

THOSE SEGREGATED AND SACRED HOURS

***New Perspectives on Religion, Race,
and Gender in America***

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MARK CHAVES, *Congregations in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004, 291 pages, ISBN 0-674-01284-4, Cloth, \$29.95.

MARLA F. FREDERICK, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003, 263 pages, ISBN 0-520-23394-8, Cloth, \$50.00, Paper, \$19.95.

CAROLYN MOXLEY ROUSE, *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004, 271 pages, ISBN 0-520-23795-1, Cloth, \$50.00, Paper, \$19.95.

INTRODUCTION

At a 2005 conference featuring children of civil rights leaders, Donzaleigh Abernathy, daughter of late civil rights leader Ralph Abernathy, revisited the popular understanding about race and religion in America that the eleven o'clock hour on Sunday morning is America's most segregated hour. Originally an observation by sociologist Liston Pope, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King included this truth about race and religion in his critique of segregation. More than a half century later, Donzaleigh Abernathy's assertion that the eleven o'clock Sunday morning hour was still America's most segregated hour came at a moment when not only the racial but also the political and ideological divides relating to religion experienced the lightning bolt illumination of the 2004 presidential election. Republicans had openly utilized conservative White religious constituencies as their political base. Thanks to the Republicans' exploitation of debates over gay marriage, abortion, and family

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values, White religious conservatives mobilized in favor of the Republican Party ticket.

The election occurred at a time when some aspects of American religion were highly visible and accessible to the culture at large. The growth in the electronic church and megachurches has made religion a striking component of popular culture. The rise to prominence of megachurches is the most significant social fact in American religion. Churches with 2000 or more congregants attending a worship service have changed the religious landscape significantly. Some of these churches claim 15,000 or more members. A few of these churches also televise their services nationally. At any time of day or night, Americans can turn on their televisions and tune into church services run by White men and women openly connected to political conservatism.

Yet there is also evidence of diversity. Some of the most popular televangelists are Black men like T. D. Jakes and Creflo Dollar. Jakes's and Dollar's megachurch congregations and ministerial staffs, while predominantly Black, are ethnically diverse. White televangelists and megachurch pastors have sometimes significant but usually token Black presence in their congregations and choirs. Occasionally Black presence on their ministerial staff is also observable. Even those televangelists who are believed to be the most conservative and associated with historic segregation, for instance, Jerry Falwell, have token Black presence in their congregations and on their broadcasts most of the time; if nothing else, there are always some Black people in the choir. Some White megachurches and televangelists openly exploit styles of worship and music that are historically African American. Religion may shape the most segregated hours in America, but in the twenty-first century that religion appears to be more racially mixed, ethnically complex, and culturally variegated. However, race still matters and, in many cases, overtly or covertly defines the congregational situation.

The civil rights movement may hold the primary responsibility for making the religious landscape more public in terms of its political salience. Civil rights were ultimately defined as a moral issue; the Southern Christian Leadership Conference described itself as being in the business of saving the soul of America. The movement mobilized the Black church in a way that pushed some of its most gifted clergy to prominence as political leaders (Morris 1984). The movement also challenged Black and White Americans to think politically in a religious context. For many White Americans, the late Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King was the first African American preacher they had ever heard. The challenges that came to churches and synagogues, particularly by way of King's 1963 "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" and the national call to clergy he issued from Selma in 1965, created a tremendously visible network of Christian and Jewish clergy and religious workers, as well as religious organizations. The White religious networks concerned with civil rights facilitated the mobilization of activism around other issues that arose during the 1960s and 70s, especially against the Vietnam War. By the time of King's assassination in 1968, the religious roots of the civil rights movement and its contribution to a larger set of issues—women's rights, opposition to the Vietnam war, a poor people's movement—were firmly fixed in the popular consciousness.

