churches' pastors. Relevant to this paper, we spent time with two black Protestant and two white Protestant families. We watched how religion was practiced in the home and by the family in their respective religious institutions, usually spending a full day with the family on the day of their major religious practice. The families all had youth under-18 years old living at home, and allowed us to see the direct connection between family practices and religious organizations.

Our ethnographic and interview data reveal the important role that religious institutions play in helping to formulate young adults' senses of who they are, what they believe, and the languages they use to articulate those connections. Of course, we want to be careful about making generalizations about racial differences that are too sweeping; but we have also seen differences in the way black and white college-age young adults' talk about their religion and their church involvement. Additionally, we have seen distinct differences in the way black and white churches respond to the youth in their midst.

4. The Dynamics of Congregational Organization

In our observations, black youth were integrated into the congregational community across generations—they are and remain part of a larger community just as they stay more connected to extended family. Comparatively, white youth were often treated as if they were distinct from other generations, with development of their personal autonomy as the highest good. The structure and functioning of the organization is an important mediating dynamic between the demographic realities of class and risk, and the outcomes and narratives that young adults embody and employ when they reflect on their religious lives.

4.1. Ministering to a Different Generation: White Churches' Organizational Practices

We began to notice in our site visits that the mostly white, mostly middle-class parents and religious educators who set the tone for the Mainline Protestant churches in the last quarter of the 20th century had clearly incorporated lessons and assumptions about generational succession into their programming. Intensely aware of rapid technological and cultural change and sensitive to the embarrassment many of their teenage children express upon being seen in their company in public, many parents despaired of the possibility of sharing the meaning of their faith with their children. Their churches' post-college-age youth workers, in turn, felt pressured to do what the parents felt they could not, a task that was regarded by their employers as well within their grasp due to their younger age and presumed fluency in youth culture, especially the music, of their young charges. However, many of these youth workers themselves employed the language of a "generational gap" to explain their own perceived difficulties in reaching youth ten or even five years younger than themselves.

One result of these impulses was the organizational creation of alternative institutional programs like one we came to call "Connexions" and another we call "Soul Station"—generation-specific groups

that would meet on their own, plan and run their own events (often in isolation from the church's adult membership), and in the extreme end up running almost a de facto parallel congregation. Connexions met in the church building of a white Evangelical Protestant (but not fundamentalist) suburban church, but not in the sanctuary. It had its own dedicated rooms that were decorated and appointed by youth and their leadership. They ran their own worship and educational programming. They focused relentlessly on finding the new, on treating religious community as peer-based, and giving a distinctly youthful and "non-traditional" version of what "church" is. The pastor leading Connexions, indeed, worried about keeping the constituency young (it did include some young adults as well as teenage youth), and was constantly changing the music lest it get dated. He was also well-read in the "generations" popular literature and spoke easily about Gen X versus Gen Y versus Millennials. The Connexions pastor, in an interview, did not know for certain what happened to Connexions participants once they "aged out" of the program—did they "graduate" to the parent church, or find another? It was a concern voiced by the parent church's senior pastor but not a central issue for Connexions itself.

With the considerable resources of the parent church, Connexions put on high quality services with professional sound, musicians, stage craft for their skits and plays, and the like. They were not just entertainment, there was serious theological content, but they were well thought out, very smoothly done, and usually used plenty of humor. The programs, often on Saturday evenings and sometimes on Tuesdays, were unusual in that congregants did not just enter the meeting room upon arrival. Doors were closed "pre-show" and there was usually a small line when they opened about 30 min prior to start. Two ushers would hand out programs (often just 5 × 7 cards) in welcome; many had coffee or lattes from the nearby church coffee bar.

Soul Station was connected to another large Evangelical Protestant congregation, that also identifies with the Reformed tradition, in a different suburb. Similarly, it used the church, but not the sanctuary, for its meetings, usually on Saturday evenings. Participants in Soul Station gathered after dark by the fountain in a garden court lit by scores of candles. Slides were projected on screens on two sides of the room, illuminating scenes of traditional religious iconography. The fountain would burble softly in the background throughout the meeting, whether anyone was speaking or a group was making music or, most strikingly for a Protestant church, there was a long period of silent contemplation. The candles suffused the air with the smell of their burning wax. Most people sat on the cool, wrought-iron chairs that had been set out, but people would move around to sit on fabric cushions, benches, and even the hard polished slate floor. The people were young, the atmosphere heavily sensory.

