Race, Region, and Religious Involvement: A Comparative Study of Whites and African Americans

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Race, Region, and Religious Involvement: A Comparative Study of Whites and African Americans*

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Abstract

This research examines (1) whether a comparative study of African Americans and whites in a nationwide sample bears out the widespread assumption of a distinctive African American religiosity (when region and other factors are controlled), and (2) whether any race differences provide support for the "semi-involuntary" interpretation of African American religious involvements. Using data from the 1974–94 General Social Surveys, we examine how a variety of indicators of religious involvement vary by race and region. We find two basic types of evidence qualifying the assertion of a generalized heightened religiosity among African Americans. First, in analyzing three major subregions of the U.S., we find that African Americans, compared with whites, are no more religiously involved in the rural South, exhibit consistently higher religious involvement in the urban South, and show lower levels of religious involvement in the urban North. Second, in analyzing various types of church attendance (i.e., "weekly," "intermittent," and "infrequent"), we find that African American church attendance is distinctive mainly at an intermittent (e.g., monthly) rather than weekly level. These findings suggest that the rural South produces distinctive patterns of church attendance across racial lines, perhaps reflecting the legacy of segregation and the central importance of the church in rural community life. The markedly different urban patterns by region point to some important areas for further research into the semi-involuntary thesis.

Most research into the religious life of African Americans suggests the longstanding existence of a distinctive religiosity owing to blacks' unique history in American society. A classic interpretation of the place of religion in the African American

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communities is that, as a consequence of the legacy of slavery and other subsequent forms of oppression, the black church represents a “semi-involuntary” institution (Frazier 1963; Johnson 1941; Lincoln & Mamiya 1990; Nelsen & Nelsen 1975). This thesis holds that segregation, especially in the rural South, has historically (1) constrained the religious practices of African Americans to segregated churches, (2) isolated them from broader public institutions, (3) increased their reliance on religious institutions and spiritual beliefs, and (4) made their church participation patterns particularly reflective of broader community pressures.

Reduced to its essentials, the semi-involuntary institution thesis (hereafter, SI thesis) predicts significant regional variations within the African American experience in both the level of religious involvement and in the factors generating such involvement. The thesis assumes regionally specific patterns wherein African Americans in the rural South have particularly high levels of religious involvement that are not maintained by African Americans who reside in the urban North. While the immediate backdrop for the development of the SI thesis was the Great Migration — the early twentieth century movement of millions of African Americans out of the South to the urban North — continued examination of this thesis using more contemporary data has been an important theme in recent scholarship on the African American experience. Although the SI thesis was developed to address regional aspects of the African American experience, it presumes a set of facts not sufficiently established: namely, that African Americans have heightened levels of religious involvement owing to the legacy of segregation and exclusion.

The central concerns of this study are whether a comparison of African Americans and whites, across a number of religious factors (1) bears out the conclusion of a higher level of religious involvement among African Americans, (2) identifies any particular regions of the country where African Americans are different from whites, and (3) points to any patterns of religious involvement that lend further support to the SI thesis.

Evidence for a Distinctive Black Religiosity

The presumed greater religiosity of African Americans has generally been attributed to a variety of historical, sociodemographic, and religious factors. As has been extensively documented, African Americans were historically concentrated in the agrarian economy of the rural South (Stampp 1956) and today remain a highly vulnerable group in an emerging postindustrial economy (Massey & Denton 1993; Wilson 1997). Research suggests that, historically, African Americans were (and still are) less likely than whites: (1) to live outside the South — especially rural areas of this region, often identified as the “Bible Belt” (Fichter & Maddox 1965); (2) to graduate from high school or attend college; (3) to live in conventional nuclear
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households; and (4) to have high social status (as indexed by factors such as income, employment status, and occupational prestige).

It is the distinct history of African Americans and their lower status in various public arenas that has been presumed to underlie comparatively heightened levels of church attendance and other kinds of religious involvements. Comparative data suggest that blacks attend worship services with higher regularity, place more value on religious practices (i.e., they identify with their churches more strongly), participate in church associations more frequently, and read the Bible and pray with greater regularity than do whites (Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Taylor et al. 1996). Additionally, African Americans are more likely than whites to be affiliated with fundamentalist/conservative Protestant churches that reinforce high levels of religious activity (Roof & McKinney 1987). In short, African Americans, compared to whites, appear to have a heightened religiosity that registers on most typical indicators of religious involvement.

These general differences between African Americans and whites have been extensively documented by a recent study (Taylor et al. 1996) utilizing seven different national data sets and multiple indicators of religious involvement. For nearly every religious factor examined, this study documented a heightened black religiosity (compared with whites) that was independent of many sociodemographic factors on which blacks and whites differ. The research by Taylor and colleagues demonstrates the importance of moving beyond the past research on African American religion that typically lacked a comparative empirical base by race and was often based upon descriptive studies without statistical controls for sociodemographic factors. Building on Taylor and colleagues' general strategy of using a multivariable mode of analysis, and directly comparing the religious involvement of African Americans and whites, we explore the question of a distinctive black religiosity and the classic perspective on the black church as a “semi-involuntary” institution.

The Semi-Involuntary Thesis

The SI thesis focuses on the structural, cultural, and interpersonal consequences of racial segregation on the role of the church in African American communities. This thesis, designed to identify the distinctive features of the African American experience, contains an implicit theory about black religious involvement pointing to different regional dynamics, with the rural South lying at one end of a continuum and the urban North defining the other. Briefly stated, it holds that the black church was the central institution in African American communities in the rural South (generating high levels of religious involvement) and has become a less dominant institution in black communities of the urban North. Just how the
urban South fits into this implicit continuum of differentiated patterns is not typically addressed in most research on the SI thesis.

The SI thesis suggests that segregation has historically shaped two major forces mobilizing involvement in the black church (especially in the segregated churches of the historic, mainline Protestant denominations in the rural South): (1) the structural absence of secular outlets for achievement that indirectly made the black church the community context in which status, leadership, and respectability were achieved, and (2) the cultural presence of powerful community moral pressures to help sustain the key institution providing both material and spiritual support to the African American community. The image of “semi-involuntary” rests upon the fact that church attendance was strategic in the status system of the African American community in the rural South; broadly based norms and sanctions acted as external constraints on behavior and generated attendance even where subjective commitment or intrinsic motivation was lacking. In short, high levels of church attendance were the norm, sustained more by external factors such as community pressures than by personal orientations.¹