The roots of what we now call the "Religious Right" were also tied to America's racial landscape. Most segregationists considered themselves good Christians. Indeed, the contradictions of racism and religion were so interwoven throughout American church history that the conflation of Jim Crow with the Bible Belt was common knowledge. While various segments of the White conservative Christian population would like to ignore, apologize for, or paper over their segregationist roots, their legacy of White supremacy is still visible and palpable. Organizations and churches

that are explicit in their Whiteness—for instance, Bob Jones University—and overtly White supremacist biblical teachings on race are virtually absent from the televised presence of conservative churches, but occasional racial controversies in the White evangelical family provide reminders that race still matters (Frederick 2003, pp. 155–157). The reality of race in America is still visibly interlaced throughout the public politics associated with White conservative Christians.

For southern segregationists, the 1948 Democratic platform civil rights plank prompted the famed “Dixiecrat” walkout led by Strom Thurmond, the South Carolina senator who ran for president on the ticket of the States’ Rights Party. The old Dixiecrats eventually became the new White Republicans and major agents of the Republicans’ southern strategy. The Ku Klux Klan’s visible opposition to civil rights reminded the nation of the religious symbolism that undergird their White supremacist doctrines, and Ku Klux Klan leaders insisted that segregation was biblically mandated in the book of Genesis, immediately after the Flood. Southern Baptist congregations were, ironically, sending missionaries to Africa and supporting African students in Negro colleges, while refusing those same African students admission to their Sunday services, even when some among them simply wanted to say “Thank you.”

Civil rights organizations, especially the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), began applying vigorous pressure through the courts and direct action campaigns. One result was Truman’s desegregation of the military in 1948. By 1950, the women of the Methodist Episcopal Church (North), concerned that the campaign against segregation could not go forward without a thorough knowledge of the extent and specificities of legal segregation, commissioned feminist and civil rights lawyer Pauli Murray to provide such knowledge. Murray’s (1951) efforts culminated in *States’ Laws on Race and Color*, a comprehensive listing of the text of every state statute and constitutional article or section defining who was and was not Black (“colored” or “Negro”) and who should or should not be the targets of discrimination. *States’ Laws on Race and Color* also contained every single ethnically specific mandate existing in the then forty-eight states, for instance, New Mexico’s requirement that literacy in Spanish be facilitated in the public schools.

As the chosen leader of the Montgomery bus boycott, King came to the forefront as a nationally recognized leader, a gifted orator who made the Black Church in America a viable political entity. Because of King, some of the internal politics of the Black Church, for instance, the conflicts within the National Baptist Convention, Inc., also gained a visibility beyond the Black community. Because of King, White religious bodies began to examine their relationship with Black America. Because of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the movement’s approach to activism and non-violence, African Americans directed challenges at White main line churches. Also because of King, many African Americans began to re-examine their relationship to Christianity.

Members of the Lost-Found Nation of Islam, termed “the Black Muslims” by C. Eric Lincoln (1961[1973]), were available to encourage Black Christians to question that relationship. This organization, formed during the period of Black urban migration, was an explicitly anti-Christian Black nationalist response to racism. Black Muslims openly challenged Black Christians, in many cases their friends, neighbors, and family members, to reflect on the contradiction of belonging to a religion that supported segregation and slavery. In some cases, members of the Nation of Islam stood outside Black churches and openly challenged their members as they left Sunday services, a recruiting feature vividly depicted in Spike Lee’s 1992 film *Malcolm X*.

The group's most prominent leaders, Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X, styled the Nation of Islam as "the religion of the Black man." The inclusion of "manhood" in their call to community came precisely at the moment when questions about the Black family and the relative economic roles of Black women and men became part of the public politics surrounding civil rights and economic justice. The Nation of Islam offered a sacred space for the most alienated African Americans: incarcerated Black men. The Black Muslims' masculinist rhetoric flowed and shaped Black Power discourse throughout the Black community.

