

**ARTICLE**

# Doing Black Christianity: Reframing Black Church scholarship

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## Abstract

The Black Church is the oldest social institution in the Black community and has played a significant role in the Black American experience by offering a space to develop Black oppositional consciousness. Despite the strong Black Christian tradition, a comprehensive review of the sociological literature on Black Christianity has yet to be conducted. The present article surveys extant literature and finds that two major frames are utilized when analyzing Black Christianity: (a) the Institutional-level frame, which focuses on the Black Church as a social and cultural space, and (b) the Ideological-level frame, which sees Black Christianity as a set of racialized attitudes, values, and beliefs. I rely on Avishai's concept of "Doing Religion" to argue the case for a new approach in framing this research and propose the use of an Individual-level frame, which considers the agency of Black Christian actors by examining how they construct identity and embody faith. To illustrate the usefulness of the new frame, I provide an exemplar of Black Christian activist Bree Newsome Bass, highlighting the ways her faith informs her activism. By shifting the focus away from the Black Church as an institution and Black Christianity as an ideology, and instead centering the mechanisms Black Christian actors use to incorporate their faith into their everyday lives, sociological research on Black Christianity will be better equipped to provide insights into how religion informs racialized experiences in society.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Religion is a foundational aspect of American society and has consistently captivated the minds of social thinkers. Prominent theorists have recognized the sociological significance of religion while also identifying the role it plays in perpetuating social problems (Durkheim, 1995 [1912]; Marx, 1978 [1846]; Weber, 2009 [1905]). For over 100 years, sociologists have specifically examined the role Christianity has played in the Black American experience. Du Bois' (2003 [1903]) foundational text, *The Negro Church*, was not only the first sociological study on religion but also the first study to investigate Black Christianity.

From their arrival as slaves, to the present day, Black people in America have always been racialized as Black and "othered" from the white<sup>1</sup> norm. Religion, particularly Christianity, has long served as a mechanism through which Black people made sense of their lives. More specifically, Christianity provided a means to affirm their humanity while existing within a racial hierarchy that otherwise deemed them less than fully human. The Black Church<sup>2</sup> remains a rich site for analysis because it is the symbolic heart of the Black community. From suffering violent attacks like the Birmingham, AL, church bombing and the Charleston, SC, church massacre, to encouraging notable acts of resistance such as Nat Turner's slave revolt and Bree Newsome Bass' tearing down of the confederate flag, the Black Christian tradition has long "affected the social, political, and religious dimensions of the African-American freedom struggle" (Chapman, 1996, p. 2). Religion and racial inequality are interconnected. In fact, scholars note that there is an "ongoing urgency of understanding race and religion as two key features of American life that shape the distribution of resources, life chances, and domination and oppression" (Husain, 2017, p. 2). In this way, a comprehensive understanding of Black religion is necessary to fully make sense of racial inequality.

In what follows, I survey the sociological literature on the Black Church and find that research on Black Christians has predominantly been discussed in one of two ways. First, the Institutional-level frame conceptualizes the Black Church as a significant organization that has provided vital functions for the Black community over time. Second, the Ideological-level frame focuses on the ideas, values, and beliefs affiliated with Black Christianity. Throughout these bodies of literature, the experiences of individual Black Christians have largely been overlooked. This is likely due, in part, to recent claims that religion is generally becoming less significant in society and that the Black Church, in particular, is becoming increasingly irrelevant. Thus, I argue for the implementation of a new approach that would fill this analytic void. I rely on Avishai's (2008) concept of "Doing Religion" to develop what I refer to as the Individual-level frame, in which Black Christian actors are the unit of analysis. Utilizing this frame not only allows for the assessment of the distinct ways Black Christian actors enact their faith in their everyday lives, it additionally provides insight on how religion informs perceptions of racialized experiences.

## 2 | THE INSTITUTIONAL-LEVEL FRAME

The Black Church is a dynamic social institution that has fulfilled a variety of roles in the Black community over time (Barnes, 2014; Littlefield, 2015). It was a meaningful institution both during slavery and in the transition out of slavery into "freedom." It evolved from originally having no structure to becoming the most structured aspect of Black life. Its ability to adapt to the unique needs of Black people, in the exact moments that they needed it, is due in large part to the fact that the Black church is the oldest, most economically self-sufficient institution in the Black community (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991, p. 433; Wortham, 2009). The oppressive politics of U.S. chattel slavery prevented the establishment of an organized Black family, yet allowed, and in many cases, encouraged the adoption of Christian beliefs. In this way, the Black Church, as a social institution, actually predates the Black family (Du Bois, 2003 [1903]) and was the first institution fully controlled by Black people.

