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## Why Do African Americans Pray So Often?

Long before we got serious about writing this book, we had concluded that black Christians more often publicly display their religious faith than white Christians do. Two observations shaped our beliefs about this. First, we stopped counting the number of times that we had seen a black athlete, actor, or musician give glory to God after winning the Super Bowl, an Emmy, or an American Music Award. It happened so often that it seemed customary. However, we both admitted that we still take notice when white athletes or artists do so (especially non-country-music singers).

Second, when asked the everyday obligatory question “How are you?” we noticed that many African Americans respond with “I’m blessed. And you?” It is worth noting that we are just as likely to hear this reply on a Wednesday afternoon as we are a Sunday morning. Moreover, the “And you?” reply is a thinly veiled test of one’s faith; it often inspires a public discussion over God’s impact on a person’s life. These testimonials can take place at any moment, in any setting from sanctuaries to subway trains, from Bible study groups to ball games.

Just to be clear, we are not saying that white Christians do not thank God in secular public settings or that they do not have their own faith-based adages (some might even respond with some variation of the expected reply, such as “I’m blessed by The Best. And you?”). But in our view, it seemed as if these small but noticeable differences were motivated by a distinct sense of Christianity among blacks rather than whites.

We did not get serious about writing this book until we experienced an awkward situation that forced us to deliberately engage the fault

lines between religion and race. The following encounter supported our speculations about the unique manner in which African American Protestants go about their religious faith.

We had narrowed our search for an administrative assistant down to three people and had begun the final step of interviewing our top candidates. Sharon<sup>1</sup>—a tall, 30-something-year-old African American woman—was one of the final three. Her interview took place on a rainy Houston day, so we let her know that it was okay if she needed some extra time to freshen up before our meeting. The interview went pretty well. It was only awkward because Michael and I both instinctively knew that one of our other candidates was a better fit for the position.

Maybe Sharon sensed this. In our final moments together, she told us that she was “so nervous” about the interview that she had spent the additional time before our meeting praying in the bathroom. “I had to talk to the Lord,” she said with a smile. “I needed some extra strength!” We all shared in a good laugh. But then she went on to tell us how she prays several times a day, just about anywhere and everywhere and whenever she feels the need to “call on the Lord.” Sharon volunteered all of this information and even gave specifics—despite this being an interview for a secular job at a secular institution. Before leaving, she openly thanked the Lord for getting her to our offices safely and asked for His “mercy” in getting back home.

After the interview, Michael and I talked about Sharon at length. I told him that as far as I could tell, many churchgoing African Americans approach their religious faith in the same way that Sharon does. “Black folks pray all the time,” I said. “It’s just what we do.” I followed up this observation with a question: “How many white Sharons are out there?” I was curious to know whether he believes that whites often call on the Lord in a public bathroom or pray several times a day. I figured that he would have a better idea than I do, since I am black and he is white. Michael stopped and paused. “Probably not too many, perhaps a few evangelicals.”

That got us thinking: Do black Christians pray more often than white Christians do? And if so, why do African Americans pray so often? Conventional wisdom presumes that despite minor cultural dif-

ferences, members of the same universal religion do not radically differ in their religious practices and convictions. This is largely because “universal religions” (such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism) are thought to have the same core beliefs and practices, no matter where a follower is located on the globe. Moreover, these universal religions, according to their own teachings, all ideally work to be vessels for bringing people together, building consensus, and inspiring camaraderie among their followers. If black Christians consistently pray more often than white Christians do and have distinctly faith-based reasons for doing so—and if this difference is merely one of many significant racial differences—then Christianity’s “universal” standing would seem untenable. Indeed, it would suggest that different groups think about and practice Christianity in perhaps fundamentally different ways.

In this book, we find out if there is any validity to our informal observations regarding *racial differences in how black and white Christians go about their religious faith*. This book has three goals. First, we bring together important ideas that are disseminated across the extensive literature on black religion. Second, we advance a new set of principles—what we describe as *building blocks*—for understanding the distinctive way that African Americans think about and practice Christianity. While some of our building blocks are familiar to scholars of black religion, we advance original contributions as well as new takes on established ideas. Third, and most important, we empirically assess the merits of these building blocks by way of rigorous research methods (surveys, focus groups, and in-depth interviews). This final contribution is what truly sets this book apart from the rest—our analysis of cutting-edge data sources allows us to move beyond theory and conjecture. We provide empirical evidence that supports our arguments in the form of statistical findings and emergent patterns from dialogue with everyday Christians. But there is no need to fret: we present what we find in plain English, in a way that is accessible to all our readers (that is why we ask those readers who are fluent in the language of statistics to please consult our appendices).

To be sure, the answers to such interesting and important questions as “Why do African Americans pray so often?” shed much-needed

light on issues relevant to race relations among black and white Christians in the United States. At stake is not just knowledge for its own sake but rather *knowledge relevant to the political, social, and religious functioning of this nation*. For instance, the findings presented in this book suggest that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's vision of the "Beloved Community"—a spiritually based gathering of people from all walks of life motivated by goodwill, reconciliation, and justice—will remain unachievable until Christians engage in honest and forthright dialogue on the respective roles that racial oppression and privilege have played in shaping commitments to dissimilar models of Christianity. Efforts aimed at improving race relations will have limited success until social scientists, religious leaders, and the wider American public recognizes that there are profound similarities—and most especially differences—among blacks and whites with respect to how they think about and practice their religious faith.

### *What Is This Book About?*

We argue that the cumulative effects of past and present racial discrimination and inequality have strongly influenced how African American Protestants go about their religious faith. The legacy of race-based oppression and privilege has helped to fuel differences in black and white Christians' *religious sensibilities* (i.e., the scope and content of faith-based actions and beliefs). As a result, African Americans remain strongly committed to a unique form of Protestantism that was born out of—and continues to protect them against—the historical consequences of racial stratification in the United States. Identity politics—that is, political beliefs and actions that are associated with a group of people that someone identifies with—drive significant racial differences among everyday black and white Protestants with respect to their faith-based thoughts and practices. Blacks and whites not only approach faith matters differently, but faith *matters* differently to blacks and whites. This is mainly because African Americans tend to lean on their faith as a supernatural call for help to protect against the

consequences of historical and contemporary racial discrimination and inequality.