Several recent studies focusing on the SI thesis have examined issues concerning regionally distinctive patterns of church attendance among African Americans in different nationally representative samples (Ellison & Sherkat 1995, 1999; Hunt & Hunt 1999, 2000). Ellison and Sherkat (1995) reexamined the 1979–80 National Survey of Black Americans, developing OLS models identifying several distinctive church participation patterns characteristic of the rural South, compared to other regions, including: (1) higher mean levels of church participation, (2) a stronger positive relationship between social status (as indexed by education) and church participation, and (3) a weaker positive relationship between subjective religious factors (perception of emotional, moral, and instrumental benefits) and church participation. Hunt and Hunt (1999) used similar OLS models in attempting to replicate the NSBA results by examining two additional nationwide data sets: the 1972 to 1994 General Social Surveys and the 1984 National Alcohol Survey. The replication was largely successful, although Hunt and Hunt found fewer differences in overall attendance between residents of the rural South and residents of the urban South than were present in the NSBA data. However, Hunt and Hunt did find rural South attendance dynamics in the GSS surveys that were highly consistent with the Ellison and Sherkat’s NSBA findings — i.e., a stronger positive connection between education (i.e., status) and church attendance, and a weaker positive connection between subjective religious identification and church attendance in the rural South compared with other regions. Ellison and Sherkat (1999) followed up the Hunt and Hunt replication by exploring several additional data sets, including the 1990 National Survey of Families and Households and the 1986 Americans’ Changing Lives survey. They report considerable consistency in a number of descriptive statistics on religious involvement in different regions across
various surveys, adding to the evidence supporting the SI thesis. Finally, Hunt and Hunt (2000) refined prior OLS regression strategies by building a series of logistic regression models (again using the GSS and NAS data sets) to examine three “types” of attendance — weekly, intermittent, and infrequent — rather than overall level of attendance. The rural South was found to be distinctive in generating a specific pattern of “intermittent,” rather than highly regular (e.g., “weekly”) church attendance among African Americans. Additionally, the logistic models showed that the key covariates of education and subjective identification examined in the earlier OLS-based studies had their most pronounced effects on the weekly pattern of attendance.

The general thrust of these studies points to the presence of structural and cultural factors in the rural South that motivate distinctive levels of church attendance among African Americans. These regional differences have been interpreted as support for the SI thesis and the presumed distinctiveness of the factors shaping African American religious institutions and involvements. However, these studies were limited to the African American population; none directly addressed the possibility of similar patterns of religious involvement among whites and whether the comparative examination of race and region might illuminate the distinctiveness of African Americans presumed by the SI thesis. Only comparative studies can locate any distinctive ways in which cultural and structural patterns register in the experience of different groups.

We pose five specific research questions concerning race and region. First, do comparisons by race in a nationwide sample bear out the widespread assumption of a distinctive (i.e., heightened, compared to whites) African American religiosity? Second, do any race differences in religiosity hold when controlling for region and other sociodemographic variables? Third, is there any particular region of the U.S. that is the locus of race differences in religious involvement? Fourth, are there regional differences in the way that status and religious factors shape church attendance? Fifth, do race and region interact in the way that status and religious factors impact church attendance (i.e., are any regional differences in the covariates of church attendance race-specific?). These research questions — particularly the last two — are raised even though the SI thesis is a partial theory predicting only certain regional differences in African American religious dynamics. An important goal of this study is to see if the SI thesis has broader applicability by exploring whether the regional patterns predicted by the SI thesis are limited to African Americans, or whether broader historical and regional processes are observed among whites as well. As such, this study contributes to other recent work (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey 1998) questioning the general research strategy of advancing explanations for social processes and/or outcomes characteristic of a particular race/ethnic group without empirical comparisons with another group (or groups).
We examine an aggregated set of surveys from the General Social Surveys (GSS) between 1974 and 1994, initially selecting respondents whose race was identified as either white or black. Because blacks were oversampled in some GSS surveys, we use the GSS variable OVERSAMP to correct for possible sampling bias. Additionally, we selected those interviews that contained data on voluntary associations (some of these questions were not asked in all survey years, which accounts for why data from 1972, 1973, and 1995–98 were not used) and three particular subregions of the national sample (explained further below), resulting in a working sample of 18,995 respondents. 16,315 of these respondents were white (86%) and 2,680 were black (14%). It should be noted that a control for year of survey was used in all regression analyses of the GSS data set, and the mean year of interview was 1985. We observe the missing values codes associated with each GSS variable.

### Dependent Variables

We examine three separate measures of religious involvement: church attendance, subjective identification with one’s religious affiliation, and membership in a church-based voluntary association. (The latter two variables are also employed as predictors of church attendance in some analyses.)

We examine both overall level and several types of church attendance for evidence of race differences in attendance at religious services. The GSS variable ATTEND reads, “How often do you attend religious services?” and has response options ranging from “never” (coded 0) to “several times a week” (coded 8). In addition to modeling attendance as a linear variable, we also partition responses to the ATTEND variable into three dichotomous measures identifying different patterns of attendance: “weekly” identifies attendance of every week or more, “intermittent” identifies attendance of once a month to less than weekly, and “infrequent” identifies nonattendance through attendance of several times a year. Because the intermittent category has two distinct comparison points — i.e., some attend more than intermittently and others less, we model two intermittent patterns: “intermittent vs. weekly” — excluding those who attend infrequently, and “intermittent vs. infrequent” — excluding those who attend weekly.

Regarding subjective religious identification, GSS surveys measure the subjective intensity of respondent’s connection to their preferred affiliation. Respondents who expressed a religious preference were asked, using their preference as part of the question, “Would you call yourself a strong (preference named) or a not very strong (preference named)?” Responses recorded by GSS were coded strong = 1, not very strong = 2, and somewhat strong (when volunteered as a response) = 3.
From these responses we created a dummy variable coded: 1 = “strong religious identification,” 0 otherwise.\(^5\)

Finally, we measured, using the GSS variable MEMCHURH, whether a respondent is a member of a church-related group, coded 1 if yes, 0 if no. Note that this variable does not reflect formal membership in a particular denomination or attendance at religious services; rather, it indicates whether people engage in a voluntary association that is linked to a church. Unlike the subjective identification variable, this measure is based on a question that was asked of all respondents. A small proportion of nonaffiliates — 3% among whites and 6% among blacks — indicated membership in a church-related group.