Within Black communities, the civil rights movement and explosive critiques of the civil rights movement followed, as various manifestations of the Black Power movement made thinking about religion, race, and activism the order of the day. In spite of changes in the Nation of Islam and the growth, thanks to Malcolm X, of Sunni Islam among Black Americans, Christianity remained the dominant mode of faith among Black people. In spite of Christian dominance, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya (1990) have pointed to the challenge of Islam as one of the most significant challenges faced by "the Black church" at the end of the twentieth century. African American congregations were challenged to wrestle with "what it means to be Black and Christian in America." The conversations with Islam and other nationalisms also challenged Black pastors to speak to the particularity of being Black in White America. One Chicago congregation's response, "Unashamedly Black and unapologetically Christian," had such a national impact that it was appropriated at a 2005 conference where participants added the phrase "unequivocally womanist."

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the segregated and sacred hours of American religious life were raced, gendered, classed, and cultured. Although the electronic and megachurch faces of American religion were racially and ethnically mixed, America's congregational life continued for the most part to address the concerns and issues of particular communities. When people gather for their sacred moments, they are sincerely religious and work hard to constitute and produce the sacred. At the same time, they bring to their sacred sites all of the concerns of people living in a society currently experiencing its greatest expansion of racial-ethnic and religious pluralism, a society where race and gender are still highly contested matters, and where the gap between rich and poor is growing dramatically.

In the last two decades, the social scientific study of American religion has become more visible to the academic mainstream. In sociology, specifically, R. Stephen Warner (1993, 1998) and Nancy Ammerman (1997) have offered new paradigms that encourage taking seriously the increased diversity of American religion and the fundamental importance of local congregations. These approaches have encouraged ethnographic studies of local congregations and the importance of religion. Without reviewing the landscape of religious research and researchers, suffice it to point out that, until a few years ago, there was no section or program unit primarily focused on the sociology of religion within the American Sociological Association. The increased visibility of the New Right and a variety of fundamentalisms generated new waves of interest among those whose training was not primarily in religious studies and whose questions therefore broadened conversations about religion and social science. The discovery that baby boomers and Black Americans were far more religious than liberal social science had predicted was a part of this conversation.

Making sense of the particularities of American religion can be a very bizarre undertaking. In spite of their religiosity, Americans are fabulously ignorant of their own and others' religions and religious lives. The insistence of some Christians that Muslims do not worship the same God that Christians and Jews worship is just one

case in point. Since the U.S. government does not keep national statistics on religion and religious bodies, researchers are left to infer the exact number of congregations and denominations from interviews, surveys, and local community studies. Because not all denominational bodies are highly organized mainstream groups with professionals paid to keep track of numbers, an accurate and thorough overview of American religion is an uphill struggle. At the other end of the spectrum, the tremendous and growing diversity of local religious gatherings has the potential for making the study of congregations and communities social science's largest growth industry. Both national overviews and local studies provide perspectives that reveal and illuminate the complexity and importance of America's most discretionary moments: America's religious moments, the segregated and sacred hours.

The three volumes that are the focus of this essay could easily include many more that represent this new scholarship on American religion (Nelson 2005; Stewart 2005; Waghorne 2004; Warner and Wittner, 1998). Here, I consider three seemingly disparate yet related works: Mark Chaves's national study of religious congregations, Marla Frederick's anthropological account of Christian women in a North Carolina community, and Carolyn Moxley Rouse's investigation (also anthropological) into the situation of Sunni Muslim women in southern California. Although they represent the polar extremes of social science methodology (survey vs. ethnographies), levels of analysis (national sample vs. local network studies), and research populations (national but overwhelmingly White vs. African American), all three studies make extensive use of interviews in their unique contributions. All three studies provide important insights into the ways that congregations, and individuals as agents of religion and spirituality, institutionalize and challenge social arrangements.