We offer a new framework for understanding how racial group membership color-codes religious sensibilities among Christians. One of our key contributions is the establishment of the *five building blocks of black Protestant faith*. These touchstones address the nature of black religion by capturing the fundamentally distinct, dynamic, energetic, and at times intricate manner in which African American Protestants go about their religious faith. Scholars across various fields of study have made significant contributions to the vast literature on racial group membership and religious identity among blacks.<sup>2</sup> Although some features of our five building blocks of black Protestant faith are common to the study of black religion, we present fresh theoretical insights and fill some of the conceptual gaps in time-honored ideas. Moreover, the five building blocks of black Protestant faith are clear and straightforward. The African American Protestant religious tradition is steeped in a rich and dynamic history that is multifaceted. Our building blocks help to clarify confusion (among both scholars and the wider American public) over the connections between religion and race among Christians, and they elicit take-home points that are useful, easily understandable, and applicable to everyday life.

Furthermore, we supply greater empirical precision and specificity than has been previously attained. The overwhelming majority of studies in this line of research are theoretical and/or historical. Our research methodology allows us to move beyond prior research by *testing* the extent to which black and white Christians differ in their religious sensibilities. This book includes a critically important comparative aspect: we directly assess black and white believers across a range of important dimensions of religious identity, such as how often they pray and attend worship services. Each of our five building blocks of black Protestant faith is simple, logical, and most important, testable. Hence, we are able to document the depth of faith-based similarities and differences—as well as to discover complexities and nuances—that lie beyond the reach of speculative analyses. In sum, these two major contributions (our comprehensive theoretical/conceptual

approach and our comparative empirical analysis) allow us to present a more exhaustive and decisive investigation of the links between racial group membership and religious identity among Christians than any other study to date.

We are not the first scholars to note a difference in how black and white Christians go about their religious faith. For instance, a recent Pew Research Center poll of 36,000 Americans revealed that racial group membership has at least some influence over faith-based thoughts and practices. Findings from the survey show that blacks do, in fact, report praying more often than nonblacks do.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, a greater percentage of African Americans than nonblacks attend worship services frequently and also report being an official member of a religious congregation.<sup>4</sup> While these findings are important, they do not tell us *why* African Americans pray or attend church services more often than nonblacks do. The “why” component of this issue is paramount; it potentially taps into deep-seated historical and contemporary tensions at the root of race relations in America.

For some time now, many scholars of black religious studies have argued that African American Christians undertake a distinct approach to their religious faith. In particular, these intellectuals have maintained that black Christians’ beliefs and actions are strongly influenced by *liberation theology*<sup>5</sup> and a distinct *theology of suffering and evil*.<sup>6</sup> The former posits that Christ’s message should not be separated from but rather should be used to alleviate social, political, economic, and racial problems in society. The latter addresses a unique set of issues pertaining to how believers—most particularly the downtrodden—reconcile their faith in Christ alongside the consequences of inequality. (We will address liberation theology and the theology of suffering and evil in detail at various points throughout this book.) Both of these impressive bodies of work argue that the dynamics of power and racial stratification in America have fostered theological and doctrinal chasms between black and white Christians.

The five building blocks of black Protestant faith—and their supporting evidence—bolster these claims. More specifically, they provide support for noted scholars C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya’s influential (though untested) assertion that a *black sacred cosmos*

lies at the center of the African American religious experience.<sup>7</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya describe this defining feature of black religion in the following insightful way:

The black sacred cosmos or the religious worldview of African Americans is related both to their African heritage, which envisaged the whole universe as sacred, and their conversion to Christianity during slavery and its aftermath. It has been only in the past twenty years that scholars of African American history, culture, and religion have begun to recognize that black people created their own unique and distinctive forms of culture and worldviews as parallels rather than replications of the culture in which they were involuntary guests. . . . While the structure of beliefs for black Christians were the same orthodox beliefs as that of white Christians, there were also different degrees of emphasis and valences given to certain particular theological views. . . . The direct relationship between the holocaust of slavery and the notion of divine rescue colored the theological perceptions of black laity and the themes of black preaching in a very decisive manner, particularly in those churches closest to the experience.<sup>8</sup>

In this passage, Lincoln and Mamiya assert that while African American Protestants are committed to core Christian tenets (i.e., “orthodox beliefs”), they have also developed their own racially specific approach to and understanding of Christianity. The authors go on to pronounce that a “meaningfully different cultural form of expressing Christianity is found in most black churches, regardless of denomination, to this day.”<sup>9</sup>

Lincoln and Mamiya’s widely respected work should be viewed as a starting point rather than an ending. Although they painted the broad strokes, Lincoln and Mamiya left it to future studies to fill in the details regarding the formation and composition of the black sacred cosmos. In our view, the following are just a few of the critical questions that their book inspired yet remain unanswered: What exactly is “African” about the African American Protestant religious tradition? What are the “different degrees of emphasis and valences” that black Christians accentuate but white Christians do not? What specifically

are the “meaningfully different cultural form[s]” that distinguish black Christianity from white Christianity?

The five building blocks of black Protestant faith advance our understanding of the black sacred cosmos’s shape, content, and structure. They not only address the aforementioned questions (as well as others) but help with clarifying the distinct manner in which African American Protestants go about their religious faith. The five building blocks of black Protestant faith are not mutually exclusive but rather are closely connected and often overlap as well as reinforce one another. Moreover, these five features of the uniquely African American model of Christianity operate at the *group* level—when blacks and whites are compared in aggregate: they are not applicable to and should not be imputed on all black *individuals*. Lastly, racial differences in religious sensibilities primarily result from the dynamic interplay between cultural and structural factors (we explain this in detail over the duration of this book). Neither African Americans nor whites are biologically or genetically programmed to think about and practice their religious faith in any way; they *learn* to think about and practice (or not) and make choices about their religious faith over the course of their lives. The five building blocks of black Protestant faith are as follows:

1. *Experiential building block*: black Protestant faith is active and experiential; it is less concerned with precise doctrinal contours than is white mainline or evangelical Christianity.
2. *Survival building block*: black Protestant faith is critical to survival and helps individuals cope with suffering associated with everyday trials and tribulations.
3. *Mystery building block*: black Protestant faith is mystical and expresses an appreciation for the mystery in life; it includes folklore and cultural components deriving from the African Diaspora, the consequences of racial inequality in America, and non-Christian religions.
4. *Miraculous building block*: black Protestant faith is confident and comprehensive; the miraculous is ordinary and the ordinary is miraculous.