Black churches represent the first instances of Black freedom and independence in America. In 1898, Du Bois noted that "the Negro Church is the only social institution of the Negroes which started in the African forests and survived slavery" (p. 4). It was the one thing that Black people had to call their own. Scholars note how Black people

pooled together their limited economic resources to fund these religious institutions. Billingsley and Caldwell (1991) found that “over 90% of the church buildings are owned by their congregations, while nearly 70% have paid off their church’s mortgage. No other segment of the African American community represents such ownership and independence” (p. 433). The amount of Black wealth embedded in these institutions starkly contrasts the amount of wealth in Black households, illustrating the significant value the community placed upon Black churches. Researchers further explained the esteem placed upon these institutions when noting how “churches are often the only non-governmental institution in Black communities” (Brown & Brown, 2003, p. 617). Black people were able to trust that these institutions were committed to their success.

The earliest version of the Black church was coined the “Invisible Institution” by E. Franklin Frazier (1964) to acknowledge the “secret religious meetings held by enslaved Africans, during which they forged a Christian tradition that responded more appropriately to their concerns and condition” (Pinn & Pinn, 2002, p. 12). After slavery, Blacks began to congregate in urban areas, and the Black Church continued in its tradition of adapting to the conditional needs of the Black community. Morris (1984, p. 6) notes that “numerous problems attended the major shift from rural to urban life, and the church facilitated the transition by offering valuable friendships and social networks through which the migrants could assimilate into urban life.” For these reasons, Black churches are “viewed as places of stability and strength” (Calhoun-Brown (2000, p. 169). They met specific social and cultural needs in the community. In the following sections, I survey key findings from literature regarding these dominant functions.

## 2.1 | Space of social refuge

Du Bois (1898) asserted that the “charitable and rescue work among Negroes should first be found in the churches and reach there its greatest development” (p. 4). While he was the first to note the Black church’s obligation to be a space of refuge, more recent studies confirm the longevity of this expectation. Scholarship demonstrates that the Black church has provided a safe space for Black people living within the hostile racial climate in America. Morris (1984) stated that “it was the church more than any other institution that provided an escape from the harsh realities associated with domination” (p. 4). Over a decade later, Gilkes (1998, p. 104) noted that “the large congregations of the Black church have been the primary gathering place from which Black Americans asserted their humanity and adapted to changing conditions in a racist society.” Pattillo-McCoy (1998, p. 770), similarly, observed that Black churches “provide social and economic support by meeting emergency needs, providing a network of friends for emotional and physical well-being, and attending to families’ special needs.” The significant benefits that the Black Church provided as an institutionalized space were undeniable.

The literature further mentions how the Church helped “foster Black identification and a sense of separateness from the white world” (Peck, 1982, p. 165) and continues to pour cultural heritage and identity into the community. Recent sociological studies have noted that this function has been particularly impactful for the Black middle-class. Lacy (2006) found that Black middle-class families, through a process she refers to as “Strategic Assimilation,” intentionally remain engaged in Black spaces such as the Black church to counteract the vast amount of time spent in white spaces due to their socio-economic status. Gilkes (1998, p. 108), similarly, found that, for “Black professionals who worked in overwhelming white settings, the cultural comfort of these Black churches provided therapeutic relief from the micropolitics of being Black in a white and unpredictably hostile world.”

The Black Church has also long accommodated the social interests of the community in addition to providing refuge. Du Bois (1995 [1903]) claimed that “the Negro church of to-day is the social centre of Negro life in the United States.” He went on to note that “one can see in the Negro church to-day, reproduced in microcosm, all the great world from which the Negro is cut off by color-prejudice and social condition” (p. 214). This description illustrates how social cohesion was distinctly fostered in the Church because Black people did not have access to any other leisure spaces. Several scholars reported on this reality. Mays and Nicholson (1933, p. 285) argued that “the Negro has been humiliated in so many public and privately-owned institutions and amusement places that he has resorted to the church as a place in which he can be sure of spending his leisure time peacefully.” Even E. Franklin Frazier,

despite being a prominent critic of the Black Church, acknowledged that “organized religious life became the chief means by which a structured or organized social life came into existence among the negro masses” (Frazier, 1964, p. 36). Providing social space positioned the Black Church to also influence Black culture.