CONGREGATIONS: THE DOMINANT RELIGIOUS WAY

Mark Chaves utilizes data from the National Congregational Study to tell the story of American congregations as agents of American religion. Congregations are important because they organize people who "are not all religious specialists" (p. 1) for regularly scheduled activities, especially worship that involves primarily "getting together to sing and hear somebody talk" (p. 133). Rather than sending teams of ethnographers all over the country to observe the goings-on in a sample of congregations, Chaves depends upon the notion that a nationally gathered random sample of individuals represents a random sample of organizations. The National Congregational Study sent interviewers from the General Social Survey back to their respondents to gather in-depth information about their congregations; later, those congregations were located so that a key informant, usually but not always a priest, rabbi, or minister, could be interviewed. These congregations were then connected with their census tracts in order to explore the community connections.

Chaves demonstrates that congregations vary widely in size. While most congregations are small (seventy-five members or less), most people belong to congregations with more than four hundred members. Demographic developments are tied to birthrates and immigration, with increased diversity and conservative fertility being the motors affecting congregational growth and the development of new congregations, especially Buddhist and Muslim ones. Smaller congregations, especially rural ones, are disadvantaged in the search for leadership at a time when fewer men are choosing to go to seminary. The changing quality of congregational leadership is tied to the larger numbers of women entering seminary, potential leaders

who are more likely to be mid- and second-career clergy, and not likely to be moving to rural areas any time soon.

What do congregations do besides worship together? They raise money. They provide social services. They engage in civic and political activities. They listen to and support organizations around specific political and civic issues, and they sometimes, especially if they are conservative or African American, address electoral politics directly. Congregations draw from and contribute to the arts in society, especially the musical arts. The arts are not only used to produce the sacred; they are also a source of exposure to art worlds outside the congregation. In spite of all that they do, congregations are primarily religious in their agency:

Three overlapping aspects of congregational culture—the worship events they produce, the religious knowledge they transmit, and the artistic activity they facilitate—occupy more congregations, engage more people, and use more resources than either congregations' social service or their political activities. They are the most important means by which congregations involve individuals and connect with the world outside their walls (p. 180).

Congregations are communities of religious engagement, and that is primarily what they do. In producing religion, they produce religiously motivated actors throughout society.

Chaves sticks to the primary focus of his book, identifying in detail the repertoires that congregations develop for their agency. Each chapter includes a detailed list of what all congregations do and the proportion of congregations and congregants (interviewees) engaging in those activities. For instance, most congregations (57%) provide social services involving a substantial majority of congregants (75%), with some doing more than others. The arts, however, engage even more congregations and congregants than do social services and politics. In detailing congregational activities and the distributions of them among various populations (liberal and conservative, Black and White), Chaves also reveals the importance of difference and the persistent social boundaries that characterize American religion. African American churches involved in social services are more likely to collaborate with other organizations. Conservative churches' collaborations with government raise issues of commitment to the religious as part of a holistic approach to social services; liberal churches tend to worry about losing their prophetic edge. While the liberals and moderates are more civically engaged (involved in a broad range of activities, from renting space to secular organizations, to sponsoring food programs), Catholics and African Americans are more politically involved than anyone else. Jews are both high on civic engagement and political involvement; they are thus similar, in different ways, to both African Americans and liberal Protestants. Interestingly, Chaves includes the hiring of outside musicians for worship service as a form of civic engagement, something that African American churches rarely if ever have to do.

Black Protestants are noteworthy in the areas of political involvement and artistic production within worship:

Reflecting the enduring political activism of black Protestantism at least since the civil rights era, black Protestant congregations are particularly likely to have voter registration drives and to invite political candidates and elected officials to congregations to give speeches (p. 117).

Additionally, Chaves points out that “people with different social class positions have different cultural tastes and engage in different cultural practices” (p. 134). He also emphasizes that social class is only one dimension of homogeneity; “age, race, and in some contexts, gender are other dimensions. . . .” (p. 134).

