

## Article

# Is the Black Church Dead?: Religious Resilience and the Contemporary Functions of Black Christianity

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**Abstract:** Recent sociological literature draws attention to the changes in religious affiliation and expression among younger generations. More specifically, extant research suggests that the increase in religious “nones” (those who no longer identify with a religion) and “dones” (those who no longer affiliate with a religious congregation) substantiates the secularization thesis which contends that religion is becoming increasingly insignificant in modern society. However, when these trends are disaggregated across racial lines, religious affiliation remains high among Black Millennials. The present study explores this anomaly further, drawing on data from in-depth interviews with 65 Black Christian Millennials to assess how, if at all, the historic functions of the Black Church are still prevalent among Black Christians today. Findings suggest that while some functions have remained constant across generations (i.e., social-cultural), others have evolved (i.e., socio-political and socio-educational) or become defunct (i.e., socio-economic) and new functions have emerged (i.e., socio-emotional). As such, I introduce the concept *religious resilience* as a framework for understanding how and why a religion’s “afterlife” is sustained despite macro-level processes that might undermine its prominence. Altogether, this study has implications for how we conceptualize racialized religion and how we measure, operationalize, and understand religious expression across social locations.

**Keywords:** religious resilience; Black Millennials; Black Christianity; racialized religion; religious afterlife



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*To understand the power of the Black Church it must first be understood that there is no disjunction between the Black Church and the Black community. The Church is the spiritual face of the Black community, and whether one is a “church member” or not is beside the point in any assessment of the importance and meaning of the Black Church. Because of the peculiar nature of the Black experience and the centrality of institutionalized religion in the development of that experience . . . the Black Church, then, is in some sense a “universal church,” claiming and representing all Blacks out of a long tradition that looks back to the time when there was only the Black Church to bear witness to “who” or “what” a man was as he stood at the bar of his community”.*

C. Eric Lincoln

## 1. Introduction

Sociologists have concerned themselves for some time with the symbiotic relationship between individuals and institutions. As the highly organized components of social life, social institutions shape not only how people interact with one another but also dictate how individuals and groups form attitudes and beliefs, and how they come to understand themselves and their role(s) in society. One of the most prominent social institutions that has experienced major shifts over time in both how it has been perceived and engaged with, is religion (Pew Research Center 2015a, 2015b). Ongoing scholarly conversations concerning the sociology of religion have consistently acknowledged how American religiosity has, from the outset, operated as a racial project (Omi and Winant 2015; Mayrl 2022). More specifically, sociologists have argued that religion is inherently racialized and politicized and, as a result, works to uphold America’s racial hierarchical system

while simultaneously offering ideologies that help individuals move within and across the “matrix of domination”<sup>1</sup> (Du Bois [1903] 2003; Weber [1905] 2009; Marx [1846] 1978; Brown 2011; Barnes 2014; Wilde and Glassman 2016; Whitehead and Perry 2020; Allen 2019b; Park et al. 2020; Yukich and Edgell 2020; and Perry et al. 2022).

Black Americans<sup>2</sup> engagement with the Christian faith has and continues to present a socio-political paradox. Despite Christianity’s role in perpetuating anti-Black racism, particularly during slavery, Black Americans remain one of the most religious demographics in the country. This puzzle compels the question: why do Black Americans continue to affiliate with a faith that has and continues to be used as a mechanism for justifying their oppression? This critical inquiry has led some portions of the Black community to reconsider their engagement with Black Christian institutions and beliefs and even refer to the Black Church as “dead” or at least “dying”. The present study explores this phenomenon further by examining Black Christian Millennials’ perceptions of the Black Church’s contemporary function(s) in society. Here I define functions as the various roles the Black Church has played in the Black community over time (i.e., how Black Americans leveraged resources from Black churches to sustain Black life beyond the church). Drawing on data from 65 in-depth interviews, I argue that while some of the historic functions have remained constant across generations, other functions have evolved or become defunct, and new functions have emerged. Claiming these fluctuations as evidence of the Black Church’s vitality, I introduce the concept of *religious resilience* as a framework for understanding how and why a religion’s “afterlife” is sustained at the micro-level despite changes within macro-level processes that might undermine its institutional prominence.

Considering the steady rise in rates of disaffiliation (Pew Research Center 2015b), this study is particularly timely and significant because it extends scholarly conversations on racialized religion by offering new insights on how (and why) Christianity survives and thrives among portions of the Black community today.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, this study compels scholars to think about the “afterlife” of other prominent social institutions experiencing significant change, such as marriage and family, education, and even media and technology.