5. *Justice building block*: black Protestant faith is committed to social justice and equality for all individuals and groups in society.

Our goal in this book is clear: to help Americans of all backgrounds better understand the links between race, religion, and identity politics. We provide an accurate, rigorous, and careful analysis of often conflicting, complicated, and controversial issues influencing how racial group membership color-codes faith-based thoughts and practices in the contemporary United States. We focus on religious identity among African Americans, and our driving theoretical and methodological contributions involve explicating and evaluating the five building blocks of black Protestant faith.

In accomplishing this goal, we undertake the most comprehensive and systematic investigation of African American religious actions and beliefs to date. Relatively few studies have carried out a rigorous empirical (i.e., quantitative and/or qualitative) examination of this topic.<sup>10</sup> We rely on widely accepted social science research strategies that are transparent. Our analysis of contemporary survey data and in-depth interviews with everyday Christians provide us with a unique opportunity to bridge the impressive theory-based and historical literature with modern research techniques.

Let us be clear: our intentions in this book are not to reignite or fan the flames of historical tension between black and white Christians. To the contrary, our purpose is the exact opposite: to expose and explore the combustible causes of faith-related racial firestorms so that they might finally be extinguished. This is the best way to ensure lasting progress with respect to improving race relations among blacks and whites in general, working for racial equality, and paving the way for Dr. King's vision for the Beloved Community.

### *Why Black and White Protestants?*

In this book, we compare and contrast faith-based thoughts and practices among black and white Protestants. However, our theoretical, methodological, and interpretive analysis focuses on African

Americans. We chose this approach for several reasons, including (a) the unique role that religion has played in buffering blacks from racial hostility, (b) the fact that blacks are more willing to talk about racial differences in religion than are whites (we will have more to say about this topic later), and (c) there are far fewer empirical studies of religiosity among blacks than among whites.

We examine faith-based similarities and differences between black and white Protestants for three reasons. First, black and white Protestants have a longstanding, contentious history in North America that dates back nearly 400 years. Second, the vast majority of blacks and the majority of Christian whites in the United States are Protestant. At least 70% of African Americans and 51% of whites claim to be affiliated with a Protestant denomination; 23% of whites and only 6% of blacks claim to be Catholic.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, less than 14% of all Asians or Latinos are Protestant. While at least 67% of Latinos are Catholic, half of all Asians are neither Protestant nor Catholic. Lastly, studies have shown that most Asian and Latino Christians are relatively recent arrivals to the United States with diverse national origins, immigration contexts, and conversion histories.<sup>12</sup> The rich racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds of Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Mexican, Cuban, and Dominican Christians, for example, are well beyond the scope of the present study.

### *Research Methods*

We discern the five building blocks of black Protestant faith by way of quantitative and qualitative research strategies. Our primary data source is the 2006 Portraits of American Life Study (PALS). This innovative, nationally representative sample of U.S. residents contains the most comprehensive survey modules to date regarding beliefs about core Christian theological tenets, religious practices and convictions, and attitudes about contemporary race-related issues. A second quantitative data source is the 2006 General Social Survey (GSS), an annual opinion poll that asks a nationally representative sample of Americans about various topics, including religion and race. Our final data

source is a series of forthright qualitative interviews with people in the pews, small-group sessions with churchgoers, and meetings with high-ranking religious clergy.

The PALS and the GSS were designed to include both time-tested and cutting-edge sampling procedures. This combination of conventional and advanced data collection techniques ensures that the study participants enrolled in these surveys accurately reflect the larger American population (see appendix A for more information on sampling procedures, sample characteristics, data coding, and analysis procedures). The everyday people included in these surveys come from various walks of life. They live in all regions of the United States, in small towns, major metropolitan areas, suburbs, and inner cities. Furthermore, the respondents in these surveys are older and younger people, men and women, rich and poor, those with a college degree and those who did not finish high school, and of course, they racially categorize themselves as black or white. In short, the research teams responsible for developing these surveys undertook comprehensive and demanding procedures in order to provide as much assurance as possible that their study participants are the same average, everyday Americans that you, your family, and your friends probably are. As a result, based on appropriate statistical tests, we are confident in generalizing our survey findings to the wider American population.

Of course, many popular and scholarly texts have already examined the connections between racial group membership and religious identity among Christians.<sup>13</sup> However, our analysis moves beyond differences in culturally based praise and worship methods such as preaching styles, music ministries, and what some people affectionately describe as “dancin’ in the aisle.” In this book, we examine religious identity among African American Protestants on a more profound theological and doctrinal level. We investigate the prevalence of faith-based actions and beliefs across numerous facets of religious life.

Some of the topics addressed in this book include levels of commitment to core Christian tenets—those consistent with the Apostles’ Creed—such as beliefs about creation and the existence of Heaven and Hell. Other assessments concern religious convictions such as whether black Protestants are more likely than whites to view God as a

“personal being” or “impersonal spiritual force” and if there are racial differences across beliefs that are closely associated with Christianity (such as angels and miracles) as well as religious-related beliefs that are typically not associated with Christianity at all (such as astrology and reincarnation).

We also test to see whether there are significant racial differences in the frequency of religious actions such as church attendance and reading the Bible, as well as the extent to which blacks and whites espouse dissimilar beliefs about the Bible (such as whether it should be interpreted literally or figuratively). Results from these analyses help to clarify whether African American Protestants place a stronger emphasis on certain faith-based thoughts and practices than whites do, or vice versa.