## 2.2 | A cultural incubator

Because the Black Church served as a space of social refuge, Black people spent a significant amount of time there. Thus, many collective Black traditions were established in and influenced by the Church. This has led several scholars to refer to the Black Church as the mother of Black culture and other prominent Black institutions. C. Eric Lincoln (1989), for example, proclaimed that

*Beyond its purely religious function, as critical as that has been, the Black church in its historical role as lyceum, conservatory, forum, social service center, political academy and financial institution, has been and is for Black America the mother of our culture, the champion of our freedom, the hallmark of our civilization. (p. 3)*

Additionally, the roots of Black schools and businesses can be traced back to the Black Church. The literature specifies that “the Negro church has taken the lead in education in the schools of the race, it has supplied a forum for the thought of the ‘highly educated’ Negro, it has originated a large portion of the business controlled by Negroes, and in many cases it has made it possible for Negro professional men to exist” (Woodson, 2000 [1933], p. 53). Others supported this claim as well. Morris (1996, p. 31) alleged that “Black universities and colleges were closely linked to the Black church” while Billingsley and Caldwell (1991) argued that Black churches supported other Black social institutions such as the Black family and Black schools. Similarly, Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) found that “many aspects of Black cultural practices and some major social institutions had religious origins; they were given birth and nurtured in the womb of the Black Church” (p. 7). The Black Church and the Black community, in this regard, were heavily dependent upon one another. Grant (1979) described this interconnectedness when stating there is “a direct relationship between what goes on in the Black church and the Black secular community” (p. 329). This relationship also included the Church providing support for Black resistance to white oppression.

## 2.3 | A mobilization center

Utilizing this Institutional-level frame, a large portion of the research on the Black Church discuss its foundational role in the Civil Rights Movement. The organized structure of the church proved to be beneficial to the movement by facilitating mobilization. For example, Sorett (2016, p. 22) acknowledged that “churches have provided Black people with an institutional base, a space of ecumenical organizing, and a horizon for imagining the terms of Black life.” Smith (1996) further articulated the church’s usefulness in social movements when describing how “rapidly and efficiently information is transmitted to the Black community from the pulpit. This reliable channel for disseminating information greatly enhances the possibility for mass action” (p. 33). Interestingly, scholars found that church music also served as a mechanism to instigate the radicalization process (Danaher, 2010; Morris, 1996).

The Black Church relied on a variety of faith-based tactics to facilitate movement mobilization. For example, Harris (2001) discussed how Black political mobilization relied on the “use of religious rituals and symbols” (p. 56). Many note how the Church assisted with resource mobilization (Brown & Brown, 2003; McAdam, 1982; Morris, 1984; Simms, 2000; Tilly, 1978) by offering “social communication networks, facilities, audience, leadership, and money to the movement” (Calhoun-Brown, 2000, p. 170). Some scholars even explicitly referred to the Black church as a “protest organization” (Lincoln, 1968) because it originated in the midst of Black struggle during slavery. Morris (1984) similarly describes the Black Church as having a “tradition of protest.”

Altogether, scholarship that relies on Institutional-level framing reveals that the Black Church has served as a place of refuge, a cultural incubator, and a movement mobilization center. These functions were essential to the development of the Black community post-slavery. Black Christianity, though, has also influenced the ideas, values, and beliefs of church members specifically and the broader Black community more generally. Research from this vantage point is surveyed next.

### 3 | THE IDEOLOGICAL-LEVEL FRAME

It's important to examine religious ideologies because much of what links together individual Black Christians is their collective racialized religious identity, which is sustained by ideological frameworks. However, the ideological frameworks vary in scope. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) recognized this when specifying that "the Black church is not monolithic, but rather encompasses a continuum of sociopolitical and theological views and postures" (p. 167). These various perspectives were extremely influential upon Church members. Frazier (1964), for instance, proclaimed that "the Negro church organizations became the most effective agencies of social control among Negroes in their relatively isolated social world" (p. 88). Black Christians were particularly loyal to religious ideals because their "faith was the one thing white people could not control or take away" (Cone, 2011, p. 22). Next, I explore the most cited ideological variations within the literature on Black Christianity.

#### 3.1 | Black and White Christianity

Much scholarship is dedicated to distinguishing Black Christianity from white Christianity because the Christian religion has played such uniquely different roles in Black and white communities (Emerson & Smith, 2000; Williams, Irby, & Warner, 2016). Trulear (1985) acknowledged how social climate influenced religious ideologies when noting that among the "religious communities of America, the social reality depicted 'religion' on one hand and 'Black religion' on the other" (p. 49). Shelton and Emerson (2012) similarly acknowledged how Black people radically differ from white people in their faith-based thoughts as a result of American racism. They eloquently state

*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.*  
(p. 4)

Literature suggests that the separation between Black and white Christianity in terms of ideology is largely based on two factors. First, they differ regarding how the Divine is racialized. Black Christianity perceives the Divine to be Black. The tendency to depict Jesus as Black has been noted by several scholars (Cone, 2011; Simms, 2000) and dates as far back as 1898 when Bishop Henry M. Turner first proclaimed that God was Negro (Cone, 1999). Cone (1997 [1975], p. 125) mentions that

*Christ's Blackness is both literal and symbolic. His Blackness is literal in the sense that He truly becomes One with the oppressed Blacks, taking their suffering as His suffering and revealing that He is found in the history of our struggle, the story of our pain and the rhythm of our bodies.*

Cone's more recent work, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2011) continues to parallel the experiences of Jesus Christ with the Black experience in America.

