



Introduction

Phonograph Religion

The preacher sat in the sweltering sun, anxiously waiting for the train. The Atlanta summer of 1926 had proven to be one of the warmest in the city's history.¹ However, nothing, not even record-breaking temperatures, could stifle the spirit of Reverend James M. Gates. The rural native turned urban migrant preacher was headed to New York City for a month-long preaching tour. Few would have guessed that Gates, an unschooled sharecropper born in rustic Hogansville, Georgia, a generation after slavery would become a highly sought-after clergyman. He had been preaching in Atlanta for more than a decade with little to no local fanfare, but by September 1926 he had become a nationally known preacher.² When the train finally arrived, the country preacher headed to the "colored" section of the Jim Crow train, en route to preach to the masses.³

This, however, was no ordinary preaching revival. Reverend Gates was headed to the city to record his rhythmic sermons for leading record labels. The recording capital of the world came clamoring to him after the resounding sales of his first phonograph sermon with Columbia records in Atlanta. The sermon was priced at almost twice the national average hourly wage, comparable to over thirty dollars today. The cost, however, did not dissuade consumers. The first release sold out so quickly, the label hurriedly pressed over thirty thousand copies of his second sermon to meet the demand. When retailers swiftly sold out, Columbia placed a supplemental order of another 20,000 copies the very next month. Americans got phonograph religion.⁴

When Gates arrived in New York City, more than ten labels vied to get him in the studio, including industry stalwarts Paramount and Victor (later RCA-Victor). The entrepreneurial preacher obliged them all. The studio jaunt provided a striking juxtaposition. The rural folk preacher was the featured attraction in some of the most technologically advanced studios in the business. When Gates visited Okeh Records's sophisticated studio in Manhattan's Columbus Circle he recorded sermons in rural black expression, namely, in the form of the chanted folk sermon accompanied by his studio congregation. There, overlooking Broadway, one of the city's most famed and modern commercial thoroughfares, Reverend Gates recorded, "Ain't Gonna Lay My Religion Down," a warning of the dangers of urban living upon traditional "down home" religion. He adjusted such vernacular sermons to fit the limited time parameters of a double-sided 78 rpm wax record and delivered them to the tune and pace of the jazz and blues era.⁵ Gates employed a new method to preach an old gospel message.

During his career, Gates recorded over two hundred such sermons, making him a leading spokesperson of old-fashioned revivalism. A white southerner attested to Gates's plain-folk appeal. "[I have] heard [D. L.] Moody, Billie [*sic*] Sunday, and Dr. [Charles] Fuller," the mayor of Cedartown, Georgia, reportedly admitted. But when he heard Reverend Gates preaching, he was convinced that "there is not a man, living or dead, who could make it so plain."⁶ Mainstream (white) publications of the day, such as the *New York Times*, *Variety*, or *Time Magazine*, did not feature or comment on Gates's revivalism as they did Moody, Sunday, and Fuller. However, in the eyes of many plain folk, Gates's gospel labors were just as significant.

The popularity of Reverend Gates's old-time media ministry made him a commercial icon. Labels advertised his sacred wares according to the latest commercial trends, giving him a seemingly ubiquitous presence in the black consumer market. Ads featuring Gates's face and sermons graced all the nationally circulated black newspapers as well as posters in local stores, handbills, record brochures and journals, and mail order catalogs. The pervasive commercials often pitched Reverend Gates alongside ads for top-billed artists such as Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, and Duke Ellington. In addition to celebrity exposure, Gates also enjoyed celebrity living. During his New York City recording sessions,

he often stayed at Harlem's luxurious and chic Hotel Olga: a precious ritual for a man who had lived in dirt floor shacks with no running water for the first forty years of his life. While residing at the "black Waldorf-Astoria" Gates lounged, dined, and rubbed shoulders with hotel regulars such as Harvard-trained philosopher and first black Rhodes scholar Alain Locke, baseball great Satchel Paige, and Armstrong. Preaching on wax transformed the folk preacher into a celebrity preacher.⁷

The outcome of this phonograph religion was pervasive. The record industry eagerly sought other black preachers who could inject folk religion into the studio pulpit, and black clerics lined up to do so. Labels jostled with one another to market their black media preachers, advertising and retailing their pricey sacred wares in a variety of local shops and chain stores. Consumers, in turn, zealously bought them. There was a harvest of souls who thoroughly enjoyed hearing the gospel preached in the old-time style on the phonograph and plenty of money for preachers and record labels to reap in the process.