### Independent Variables

**Race** is measured with a variable coded 1 if the respondent’s race is recorded as “black” by GSS, 0 if “white.” **Region** is measured with three dummy variables: **rural South** is coded 1 if a resident of a nonurban area in a southern state, 0 otherwise; **urban South** is coded 1 if a resident of an urban area in a southern state, 0 otherwise; and **urban North** is coded 1 if a resident of an urban area in a northern or western state, 0 otherwise.\(^6\)

We also examine four other independent variables to learn if there are race and/or regional differences in the way important covariates predict church attendance. Two measures (education and voluntary association activity) are indicators of social status, and two measures (subjective identification and church-group membership — previously considered as dependent variables) are indicators of religious involvement. Following past research (Ellison & Sherkat 1995; Hunt & Hunt 1999, 2000) we examine the way education (measured in years) and subjective religious identification predict church attendance. Past studies of African Americans have consistently pointed to the pattern of education being more positively predictive of attendance in the rural South and subjective religious factors being less positively predictive of attendance in the rural South. Indeed, it is the specific regional effects of these two kinds of covariates (i.e., “status” and “religious”) that represent the most consistent empirical pattern in the nationwide studies of the SI thesis. In order to extend past research, we examine additional measures of status and religiosity — both of which involve voluntary association activity. The additional status variable measures the level of secular voluntary association activity. The GSS surveys asked respondents to indicate, from a long list of various types of voluntary associations, the kinds of groups or organizations in which they were members. We created a “voluntary associations” variable indexing the total number of the top ten nonchurch-based voluntary association memberships claimed by respondents (range 0 to 10, mean = 1.14).\(^7\) The additional religiosity variable is the “church-group membership” measure described above.
On the issue of distinctive attendance dynamics by region, the SI thesis implies that African American church attendance in the rural South is more strongly influenced by broader community and institutional forces than in other regions. Specifically, in the rural South, church attendance for African Americans should be more positively linked to higher status (the black church as the key setting in which status and respectability are demonstrated, due to the comparative absence of alternative secular associations) and less positively linked to other religious factors. To phrase these dynamics more generally to potentially apply to both African Americans and whites, under semi-involuntary conditions, it is presumed that (1) persons with higher status attend church as a means of gaining and maintaining status, and (2) people attend church more, independently of whether they are highly identified with their religious affiliation and/or whether they participate in voluntary associations linked to a church.

Finally, we control for a variety of religious and sociodemographic variables on which whites and African Americans, and residents of various regions of the U.S., differ. First, regarding religious affiliation, respondents were classified into four affiliation categories: Catholic, mainline Protestant, conservative Protestant and nonaffiliates. Catholic is a variable that identifies respondents who described their affiliation as Catholic on GSS variable RELIG, and none identifies those who reported no religious preference on that same variable. The two Protestant variables were created by utilizing specific denominational affiliations reported by the respondent on the DENOM variable and also the GSS variable FUND that classifies denominations into liberal, moderate, and fundamentalist subgroups (Smith 1986). For those reporting a Protestant affiliation, we collapsed the liberal and moderate categories on the FUND variable to create a mainline Protestant variable. Those classified as fundamentalist on the FUND variable were used to create the conservative Protestant variable. Each of the four affiliation categories is measured by a dummy variable in which a 1 is assigned to members of a category and a 0 is assigned to all other respondents. And, because most research has found higher attendance among women, older persons, and married persons, we control for the following sociodemographic variables: female is coded 1 if female; married is coded 1 if currently married; age is the numerical age of the respondent in years at time of interview. Finally, year is a variable that records the calendar year in which an annual GSS survey was conducted and is entered in all regression models as a linear control.

Findings

Question 1: Do African Americans exhibit stronger religiosity than whites?
Table 1 presents the means (by race) for study variables for the total sample and for the three regions central to our comparative analyses. The comparisons in Table 1 show that there are significant black/white differences on nearly every
TABLE 1: Means by Race for Total Sample and Three Regions, GSS Surveys, 1974–1994

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Sample</th>
<th>Rural South</th>
<th>Urban South</th>
<th>Urban North</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall attendance</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>4.67***</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>4.84***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermittent</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.32***</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.43***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrequent</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>.37***</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.27***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly and intermittent</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.62***</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>.73***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermittent vs. weekly</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.41***</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.59***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermittent vs. infrequent</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.41***</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.61***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective identificationa</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.50***</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.56***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church-group membera</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.44***</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status covariates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary associations</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>.90***</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.92**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>11.4***</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>9.8***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline Protestant</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.19***</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.19***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative Protestant</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.68***</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.77***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.08***</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.02***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonaffiliated</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.05***</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.02*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>.62***</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.62**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>43.2***</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>.39***</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.47***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>85.1</td>
<td>85.5***</td>
<td>83.9</td>
<td>84.9**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Also used as a covariate in some logistic models.

Significance of white/black difference: * p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001

variable. On the initial issue of greater African American religious involvement, African Americans have a higher level of church attendance on the overall attendance measure, evidence a stronger subjective identification with their affiliation, and are more likely to be a member of a church-related group. Additionally, blacks and whites differ on the kinds of religious affiliations they report; blacks are most likely to be conservative Protestants and are less likely to be Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, and/or to report no affiliation. These differences point to a distinctive type of religious involvement on most measures. However, when type of attendance is specified, African Americans do not have consistently higher church attendance than whites.
The partitioning of the church attendance variable into different types of attendance shows that for the total sample and for each of the three regions, African Americans are mainly distinctive in having higher intermittent attendance, and in being much less likely to attend infrequently. African Americans and whites are equally likely to attend “weekly” (30% for both groups), and African Americans are most different in having more “intermittent” (32% compared to 21%) and less “infrequent” attendance (37% compared to 49%). The same race pattern of more frequent intermittent attendance by African Americans is found for the two refined intermittent comparisons in the total sample and in each of the three regions. Additionally, it is worth noting that there is no race difference in weekly attendance for either the rural South or the urban North. The only hint of higher weekly attendance of African Americans compared to whites is in the urban South. Thus, these data suggest a distinctive pattern of church attendance for African Americans, but mainly at the intermittent level.

Question 2: Do any race differences in religiosity hold when controlling for region and other sociodemographic variables?

Given these zero-order differences by race, the important question becomes whether these race patterns exist net of the effects of region and the other sociodemographic factors on which race groups differ. Table 2 contains the results of a series of logistic models of six ways of measuring religious involvement: subjective identification, church-group membership, and four specific patterns of church attendance: (1) weekly versus intermittent and infrequent (isolating the “weekly” pattern), (2) weekly and intermittent versus infrequent (isolating the “greater than infrequent” pattern), (3) intermittent versus infrequent, and (4) weekly versus intermittent.\(^\text{10}\) In all four cases, models predict the category that represents a higher level of attendance. (Results for “infrequent” are not presented as they precisely mirror, with signs reversed, the results for the “weekly and intermittent versus infrequent” pattern.) Model 1 shows the main effects of key variables, and model 2 adds interaction terms for “race by region” to assess whether any effect of “being black” on a type of attendance is conditional upon particular regional locations. These models also control for religious affiliation, age, gender, marital status, and year of interview, though these coefficients are not presented in the tables for reasons of space, allowing for focus on the variables central to our analyses.\(^\text{11}\)

Model 1 results show that African Americans have higher subjective religious identification and are more likely to be church-group members. But a comparable high level of religious involvement is not found when all four types of attendance are examined; rather, as was the case in Table 1, African Americans are distinctive mainly at an intermittent level of attendance even when the control variables and status covariates are specified. The effects of both “status” variables (education and voluntary associations) are consistently positive. Put simply, as education and the number of voluntary association memberships increase, people are more likely to describe themselves as strongly tied to their religious affiliation, are more likely to
belong to a church group, and are more likely to attend church more often on each of the four patterns of attendance.