Furthermore, we analyze faith-based beliefs about morality such as whether “God’s law” is the basis of “right and wrong” and whether it is “sometimes okay to break the rules if it works to your advantage.” Our analyses of morality are especially critical because they allow us to assess the extent to which racial group membership color-codes Christians’ views on righteousness and virtue.

Popular media outlets and scholarly publications have detailed the ardent and impassioned manner in which white evangelicals go about their religious faith.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, for our most specific comparisons, we restrict our analyses to black Protestants and white evangelicals—whose common heritages derive from the Great Awakenings of previous centuries in American life. This is important because recent studies by sociologists of religion confirm that there are significant racial differences among blacks and whites with respect to how denominational affiliations shape faith-based thoughts and practices.<sup>15</sup> In short, denominational affiliations appear more important in shaping religious identities among white Protestants than among black Protestants.

This is not to say that denominational differences are not meaningful to African Americans. The majority of black Protestants attend predominantly African American churches that are Baptist, Methodist, or Pentecostal.<sup>16</sup> Strong theological and doctrinal differences exist across these denominations (not to mention differences within them

by subdenomination). However, the fact that African Americans are *black* tends to take precedence over their individual denominational affiliations. Most scholars agree that the impact of denominational differences is small when compared to more consequential underlying similarities linked to past and present inequities associated with racial minority status. The findings presented in this book support this conclusion.<sup>17</sup>

We limit our analysis to similarities and differences between black Protestants and white evangelicals when this is the most appropriate and interesting comparison. Results from these procedures are especially critical: they further attest to the centrality of race within a subset of black and white believers who, at least from the outside, appear similarly fervently committed to their Christian religious identities. What does it mean if the average black Protestant—who might be Baptist, Pentecostal, or Methodist—prays and attends worship services more frequently than the average white evangelical does? We attempt to attach meaning to these differences.

The final set of items that we examine assesses the extent to which black and white Christians differ in their beliefs about racial problems and racial reconciliation. Public opinion research has long established that blacks and whites espouse contrasting beliefs about the causes of and solutions to our nation's historic "race problem."<sup>18</sup> Moreover, a handful of studies have shown that blacks' and whites' beliefs about how to solve the "race problem" are often intensified in the religious realm.<sup>19</sup>

Consequently, we also compare and contrast black and white Protestants' views on individual versus structural solutions for ameliorating racial inequality. Some of the hot-button topics addressed include whether the U.S. government should develop and implement racially specific policies such as affirmative action and reparations for slavery. Our findings for these aspects of *identity politics* tell us whether black and white Protestants are on the same page regarding strategies for bridging racial divides. This portion of the book further enhances our awareness of the potential pathways and roadblocks to faith-based racial reconciliation.

### *Our Quantitative Analysis*

In this book, we make use of both descriptive and multivariate statistics (again, don't worry, you don't have to know statistics to read or understand this book). Descriptive statistics provide readers with a general "description" of the topic under analysis (such as the percentage of people who say that they pray at least once a day). Multivariate statistics are more sophisticated in that they provide much more specific information on the topic under analysis (such as the likelihood that a person who makes more than \$100,000 a year and has an advanced degree prays at least once a day).

The handful of survey-based studies in this area tends to make use of descriptive rather than multivariate statistics. Our utilization of both methods is vital; they allow us to paint a more precise picture concerning the extent to which racial group membership color-codes the manner in which blacks and whites go about their religious faith. An exclusive reliance on descriptive statistics can be misleading since they do not account for important background information (such as a person's income and education level).

For example, regarding the aforementioned Pew Research poll, 59% of black Protestants reported attending church services at least once a week, while 50% of nonblack Protestants reported attending weekly (this latter statistic must be interpreted with caution since it includes data for whites as well as other nonblack groups).<sup>20</sup> Polling data from the PALS and the GSS are consistent with this finding. We found that 45% of black Protestants in the PALS say that they attend church at least "once a week," while 37% of white Protestants say that they do so (see appendix B, descriptive table B.1A). Similarly, 44% of black Protestants in the GSS report going to church at least once a week, while 33% of white Protestants say that they do so (see descriptive table B.1B). Taken together, across all three of these nationally representative surveys, it appears as though African American Protestants attend worship services more frequently than whites do. Note that in each of these surveys, a greater percentage of blacks report attending services more than once a week as compared to nonblacks in general or whites in particular.

But can these descriptive findings withstand more rigorous tests of scientific scrutiny? For instance, will blacks continue to attend worship services more often than whites do after accounting for relevant background factors such as income, education, age, gender, and region of residence? Studies have shown that each of these variables plays a statistically significant role in shaping faith-based thoughts and practices.<sup>21</sup> If there is no meaningful difference between blacks and whites after accounting for these factors, then it could be that one or more of the aforementioned variables (such as age or education, for example) accounts for the percentage gaps in church attendance between blacks and whites. However, if we find a statistically significant gap between blacks and whites—even after accounting for the background factors—this tells us that the percentage differences between blacks and whites cannot be reduced to other variables such as income, gender, and region of residence. In other words, if the difference between blacks and whites holds constant after adjusting for these potentially explanatory factors, then the difference between blacks and whites is statistically meaningful and operates independently from the other variables.

In returning to our example of racial differences in church attendance, it turns out that black Protestants continue to go to church more frequently than white Protestants even after adjusting for relevant background factors. While education, age, gender, and region of residence play a significant role in shaping how often Protestants attend worship services, the finding for African Americans is highly statistically significant and is by far the strongest in magnitude of all variables in the model. This result holds constant across both the PALS and the GSS (see the corresponding multivariate tables D.1A and D.1B in appendix D).<sup>22</sup> In fact, the similar finding for blacks in both surveys is striking. These results further attest to the statistical accuracy and generalizability of our survey findings.