This book explains why a critical mass of African American ministers, like Reverend Gates, teamed up with major phonograph labels to record and sell their sermons and why black consumers eagerly purchased them. More specifically, it chronicles and evaluates how this "phonograph religion" significantly contributed to the shaping of modern African American Christianity.

There has been much work in the study of American religion that chronicles the significance of mass mediums such as print, radio, film, television, and the Internet in the practice(s) of Protestant Christianity. The field, however, has been slow to recognize the phonograph as an equally vital tool within these religious traditions. This book takes up this neglected task by tracing the phenomenon of African American Protestant clergy who utilized the phonograph to sell and broadcast their sermons during the interwar period.

Many white mass media religious celebrities came to the fore during the early part of the twentieth century. Noted evangelists Aimee Semple McPherson and Charles Fuller, for example, became iconic names through their trailblazing use of radio. Black clergy have not

traditionally been seen as attaining the same kind of “big name” status in their communities through religious broadcasting. Indeed, African Americans did not have the same kind of access to radio as their white counterparts. However, black clergy utilized other means to get their message out and join the chorus of modern religious broadcasting. Scores of African American preachers teamed up with leading phonograph record labels to record sermons and transmit their spiritual messages to a broad—and, it turned out, eager—African American consuming public. As a result, these black phonograph preachers played an active role in the shaping and continued vibrancy of black Protestantism during the interwar period.

The revitalization of black religion during this era has largely concentrated on the experiences of the black literati. However, chronicling the rise of professionally trained ministers and scholars, black institutional churches and schools, and the artistic musings of the black literati on “the folk” does not tell the whole story. While the black literati of the Harlem Renaissance were examining and debating the “primitive” nature of black Christianity in Broadway plays such as *The Green Pastures* and acclaimed writings such as *God’s Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*; black “folk” were busy crafting their own ideas and practices of religious revitalization. This renaissance of black religion was not written down in intellectual tomes. Rather, it was recorded on wax.⁸

The phenomenon began, in many ways, with the Great Migration. From 1900 to 1930, more than 3 million African Americans left their rural homes in search of better lives in urban America. More than half of this black rural diaspora moved to the urban south, while there were about 1.4 million southern-born African Americans living in the urban north and west.⁹ This widespread urbanization severely changed patterns of consumption, community, and domesticity, as well as canons of civil and religious authority. This fundamental shift in worldview altered the way Americans understood and practiced religion. Formally held beliefs and authorities were brought into question. In a word, religion and the role it played in black life changed dramatically during the Great Migration.

Protestant clergy perceived the colossal population and cultural transformations as a clarion call for revival. Their efforts were not

necessarily aimed at launching a collection of large religious gatherings of emotional fervor. Such efforts largely fell out of favor during the interwar period. As one clergyman of the time noted, the increasingly urban nation demanded “a different type of revival.” Rather, clergy labored to remake or “revive” the faith and its social mission according to the new social and cultural mores. Some clergy, mostly liberal Protestants, augmented creeds, dogmas, and practices as a means to grapple with the modern era. Evangelical clergy, however, attempted to hold fast to traditional beliefs. Eager white Protestant clergy such as McPherson and Fuller responded by taking old-time revivalism to radio: a new medium for an old message. Evangelical black clergy in turn harnessed the phonograph as an instrument for the urban revitalization of black Protestantism. Phonograph religion was a revival on wax.¹⁰

Phonograph religion, then, retooled African American Protestantism for the modern era in four primary ways. First, preaching on wax made black Christianity a mass-produced commodity. To be sure, African Americans, born a generation or so after slavery, grew up seeing the conspicuous presence of black clergy in the national marketplace. Following the Civil War, African American clerics began to endorse and sell novel branded products such as home wares and medicines as a display of bourgeois respectability and as a means to raise funds to support black faith communities and institutions.¹¹ However, phonograph religion went a step further; it packaged the central ritual and tenet of Protestant Christianity for the marketplace: the preached word.