By separating elements of worship, civic engagement, and the arts, which may in fact be related, Chaves misses the possibility of differences among churches in generating artists and artistic activities from within. On the one hand, Chaves points out that:

African American congregations, whatever their religious tradition, include more singing and dancing in their worship services than white congregations [and that]. . . African American congregations apparently expose their constituents to more artistic activity than other congregations—a finding consistent with standard observations about the internally rich cultural life of organized black religion in the United States. . . (p. 178).

On the other hand, Chaves does not interpret his finding about Black churches’ relative lack of “contact with outside art worlds.” Black churches do not hire outside artists (the lack of “contact”) primarily because those churches are not only sites of cultural production but also sites that produce artists and styles—styles that have been appropriated in the last several decades by predominantly White churches: conservative, evangelical, and enthusiastic.

SPIRITUALITY BEYOND THE CONGREGATION: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

While Chaves identifies significant national patterns involving class, race, and space, which indicate the persistence of the sacred as a site of highly discrete social homogeneity, Marla Frederick produces a study that takes seriously the spirituality of African American women in a particular community and the importance of their spirituality in everyday life. *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* is concerned with “the role of spirituality in the cultural production of activism” (p. ix). In her study, Frederick utilizes both ethnographic fieldwork and interviews. In addition to attending church services and conferences, Frederick also spent time in women’s houses watching soap operas and televangelists. Over time, she came to focus intensively on the perspectives and activities of eight women. We learn that African American women, although critical of the way churches treat them and limit their leadership roles, are highly committed to the maintenance and strengthening of the congregations, what Frederick calls “institution building,” which in turn strengthens the women for the struggles they face in “the Black public sphere” as they confront the economic and social injustices that affect their family’s lives and limit the prospects of their children.

The book is organized around a week; the chapters move through the days of the week, from Sunday to Sunday. Among the “days” are intervening “revivals.” These revivals are highly detailed observer’s (the author’s own) comments and reflexive excursions that help us to follow the women of Halifax County through a variety of activities that connect them across congregations and transcend denominational allegiances. We learn that the women consider their activism to be “God’s work, not just political work” (p. 126). In one reflexive excursus, we hear Frederick’s questions about the particularity of Black women’s responses to T. D. Jakes’s preaching. Through-

out, Frederick takes seriously the internal, personal work that people do *in conjunction with* the external work involved in seeking social justice and change.

Frederick's study engages the history of Halifax County and the larger historical realities governing the African American experience. Her discussions of history—labor history, political history, and education—are connected to issues of structure, economic inequality, racial discrimination, violence, and dislocation. A continuing legacy of occupational segregation creates miserable work lives that these women do not want to pass on to their children; they want better for them in terms of education and work.

Frederick's focus on the women's spirituality, a set of practices and consciousness that are transdenominational and transcongregational, enables her to move beyond a particular moment in these women's lives and examine their contributions to church and community over the long-term, thus revealing the interplay between institutions and the person. In spite of tremendous levels of deprivation, these women express gratitude for God's strength in enabling them to make it through (p. 65). They also empathize with other people's suffering as they engage with the diverse experiences around them. Scripture is important for personal spirituality, and it also teaches the women to share and to identify with those who are deprived. The women's faith also makes them challenge the church to be a better site for individual and group development. The skills garnered within the church setting further empower the women to speak out and to address education, health, and elder affairs. Throughout, the women foster "a black counter public sphere" that addresses a "shared threat" with what Frederick calls "strategic essentialisms," that refer to "a common 'racism' and an acknowledgement of 'our'" problems (p. 117).