Soul Station began with a handful of upper-middle class young adults, some of whom grew up in the church, others who did not but who were looking for a place to worship with people their own age. Part of the philosophy behind Soul Station is that internal change by the participants will lead to external consequences for the larger community. It describes itself as a "worship-driven" community in that its primary focus is to provide a space for young adults to freely worship and experience the presence of God.

Connexions and Soul Station are two types of programs, one more verbal and discursive, one more sensual and affective, that have been lifted up by many as an answer to the generational crevasse between youth, and young adults, and their parents. They offer intense religious experiences, but are distinct and separate. These types of organizational arrangements also mark the campus ministries of many white religious groups, whether Baptist, Presbyterian, or Catholic. The Baptist Student Union at one of the universities at which we did interviews ran events, held services, and sponsored social gatherings at which the lead author and his graduate assistant were regularly the oldest persons there; it was a constituency that was almost entirely white. Another Baptist church near the campus, also overwhelmingly white, had programs catering to members of the university community and many younger members, but the campus' Baptist Student Union itself ran independently of those efforts. While we heard frustrations from youth leaders about reaching young people, and even from

senior congregational leaders who feared losing their young people, we also continued to see and hear evidence of organizationally disengaged young adults—with assumptions about keeping youth somewhat segregated that seemed unexamined.

We note that age-stratified involvement is multi-faceted in many white churches. For example, a significant number of our white interviewees reported going to church camps, one- or two-week summer getaways for young people, with young adult camp counselors and programming oriented toward youth. This is partly a class-oriented activity, not explained totally by race, but it is yet another feature of many white churches that reinforces the idea that youth development needs significant amount of time separate from adults and surrounded by peers.

4.2. Keeping Them with Us: Black Churches' Organizational Practices

By contrast, we found a fundamentally different way of doing "youth ministry" at an African American church we call "Southside". At the "youth night" event one evening, there were plenty of young people at the church, both youth and young adults, both young women and young men. There was loud music–singing to the beat of guitars, drums, and keyboards, performed by a band composed of young church members, with many of the non-performing young men still crowding around the instrumentalists and the women predominating among the singers. Young people gave many of the Scriptural readings, led many of the prayers, and constituted the signature presence on the stage. It was "their" night, as they proclaimed.

However, the evening's central talk, or sermon, was not given by one of the church's young members, but rather by a youthful-looking/young middle-aged woman who was an invited guest. Her talk was based on a teaching relevant to the young people's lives and the challenges they faced. It was filled with references to pop culture and "church-appropriate" slang. But even beyond the featured speaker, the young people were not on their own. There were scores of grown-ups in the hall, many of them parents of the youth on stage but many of them not. The senior church leadership was also there—not actively leading things, but sitting on the side, attentive and watchful.

This wasn't an "autonomous" youth event. Young people clearly planned much of it, and were active and featured participants. However, this was a night for the young people to demonstrate to the rest of the congregation their growing religious competency. This was a night where they demonstrated their mastery in this phase of the life-cycle of growing into adult church membership. This wasn't a distinct generation constituting its own version of "church". It was young people, with the active assistance of an adult audience, demonstrating that they were preparing to carry on the work of the congregation—and its traditions—into the future.

One of the elders of the church who happened to be there that night also happened to be an acquaintance of one of the authors, and she gladly accepted our offer of a ride home. During the lengthy drive back to her home we talked about the events of the evening, and she spent some time talking about her presence at the church's "youth night". She was single at the time, and not a parent of any of the young people. But she is a long-time member of the congregation, personally devoted to the church and its pastor (it takes her two train rides, a bus ride, and a half-hour walk to get from her home to church on Sunday mornings). As she explained it, as one of the active adults in the congregation, she feels called to be a witness to the youths' public religious commitment, which, in turn, meant being part of an appreciative audience and keeping tabs on what they were up to. As social analysts, we recognized that her role was one of both support and surveillance, or perhaps we might say, monitoring.