The second point of distinction between Black and white Christianity lies in the way each conceptualize racism. Lincoln (1974, p. 107) particularly noted that Black Christians were determined to distinguish themselves from white

Christians because white Christianity's "cultural style and spiritual understanding made no provision for racial inclusiveness" (p. 107). The ability for one religion to shape attitudes surrounding race and racism in such starkly different ways is quite fascinating, causing scholars to analyze this phenomenon more intently. For example, Chapman (1996) discovered that Black Christians often openly "attacked the racism of the white church" in order to demonstrate that Black Christianity's social justice focus was the accurate one (p. 5). Further, Cobb (2013) noted that white Christians' hyper-individualism today prevents them from accepting structural explanations for racial inequality, which is the predominant understanding among Black Christians, with the notable exception of Black Christians who attend predominantly white churches. Cobb, Üsküp, and Jefferson (2017) find that Black congregants who attend multiracial or predominantly white churches are less likely than Black congregants of Black churches to conceptualize racial inequality as a structural problem, illustrating how Christianity is often used in white spaces to mask racism. White Christians' failure to acknowledge systemic racial oppression has and will continue to result in a persistently divided Christianity.

### 3.2 | This-worldly versus other-worldly theology

Within the Black community, Christian ideology has been used to both encourage and suppress social action regarding racial inequality. The former is referred to as this-worldly theology while the latter is considered other-worldly. Pattillo-McCoy (1998, p. 770) characterizes the other-worldly and this-worldly ideological approaches as a debate situated within the "tension between fighting problems of the world and looking hopefully toward salvation in the next world." Marx's (1978 [1846]) notorious quip that religion is the "opiate of the masses" similarly critiques the value other-worldly theologies place on responding to social ills with inaction. Morris (2001) argued that other-worldly beliefs produced a "culture of subordination" that repress collective action. And even James Cone, the father of Black Liberation Theology, acknowledged that Black Christianity was not always a mechanism towards liberation (Cone, 1985). He stated that "the post-Civil War Black Church did not sustain the zeal of its fathers. It compromised—consoled and pacified Black people as they endured new forms of white oppression" (Cone, 1970, p. 54). McRoberts (2003) found that churches in Boston's Four Corners neighborhood fit into the category of churches that lack the zeal to better the community. The Black churches in this study relied on conservative interpretations of the Gospel to distinguish themselves from the dilapidated Black community they were located in, thus rationalizing their disengagement and neglect of local concerns.

Other scholars, in contrast, have focused on a Black Christianity that promotes resistance to racially oppressive structures in society (Billingsley, 2003). Scholarship on this-worldly ideology has shown that it facilitates the development of an oppositional consciousness among Black Christians. bell hooks (1989) defined oppositional consciousness as "a location that has provided space for the kind of decolonization that makes loving Blackness possible" (p. 148). Morris (1996) found that when this-worldly ideology was incorporated into Black Christianity, a "good Christian" became defined as one seeking to rid society of evil, inequitable conditions. One example of this is Black Christian Nationalism which subscribes to an ethos generated at the intersection of sacred and profane where effectuating "Negro uplift" is considered an integral aspect of building God's kingdom (Oltman, 2008).

### 3.3 | Radical and conservative approaches

It's important to note that even within the literature on this-worldly theology, variations exist, particularly regarding the style of resistance. Scholars find that Christian beliefs have, on one hand, been used to encourage radical change. For example, Simms (2000) reports how Biblical teachings were used "to 'conscientize' the masses and strengthen their opposition to the existing order" (p. 108). Morris (1996) additionally found that Black Christianity provided "an ideological framework through which passive attitudes were transformed into a collective consciousness" (p. 33). Black Liberation Theology similarly endorses radical action through the overt rejection of Black oppression. Cone

(1970) explained that “the purpose of Black Theology is to place the actions of Black people toward liberation in the Christian perspective, showing that Christ himself is participating in the Black struggle for freedom” (p. 53).