Between Sundays provides a window onto the conversations among African Americans that are critical of the church and its leadership. Their own local traditions influence the way they discriminate among television ministries. The women actively discuss the difference between teaching and preaching, and "worry about the authenticity of Spirit displays on television" (p. 138). In light of social scientists' and theologians' criticisms of televangelism and its prosperity doctrines, doctrines and criticisms which Frederick describes in detail, she concludes that "while the women of the study listen to televangelists, they are able to discount much of the emphasis on individualism, maintaining a critique of structural inequalities and commitments to the health of their communities" (p. 158). These publicly activist women also engage their spirituality in the most private areas of life: money and sexuality. Frederick points to the practice of tithing as empowering, in that the women work against materialism, contribute to building religious institutions, and exercise a freedom that Frederick labels "self-empowerment" (pp. 173–180). Their view of sexuality as "God created" allows the women to engage in moral strategies that protect their bodies as sacred space. The conservatism of their Christianity emerges in their attitudes critical of homosexuality. Frederick grasps the dialectics of spirituality when she points out:

Spirituality is a component of life that has the ability to both confine and liberate, based upon one's vision and understanding of who God is and what God's requirements are. These ideals are often shaped by the race, gender, class dynamics of society (p. 184).

Frederick's work importantly emphasizes that African American churchwomen who are members of congregations are also the African Americans embedded in civic and political organizations outside the church. Women's leadership utilizes the alterna-

tive to the church of the “Black public sphere” and also organizes the agency and resistance that takes place there. Just as these women’s church activities reflect a religious tradition, their civic activities are part of a historic tradition of women’s activism. The women of Halifax County are very clearly integrated into the historic traditions of African American Christian women’s activism, comparing favorably with the complex interplays of political consciousness and spirituality observed in earlier generations of African American women.

A PLACE IN THE WORLD COMMUNITY: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN ISLAM

Islam is the fastest growing world religion in the United States, and African Americans represent the largest indigenous group of American Muslims. African American Muslim history, while directly tied to the politics of race and racism, follows a trajectory that seeks to transcend race. Malcolm X’s antiracist epiphany occurred precisely when immigration laws in the United States changed in favor of people coming from the nations of Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East. Immigration since 1965 has dramatically enlarged the U.S. Muslim population, but there are no truly reliable figures on its size. Estimates run as high as 6 million. Although Chaves made a brief reference to Islam in his discussion of American congregations, the relatively small size of American Islam and the transitory nature of “congregation” would have made a systematic treatment of the phenomenon through a survey difficult. Nationalism and transnationalism are inextricably linked to the growth of Islam in America.

Carolyn Moxley Rouse’s *Engaged Surrender* is a study of African American women who have chosen to pursue Sunni Islam, which is Islam’s largest tradition. The women in this study are African American converts to the faith who must construct their lives between the legacy of Black nationalism in the form of the Nation of Islam and the crosscurrents of world Islam that tends to treat African Americans as perpetual strangers. Their lives as faithful Muslims are complicated by the stereotypical images of gender that adhere to Islam and a postmodern society where feminist critics challenge the patriarchy in all religions.

Where Frederick’s community of women lived their faith between Sundays, Rouse’s community of women enact a daily discipline of prayers; a weekly cycle of public prayers, ostensibly between Fridays; and an annual discipline of fasting and feasting. Because the Friday gatherings for prayer are not meant to be congregations as permanent voluntary associations, the home and family can be said to serve this function and, therefore, gender roles and performance figure prominently. Rouse’s intensive study reveals and explains African American converts’ reasons for belonging to and strategies as participants in the world community of Islam. Although it is not Rouse’s *primary* aim, her study also illuminates how African American Sunni Muslims and their tradition constitute a challenge to the Black Church.

Rouse, an anthropologist (who is not a Muslim), articulates questions about Islam that reflect the perceived contradictions between women’s freedom and independence and a religion suffused with the ethic of submission and surrender. While Frederick confronts the issue of women’s “submission” through her interpretation of one woman’s conflict with her husband over tithing, Rouse explores the issues of surrender and submission throughout the book. Islam literally means “submission to God” (p. 244), and Rouse admits that her initial fascination started with her own question, “Why would a woman in America choose not to have choices?” (p. 1).

These perceptions of “unfreedom,” antifeminism, and lack of choice have been magnified in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.