This particular church was not idiosyncratic among African American congregations, as we found consistently an "intergenerational ethic" in black churches in our study. Church leaders and youth departments stressed that children belong in worship, an expectation that is alternately a burden on families (when the kids just don't want to be there) and an opportunity for them (a safe place to bring them). One congregation we attended fairly frequently, that we dubbed "One Accord Missionary Baptist Church" (OAMBC) made that practice possible by informally setting aside the balcony at the

back of the church for families as a place with a more relaxed standard of decorum, where grown-ups were freer to come and go, to take little kids to the bathroom, wipe their noses and tie their shoes, where older children could quietly read a book, and still older youth could sneak pre-flirtatious looks at one another. Significantly, those in the balcony joined with everyone else in the march to the offering plate, and the children of almost every age were expected to have something to put in it.

From time to time, youth workers at OAMBC led an hour of "children's church" at the rear of the balcony, where primary grade children were given other things to do during the sermon. In addition, there was also a nursery for the youngest kids, which some parents took advantage of on and off during the 2 h or so of the Sunday service. But no other activity of religious significance goes on in the congregation during worship. Just as children are supposed to be in worship, so adults are expected to be in Sunday School during the preceding hour, even if, from week to week, only about a third of them are. Age-graded classes study the same syllabus of Biblical texts according to what the pastor called a scheme of "graduation, not generation". All the classes come together before worship for a collective review session, where a delegation from one of the classes, who may be middle-aged or pre-teen, summarizes the lesson as they understand it.

Every fourth Sunday at OAMBC was Youth Day, where the young people would take on just about every role in worship other than the pastor's—they act as ushers, readers, soloists, devotional leaders—both in the morning service and in the evening. With the proud help of their coaches, they often performed contemporary dance. Because fewer people regularly returned in the evening for the second service, the pastor and other elders would often make a special appeal to the congregation at the morning service, "please come out to support our youth." Like any congregational worship service, youth night is for people of all ages.

The intergenerational ethic went both ways. Kids were expected to make at least an effort to participate in worship, and grown-ups were expected to appreciate the kids' dancing. The pastor insisted that elders must be willing to experiment with new worship styles even as he equally insisted that youth mind their manners. Whether an inspirational speech given by a teenager or a dowager, the speaker was supposed to be given respectful attention. Deference is owed to the wisdom that is supposed to come with age, even when, again as is often the case in immigrant churches, some of the teenagers have a better command of and comfort with English than some of their Sunday School teachers.

We do note that one church where we did extended observations, OAMBC is a mid-sized congregation, with about 300 weekly service attenders. They have a professional full-time clergy person, and some part-time staff (such as the music director), but it is not a large or mega-church. Southside Church, the congregation that was the site of the earlier vignette above, however, was indeed a large congregation with several professional clergy. While congregational size and the attendant resources that brings, surely affecteds the programming choices that are made, we are convinced this intergeneration ethos can be found in African-American churches along the size spectrum. The intergenerational ethic is dramatically different from the generationally specific offerings of the many white middle class churches where youth have their own celebration service. When we asked the pastor's wife at one African-American congregation whether youth have activities of their own, she very emphatically said that they do not. "They need supervision and guidance," she said.

Combined with insights from the "family" data we generated by spending time with two African-American families, it is clear that "family" was understood expansively and "fictively", not narrowly and specifically; the idea is not limited to the nuclear family or even necessarily blood relations. Married couples are neither privileged as the norm nor overly burdened with sole responsibility for their children. Women's Month and Men's Month mean that responsibility for worship cuts across families, being shared by members of the same gender of all ages. Many of the parents are single mothers, many of the children come on their own or with friends and cousins, and grandparents pitch in. Unlike many white Protestant churches, where mothers bear the burden of shushing their toddlers or whisking them out of church before their fussiness upsets others, children

at our Black Church sites were both given greater latitude and admonished by other, non-parental grown-ups as they saw fit. On one of our visits, right after the offering, the pastor at OAMBC announced that he had "a little policing" to do, and he scolded the youth in the balcony for talking and eating during the service. He said that it sometimes helps if you tell people what's expected of them so that they can correct themselves. For today, he concluded, "I'm the Daddy here."