On the other hand, however, some factions within Black Christianity are more conservative, promoting adherence to mainstream cultural norms and values. This tendency to acquiesce to the status quo, through what we now refer to as respectability politics, originated in the Black Church. Higginbotham's (1993) examination of how the women's movement influenced the Black Church revealed that Black Baptist women unintentionally established politics of respectability. She notes that adherence to dominant attitudes and beliefs “enabled Black women to counter racist images and structures” in their interactions with white institutions but became more problematic when “their discursive contestation was not directed solely at white Americans” (p. 187). Instead, these Black Baptist women additionally condemned other Black people for not ascribing to the values and morals that they deemed a priority. Respectability politics are also intertwined with the prosperity gospel or the idea that it is God's will for you to be wealthy and prosperous. Harrison (2005) notes that prosperity theology relies on Biblical conservatism laced with capitalism, to claim that the faithful are deserving of material rewards. This perspective, conversely, demonizes those who are socio-economically disadvantaged, perceiving them as simply having weak faith.

Interestingly, secular ideologies within the Black community such as Black Nationalism have historically drawn on *both* conservative and radical tenets at the same time (Lively, 1984; Jennings, 1992; Fergus, 2009; Anderson, 2015). Literature suggests this duality is the case with many Black religions, including Christianity, as well. For example, Rev. Albert Cleage founded the Shrine of the Black Madonna Church, now known as the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church, which drew heavily upon Black Nationalism. Conservative in its outright rejection of racial integration and strict interpretations of Jesus, this new denomination is also liberal in its efforts to effect social change for Black people.

Some literature also address how these various religious ideologies are transmitted. Lee (2003), for example, claims that, ultimately, clergy have the most significant impact on the attitudes of congregants and that their lifestyles and worldviews, established prior to assuming church leadership roles, significantly shape their interpretations of religious doctrine. Respectability politics and other conservative ideologies like prosperity gospel are now increasingly criticized for perpetuating the false narrative that compliance with Euro-centric behavioral standards can and will provide Black people with protection from anti-Black discrimination prevalent in a white, racist society (Cooper, Morris, & Boylorn, 2017; Taylor, 2016). This erroneous assumption also explains why conservative Christian ideals were additionally referred to by some as the “integrationist tradition” (Chapman, 1996; Peck, 1982). This tradition promoted non-violence as the only response to racism and as a result was often ridiculed (Cone, 1999). Conservative ideologies particularly elicit harsh critiques from other parts of the Black community, such as Black Power militants, the Nation of Islam, and in some cases even from disruptive-prone clergy (Chapman, 1996; Ogbar, 2004). Despite these critiques, proponents of this ideology perceive it as an effective tool in the overall fight against inequality.

Altogether, Ideological-level framing pinpoints the various ways Black Christianity influences ideas, values, and beliefs. It is not surprising that Williams (1971) characterized the Black Church as “the conscious of the Black community, and the matrix out of which self-awareness and identity, the Black soul, grew,” given the plethora of ideologies affiliated with Black Christianity (p. 261). Little research, however, has explored the important processes through which Black Christian identity is constructed. The way this identity influences behaviors has similarly been neglected. Next, I propose a new frame to rectify these analytic limitations.

## 4 | TOWARDS AN INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL FRAME

The previous two frames conceptualize the Black Christian experience with a top-down approach. Top-down framing has overlooked the social realities at the microlevel. More specifically, conducting research on the Black Church with Institutional-level and Ideological-level frames disregards the empowering practice of self-definition and self-valuation (Collins, 2004) occurring at the individual level. Therefore, I propose a new frame, the Individual-level frame

which focuses on individual Black Christians' identities, actions, and performances. This frame facilitates analysis on the agency of Black Christians by viewing them as individual social actors who embody their faith in various ways.

This Individual-level frame is informed by Avishai's (2008) concept of "Doing Religion" which encourages a shift towards "thinking about religion as something that people do, in social interaction and in the context of symbolic boundaries" (p. 428). She further notes that religiosity is a social construction that creates a false dichotomy between agency and subversion by neglecting the individual's ability to interpret their realities and adjust their faith. This neglect is where I situate the need for an Individual-level framework in studying Black Christians. Given the long tradition of Christianity in the Black community, it is possible that Black Christians today are navigating society in a way that existing literature and frames do not equip sociologists to fully understand. With church attendance generally in decline and religious ideals shifting, a different approach for analyzing Christianity's influence outside of church is needed, and the Individual-level frame fills this void. As social actors, it is plausible that Black Christians are intentionally embracing some symbolic aspects of the Christian religion while rejecting elements they deem problematic—a practice that has likely occurred throughout several generations and across a variety of denominations. Still, Black Christians today might make deliberate efforts to define their faith, rather than be defined by it. A bottom-up analytic approach is needed to capture the negotiation and reconciliation processes at play. The proposed Individual-level framework encourages analysis of this nature. Avishai (2008) claims that "one cannot make sense of religious practices without appreciating the behavioral scripts and cultural expectations that shape conduct" (p. 428). As the interpretation and application of these scripts and expectations vary from person-to-person, and particularly for Black people navigating a racialized society, an Individual-level frame is necessary to capture the differences in individuals' perceptions of religious experiences.