Paradoxically, the growth of Sunni Islam in Black communities is the product of many African Americans’ struggle for freedom and humanity in a racially oppressive society. African American women Muslims (“Muslima”), as agents of religious tradition and sociopolitical activism, “choose to adopt a minority faith and choose to perform that faith in public spaces” (p. 8) and “publicly disagree with the American mainstream, who are predominantly Christian and keepers of the American dream. . .” (p. 7). Rouse demonstrates that, with these choices, African American Muslima “challenge the legitimacy of American assumptions about race, gender, class, family, and community” (p. 9).

Rouse’s study of African American Muslima focuses on a community in southern California and concentrates on members of the community who are *mubajjabah*, those Muslima who “express their faith through dress” (p. 11)—the majority of practicing African American women wear their headscarves only in the mosques. What started as a project to determine if the women were victims of false consciousness became an effort to understand how these women created a moral world.

Because this community is overwhelmingly a community of converts, African American Sunni Muslims must labor under the burden of other Muslims’ judgments regarding their authenticity and competence as Muslims. At the same time, non-Muslims confuse the Sunnis with the Nation of Islam. Critical of the prevailing society, these women’s conversion inspires a disciplined study of text and tradition, Islamic exegesis, making them lay scholars of Islam. Membership in the community involves a commitment to engage in the interpretive process, although Islamic exegesis “does not require one to accept the interpretations of others” (p. 36). Islamic exegesis, or this process of truth verification, is more often than not applied through criticisms of Christianity, American patriarchy, and family life. There are constant negotiations of gender roles, with women seeking responsibility and cooperation in the domestic sphere and men desiring reinforcement of their roles as protector and leader. Life for these women, Rouse tells us, is a constant struggle between local personal realities and universal Muslim ideals. In groups where the meaning of scripture, history, and tradition are discussed “sister to sister,” these African American women “isolate interpretations that make sense given their particular social reality” (p. 80).

In spite of their explicit distance from the Nation of Islam, African American Sunni Muslims are a product of that history. Like Frederick, Rouse identifies dynamic conversations within the community over women’s relationships with other African Americans. The Sunni Muslima reject the explicit theory of race maintained by the Nation and see the move to Sunni Islam, a move prompted by Wallace Muhammad after the death of his father, as a means to transcend the burden of race. The desire for universal community, and the ethic of race neutrality that goes along with it, sometimes leads these Muslims to political conclusions that differ from those of the African American mainstream, for instance, a critical stance toward affirmative action.

One of the pillars of Islam involves fasting during Ramadan. The end of Ramadan involves a wonderful time of feasting known as *Eid*. The founder of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad, instituted a battle over food, especially the hog, that is still being fought in Black communities. Dramatic change in diet was probably Elijah Muhammad’s most lasting legacy. The Sunni women re-engage that debate through reinterpreting and re-appropriating those aspects of soul food that are permissible (*halal*). Eating *halal* becomes the important goal, and the women are proud of their skills at providing *healthy*, permissible, and enjoyable food, rather than focusing on

what is forbidden. Sharing that food at the appropriate occasions not only demonstrates their skill as Muslima but may, at times, provide food for less fortunate members of the community who depend on *Eid* and other festive occasions to supplement their diets. In response to Rouse's searching questions, the women normalize their domestic roles by comparing them with those of women throughout the society. To her surprise, Rouse thus discovers that things really are not all that different for Muslim and non-Muslim women.

Conversion by way of "*shada*, [the] witness of faith spoken when one converts" (p. 245), is a significant opportunity for "narrative therapy," as the women reorganize their life histories and address significant concerns about other women's attitudes toward themselves. Muslim women feel empowered by their confession, whereas feminists question their choices. Muslim women are forced to deal with the idealization of patriarchy by contemporary Muslim men, and Rouse provides an extensive account of this confrontation, utilizing verbatim accounts from her interviews. Not only is the opportunity to reorganize their personal histories empowering, Muslim women share with womanists and other Black feminists the desire to empower both genders. African American Sunni Muslima are deeply aware and explicitly critical of the history of racism in American feminism and therefore feel free and justified in reinterpreting empowerment from the standpoint of Islam.