We must reiterate that the extended family community we observed at the black churches we studied is constructed, not given, intentional and not merely "traditional". One congregation we saw has a church bus that traverses over a hundred square miles to pick up parishioners every Sunday. Ammerman [46] also observed that African American churches regularly draw their congregants from wide geographical regions. People go to considerable effort to "choose" their church, and get there once or twice a week, but they do not consider their involvement as the purely voluntary act of isolated and autonomous individuals. They are "called" to belong. It is a set of institutional arrangements, an integration of generation and participation that leads to a distinctive discourse about religion, about church as organization and community, and about the nature of social relationships.

5. Black and White Young Adult Discourse

College is a period of exploration, doubt, sometimes experimentation. The received patterns of religion, whether belief or practice, have to be—at the very least—consciously decided upon. Particularly for those who go away to college, parents are no longer around to "force" one to go to church (see [23]). At this age, personal autonomy is often both an issue and a value—reinforced by peers and often by parents themselves. In religious belief and religious practices, this autonomy produces a particular "talk" about searching, choices, and attempting to discern what is best for oneself (see, e.g., [47]). There is often a great deal of what might be called "church shopping" by those young adults who want to be connected to a congregation, even if the person wants to stay within their denomination of origin. And yet, in individual interviews and in focus group sessions with black and white college students, we found some distinct differences in how young adults talk about their religious involvements and beliefs, and how these in turn reflected distinct religious identities. Here, we focus on examples of the "talk", or what we would call the "discourse"—the sets of assumptions, phrases, and metaphors—that black and white students used to explain and understand their own church involvement or lack thereof.

5.1. White Students' Organizational Biographies—Client Orientation

The major difference we found is that white students discussed their religious involvements in terms of what they "needed" from a religious organization at that point in their lives. They often presented us with what we call "organizational biographies" that chronicled and described the contours of their belonging. They tended to see religion's positive influence in their lives in terms of personal life and happiness, and expressed their doubts in terms of personal questioning. They often recognized that church involvement gave them skills and experiences that could be useful to them in life. Not surprisingly, we also often heard the suspicion of organized religion and its institutions that is so common in contemporary American society. In that sense, they have what might be called a "client" orientation to the church, and treat their involvement in it as largely voluntary, personalistic, and for their own benefit. We should note that we are not necessarily alleging cynicism or selfishness to these young adults; indeed, there was a consistent theme in our interviews in which respondents assessed congregations and other religious choices based on how well they embodied or expressed religious truth. However, we note that white students consistently assumed that they themselves were competent and authentic judges of that.

We began our individual interviews by asking respondents to draw a "time line" of their religious lives and their involvement with religious organizations. It is important to recognize that we were seeking information on organizational involvement, and thus it is not surprising that we solicited talk about churches and organized religion from both white and black students. Of course, most

of the organizational biographies we elicited also involved talk about parents, families, and family life, as well as the transition from their childhood pasts to their current religious participation and involvements. That was our purpose. What caught our interest were the differences in the discourse, which we highlight in these sections.

First, while white students often described childhood experiences in the church, as well as times of crisis in which they turned to religion, for many of them church involvement could be distinct from religion. For example, some students separated "organized religion" from "true" religious beliefs, and often made the well-known and much commented upon (e.g., [8,22]) distinction between "religion" and "spirituality". The emphasis from white students repeatedly returned to individual autonomy and personal decision making, with a basic attitude that considered religious organizations as potentially useful but largely optional. For example, consider these quotes from several different interviews or focus groups:

> "going to church no more would make you a good Christian than going into a garage would make you a car." (white female focus group member)

> "I actually asked my mom why I have to go to church if I believe...She said she thought that going to church made everybody come together...You know, like, I was like, whatever." (white female focus group member)

> "I don't ever remember questioning the existence of God, but I started to question the institution." (white male focus group member)

> "Well, I don't really believe in organized religion at all" (white male interview)

Clearly, these students remain concerned with religion—after all, they attended our focus groups or agreed to do (uncompensated) interviews about religion—but there is a certain amount of "anti-institutionalism", or at least a suspicion of organizational authority, in their words. There is a clear subtext of assuming individual autonomy about spiritual and religious issues, a reserving for themselves the options of making their own decisions about truth, just as they are beginning to make decisions about their own lives separately from their parents.