Still, we decided to take our analysis a step further. How do black Protestants specifically compare with white evangelicals on the frequency of church attendance? Results from both surveys show that the average African American Protestant attends worship services more often than the average white evangelical does (the corresponding

“special” multivariate tables are also presented in appendix D). This finding is particularly meaningful considering these groups have deep historical roots in the Great Awakenings. The role that racial group membership plays in color coding church attendance can neither be ignored nor reduced to the other factors.

Our descriptive analysis of the PALS data also shows that a higher percentage of black Protestants than of white Protestants report having an official church membership (see descriptive table B.1C). Remember that the Pew poll reported this result as well. Does this finding hold even after accounting for racial differences in church attendance? Yes. In fact, the difference between blacks and whites only grows stronger in magnitude and more highly significant when restricting our analysis to African American Protestants and white evangelicals.

### *Our Qualitative Analysis*

Thus far, our descriptive and multivariate analyses have shown that black Protestants are more likely than white Protestants to regularly attend worship services and to report being an official member of a religious congregation. Why would this be so? We realized early in the process of researching this book that statistics alone could explain neither the rich complexity nor the real-world consequences of our findings. The results for church attendance, church membership, and prayer (which mirror the findings already presented but are discussed in greater detail later in this book) impressed on us the need for engaging in dialogue with everyday Christians.

Therefore, we complement our analysis of survey data with one-on-one interviews and focus groups with 30 Christians representing the three largest African American Protestant denominations. Our small, nonrandom snowball sample of black believers should by no means be viewed as a definitive or conclusive qualitative inquiry. Nevertheless, we were astonished by the remarkable intellectual consistency with which our interviewees answered the questions that we asked them. Qualitative researchers often say that it is okay to stop conducting

interviews once you no longer learn any new information from the people with whom you have spoken. In other words, there is no need to recruit new people for your study once an obvious pattern of responses has emerged, and when the most recent people you have interviewed do not say anything that dramatically differs from those whom you have already interviewed.

That is exactly what happened with this study. Despite our small sample size, we decided to stop recruiting people for interviews because a distinct pattern had become apparent among our earliest and most recent participants. This is especially important considering that the people of faith whom we talked to are members of both big and small churches in and around Cleveland, Dallas–Fort Worth, Los Angeles, and New York City. The 14 in-depth interviews that we conducted with high-ranking clergy—including senior pastors well as other influential members of the pastorate—took place on the interviewees’ terms. They dictated the time, location, and duration of the meeting (which typically lasted about an hour and a half). We interviewed pastors during the morning, noon, and night in their church offices, homes, or favorite local restaurant. The remaining study participants enrolled in hour-long focus groups that were typically conducted following Sunday worship services or Bible study groups (the in-depth pastoral interview and focus group interview guides are presented in appendix C).

We did not intend to conduct the overwhelming majority of our interviews with African Americans. At the outset, we aimed to conduct interviews with a similar number of black and white Protestants. We realized that some of the topics to be discussed in these interviews (such as race relations, prayer, and church attendance) could potentially make some study participants feel uncomfortable. That is why we decided that Michael Emerson would mainly interview the whites, and Jason Shelton would mainly interview the blacks.

However, we quickly found that many whites were averse to participating in a study about race relations among Christians. Furthermore, many whites were puzzled to hear of our survey finding that racial group membership influences people’s faith-based thoughts and

actions. We made it clear to all potential respondents that their participation was anonymous and confidential and that they did not have to answer a particular question if they did not want to. Our university protocol required us to let potential respondents know that there were no correct or incorrect answers and that each participant would be compensated at least \$40 for sharing their time and thoughts. Most important, we let all potential participants know that we would not ask them any questions about how they *personally* go about their religious faith (although they were free to share this information). As survey researchers, we were most interested in hearing their opinions about why one group of Christians (African Americans) answered a survey question one way, while another group of Christians (whites) answered it another way.

Even so, many whites still expressed great consternation about our study. For instance, a white woman who participated in a focus group was forthcoming in her confusion about a survey finding that people who say that their race is “very important” to them also tend to pray more than other people. In an irritated tone she said, “I’m really shocked at that statement, that people who pay more attention to their race tend to pray more. That blows me away. But it should be the opposite. I . . . I mean . . . I can’t quite put it together, but that doesn’t jibe right with me because Christians shouldn’t even be looking at race.”<sup>23</sup>

This was precisely the “off-the-record” sentiment conveyed by a white male Methodist pastor who declined to participate in our study. Like many whites, he let us know that he “does not see color” but rather ministers to all people regardless of race or sexual orientation. Yet he told us that his participation in our study would require him to do something that he “simply” does not do: “think about people in categories.” At the end of our conversation, he informed us that earlier in the day he had faxed our interview guide to his church’s lawyer, who subsequently advised him not to participate.<sup>24</sup>

Our experiences with recruiting blacks to participate in the study dramatically differed from our experiences with whites. Only one African American pastor whom we approached about participating in the study declined to be interviewed (he said that we would not “un-

derstand” him since we were trained as sociologists and not theologians). Blacks were also eager to participate in our focus groups—so eager that we had to turn people down so as to ensure that the groups remained manageable. Moreover, the vast majority of our interviews with African Americans were lively, informative, and energetic. In fact, our African American informants—both the pastors and the focus group members—provided rich and defined data that fit squarely in line with longstanding arguments advanced by leading scholars in black religious studies. Consequently, we deemed it intellectually appropriate and worthwhile to secure an interview with a foremost contributor to the scholarly literature on black religion. An interview of this sort would serve as a meta-analysis for contextualizing, synthesizing, and cross-referencing the findings from our survey and personal interview data.

Dr. James H. Cone was the last participant whom we interviewed for this study. Dr. Cone is the Charles A. Briggs Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary, which is affiliated with Columbia University in New York City. He received his master of divinity degree from Garrett Theological Seminary in 1961 and his Ph.D. from Northwestern University in 1965. Dr. Cone is an ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church, the first Protestant denomination founded by African Americans. He has authored 12 books and more than 150 research articles and has been invited to speak at more than 1,000 colleges and universities across the globe. Dr. Cone is best known for penning the following classic texts: *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969), *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), *God of the Oppressed* (1975), and *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare?* (1991). Each of these books has been translated into nine different languages. Dr. Cone’s latest book is titled *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2011). Many people (both inside and outside the academy) consider him *the* most influential scholar of black theology living today.