Thus, the question of whether a heightened black religiosity exists net of region and other factors has a mixed answer. Being black does mean higher subjective identification and greater probability of being member of a church-related group; however, it does not predict the most highly regular pattern of “weekly” attendance. Interestingly, the effects of region show that being a resident of the rural South predicts higher levels of religious involvement than does being black. Regarding the other regions, the urban South is consistently in between the rural South and urban North, with the latter being a context that predicts lower level of religious involvement on most of the six measures. These across-region patterns are consistent with the SI thesis’s image of a general continuum of religious involvement with endpoints defined by the rural South and the urban North.

**Question 3: Is any region the locus of race differences in religiosity?**

Turning to the model 2 interactions that address the question of whether any particular region is the context of African American distinctiveness in religious involvement, these interactions show that black distinctiveness is most dramatic outside the rural South. No consistent race differences are found in the “black by rural South” interactions; the signs of the regression coefficients across the six religious involvement variables are not consistently in the same direction, and only the “intermittent vs. infrequent” pattern of attendance shows any hint of greater African American religious involvement (significant at the .10 level). It is the urban South that is the regional context of comparatively heightened religiosity among African Americans. Here, the regression coefficients for the interactions are all positive, and being black predicts significantly higher religious involvement on four of the six dependent variables. Also distinctive, but in a different direction, are the “black by urban North” interactions. For these interactions, the coefficients are all negative and being black predicts markedly lower religious involvement on five of the six measures.

These findings demonstrate that there is significant regional variation in the relationship between race and religiosity: African Americans are basically no different from whites in the rural South; African Americans have higher religious involvement than whites in the urban South; and African Americans evidence greater disengagement than whites from religious institutions in the urban North. Thus, the analyses in Table 2 suggest two important modifications of the view that there is a general, nationwide pattern of higher African American religious involvement: (1) African Americans differ from whites only at an intermittent level of church attendance, and (2) it is only in the urban South as a region that there are any signs of a greater religiosity among African Americans — a finding that calls into question the assumption of a general continuum with endpoints defined by the rural South and urban North. We turn next to the issue of whether the status and religious covariates operate differently by region.
TABLE 2: Logistic Regression Estimates of Subjective Identification, Church Group Membership and Four Patterns of Church Attendance, 1974–1994 GSS Surveys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>High Subjective Identification (1) vs. Low Identification (0)</th>
<th>Church-Group Membership (1) vs. No Membership (0)</th>
<th>Weekly (1) vs. Intermittent and Infrequent (0)</th>
<th>Weekly and Intermittent (1) vs. Infrequent (0)</th>
<th>Intermittent (1) vs. Infrequent (0)</th>
<th>Weekly (1) vs. Intermittent (0)</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>.395*** (.058)</td>
<td>.471*** (.060)</td>
<td>.001 (.062)</td>
<td>.555*** (.059)</td>
<td>.790*** (.068)</td>
<td>.437*** (.073)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>.420*** (.062)</td>
<td>.489*** (.064)</td>
<td>.006 (.066)</td>
<td>.638*** (.065)</td>
<td>.872*** (.074)</td>
<td>.453*** (.076)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Model</td>
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<td>Model</td>
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<td>Model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>.173*** (.035)</td>
<td>.219*** (.036)</td>
<td>.105** (.037)</td>
<td>.225*** (.035)</td>
<td>.295*** (.043)</td>
<td>.262*** (.044)</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>.174*** (.038)</td>
<td>.234*** (.039)</td>
<td>.125** (.040)</td>
<td>.238*** (.038)</td>
<td>.262*** (.047)</td>
<td>.028 (.049)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>-.056 (.031)</td>
<td>.032 (.032)</td>
<td>-.010 (.033)</td>
<td>-.007 (.031)</td>
<td>-.006 (.037)</td>
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<td>Model</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>.089*** (.014)</td>
<td>.455*** (.016)</td>
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<td>.175*** (.015)</td>
<td>.162*** (.017)</td>
<td>.038* (.017)</td>
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<td>.089*** (.496)</td>
<td>.455*** (.016)</td>
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<td>.175*** (.015)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High Subjective Identification (1) vs. Low Identification (0)</td>
<td>Church-Group Membership (1) vs. No Membership (0)</td>
<td>Weekly (1) vs. Intermittent and Infrequent (0)</td>
<td>Weekly and Intermittent (1) vs. Intermittent (1) vs. Intermittent (0)</td>
<td>Weekly (1) vs. Intermittent (0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>-------------------------</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black * R South</td>
<td>.020 (.934)</td>
<td>-.068 (.095)</td>
<td>-.103 (.101)</td>
<td>.151 (.101)</td>
<td>.215† (.111)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black * U South</td>
<td>.121 (.081)</td>
<td>.253** (.083)</td>
<td>.280** (.086)</td>
<td>.169* (.086)</td>
<td>.071 (.097)</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Black * U North</td>
<td>-.141† (.074)</td>
<td>-.185* (.076)</td>
<td>-.177* (.080)</td>
<td>-.320*** (.077)</td>
<td>-.285*** (.089)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-4.139</td>
<td>-4.152</td>
<td>-2.798</td>
<td>-4.211</td>
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<td>-2 Log-likelihood</td>
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<td>14,789</td>
<td>14,584</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>13,309</td>
<td>13,609</td>
<td>14,777</td>
<td>14,571</td>
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</tbody>
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Note: Standard errors are in parentheses. These models also control for religious affiliation, marital status, gender, age, and year of interview. Tables with models showing every coefficient are available upon request.