The aim of phonograph religion, in part, was to address the materialization of modern consumer culture. An unprecedented rise in recreational spending during the interwar period marked the emergence of modern-day consumer rites. Urban life offered the rural diaspora regulated working shifts as well as higher wages and salaries with daily and weekly cash payrolls as opposed to the inconsistent income of farm life. Urban migrants were endowed with more cash *in hand* than many had ever had before and the leisure time and freedom to spend it. This was evident in the rise in recreational spending. In the first twenty years of the twentieth century, the average household expenditure for non-necessities—such as cars, cosmetic products, home wares, and records—grew by only 1 percent. However, from 1920 until the

end of World War II, the average family expenditure for these items grew by almost 10 percent. The period witnessed the largest incremental increase in leisure spending in American history. Americans were buying phonographs, blues and jazz records, cars, clothes, and a host of other mass-produced goods with unparalleled alacrity. However, religious institutions by and large did not benefit from the economic boom. The hike in recreational spending coincided with a decline in the percentage of income Americans devoted to religious work. Urban residents, native and migrant alike, were increasingly devoting their dollars to the nonessentials of the consumer market and less to religious life. "The uncertainties of 1919 were over," wrote F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1937. It was the Jazz Age, "an age of excess" when America went "on the greatest, gaudiest spree in history."¹²

Phonograph preachers packaging their sermons as desirable commodities as a means to address and redress such trends, while the phonograph industry welcomed the chance to broaden its market share. These complementary desires resulted in the mass-production of black Protestant sermons by leading record labels. From 1925 to 1941 approximately one hundred black preachers teamed up with the phonograph industry. Their spiritual wares were advertised and sold in numerous places including black newspapers, posters, handbills, department stores, mail-order catalogs, record label shops, and furniture stores. The preached word, along with black popular music, art, film, and beauty products became a mechanized product in the burgeoning consumer marketplace of the twentieth century.

The rural diaspora welcomed the recorded folk sermons. They were purchased across the country in large numbers. The chanted sermon was a ritual that many believed was a core tenet of Christian worship. The sermons many heard in black urban churches lacked such cadence. A sermon without the rhythmic chanted pace was, to many black migrants, not a sermon at all. Phonograph religion helped the transplanted faithful to hold fast to their faith in a strange new land.

Second, phonograph religion shifted black Protestantism by laying the foundations of modern religious broadcasting in black Christianity. Religious broadcasting, as religion scholar Jonathan L. Walton notes, is not just the widespread utilization of sound mediums for

proselytization, but also the industries that aid clergy in producing, merchandizing, and marketing their spiritual products.¹³ The phonograph trade electrically recorded, packaged, and aurally transmitted black preachers and their sermons across the nation prior to widespread black radio preaching.¹⁴

The collapsing of temporal and spatial boundaries was a definitive characteristic of modern culture. Scientists (Einstein), inventors (Alexander Bell and Thomas A. Edison), and thinkers and artists (James Joyce) of the period “were united by their desire to challenge the traditional bounds of space and time.”¹⁵ Jazz music trumped the parameters of musical time, and automobiles altered notions of distance and time. It was the ethos of the era. Likewise, phonograph religion released black clergy and the essential ritual of preaching from the temporal and corporeal confines of the pulpit and preaching moment into the sonic arena of modern life and consumer culture. Seen in this way, the transmitters of phonograph religion were apostles of modern black church work and the architects of popular black religious broadcasting.¹⁶

In addition to commodification and broadcasting, recorded sermons created commercial celebrity preachers in black Christian practice. The era has largely been known for the emergence of modern black celebrities in sports, art, and entertainment. However, the nationwide packaging, marketing, and selling of the revival on wax made phonograph preachers commercial celebrities as well. This iconic status aided clergy claims of authority and influence during the rise of black cultures of urban professionalism. Some black clergy pursued education, elected office, and associations with elite organizations to bolster their standing. Popular phonograph preachers, however, eschewed such channels, basing their status on broad commercial appeal.