> "I still call myself Baptist but I don't agree with everything in the established religion.
> I kind of just got my own little thing, you know." (white woman focus group member)

This woman offers a construction that resonates with Bellah et al.'s [48] famous "Sheilaism", wherein an individually tailored spiritual system is her focus. Others voice a concern with the translation from beliefs into ethical conduct and a keen eye for the potential for alleged hypocrisy between beliefs and behavior. That "religion" is often social, but "spirituality" can be individualized leads them to portray the church as an institution as irrelevant to them or sometimes as an actual hindrance to spiritual development. One can see that here:

> "You don't have to go to church to be religious...I tend to like the word spiritual better than religion because to me the word religious has a lot of dogma attached to it." (individual interview, white woman)

> "I asked [my friend] where she was going and she said the training...I said what...are you training for? And she said to go to church...I was like, to do that is so stupid! If you talk about religion as being accepting of all kinds of different people then they shouldn't make them train to be good enough to come and worship God." (individual interview, white woman)

When these white college-age young adults did look for a church, they focused on one that fit what they perceived as their spiritual needs and evaluated their involvement based on the extent to

which the institution seems to be serving them well. Church is not necessarily a place that functions to give them a needed community. One young woman described her search for a church in terms of how it suited her personally:

> "it's not about going to church, it's about personal relationship…it's not forced. … [my friend] asked me, 'do you want to go to a church that teaches you what I'm teaching you?'…I went with him to the church…it was really cool…it was really good for me at first. … [but] there were problems with the people there. They were too judgmental. If you did things a little different, they wouldn't like it. … So, it became too judgmental for me and I stopped going to that church after about five years. … let me tell you what I did after I left…I worked on my own personal relationship with God. I did it with my friends. We had our own church. … we all would get together and have our own church." (individual interview, white woman)

Five years of involvement is not insignificant in the life of a college student. However, her organizational commitment was determined by her perception of her own spiritual requirements. Namely, as she saw her spiritual needs change, she changed her organizational involvement.

Distinct from, even if sometimes connected to, the general questioning of institutionalized religion was a narrative that portrayed the varying forms and periods of involvement in terms of individual needs and outcomes. For example, an interview with one white man elicited:

> "I think it was good that I went when I did because I think if I hadn't of gone then I may have picked a different path in life. I think it was a good choice. Even though I didn't stick with it, and I don't necessarily believe it, it still taught me some good things. I got better friends. But not now, not in the present, it doesn't really help. Actually I think that every major theme of being Baptist, I think I'm the opposite now."

Or a young white woman explained: "I saw that when I needed it I went there, then I found out that I didn't need it anymore…I felt that I could have a place in the universe without it." Yet, another white young man said:

> "I'm only concerned with my own spiritual growth, not with my religious…interaction. Well, I mean,…I have my friends who are Christian and I try to keep up with them, and, go to Bible study, and make sure we're all growing, but, see what I mean? I'm…only in it right now to make sure I'm spiritually sort of on track, you know what I mean." (individual interview white man)

One can see that this young man values spirituality, and even maintains an involvement with others. But the emphasis is on his personalized growth, not a community, and he places himself as the clear judge of what is best for accomplishing that growth.

We note that not all the commentary was negative, by any stretch. In the following quote from an interview with a white man, he places great value on his religious involvement. Importantly, however, these very positive comments are framed in terms of individual needs and outcomes:

> "Looking back on it, I haven't been [religious]. I am now. I have found myself in the church. There was a time when I started dropping out. I stopped going to church as much. I still went because my mom was the secretary. I lost that connection with my church. I don't know how spiritual I had ever been. Now I just see things in a different light. Coming down here [college], I've found a different church. And as much as I've found God, I've found myself. I've realized I wasn't really close to God. I went to church because I was expected to."