Much existing literature highlights how people self-construct their religious identities and incorporate their religion into their lifestyles. Swidler (1986) argues cultural components impact the construction of actions like religious expression, by informing a "tool-kit" of performance styles. Read and Bartkowski (2000) find that religious performances can have different meanings for members of the same religion. Peek (2005) distinguishes between ascribed, chosen, and declared identities noting that religious identity is particularly variable. Further, Ellingson (2007) describes a process of reframing religion and refashioning church traditions so that they remain powerful in the contemporary moment. Approaching future studies with the Individual-level frame proposed here will reveal the extent to which such findings also apply to the experiences of Black Christians today.

Because religion is an often-overlooked aspect of our intersectional identities (Collins, 2000; Barnes, 2014; Schnabel, 2016), the Individual-level frame will additionally contribute to our understandings of how race and religion impact individuals' situated knowledge and the perceptions of the interlocking nature of oppression. While Black Christians occupy a unique space within the matrix of domination due to their oppressed racial classification and privileged religious affiliation, this review did not locate a single study that explores how Black Christians grapple with this interpersonal tension. This further illustrates the utility of extending the "doing religion" concept, via the implementation of an Individual-level frame, for sociological research on Black Christians. The Individual-level frame similarly draws on Ammerman's (2014) concept of "lived religion" which contends that religion can exist in unexpected places. By focusing on how spirituality and faith are embodied and performed in everyday life, sociologists can better understand the various ways that Christianity impacts the social experiences of Black people, especially when it comes to navigating oppressive racial systems. Analyzing how Black Christians are "Doing Black Christianity" in their daily lives allows for a more nuanced understanding of the way religion impacts identity formation and interpersonal interaction. This frame becomes particularly necessary when considering the growing diversity underneath the Black Christian umbrella.

#### 4.1 | Heterogeneity among Black Christians

As mentioned earlier, Black Christianity is not monolithic (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990); those who identify as Black and Christian engage with the faith in a variety of different ways. Existing literature points to three prominent areas of

variation within Black religiosity—areas that the Individual-level framework could help explore further. First is church disaffiliation. Many Black Christians are no longer choosing to signify their faith through church membership. Barnes (2017) notes that this disaffiliation is linked, in part, with racial integration. She states,

*Blacks now have access to religious, social, cultural, and intellectual activities and organizations that were unavailable to their historical counterparts ... The contemporary Black church is losing adherents as Blacks seek other alternatives for their time, energy, and financial resources. (p. 150)*

I add that racial de-segregation also allows Black Christians to openly critique the Church in ways they never have before, due to its historic role as the epicenter of the Black community. These criticisms draw attention to the church's ability to serve as a place of refuge for some while proving toxic for others and have undoubtedly contributed to increasing rates of disaffiliation. Specifically, many Black women are tired of the “in the pews but out of the pulpit” rhetoric (Grant, 1989). Some Black men have grown impatient waiting for ministry efforts that edify their spiritual journey *and* their masculinity (Mattis et al., 2004). And Black queer folks are no longer tolerating Black churches that are accepting but not affirming of sexual and gender minorities (Barnes, 2013). Individual-level framed research is needed to explore these positionalities further.

Relatedly, scholars have hinted at the emergence of a Christian stigma. Dillon (2015), for example, speculates that “the growth in disaffiliation is propelled not necessarily by secularization forces, but by the emerging social undesirability of identifying as a church-involved person” (p. 361). Church disaffiliation is often misinterpreted as rejection of religion altogether. McGuire (2018) proves otherwise when arguing that religion has an “afterlife” for church-disaffiliated individuals, noting that “religion remains embodied, socially constructed and perpetuated through religious habitus” (p. 322). Studies with individual Christian actors as the unit of analysis, just as the Individual-level frame encourages, could determine what this religious habitus consists of, for church-disaffiliated Black Christians.