Dr. Cone granted us the special consideration of waiving his anonymity and confidentiality. We are therefore able to attribute quotations directly to him. Dr. Cone brings decades of experience and

insight to our study. Not only do we view him as a data source in and of himself, but his interpretation of our survey findings suggests that the logical consistency of African American viewpoints largely remains uniform regardless of whether an interview took place in a storefront, megachurch, or a hallowed hall of academia.

### *But for the Grace of God*

We agree with Lincoln, Mamiya, Cone, and many other scholars of black religion who argue that in the United States, racial group membership and religious affiliation are so deeply interconnected that they cannot be separated without losing knowledge vital to our understanding of Christianity. Our survey findings for church attendance, church membership, and prayer support this conclusion. Findings from our in-depth interviews and focus groups reinforce this claim as well.

For instance, Rev. Washington, the senior pastor at a neighborhood Baptist church in Cleveland,<sup>25</sup> linked African Americans' unique approach to Christianity with racial stratification in the United States. Notice that in his statement, Rev. Washington references the "social gospel" and the "evangelical gospel." The former refers to the worldly, people-oriented dimensions of Christianity that can help with solving social problems in society. In contrast, the latter refers to the Biblically based dimensions of Christianity that are critical to attaining one's personal salvation:

Well, I think that first of all there are different experiences that African Americans have had in American history, such as slavery and discrimination, in which the church religious bodies were complicit and white Christians were complicit in it. This led to African Americans starting their own churches, which reflected their own historical background; so the rituals, the symbols, the worship design, the music, the preaching, the prayers, all of that, . . . how they interpret the Bible, their theology—all of those things were *theirs*.

I think another issue between a very large percentage of black Christians and white Christians is the social gospel versus the evan-

gical gospel. It has been suggested throughout history that white Christians tend to be more doctrinaire and black Christians tend to be more practical oriented, which is why you get the social gospel.

Rev. Washington's statement describes how the legacy of racial discrimination and inequality in the United States encouraged the onset of dissimilar faith-based actions and beliefs among black and white Christians. In fact, he—like many of the pastors whom we talked to—contends that the dynamics of race-based oppression and privilege are the driving force behind the racial difference in religious sensibilities. As we will soon detail, most of our interviewees believe that white Christians are more attentive to the fundamentals of Christian doctrine while black Christians are more concerned with the practical application of the faith to their everyday lives.

We asked Rev. Washington to clarify exactly what he meant by the term “experiences.” This seasoned pastor with a scholarly demeanor replied, “I mean slavery. We're still living with the scars of slavery. I mean discrimination. I mean this whole matter of depersonalizing people, just stripping them of their identity and even in some instances destiny—all of the things that happened to black people and continue to happen to black people in America today.”

Rev. Washington's feelings are by no means rare or unique. In fact, *all* 14 of the African American pastors we spoke to specifically referenced slavery or issues related to racial discrimination at some point during the course of their interview. This is important because none of the questions in our interview guide specifically references these topics. Our study participants evoked these concepts—slavery and racial discrimination—on their own intellectual volition, without prompting from us.

Findings from our in-depth interview and focus group data suggest that beliefs about slavery, racial discrimination, and inequality are a critical component of the African American Protestant religious tradition (these sentiments are consistent with our *Mystery building block of black Protestant faith*). Take, for instance, this powerful revelation from Rev. Edwards, a young Pentecostal pastor focused on “building up” the size of his small congregation in Cleveland:

We [African Americans] have dealt with things through our existence where the only help we had was God. We were set aside—anything that you can conceive of negatively that happens to a group of people basically happened. We survived through it all; we made it. Women survived rape; we survived beatings. I read that 10 million slaves made it to America, but there were 13 million in all. So 10 made it, but there are 3 in the sea somewhere. We have had to come through all of that, and I think now when our race looks at it and we see how blessed we have become, we attribute that to God. We didn't get out of slavery on our own.

More often than not, the portion of the interview in which our interviewees mentioned slavery, racial discrimination, or inequality was packed with tension and antipathy. However, these moments could also be quite humorous. A fun-loving yet quirky focus group participant at a Pentecostal church in Los Angeles literally brought the room to laughter-produced tears with his response to the aforementioned question about racial identity and prayer. After patiently waiting his turn to speak, he leaned back, looked toward the ceiling, placed his hand on his forehead and sarcastically said, “Uuuuhmmmm . . . We've been catching hell for about . . .” He couldn't even finish the statement. The laughter in the room had overwhelmed his otherwise booming voice. Everyone knew what he was doing: using humor to make a serious point about the connection between prayer and racial identity. He was finally able to make his point a few minutes later, after folks in the room had gathered themselves:

Five hundred years, five centuries of slavery, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, the whole nine yards—so we [African Americans] had to depend on a power greater than ourselves because that is the only way we kept our sanity. We were being lynched and everything else. We had to depend on somebody other than ourselves to keep our heads together to keep surviving. So we were in church every Sunday. We were crying out for God to help us. And that's one of the reasons why I personally believe that we [African Americans] are more keen

on being in church and being more religious and studying the Bible. Our faith in God is what got us through slavery.

While the subject of slavery, racial discrimination, or inequality became a topic of discussion during all of our interviews, not all of our study participants said the same things about how these issues shape religious sensibilities among black and white Christians. In fact, as we will see, there is important intellectual, attitudinal, and emotional variation among them. For instance, Rev. Shannon, a self-described “womanist” A.M.E. assistant pastor (*womanism* is a faith-based perspective positing that some ideological elements of feminism and black liberation theology should have a place within the African American Protestant tradition), emphasized that a person’s social status can play a critical role in shaping his or her religious beliefs. According to her, race, economics, politics—and most important, *power*—each influence people’s faith-based thoughts and practices:

I think that black and white Christians recognize that there is one God. We recognize there is one Jesus, and I think that as Christians we understand there is one Holy Spirit that’s the Trinity in three persons. Our faith helps us to see our theology through those eyes and to call ourselves Christians.