In summary, the discourse of the white students, as well as their abilities to narrate developed organizational biographies, are framed around assumptions about individual value, autonomy, and

choice. There was often genuine spiritual seeking, and a great concern with religious truth and ethical behavior. However, there was little concern if that seeking produced a distancing from a religious community, and a clear willingness to assess any organization's value as distinct from what the religious and spiritual message might be.

5.2. Black Students' Organizational Biographies—Called to Belong

Black students, on the other hand, voiced far less suspicion of religion or its institutions. They often credited religion and church involvement with helping them in college, either by keeping them out of trouble or by providing a support system for them. Black students often discussed church involvement using "family" language and metaphors—that is, with the same kinds of terms that one uses for familial blood relationships. Family relationships are not entirely voluntary—we may not like family but we are pretty much stuck with them. Black students regularly used the language of personal "choice", and they repeatedly noted that when at college and not being "forced" to attend church by their parents, they often did not. Yet, black students often did a remarkable amount of "church shopping"—after all, these are kids who are away at college. In addition, when they explained the "church homes" they did find, they used the language of the "home church"—the place where they felt as enmeshed in familial-type relationships as they did when they lived with their families of origin.

Several of the black students had not found a church home at the time of the interview, and some reported not attending as much as they did while living at home (as did white students). They noted the importance of making their own choices as a way of authenticating the genuineness of their religious lives. Yet, their criteria and qualifications for what counted as an appropriate church differed from their white peers because personal happiness and satisfaction alone were not enough to justify religious involvement. Rather, being part of a community, making a public witness (not just personal morality), and finding the types of relationships that family can offer permeated their discussions. Here are some examples that are explicit about the connection to "home":

> "I wish I was involved a little bit more, like in a community. Like back at home." (individual interview black woman)

> "I am still in the process of looking for a church home...I really do not desire to forsake the fellowship of believers...it's really very hard for me not to be in fellowship." (black woman focus group member)

Others used the language of "home" less, but were explicit about aspects of what we might call "community":

> "My spiritual growth...needs...some feeding. It's not just about me getting fed, obviously. It's also about what I give back by coming to worship the Lord as well." (black women focus group)

> "I got down here and started enjoying the Voices of Inspiration Choir [in which she participates]. So really for me, it was like church was basically just on Sunday. That was it. As far as Bible study, we would go every now and then. But now that I've come down here [to college] I go more often. It's more close knit."

In addition, there was clear recognition that it was not easy to balance the searching, and the choice, with the rewards of the sense of connection:

> "I'm glad I go to church now, like she [another focus group participant] said she doesn't go to church now. That can be good because you can drag yourself crazy looking for the right church, but I like going to church." (black women focus group)

It was not uncommon to hear black students provide a more instrumental rationale for their involvement. For example:

> "Getting involved in church down here has kept me out of trouble. I have gotten involved in church activities. It keeps me focused on God and on my studies and on my grades...I am just thankful that I stayed in church when I came to college." (individual interview black woman)

However, the goals in this quote are not articulated as personal spiritual development, or personal happiness alone. Church involvement is a discipline that keeps the respondents pointed toward their goals. Thus, we regularly found black young people who were engaged in practices of "church shopping" and who used individual religious authority (for example, to decide whether any particular church is preaching the "Word of God") to discern the usefulness and appropriateness of any given religious congregation. But organization and religious authority matter, distinct from the sentiments common among the white students that regularly separated the two. Furthermore, collective identity and connections to a community matter, with a clear sense that the community can enforce parameters of belief and behavior that benefit the person.

5.3. Religious Involvement and the Language of Family

We do not want to overdo the talk of racial differences, as many themes crossed races in the young people's discourses. Issues with the transition from living at home to attending college were common, as was the use of personal authority to assess the appropriateness or worthiness of a organized religion or a specific congregation (however, Christerson et al. [22] use survey data to show that this is more common among white than among black teenagers). One shared theme was the considerable discussion of religion and family life. But even in that discourse, there was an important distinction—white students often spoke of their church history and involvement in terms of their family—but they meant their blood kin, such as parents, siblings, and their own prospective children. For white students, the connection between family and religion centered more on whether and how they wanted their own families to be involved with religion. While black students certainly mentioned this view, their discussions of family did not end there and often had much more to do with extended family, especially female relatives such as grandmothers and aunts. Moreover, for black students, discourses about family were often used to describe what church is and should be—church was so often described with metaphors of it being "family" or relationships that are "called" rather than chosen.