Second, of those who are still attending church, many Black Christians are opting out of Black churches and instead seek out multiracial or predominantly white congregations (Chaves & Anderson, 2014). Literature, though, provides inconsistent evidence of the Black Christian experience in these spaces. Emerson (2006) believed that multiracial churches would serve as “bridge organizations” between the races and could facilitate racial change in the United States. de Young, Emerson, Yancy, and Kim (2003) similarly state that racially inclusive congregations are “God's plan for responding to racism” (p. 184). Edwards (2008), in contrast, argues that multiracial churches are only symbolically inclusive. They welcome racial and ethnic members but continue to center white standards and practices in the organizational structure and culture. Barron's (2016) work supports this claim, noting that multiracial churches engage in a process she refers to as “managed diversity” in which church leaders appropriate urban Blackness, limit the visibility of Black volunteers, and avoid racialized texts and performances during service to provide an illusion that the predominantly white church is not “too white” (p. 20). Literature further suggests that multiracial churches actually legitimate and reproduce racial inequality rather than disrupt it (Edwards, Christerson, & Emerson, 2013). Yancy (2012) contributes to this conversation noting Black congregants feel alienated in multiracial churches because these institutions are still read by white people as white spaces. This alienation, unsurprisingly, applies to Black Christians at predominantly white churches as well. Bracey II and Moore (2017) find that white clergy and congregants reinforce racial boundaries by effectuating overt microaggressions through what the authors refer to as “race tests.” The Individual-level framing encourages studies to examine how and why Black Christians “do religion” in either predominantly Black, multiracial, or mostly white spaces.

The last major dimension of diversity among Black Christians is denominational differences. Denominations dictate the various ways believers embrace and perform their Christian identities. These different approaches to Black religiosity are so wide-ranging that Shelton and Cobb (2017) established a new coding scheme that distinguishes “between traditional and nontraditional liberal and conservative Protestant affiliations with roots inside and outside of the Greater Black Church ... captur[ing] similarities and differences in African Americans' religious sensibilities”

(p. 738). Sherkat and Ellison (1991) studied “religious switchers”—those who transferred from one denomination to another—and found that the switch was often for political reasons, with members leaving mainline churches for more liberal ones that better accompanied their activist leanings. The Individual-level framework will prove particularly useful for not only studying these shifts in the demographics of Black Christians, but more importantly for capturing why these shifts are occurring from the vantage point of those enacting this change. Chaves and Anderson (2014) find that an increasing number of Christians are leaving denominations altogether, choosing to pursue a non-denominational route when exercising their faith. Non-denominationalism, for many, provides the freedom to engage with Christianity on their own terms, a particularly important option given the current shifts in political attitudes (Pew, 2019) at this socio-historic moment where Christianity is often misconstrued in media and public discourse as far-right leaning and intolerant. The Individual-level frame’s microanalytic approach helps to examine the way Christianity is constructed and politicized for individual believers. I demonstrate this in the following section.

## 4.2 | The case of Bree Newsome Bass: An exemplar of Individual-level framed research

To further exemplify the usefulness of the Individual-level frame, I draw attention to Christian activist Brittany “Bree” Newsome Bass. As briefly mentioned earlier, Newsome Bass gained significant attention after scaling the South Carolina state capitol building flagpole to remove the confederate battle flag on June 27, 2015. This act of civil disobedience responded to the series of attacks against southern Black churches but particularly replied to the massacre at Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC, where nine members were killed while attending midweek Bible study by a white American terrorist emboldened by the racist history signified in the confederate flag. Newsome Bass later noted that she saw the flag as a symbol of hate and orchestrated her demonstration as an attempt to abolish “the spirit of hatred and oppression in all its forms” (Taylor, 2015). While removing the flag she proclaimed, “In the name of Jesus, this flag has to come down. You come against me with hatred and oppression and violence. I come against you in the name of God. This flag comes down today” (Democracy Now!, 2015). After descending from the flag pole, Newsome Bass was arrested and escorted by police into custody. Still, she exemplified her faith, reciting Psalms 27, “The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?” Newsome Bass truly demonstrates the Individual-level frame’s utility because she unashamedly incorporates her religion into her resistance—an application that would go unnoticed if the Institutional-level frame’s church-focused or the Ideological-level frame’s belief-focused approaches were used.