But how we look at that and what it means to us and how . . . [*Her thought trails off.*] I think that our social status and our economic status weigh into our theological beliefs, tremendously, and I think that’s why there’s a difference in how white people look at their theology. White people are looking at their theological belief system through their economic and social eyes. Black people are doing the same thing. We are looking at our theology, our belief system, through our economic and social eyes, but we’re *oppressed*. So we have heavier reliance on our theology to carry us through. We don’t have the advantage of asking somebody to help us out financially. I mean, when you run out of food stamps you’re going to have to figure out something else to do. So we look at our belief system, our theology, through our social and economic and our political eyes. And a white person does

too. There's the three: the social, the economic, and the political. But they have always had the *power*. So if you already got the power, you may not have to look at your theology and your God in the same way because you've got the power.

Rev. Shannon's comment suggests that having a privileged position on the status ladder can strongly impact how a person thinks about and practices his or her religious faith. She is trying to tell us that the circumstances of individuals' lives can literally determine what they see (or at least what they think they see) out in the social world. This perception—of being near the top, middle, or bottom of the social ladder—in turn affects how individuals and groups go about their religious faith.

The basic thrust of Rev. Shannon's point—that the worldly social dynamics of race, economics, culture, and politics strongly influence people's faith-based thoughts and practices—was a common sentiment expressed by our interviewees. Both the preachers and the people in the pews made it clear that they were aware that African Americans continue to lag behind whites across many quality-of-life indicators such as income, education, occupational status, health, and family-related issues. While our respondents differed in the extent to which they believe that blacks themselves are responsible for these cleavages, virtually all of them recognized that structural factors beyond individual initiative—such as racism and classism, for example—play a significant role in explaining racial differences across many important spheres of American life (we address the ideological debate over *individualism* and *structuralism* in chapters 4 and 8).

Rev. Johnson, a widely respected senior pastor at a large Baptist church in the Dallas–Fort Worth area, said that he did not realize how important the status ladder was in shaping one's religious faith until he invited a white preacher to his church one Sunday. His comment addresses the links between everyday practical concerns and the institutional centrality of the black church:

Dr. Jeffery Hunter of [a Christian college] spoke at our church several years ago. He's a white preacher, and he was listening to the songs that

our choir sang. And he made an interesting observation, and that is, a lot of songs our choir sang, they had to do with “the rent is due,” “I need money to get my hair fixed”—they sang about a God that has to do with personal issues. And he said to me, “You would never hear that in a white church.” I didn’t think about it until he said it, because I have visited a lot of white churches.

In black churches, we sing and testify and talk about a God that I expect to show up and deal with my problems *today*. I’m looking for hope and answers and encouragement *right now*, today, for my concerns.

He [Dr. Hunter] said that whites keep it a little more generic and intellectual. Whites would not bring God down to precisely address the fact that you and your husband are breaking up, and you don’t have money to pay your rent tomorrow. He said those kinds of songs, testimonies, and issues are rarely dealt with publicly in a white church.

So that’s why I think African American Christians rely on the church. That is what we do; that has been our tradition. We couldn’t afford psychology or psychiatry. We didn’t know what a “therapist” was. So the church became . . . [*His thought trails off.*] I’m shocked at the number of people who call my office looking for a lawyer. They will call my office and say, “Recommend one” [*laughs*]. We get a lot of calls, and I’m thinking, “Why are you asking me for a mechanic? A doctor? A lawyer? The funeral home?” [*laughs*]. But all those questions come right here to this church because the church is expected to help people. That has been our history and tradition as African Americans.

We found this sentiment—that black Christians pray to and recognize a God that they believe can and will “show up” when needed—to be an important feature of black Protestant faith (it is consistent with our *Survival* and *Miraculous* building blocks). Real-world stressors and pressures such as paying the rent, feeding one’s family, paying the electricity bill, getting or keeping a job, and even affording a trip to the beauty salon or barber shop are common concerns for African American Protestants. In the minds of many of our study participants, the legacy of racial discrimination and inequality has a lot to do with these everyday trials and tribulations.

So why do African Americans pray and attend worship services so often? The answer is closely related to the fact that many African American Protestants believe that they as individuals and blacks as a group would not have made it in this country *but for the grace of God*. That is essentially what Rev. Edwards and Rev. Shannon meant by their statements that African Americans “didn’t get out of slavery on our own” or that blacks need a “heavier reliance on our theology to carry us through.” Blacks recognize and ask for God’s help so frequently because they are thankful for still being here, despite all of the big and small historical and contemporary challenges that they have faced in the United States.

This sensibility was best clarified by Pastor Thomas, the ranking minister at a large A.M.E. congregation in New York City. He described how a popular gospel song captures the theological underpinnings and basic teachings of the African American Protestant religious tradition:

My wife and I were at a banquet recently, and someone at the piano started playing a song—Marvin Sapp’s “Never Would Have Made It.” Somebody at our table joked that the song has been like number one on gospel and R&B charts forever.

We started laughing about how simple the song is. I could have written that song! [*laughs*]. But seriously, it raises three themes that you’ll hear in most black churches every Sunday. First, “I never would have made it. I can’t make it without God. I would have lost it all, but now I see that you were there for me.” “I couldn’t have made it without God” is one theme. Second, another theme is that “in my worst situation, God is there with me, and even though I maybe didn’t recognize it at first, I now realize that whatever I’m going through God is with me.” And third, “I’m wiser, stronger, I’m doing better—so much so that those trying experiences don’t destroy us but actually makes us stronger, wiser, better.”

And so those themes are central in African American churches, and it’s all related to having that connection and relationship with God. So reading the Bible, praying—“I’ve got to pray because I got to. I need God to help me through what I’m going through.”

This pastor, like so many of the African American Protestants whom we talked to, believes that blacks would not have “made it” but for the grace of God. (By the way, Marvin Sapp’s song has maintained a significant presence on the gospel music charts for several years now.)