† p < .10   * p < .05   ** p < .01   *** p < .001
TABLE 3: Logistic Estimates of “Weekly” Church Attendance Regressed on Key Independent Variables and Both First- and Second-Order Interactions

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>“Weekly” Church Attendance</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>.392***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rural South</td>
<td>.030</td>
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<td>Urban South</td>
<td>.038</td>
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<tr>
<td>Urban North</td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.057***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary associations</td>
<td>.060***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective identification</td>
<td>2.003***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church group member</td>
<td>1.854***</td>
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First-order interactions

<table>
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<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural South * Education</td>
<td>.023†</td>
<td>.017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Urban South * Education</td>
<td>.028*</td>
<td>.026†</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban North * Education</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.010</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural South * Voluntary assns.</td>
<td>.072*</td>
<td>.074*</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban South * Voluntary assns.</td>
<td>-.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Urban North * Voluntary assns.</td>
<td>-.060*</td>
<td>-.048†</td>
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<td>Rural South * Subjective iden.</td>
<td>-.198*</td>
<td>-.210*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Urban South * Subjective iden.</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.214**</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural South * Church group</td>
<td>-.137</td>
<td>-.078</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban South * Church group</td>
<td>.206*</td>
<td>.237*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban North * Church group</td>
<td>-.069</td>
<td>-.159*</td>
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Second-order interactions

<table>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black * Rural South * Education</td>
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<td>Black * Urban South * Education</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Black * Urban North * Education</td>
<td>-.032</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black * Rural South * Vol. assns.</td>
<td>.026</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Black * Urban South * Vol. assns.</td>
<td>.031</td>
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<td>Black * Urban North * Vol. assns.</td>
<td>-.057</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black * Rural South * Subj. iden.</td>
<td>-.041</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black * Urban South * Subj. iden.</td>
<td>-.168</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black * Urban North * Subj. iden.</td>
<td>.127</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black * Rural South * Church group</td>
<td>-.458†</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black * Urban South * Church group</td>
<td>-.190</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black * Urban North * Church group</td>
<td>.648**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Constant                   | -5.031  | -4.980  | -4.990  |
-2 Log-likelihood          | 10,290  | 10,256  | 10,238  |
Improvement                | 33***   | 12      |         |

Note: Models 3 and 4 also control for religious affiliation, marital status, gender, age, and year of interview. Model 5 controls for all other possible first-order interactions. Tables with models showing every coefficient are available upon request.

† p < .10  * p < .05  ** p < .01  *** p < .001
Question 4: Are there regional differences in the way that status and religious factors (covariates) predict church attendance?

Table 3 presents the effects of race, region, and four key covariates on “weekly” church attendance, along with two sets of interaction effects showing how the covariates predict attendance when combined with region, and then with race and region. We focus on “weekly” attendance at this stage in our analysis for reasons of space, and because past research suggests that this is the crucial level of attendance for analyzing the impact of the covariates specified by the SI thesis. Model 3 reports the main effects of key variables entering into the subsequent interactions; model 4 adds the first-order interactions; model 5 adds the second-order interactions. The first-order interactions test whether the SI thesis’s predictions of region-specific effects of covariates are found (irrespective of race). Then, the second-order interactions isolate the joint impact of being black and a resident of a particular region on the way that the status and religious covariates impact attendance (in order to examine whether any regional effects are more pronounced for blacks or whites).

Regarding the main effects presented in model 3, entering the two religiosity measures (subjective identification and church-group member) as independent variables shows that they are, as expected, strong positive predictors of higher church attendance. Further, their presence in model 3 (compared to the previously identified effects in model 1 of Table 2) changes the effect of one of the status measures, making voluntary associations less positively predictive of highly regular church attendance. Finally, adding the two religiosity variables as predictors has an impact on the way race and region predict weekly attendance, where, compared to the model 1 results, the effect of being black is more dramatically negative, and the sharply different effects for the rural South and urban North are reduced to nonsignificance.

Turning to the first-order interactions in model 4, the results show that the patterns predicted by the SI thesis for the rural South — i.e., a more positive effect of status and a less positive effect of religiosity — are observed in every case except the “rural South by church-group member” interaction. This means that in three of the four possible covariate effects, there is a pattern consistent with the SI thesis for residents of the rural South, regardless of race. These findings point to the conclusion that some of the general dynamics of the SI thesis, as developed in studies of African Americans, may point to a general regional condition, rather than to a race-specific pattern.

There are also interesting first-order interactions involving the urban South and urban North. First, for the urban South, higher levels of education predict lower church attendance. This pattern differs sharply from that observed for the rural South, where, consistent with the SI thesis, higher status, as indexed by both education and voluntary associations, increases regular church attendance. Further, unlike for the rural South where the general effect of the religiosity covariates is more negative, in the urban South, being a church-group member is
more positively predictive of higher church attendance. Thus, the urban South demonstrates effects of key covariates that are the reverse of the predictions of the SI thesis, thus reinforcing the image of the rural South as a distinctive subregion.

There are also two interesting patterns in the first-order interactions for the urban North (involving the two covariates not significant for the urban South). First, the “voluntary association memberships” variable negatively impacts weekly attendance in the urban North. Thus, as in the urban South, where a status covariate (education) has a negative impact on attendance, the urban North differs in religious dynamics from the rural South, where both status covariates positively impact attendance. This could be due to the proliferation of secular voluntary associations eroding highly regular patterns of church attendance in urban contexts — an image consistent with the SI thesis. Further, the impact of subjective identification is more positive in the urban North. This pattern is similar to the positive impact of the other religious covariate (church-group membership) in the urban South — i.e., in both urban contexts, at least one measure of heightened religious commitment translates into more regular church attendance. These patterns reverse those found for the rural South, where the link between the religious covariates and church attendance is more negative.

In sum, the first-order interactions suggest that region is an important factor in shaping different patterns of church attendance, irrespective of race. Because the SI thesis was developed with studies of African Americans, we turn next to some second-order interactions isolating the intersection of race, regional residence, and key covariates, to see whether specifying the joint impact of these variables leads to results that are more consistent with the predictions of the SI thesis for African Americans (i.e., to discern whether the regional patterns predicted by the SI thesis are in any way race-specific).

Question 5: Does region interact with race regarding the way that status and religious factors impact church attendance (i.e., are any regional differences in the covariates of church attendance race-specific)?

The model 5 effects show that only one of the four covariate patterns predicted by the SI thesis for African Americans in the rural South is observed. While the interactions of being black, a resident of the rural South, and both ways of measuring status show positive coefficients, they are not statistically significant (indicating that African Americans are not markedly different from whites in the rural South). And, with regard to the interactions involving the two religiosity measures, both coefficients are negative, with only the interaction involving church-group membership statistically significant at the .10 level. The fact that only one of these second-order interactions points to black distinctiveness suggests that the SI thesis may apply to both African Americans and whites in the rural South.

Regarding the two other regions, there are no significant second-order interactions involving the urban South, and only one significant pattern involving the urban North. The urban North patterns suggest that African Americans are
distinctive in ways that basically reverse the largely nonsignificant patterns observed for the rural South. The interactions involving being black, resident of the urban North, and having higher status are both negative, but neither effect is statistically significant. And the interaction effects using the two religious covariates have positive coefficients, with the effect involving church-group membership statistically significant at the .01 level. This latter effect is consistent with the general logic embedded in the SI thesis regarding African Americans in the urban North, holding that some form of heightened religious identification or involvement (e.g., church-group membership) is especially critical in maintaining highly regular church attendance.

In sum, the general absence of black distinctiveness in the effects of the covariates in the urban South (the only region where the main effects and the first-order interactions pointed to blacks being distinctive in having a heightened level of religious involvement), along with the limited unique effects of the covariates in both the rural South and the urban North reinforces the impression that region may be more important than race as a factor shaping church attendance.