Thus, for example, many white students saw enough value in their religious upbringing to want to pass at least some of it on to their own prospective children:

> "I will regulate my [future] kids...I learned a lot of my morals at church, a lot of what's right. I learned what the Church thinks is right anyway...It was good for me, and was...a positive thing in my life. So I would want my kids to experience that as well. And if they didn't want to I wouldn't make them." (individual interview white man)

> "I'll make my kids go, but not every Sunday." (individual interview white man)

Note that these quotes show white students affirming aspects of their personal history, and the determination to recreate much of their own family life in future families, but they still separate institutional authority from personal choice and emphasize autonomy in decision-making. The church in these scenarios is seen as a useful guide to life, but not a necessity and not a source of binding rules and moral precepts—for example:

> "I am happy that they made me go when I was little, but I am not so sure that I am happy that they made me do it once I entered high school...I think once your reach a certain age, you are to the point when you can decide for yourself." (white man focus group)

Church involvement is a matter of family connection, for both black and white students. However, compare the following discussion about raising children in the church among black students with the white students' quotes about children that were listed above:

> "[W]hen I have children, I want us to go to church together. I won't tell them they have to go to a Pentecostal church or a Baptist church or Catholic. They can choose where they want to worship the Lord." (individual interview black woman)

> "I'm going to feed them [giving children religious instruction] until they're fat and they can't take no more. I'm going to guide them until they feel they can make the right decisions. I'm not going to try to be a new-age parent—'oh, I'm not going to do this to my kids because it's a different age.' I will guide my kids to the light." (black woman focus group)

> "The people in my church I have known them ever since I was a little girl. We all grew up together...it's not just like just religion, it's my friends and my family are there. We are like a community within a community. We are all there. We are all there to support each other." (black woman focus group)

The black students see religious involvement as integral to their identity. They believe it supports them, provides them with personal discipline, and reminds them that they are public representatives of the faith. Where white students sometimes worried about a potential "stigma" of church membership that would restrict or inhibit their relationships with others, black students discussed church membership as a type of "insulation" that helped them resist temptation (especially, we heard in one focus group, the temptation of "cute guys"). Church involvement, in summary, is a social factor for black students, not just a personal one. And while family connection is important to both groups, black students conceptualized church relations in family terms, as what used to be called by sociologists "fictive kin". We would hear respondents say things such "the organist at church is my auntie"—but the woman was not a blood relation (the sister of her parent). Instead, the older woman, was a respected authority figure who also had the emotional connection and the sense of responsibility toward the younger woman that an older woman would have. Just as fellow church-goers are "sister" or "brother"—or just as South Asian students we observed called elders from their community "uncle" or "aunt" whatever their familial status—the relationships formed within church had the binding power of blood ties. Church involvement is "like a family" as well as being "with family". One doesn't "choose" family—it is not a social contract from which a dissatisfied party can withdraw and move on to find a different and better deal [48]). Family is locative, but transcends the particulars of place and time—it is grounding, constraining, and empowering.

Obviously, developing personal autonomy, trust in one's individual judgment, and the like are important processes and life skills. In addition, they are key skills needed by those in the contemporary middle-class. Both black and white students were developing and using those skills, but in ways that had important differences. Many of the white youth we talked to do not face as risky a world as many of the black students who are trying to make it in college. The community has been a great source of resources and resilience for African Americans, and the church in particular is often a bulwark for protecting children and young people from "the street" (see [33]). Religion greatly matters for urban black communities, but as in the case of immigrant groups, it has become less something that can be taken for granted and more something that has to be worked at (see [34,43]). Urban black neighborhoods have more than their share of people at the socio-economic margins, and those people who have achieved or are trying to achieve middle-class status are more precariously perched there than are white families. This is where religion matters most for promoting positive outcomes for young people [38,42,44]. Precisely where young people are disadvantaged, religious involvement can make the biggest difference in their capacity to take advantage of opportunities and skirt dangers.