So what does Dr. James Cone, one of the foremost scholars of black religion in the United States, have to say about all of this? Does he think that there is any validity to claims made by the African American Protestants that we interviewed? Most certainly. In fact, Dr. Cone believes that there is a clear link between the legacy of racial discrimination and how African American Protestants go about their religious faith. His views corroborate the initial findings that we have discussed thus far:

Blacks are searching for meaning. They are searching for purpose because they don’t see it obviously allowed and expressed in the society. And when you live in a society which does not grant you meaning, from a human point of view, but considers you less than human, then you have to look beyond the values in the society for a meaning which that society cannot control. And that’s where religion comes in. And that’s where imagination comes in. Religious imagination empowers black people to know things about themselves in an ultimate sense that cannot be controlled and defined by the people who oppress them.

See, faith emerges because there are contradictions in the world which people can’t quite explain. So faith emerges in a community because they need resources to cope with the world they’re living in.

And black people got a whole lot of contradictions [*laughs*]. I mean, slavery, oppression, lynching, unemployment, prisons—just a whole lot of contradictions . . . [*His thought trials off.*] What do you do when you see your community cracking up, and you’ve got to respond to tragedy, but you have little material resources to respond?

### *Overview of the Book*

The remainder of this book is devoted to developing, explaining, and substantiating our argument concerning the *five building blocks of*

*black Protestant faith*. We argue (and show) that these five postulates go a long way toward explaining racial differences in religious sensibilities among black and white Christians. In accomplishing this goal, we fill a major hole in the existing scholarly literature by detailing the form, content, and structure of the *black sacred cosmos*. The distinct manner in which African American Protestants go about their religious faith will become evident.

Before proceeding, however, we must make three points abundantly clear. First, as previously stated, one of our primary contributions is a comparative statistical analysis of black and white Protestants. In our final chapter, we devote some attention to examining the impact of denominational differences among members of the same race. Nevertheless, a comprehensive test of contrasting religious sensibilities among black Methodists and black Pentecostals, for instance, or white Baptists and white Lutherans largely lies beyond the scope of the present study. Hopefully scholars will consider addressing this important and undoubtedly complex issue in the near future. Second, there are limits to survey research. As social scientists, we are bound by the scholarly expectation not to theorize or interpret beyond our actual data. Consequently, we do not attempt to read our respondents' minds or psychoanalyze their responses. Religious beliefs are often deeply personal, subtle, and nuanced. We explain our survey findings at face value because it would be intellectually inappropriate to do so in any other way.

Last, and most important, our analysis highlights racial differences that are more often than not driven by African Americans' religious sensibilities. Blacks should by no means be viewed as "deviant" because they pray and attend worship services more often than whites do or because they prescribe to certain faith-based beliefs. That there are differences between blacks and whites does not mean that one or the other is deficient or operates at a faith-based deficit. In fact, we argue that black Protestants *and* white Protestants think about and practice their religious faith in often unique and distinct ways.

This book proceeds in a stepwise fashion; each chapter addresses a specific feature of our *five building blocks of black Protestant faith*. In the coming chapters, we assess a wide range of faith-based similarities

and differences with respect to black and white Protestants' religious sensibilities. Some of our results are easily explainable. However, others are not. In fact, the pastors whom we interviewed expressed deep reservations about two very important survey findings that concern beliefs about God and the afterlife.

We will continue sharing relevant commentary from Rev. Washington, Rev. Edwards, Rev. Shannon, Rev. Johnson, and Pastor Thomas (as well as introduce others to the dialogue). Data from our in-depth interviews and focus groups remain a critical component of most chapters in this book. We will also continue to share Dr. James Cone's expertise and analysis. His renowned acumen brings further clarity, context, and insight to the topics under discussion.

The next chapter of this book is a necessary, focused review of the role that slavery played in shaping the African American Protestant religious tradition. With assistance from Derek Hicks, a professor of religious studies and theology, we spotlight the structural and cultural factors that gave rise to and reinforced racial differences in religious sensibilities among black and white Christians. Moreover, we establish that *liberation theology* and the *theology of suffering and evil* are widely accepted and deeply rooted themes among scholars of African American religious studies.

We continue our analysis of national survey data in chapter 3. Here we examine whether black and white Protestants report contrasting beliefs about the importance of God in their personal lives and whether there are racial differences in commitments to core Christian theological tenets.

In chapter 4, we establish our theoretical framework for understanding racial differences in religious sensibilities by further developing an idea that we introduced earlier in this chapter: many of the high-ranking clergy members whom we interviewed believe that whites are more concerned with the precise doctrinal fundamentals of Christianity, while blacks are more concerned with the practical application of their religious faith to their everyday lives.

Our analysis of racial similarities and differences in faith-based actions and beliefs continues in chapters 5 through 7. In these chapters, we examine black and white Protestants' commitments to religious

convictions such as beliefs about the Bible, the frequency of reading the Bible and prayer, and the extent to which our respondents claim to have doubts about their faith. We also assess beliefs about morality, including attitudes about whether God punishes people for their sins and whether blacks or whites are more likely to lean on their religious faith when “facing major problems” in life. In chapter 7, we analyze commitments to religious beliefs that are closely associated with Christianity (such as the beliefs in angels and miracles), as well as those that typically are not associated with Christianity (such as reincarnation and astrology). The intriguing findings presented in this chapter make it abundantly clear that the African American Protestant religious tradition is simultaneously theologically *broad and definitive* in its attentiveness to Christianity.

Chapter 8 establishes the wide and deep gap between black and white Protestants’ beliefs about the causes of and solutions to contemporary racial inequality. For instance, there are major attitudinal differences regarding (a) the individual and structural roots of racial inequality in America and (b) beliefs about the U.S. government’s role in bridging racial gaps in society. In this final chapter, we discuss the results of this study within the context of faith-based efforts aiming to achieve racial reconciliation. Our quantitative and qualitative results suggest that contrasting commitments to identity politics severely limit prospects for racial reconciliation among black and white Protestants.