Implications of the Findings

This study’s findings provide answers for two general research issues. First, African Americans do have a distinctive religiosity compared to whites nationwide, but with important qualifications: they exhibit higher overall levels of church attendance, are more strongly subjectively identified with their church affiliation, and are more likely to be members of a church-related group; but, they are not more likely than whites to attend church on a highly regular (weekly) basis. Second, our analyses provide some empirical support for the semi-involuntary interpretation of African American religious involvements, and even more importantly, point to some important regional differences in religious involvement both irrespective of, and conditional upon, race.

A Heightened African American Religiosity?

The longstanding impression of a generalized heightened religious involvement for African Americans nationwide is clearly qualified when church attendance is refined into distinct types of attendance, and when region is controlled as a contextual factor using interaction terms (as opposed to merely entering region into the model as a linear control). While past comparative studies measuring overall level of attendance as a continuous variable concluded that African Americans attend church more frequently than whites, our logistic analyses suggest that African Americans’ greater attendance is at an “intermittent” (e.g., monthly), rather than at the most highly regular (e.g., weekly) level — a finding that qualifies
the general image of heightened religious involvement among African Americans. Nevertheless, the effects of being black on intermittent attendance is not a trivial finding. Intermittent attendance may well be an important indicator of the latent loyalties of African Americans as a status group, and may reflect other aspects of African Americans’ unique historical experience. Indeed, this pattern may reflect the way African Americans, more than whites, are linked to a “church culture” that shapes a variety of community and voluntary association patterns (Pattillo-McCoy 1999).

The other set of findings qualifying the image of a generalized heightened African American religious involvement include the markedly different church attendance patterns for African Americans and whites by region. While nationwide comparisons suggest a pattern of heightened religious involvement among African Americans (even when region is statistically controlled), treating region as a contextual factor leads to the conclusion than African Americans, compared with whites, have different levels of religious involvement depending on region. In the rural South, there are few differences in religious involvement by race; but, in the two urban contexts investigated, there are sharp race differences, with African Americans having markedly higher religious involvement in the urban South and markedly lower involvement in the urban North. The implications of these three distinct regional patterns for the SI thesis — a theory specific to African American religious involvement — are addressed by posing a series of questions about the intersection of race and region, each of which is followed by some speculations offered as a guide to possible future research.

Why So Few Differences in Religious Involvement by Race in the Rural South?

On one hand, the fact that the rural South is the locus of high levels of religious involvement for both African Americans and whites may not be a surprising empirical finding. However, this lack of observed race differences carries implications for the SI thesis and suggests that elements of this thesis may have wider applicability. The SI thesis was originally derived from a concern with how African American communities of meaning and the black church were being transformed by urbanization and movement to the North. However, what was developed as a partial theory limited to African Americans may isolate important structural and cultural features of the rural South as a region, irrespective of race. That is, while there is little reason to doubt that segregation made the black church a central institution in black communities in the rural South, it may have made the white church a central institution there as well. Historically, racial segregation was a process that simultaneously divided and brought together blacks and whites within a “peculiar” social formation (Stampp 1956). While the structural reality of segregation assigned the races to different economic and political roles, it also established, especially after Reconstruction, separate places of worship as the operative norm in the religious sphere. As a result,
the “institutional church” represented the most highly segregated place in the weekly cycle of life. And, although imposed by white political and economic power over blacks, segregation clearly did not insulate the two groups from mutual and reciprocal influence. Specifically, in making the church a place dramatizing the separation of the races (more so than most other settings), segregation and white domination likely made both black and white churches key institutions in the rural South. For blacks, the church’s role was one of lessening the direct economic impact of segregation through mutual support systems; for whites, it helped legitimate the system of structured racial inequality. Thus, it seems possible that the legacy of slavery, especially after blacks were “legally” free to begin building their own institutions, created community pressures among both blacks and whites to support separate churches as moral and community centers sustained by semi-involuntary patterns.

**Beyond the Rural South**

The fact that we observe race differences only in urban contexts suggests the possibility that the rural South has not been the most important regional context generating a distinctive level of black religious involvement. And the fact that we find markedly different patterns by race in the urban South and urban North suggests the need for examination of the different kinds of urban worlds characterizing the two regions.

The SI thesis suggests that urbanization should lead to a lower religious involvement of African Americans, and this prediction shares the general view of most theorists on urban life that traditional roles and identities forged by rural residence are dramatically reshaped by urban residence. Classic views on urbanism as a way of life (Wirth 1982) and the SI thesis’s predictions about urbanism’s impact on the declining role of the church among African Americans are cut from the same theoretical cloth. Wirth saw the city and countryside as sharply differentiated contexts, and the SI thesis suggests it is the pervasive differentiation of institutional spheres under urban conditions that leads to a distinct separation of the black church from other institutions. However, this classic view of urban residence leading to the loss of community has been challenged by researchers such as Gans ([1975] 1982), who document the continuing significance of ethnic communities under urban conditions, focusing on the way white ethnic groups continue to flourish within urban enclaves. And, as mentioned earlier, Frazier’s version of the SI thesis has been challenged by those who claim he overestimated the degree of institutional differentiation in northern cities (Lincoln & Mamiya 1990; Chaves & Higgins 1992; Pattillo-McCoy 1999). Although Gans’s work focuses on the experience of urban whites (and the critique of the Frazier thesis is concerned with blacks in the urban North), the idea that urban contexts and traditional enclaves of meaning and identity are not necessarily antithetical may help illumine some features of the urban South.
Why Is African American Religious Involvement Highest in the Urban South?

Brownwell and Goldstein (1977) have cogently argued that the South as a region has had greater cultural continuity between rural and urban areas, where cities have been more closely tied to rural areas in their basic institutions. Compared to the urban North, the urban South has been a setting where (1) there has been less differentiation from rural areas (cities were more closely tied to the agrarian economy in the South and less likely to have developed a distinct manufacturing base); (2) commercial and residential areas were more geographically decentralized, with the black population generally dispersed in small localized enclaves; (3) both nineteenth- and twentieth-century outmigrations from the rural South have meant that southern cities are more likely to have a sizable African American population having rural southern origins; (4) African Americans have established a sizable longstanding presence (when contrasted with the twentieth-century’s Great Migration to the urban North); and (5) the lesser physical distance between the rural South and southern cities, compared to cities in the North, may have increased the frequency of “circular migration” among geographically mobile segments of the population, with more movement back and forth between rural and urban places in the South.