The study of American religion has traditionally positioned such celebrity as an anomaly and a departure from black Christianity. Such practices have long been considered the arena of white Protestants and the black urban “sects” and “cults” of the 1930s. The contemporary presence of wealthy black celebrity preachers and their branded products, some argue, is actually evidence of a “new black church” or in the case of a black Pentecostalism, an expression of neo-Pentecostalism.¹⁷

However, commercial celebrity became a significant aspect of traditional black Christian practices when phonograph religion transfigured Baptist and Pentecostal clergy into mainstays of black celebrity culture. Popular preachers on wax pursued and basked in the same commercial publicity, public adulation, and compensation of leading black entertainers of the day. The phenomenon is not new; it simply has not received the same scholarly attention as racial uplift and community mobilizing in black religious experience. Designations, then, such as “new” or “neo” are misleading. The difference between black commercial celebrity preachers of then and now is one of technological and financial scale, not religious ideology.¹⁸

Finally, and closely related to this, the iconic clergy of phonograph religion altered not only the sources and channels of black clerical authority, but also its tone. As black religious broadcasters wedded their cultural and social clout to the market and celebrity—rather than profession, custom, and education—their ability to authoritatively address and protest societal ills was attenuated according to the dictates of the market.

In all, this book argues that the placement of black Protestant preachers and their phonograph sermons on the market shelf significantly changed the face of African American religion and culture during the interwar period by establishing the black religious practices of sermon commodification, broadcasting, commercial celebrity, and the modern nature of religious authority.



The phonograph puts this story in play. Chapter 1 then offers a broad look at the prominent role of the phonograph in American life and culture during the early twentieth century. The phonograph was not limited to music; it was also the primary home entertainment medium for speeches, letters, news, books, family records, children’s stories, and even advertising. Thomas Edison, the inventor of the phonograph, anticipated the day when he would “see a phonograph in every American home.” His dream became a reality.¹⁹ The chapter relies on the voices of consumers to highlight the ways in which the talking machine altered American life.

Chapter 2 examines how black faith communities responded to the emergence of race records—black popular music recorded by and for African Americans. Many established black churches demonized this manifestation of the black entertainment industry in one way or another. Despite such efforts, a host of evangelical black clergy responded to the rise of race records by joining the phonograph industry. Their response to race records was steeped in the time-honored practice of American evangelicalism: duplicating and utilizing forms of popular entertainment and communication as a means of proselytization and religious revitalization. The phonograph, in their eyes, was a utensil of church work. Chapter 3, then, centers on the rise of phonograph sermons, tracing the production, marketing, advertising, and selling of these mass-produced spiritual commodities.

Chapter 4 focuses on the popularizing of phonograph religion. The revival on wax went into full swing when phonograph preachers began to channel the linguistic folk style of race records into the studio pulpit. The record-breaking sales of these phonograph preachers carved out a lasting blueprint for popular black religious broadcasting. The final two chapters explore the life and career of Reverend James M. Gates. As the most popular and prolific sermon recorder of the era, Gates set the tone and standard for successful black media ministry. As a case study, his life grounds the celebrity and authority of phonograph religion. Chapter 5 traces how the popularity of recorded sermons made Reverend Gates a commercial star, established and molded in the black celebrity culture of the era. This new preacher derived his authority not from the world of letters and elite black institutions and organizations, but from the commercial marketplace and the social mobility associated with celebrity. Chapter 6 examines the relationship between recorded sermons and dominant notions of race, class, and gender. The spotlight is placed on Reverend Gates's experience of corporate retail and his 1930 sermon "Say Goodbye to Chain Stores" to reveal how the market simultaneously amplified and attenuated black religious broadcasters' ability to address inequality.

In the end, the story of phonograph religion has implications for the past and present. It broadens our narrative of African American and American religion by injecting a new cast of historical actors, media, and corporations into our understanding of how religion in America

was shaped and formed during the twentieth century. In doing so, it invites scholars and casual observers of black religion and churchgoers alike to a more sober assessment of contemporary times. Black religious commodities, broadcasting, celebrity, and popular social authority are not in fact new phenomena in black life. Rather, these practices largely stem from preaching on wax.