An assessment of her post-demonstration interviews and tweets provides insight into the unique way that she “does religion” and why. For example, on Twitter, Newsome Bass explicitly links her Black and Christian identities together and credits both with influencing her activism. On November 9, 2016, she tweeted, “Like my faith in Christ, I remain unshaken. Like the spirit of my ancestors who built this nation with chained hands, I remain unbowed” (Bass, 2016). A year later, on November 6, 2017, she similarly posted, “I operate according to my faith and believe strongly that being an abolitionist is a spiritual calling for me” (Bass, 2017). Through Twitter, Newsome Bass articulates that her religious convictions influence her racial politics. These racial politics, in turn, inform her social action. During an interview for New York Times Magazine, she stated “I’m offended by the notion that Christianity can align only with the conservative movement. As a Christian, I don’t agree” (Cox, 2017). This sentiment builds on her earlier comments that Christianity should have global reach. In 2015, she stated

*I am a global citizen. My prayers are with the poor, the afflicted and the oppressed everywhere in the world, as Christ instructs. If this act of disobedience can also serve as a symbol to other peoples' struggles against oppression or as a symbol of victory over fear and hate, then I know all the more that I did the right thing. (Taylor, 2015)*

Newsome Bass refuses to allow conservatives to co-opt Christianity and distort the Gospel. Their attempts to do so, “offend her,” and inspire her to engage in overt justice-focused behaviors—behaviors she believes Christ would approve of. Overall, this assessment reveals that Newsome Bass actively asserts a dual identity as both Black and Christian which filters her interpretations of racial oppression through a spiritual lens, a process that other Black Christians may be engaging in as well. Individual-level framed research, as this exemplar shows, has potential to generate new theories and concepts that will push the study of Black religiosity forward by capturing and contextualizing religious expressions even as they inevitably shift in the future.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

This review has surveyed the sociological research on Black Christianity. Existing literature predominantly relies on two frames. First, the Institutional-level frame sees the Black church as a social institution serving specific functions to the community such as providing a place of refuge away from American racism, birthing Black culture and other Black institutions, and operating as a mobilization center during the Civil Rights Movement. Second, the Ideological-level frame sees Black Christianity as an assortment of racialized ideologies based on Christian principles such as respectability politics and liberation theology. These two frames alone provide an inadequate understanding of the Black Christian identity and experience today.

In this paper, I advocate for the incorporation of a third, Individual-level frame, which would center the agency of individual Black Christian actors. Informed by Avishai's (2008) concept of “Doing Religion,” I contend that microlevel analyses on Black religious life are needed and incorporating the Individual-level frame into the analytic approaches utilized in scholarship on the general Black Christian experience will undoubtedly help us move towards a more critical sociology of race and religion. To exemplify the usefulness of this approach, I draw attention to Bree Newsome Bass as an exemplar of how and why Black Christian identity construction matters. Assessing Newsome Bass' correspondence in interviews and tweets, I illustrate that she interprets racial oppression through a spiritual lens which in turn compels her social activism—an insight that could not have been produced had either an Institutional-level or an Ideological-level approach been employed.

Given the intricate role religion has played in sustaining racial hierarchies, no attempt to study racial progress would be complete without mention of religion. Distinctly situated at the intersection of racial inequality and religious identity, the lived experiences of Black Christians are rich sources of subjugated knowledge—knowledge that could teach and inspire social change. Approaching future research using the proposed Individual-level framework would position researchers to capture the nuances and complexities of Black religious life and to unpack these experiences within the context of ongoing racialization in America.

I propose three areas for future research. First, additional scholarship is needed regarding how culture mediates the relationship between race and religion for Black Christians. More specifically, the Individual-level framing presented here would be useful in investigating how Black Christian actors facilitate the development of new cultural tools that draw on Christian faith. Second, future studies should examine the novel ways Black Christians “do religion” via the internet, technology, and social media, an increasingly popular yet severely understudied area. The Individual-level frame is premier for analyzing how social media provides opportunities for Black Christians to engage their faith outside of the four walls of the Church. Lastly, the reciprocal relationship between religious faith and social action will always be of interest to sociologists. Continued examination of how Christian faith encourages and/or suppresses social change efforts among Black people today could easily incorporate an Individual-level framework. Because religion remains a prominent aspect of Black social life—one aspect that they control and construct themselves—studying it is significant for understanding Black agency. While the Individual-level framework emerged within this analysis of Black Church scholarship, it can also help make sense of individuality within other Black religions as well. This shift towards conceptualizing Black religiosity as something that is “done,” produced and

reproduced within daily interactions, is needed in social research and the Individual-level frame will help usher in this change.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> I draw on the capitalization practices of Kimberlé Crenshaw who stated, "I capitalize "Black" because Black people, like Asians, Latinos, and other 'minorities,' constitute a specific cultural group and, as such, require denotation as a proper noun. By the same token, I do not capitalize "white," which is not a proper noun, since whites do not constitute a specific cultural group." (1991:1244).
- <sup>2</sup> Although often used interchangeably, throughout this paper, I distinguish between the Black Church, Black Christianity, and Black Christians. Black Church is used to refer to the church as an institutional collectivity; Black Christianity refers to the ideas, values, and beliefs within the institution; and Black Christian is used to reference individual believers.

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