These distinctive features of the urban South mean there has not been a sharp divide between city and countryside, making stable African American enclaves a more central feature of the urban landscape in the South. Such enclaves may well mean that the urban South has been, and remains, a context where African Americans more readily maintain their religious traditions historically forged in the rural South. Their continuing segregation from whites, and lack of broader economic opportunities in the urban setting, meant that African Americans were less likely than whites to abandon their rural religious traditions. At a minimum, the clear differences in the GSS data between the urban South and the urban North suggest that future research on the SI thesis needs to reexamine the assumption of a single continuum of black religious involvement defined by the endpoints of the rural South and the urban North.

Why Is African American Religious Involvement Lowest in the Urban North?

The remaining regional pattern present in the GSS data suggests that the SI thesis accurately points to some clear consequences for African American religious involvement in the urban North. The SI thesis’s expectation of lowered levels of religious involvement for African Americans in the urban North appears to be an accurate one, not only relative to their black counterparts in the rural South, but also compared to whites in the urban North. This pattern qualifies the longstanding image of a heightened black religiosity nationwide that, when held, may understate the importance of ongoing institutional changes occurring in African American communities in the urban North.
Beyond the key differences between southern and northern cities already described, the institutional dynamics of African Americans in the urban North were forged on a sharp duality: the contradiction between the hopes raised by participants in the Great Migration and the subsequent failure of later generations to fully realize the promise of those hopes. The Great Migration provided northern cities with a large influx of blacks from the rural and urban South who carried their forms of religious involvement to the North. This period of extensive migration and community building was one where displaced southerners and the black church had to struggle to survive in the face of considerable discontinuity in the cultural landscape. Over time, this mass movement eventually ended with African American institutions coming to be shaped by a population born in the North. That is, increasingly, the northern urban scene was constituted by replacement from within rather than migration, progressively reducing the importance of migrants from the South as a sizable component of that “region.” Such broad demographic changes, as well as greater institutional differentiation, is likely the source of the accuracy of the SI thesis’s prediction for the fate of the black church in the urban North. Lacking any central institutional role and without the replenishment of membership of those whose southern backgrounds had contained the tradition of semi-involuntary motivations and loyalties, the black church became a less central place in people’s lives.

It is noteworthy that both the people moving to the North in search of jobs and a better life, and the contrast of the urban North with the rural South central to the SI thesis, focused on the North as a land of greater hope and promise for African Americans. For some, the North did offer expanded opportunities, but for many, this new “promised land” meant only new and different forms of struggle against racial discrimination. Scholars of African American life such as Wilson (1997) and Anderson (1990) have addressed the consequences of extensive de-industrialization, identifying the erosion of a strong moral center in African American urban communities, defined by the exodus of a rising black middle class to the suburbs that isolates — both geographically and economically — a sizable unemployed underclass in urban centers. These devastating economic consequences for current forms of urban black community probably underlie and illuminate the markedly lower church attendance patterns among African Americans in the urban North.

Finally, it is important to note that these church attendance patterns for the urban North are largely consistent with Frazier’s general formulation of the SI thesis and are contrary to some aspects of recent critiques of Frazier’s views. Several scholars have attempted to address the continuing institutional strength of the black church in the urban North (Lincoln & Mamiya 1990), and to document the continuing role of religion in shaping African American experience (Chaves & Higgins 1992; Pattillo-McCoy 1999). Yet the distinctive church attendance patterns we observe for the urban North suggest a pervasive movement of blacks, more than whites, away from this kind of religious involvement. While Pattillo-McCoy has
cogently argued that links to the black church are central to African American social and political discourse, our findings for the urban North suggest that while the black church may remain a key setting in which African Americans are socialized into the use of religiously based rhetorics, they do not necessarily, to the same extent, engage in important religiously based institutional practices such as attending church services.

Conclusions

The most general implication of this research is to reinforce Ellison and Sherkat’s (1995) call for more studies of region as a factor in the African American experience, and to extend the concern with region to include examination of the religious involvement of whites (and other race/ethnic groups). More work needs to be done that is comparative by race/ethnicity, and which explores the varieties of ways in which blacks, whites, and other race/ethnic groups are involved in religious activities. Only through comparative studies can we locate any distinctive ways in which cultural and structural patterns register in the experience of different groups.

Our analyses of how religious involvements vary by race and region point to some important suggestions for further research into the SI thesis. A central implication of this study’s findings for the rural South is that the metaphor of “semi-involuntary,” applied only to African Americans, may contain a subtle bias suggesting that the religious dynamics of blacks are distinctively constrained by outside forces and, by implication, that white religious dynamics are more “voluntary” or freely chosen. However, it is important to note that under systems structured around the legacy of slavery and segregation, no particular group exhibits patterns unconstrained by larger social structures. It was not just the situation of African Americans in the rural South that produced semi-involuntary patterns for this status group; rather, the central fact of slavery and its legacy may have created pressures for both blacks and whites to develop the church as a key institution in southern rural communities.

A final speculative and important possibility suggested by the sharp urban differences in religious involvement by region is that a new period of the African American experience may be emerging in which the North no longer embodies the hopes and dreams of the African American community. No better marker for the end of the period defined by the high hopes that accompanied the Great Migration is a new migration dynamic: the “return migration” of increasing numbers of African Americans from North to South. However, unlike the Great Migration, where the poor and jobless left the South in search of a new life, those involved in the return migration appear to be among the more advantaged and successful (e.g., the more highly educated African Americans) (Frey 1998). If this movement from North to South continues and expands, the generalized exodus
of higher-status African Americans from the inner city to the proximate suburbs noted by Wilson (1997), may become an important social movement played out on a broader regional scale. A crucial question for future inquiry into issues of race, region, and religion is how this return migration interacts with patterns of African American religious involvement. Important issues to be addressed in future studies include whether the return migration differentially selects those African Americans with (or seeking) higher levels of religious involvement and/or whether residence in the South reshapes religious orientations forged elsewhere.

Notes

1. The SI thesis, as originally developed by Frazier (1963) and others, predicted a marked decline in the role of the black church under conditions generated by the “relocation” of African Americans from the rural South to the more “institutionally differentiated” urban North — i.e., in the urban North, the black church was forced to compete with other more racially integrated churches and with other wholly secular institutions for people’s involvements. Frazier’s image of the isolation of the black church from secular institutions in the urban North has been challenged by recent scholarship (Lincoln & Mamiya 1990; Chaves & Higgins 1992; Pattillo-McCoy 1999), suggesting that Frazier overestimated the extent of institutional differentiation under urban conditions.

2. While Taylor and others’ (1996) OLS study finds a distinctive level of overall attendance, close inspection of this global finding suggests black/white differences are probably at the “intermittent” level, a pattern that was not explicitly noted nor clearly specified. For example, Taylor’s study reports in text (but not in tables) findings from different data sets that point to black distinctiveness mainly at the “monthly and above” levels of church attendance (p. 406).