Ultimately, Rouse unveils what is a quest for Islamic ideals and purity. The subset of women in Rouse's study, these *muhajjabah*, are women with "an eastern gaze" (p. 179). The Muslim women who live most strictly help to emphasize that Islam is a total lifestyle, not simply a matter of going to worship and then back out into the secular world. Their lifeways are the product of their dynamic engagement with the authorized discourse of Islam. Those who carve out marginal existences and live counter to American materialism may find themselves somewhat isolated, but they also illustrate the complex strategies required to "perform" gender as Muslims in contemporary society. At one level, these female converts appear to be "participants in the reproduction of their own oppression" (p. 213). Rouse points out, however, that:

As soon as I learned the cultural map of the female converts in this community, I understood that these women are attempting to empower themselves by engaging in Islamic exegesis, or put another way, by situating a discourse of liberation within the authorized discourse of Islam. Surrender is to a faith in Allah. . . . But surrender does not happen in the absence of engagement with the sources of faith, the texts, and the community (p. 213).

One may question Rouse's choice not to begin with conversion but instead to focus first on issues of community, gender roles, history, and markers of identity before turning to an in-depth analysis of conversion and family life. Nevertheless, Rouse provides a detailed understanding of Islam as it is lived by a diverse community of African American Muslim women. She keeps the intercalation of the women's particular history and the larger issues of race and gender in constant dialogue, both at the conceptual level and by way of extensive presentation of the women's own voices. Regardless of how visible and therefore marginal they may choose to be, African American Sunni Muslim women engage the sacred by constructing an alternative world of belief and practice that also challenges the system of racial oppression. Like their Christian counterparts in North Carolina, they, too, are engaged in seeking opportunities for their families, including better education for their children.

STILL SEGREGATED AND SACRED

Rouse points to a truism that applies across all three of these studies: “Religion can keep people complacent in an oppressive system, but there are always religious adherents who are challenging the system and redefining the faith” (p. 217). There are hegemonic faiths, and there are “counter-hegemonic faith[s].” Some congregations and individuals affirm mainstream American values and validate the reigning hierarchies; others criticize the prevailing social arrangements and the maldistribution of privilege. While it is not the *primary* aim of his book, Chaves reveals patterns of congregational/community formation in America that indicate that the contestations of race, gender, class, and culture still matter. Both Frederick and Rouse point to the agency of African American women, Christian and Muslim, in building alternatives that challenge dominance. Understanding the dynamics of faith in America requires attention not only to the grand patterns of organization, but also to the specific communities and congregations where people utilize their faith in everyday life.

Chaves, Frederick, and Rouse have all written highly nuanced studies, based on substantial and innovative research. All three volumes are part of the new leading edge of religion research and set a standard for quality and depth. Each volume reminds us in its own distinctive way that religion is produced by people who are actors in society, people who must account for the specificities of their lives in community: in sacred spaces, but also in everyday life beyond those sacred spaces. Frederick and Rouse, in their extensive exploration of unique communities of African American women, demonstrate that members of congregations are spiritually empowered and equipped to be civically and politically engaged. Within Black communities, civic engagement forms a part of a tradition of activism that engages the historic Black Church, both in continuity and in conflict and reorganization.

In Chaves’s national overview of congregations, the identifiable patterns of difference indicate that, in spite of the more diverse appearance of American congregations, race still matters within and beyond the sacred hours. While no one volume can address the full complexity of religious life in America, these three challenge us to think about society as a whole, regardless of our specific interest in the moment, and to remember that C. Wright Mills’s (1959) maxim, that the coordinate points of sociology are biography, history, and social structure, is still true and must shape the consciousness of every social scientist who studies religion in America, an America whose most sacred moments are still the most socially discrete and rigidly bound.

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