6. Conclusions

Studies of the religious lives of young adults have tended to implicitly emphasize the differences between them and their parents and their religious communities by either stressing the life cycle dimension of being a "young" adult or the generational factors that shape a unique experience. The relative emphasis on continuity between young people and adults varies. For example, Smith and Denton [8] conclude that most of the youth they talked to were actually pretty close to their parents' religiosity. Not surprisingly, as youth age, they often change their religious beliefs and practices, as Smith and Snell [9] and Pearce and Denton [14] demonstrate, but often that change is not radical. Similarly, Bengtson et al. [18] tell a story that emphasizes intergenerational continuity. Nonetheless, some of the religious change experienced by young adults is thorough and dramatic—and often those who begin as most highly religious become least involved later (a finding in both Smith and Snell and Pearce and Denton).

More encompassingly, Flory and Miller [21] and Wuthnow [11] posit a fundamental generational difference in the ways that young adults now engage religious belief and practice, though they differ in the content of the new patterns. That is, Flory and Miller see an "expressive communalism" as the typical religious orientation of the post-boomer generation, while Wuthnow sees young adults who are in the "after baby boomer" generation as fundamentally "tinkerers" who put together religious lives from whatever they have at hand—a *bricolage* of beliefs and practices that are suited to individualized needs (see also [13,22]) find both personalistic and communal orientations in the youth they study—white youth much more likely to be individualist in belief and questioning of institutional authority, while black and Latino/a youth are more oriented toward community and family, and more trusting in the religious authority of those communities.

We have offered an argument that stresses the differences between black and white youth/young adults, but that simultaneously shows a basic continuity with their communities of origin—rooted in the ways in which they participate in religious organizations. Thus, while we show racial variation among young adults, we argue that it is built upon a continuity with their congregations and communities of origin.

It would be tempting to over-interpret our findings. We did not set out to discover the different ways in which African American and white Americans either do or talk about religion. We recognize that class differences, and differences in religious traditions, complicate any generalization that is too sweeping. We cannot address why some young people get or stay involved with religious organizations and others do not. While we grounded our analysis of the discourses of white and black students in the ways in which various congregations practice "youth ministry", we also recognize that cultural and social locations, as well as economic class, are powerful contexts that shape the ways in which we talk and act. Furthermore, we also saw many similarities in the interviews between black and white students—they wrestled with their own faith commitments, and they were testing a certain amount of autonomy now that they were not living at home and thus had less direct familial pressure to get up and out on Sunday mornings. Many were less observant than they had been earlier in their lives.

That said, we found two distinct sets of differences: first, the uses of individualized, "client" language by white college students to describe their organizational biographies versus the use of "family"and "home" language by black college students to describe their immersion in religious communities; and second, the generational segregation of youth into age-graded ministries in many white churches versus the age-integrated activities in black churches that focused on youth demonstrating their religious "chops" for their elders in settings that combined moral support with adult supervision. We do not think these differences are coincidental.

Pushing our empirical observations more conceptually, we witnessed differences in what we term the "dynamics of commitment". A long thread of analysis of American cultural and religious history has contrasted individualized versus communal approaches to connecting to groups (e.g., [48–50]). On one hand, there is the "social contract" language of classical liberalism, in which society is conceptualized as an aggregation of individual connections. These connections are basically "contracts"

in which people exchange varieties of personal and social "goods". The implication of a contract is that once it becomes perceived as not a good deal for one of the parties involved, they renegotiate or perhaps leave. On the other hand, "covenant" language portrays social groups as bound together by a collective identity and a collective commitment to the survival of the group. In the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, this was a pact initiated by God; but it is more than a simple contract—it binds individuals into a "people" who have collective and individual responsibilities and who are bonded through both good and ill fortune.

At the level of understanding young adults' discourse about their own religious involvements, we have revealed distinct hints of both contractual and covenantal thinking. When white students found a congregation not to their liking, or upholding values or practices they could not abide, or felt that their personal journeys were not being well served, they disengaged. When black students—even those not very active at the time—discussed their own involvements they were conscious of the ways in which church connections were family-like, and communal. They served to keep individuals on the right path, a path that was understood as benefiting the collective as well as the individual.

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