3. We explored alternative cutting points by looking at most of the discrete categories of the “ATTEND” measure such as “more than once a week,” the “never” attend category, and a modification of the weekly level that included an “almost weekly” response. None of these alternative cutting points changes any of the basic conclusions of our study.

4. Some researchers have cautioned against making inferences about church attendance based on self-reported information. Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves (1993) compared official church attendance figures against what people claimed and found considerable inflation of self-reported attendance levels. Presser and Stinson (1998) extended this work, comparing time-use studies and self-reports and also found evidence for inflation in the frequency of church attendance when self-reported. Interestingly, Presser and Stinson show this inflation effect is a general tendency and find no evidence of distinctive patterns by various demographic categories. This is important for studies making race comparisons — i.e., while a social desirability tendency may lead people to overestimate actual attendance, it appears to do so similarly for all major sociodemographic groups. In short, Presser and Stinson’s work suggests any generalized inflation does not affect the demographic correlates of overall attendance and should not compromise comparative analyses by race. However, we cannot say, with any confidence, that there
are not race differences in misreporting specific “types” of reported church attendance analyzed herein.

5. The fact that those reporting no affiliation were not asked this question posed a methodological problem that we resolved as follows. We assigned all nonaffiliated respondents to the 0 category. Obviously, those not claiming a preference cannot, by definition, have a “strong” identification with a particular religious affiliation. We explored whether this methodological compromise introduced any problems in estimating the effects of the race and region. We found that, owing to the small proportions of nonaffiliated compared to those reporting a particular affiliation, this measurement strategy had little effect on the empirical patterns uncovered in this research.

6. We used the conventional U.S. Bureau of the Census definition of the South Region (sixteen states and the District of Columbia) as our definition of the South. Also, we used the GSS variable XNORCSIZ and treated all residents living within the boundaries of an SMSA as urban and those living outside an SMSA as rural. Additionally, this study’s treatment of region differs from earlier studies of the SI thesis (which only studied African Americans) in how region is specified. Prior studies (Ellison & Sherkat 1995; Hunt & Hunt 1999, 2000) ignored the rural-urban distinction outside the South owing to the small numbers of blacks (approximately 3% in each of the three data sets) living in rural, nonsouthern areas. Thus, rural nonsouthern blacks were included with urban nonsoutherners in these studies. Because this comparative study includes whites, and white proportions are dramatically higher than black in the rural non-South in the GSS sample (18% of whites and only 2% of blacks reside in the rural non-South), any general comparisons by race that included this subregion would be misleading. Because of the small number of blacks in rural areas outside the South, any regression models that attempted to specify black/white dynamics linked to the rural non-South would be problematical; the subclass Ns for rural non-South blacks would become very small when multiple variables are entered in any of the models. Therefore, we elected to exclude all respondents residing in the rural areas outside the South.

7. This index is based on the following kinds of voluntary organizations (percentage of total sample indicating a group membership is in parentheses following that group): fraternal (9%), hobby (10%), literary (9%), nationality or political (7%), professional (15%), school (14%), service (10%), sport (20%), union (14%), youth (10%).

8. We elected to restrict our analyses to these affiliations, owing to the small number of blacks in additional available categories such as Jew, other, etc.

9. OLS models (not reported here) predicting overall level of attendance show that the higher attendance of blacks is net of sociodemographic factors on which blacks and whites differ. These same models also show that the rural South, as a region, is characterized by higher attendance net of race and other sociodemographic factors.

10. For region and religious affiliation, the dummy variables described above were used to create two different categorical variables used in all logistic analyses. For these categorical variables, the logistic regression coefficients are computed as deviations from the average effect of all subcategories of these variables. This coding scheme permits comparison of the effects of a particular subcategory of a categorical variable compared to the average effect of all categories, thus avoiding the problem of dummy-coding multiple category variables and then interpreting how particular categories differ from
some arbitrarily chosen reference category. This computational strategy results in coefficients that show whether the effect of a particular subcategory — for example, the rural South — is more or less than the average effect of all subcategories (i.e., all three regions in this example). In all cases, the logistic regression coefficients are treated as estimates of the slope of the relationship between a predictor variable and a dependent variable. The level of significance reported for the logistic regression coefficients is based upon the Wald statistic that describes the relationship of the coefficient to its standard error.

11. The unreported effects for the control variables in Model 1 are fairly uniform across the six dependent variables. Not surprisingly, religious affiliation of any type predicts higher religious involvement compared to nonaffiliation. And, consistent with most prior research, being older, female, and married predicts higher religious involvement. Also, the year of interview control suggests that has been a slight decline in religious involvement on most measures across the years spanned by the different surveys.

12. Additional models run with the other “types” of church attendance as dependent variables revealed far fewer significant findings than for “weekly” attendance (as was the case with past research). These models are available upon request.

13. This different effect of education for African Americans in the urban South may be due, in part, to the fact that a sizable portion (over 25%) of those living in urban areas of the South have rural South origins. These residents have both lower education levels and higher rates of regular church attendance.

14. To illustrate, Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) suggest that the black church in the rural South has distinctive organizational patterns and distinctive norms regarding the meaning of regular attendance. They observe that many black churches in the rural South do not have the resources to support a full-time minister — resulting in a pattern wherein several churches may share a single religious leader — a phenomenon they term the “absentee pastorate” pattern. Further, Lincoln and Mamiya suggest that there are distinctive cultural nuances and assumptions regarding church attendance in the black church in the rural South. Specifically, they argue that “although the majority go every Sunday, some black church members attend only on the ‘first’ and ‘third’ Sundays, while others go on the ‘second’ and ‘fourth.’ Still others attend once a month. Yet, all of them consider themselves to be ‘regular churchgoers’” (p. 423).

15. We cannot specify, using the GSS data, the current significance of segregation as a factor shaping church attendance patterns of both whites and African Americans in the rural South. And we cannot sustain race comparisons in rural areas of the non-South, owing to the small proportions of rural African Americans outside the South. However, in analyses not shown here (available upon request) we compared “rural South” versus “rural non-South” patterns among whites, and found that the rural South is the locus of consistently higher levels of religious involvement on all of the present study’s indicators. This regional pattern for rural residence among whites, coupled with this study’s findings of no marked black/white differences in the rural South, lends additional support to the conclusion that the rural South is a distinctive subregion with high levels of religious involvement regardless of race.

16. While black and white churches differed along a number of dimensions, the key issue on the importance of the church as an institution is not one of theological content or
styles of worship, but how the church fits into the daily, weekly, monthly rhythms of daily life for both race groups.

17. Despite the recent growth of a black middle class, there has been a general failure to incorporate African Americans into the productive work roles of an expanding postindustrial economy. This means that a key to current conditions is not only institutional differentiation and its expansion of choice, but de-industrialization and new forms of poverty and exclusion (Bluestone & Harrison 1982).

References


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