## 2. Background: Historic Functions of the Black Church

American religion is highly racialized and this is particularly evident when considering the tradition of Black American Christianity.<sup>4</sup> As the first stable and systematic aspect of Black life and culture, the Black Church is the oldest social institution in the Black American community,<sup>5</sup> and one of the preeminent institutions throughout American history (Gates 2021). In the first sociological study of religion in the U.S. context and of the Black Church, Du Bois ([1903] 2003, p. 154) notes, “The African church is the oldest Negro organization, dating in part from Africa itself, and here Negroes have had the most liberty and experience”. He suggests that the high value placed on the Black Church historically is in part due to it being the first institutional space in which Black people experienced (constrained) agency and (perceived) autonomy.<sup>6</sup>

While most organized religions attract adherents across social identity markers and historical subjectivities, faith-based beliefs and practices often manifest differently across ethno-racial groups. Christianity, in particular, has been leveraged in distinct cultural and political ways by Black and white communities (Du Bois 2000; Morris 1984; Shelton and Emerson 2012; Allen 2019b; Butler 2021). For instance, Lincoln (1974, p. 107) notes that the Black Church was formulated via “the determination of Black Christians to separate themselves from white Christians, whose cultural style and spiritual understanding made no provision for racial inclusiveness at a level acceptable to Black people”. In this way, the Black Church, from its outset as the “invisible institution” within slavery, has always served the Black community in both religious (sacred) and non-religious (secular) ways (Frazier 1974). Barnes (2017, p. 167) referred to the sacred functions as “priestly”, noting that “Priestly functions tend to focus on the spiritual or “other worldly” dimensions of religious life . . . Priestly congregations tend to emphasize the importance of personal religious hygiene, godly living, worship, and events to meet the spiritual/religious needs

of congregants". To further illustrate the multifaceted impact Black Christianity has had in the lives of Black Americans, below I identify and discuss the four most prominent extra-religious functions the Black Church has offered the Black community over time: (1) socio-cultural functions; (2) socio-political functions; (3) socio-economic functions; and (4) socio-educational functions.

### 2.1. Socio-Cultural Functions

First, the Black Church provided socio-cultural resources for Black people. Black Churches have a long history of replicating the social activities and cultural amenities present in white society that Black people were excluded from due to slavery and Jim Crow segregation laws. For this reason, [Allen \(2019b\)](#) describes the Black Church as both a "space of social refuge" and as a "cultural incubator". These socio-cultural functions aided Black folks in cultivating community and a sense of connectedness. [Frazier \(1974, p. 54\)](#) describes this function further when stating, "The Negro church, as we have seen, was not only the organization that had created cohesion among the slaves but it was also the basis of organized life among the Negroes who were free before the Civil War and among the freedmen following Emancipation. Moreover, it had set the pattern for organized social life among Negroes". The organization of Black social life that Frazier mentions involved the establishment of several Black voluntary associations. Clarifying the overlap between Black churches and Black social clubs, [Lincoln and Mamiya \(1990, p. 123\)](#) note, "Since Black people were by and large excluded from most white groups, they created parallel institutions such as lodges, fraternities and sororities, and civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and the National Urban League . . . Throughout most of their history in local Black communities, many of these groups depended upon Black churches and pastors for meeting places, leadership, financial resources, publicity, and members". Black Churches also played a prominent socio-cultural role as Black people transitioned geographically from the southern United States to the mid-western region. For instance, in their discussion of churches formed in the North during the Great Migration, [Lincoln and Mamiya \(1990, p. 121\)](#) note that the "main function of these churches from World War I until the mid-1950s was to act as a "cultural broker," a mediating institution, to help acculturate rural migrants to the urban environment". Altogether, the Black Church is an undeniable purveyor of Black culture and sociality.

### 2.2. Socio-Political Functions

Second, Black people relied on the Church for socio-political functions. The Black experience has been politicized from the outset as it has been fraught with various efforts to sustain imbalanced power dynamics between Black and white communities. These efforts include anti-Black institutionalized racism via state-sanctioned violence and legalized disenfranchisement among others. Because Black Churches represent the first spaces of Black independence in America, it is within this institutional space that the community first began to develop a collective oppositional consciousness that helped them identify ways to respond to their oppression.<sup>7</sup> Many of the oldest political organizations in the Black community have ties to the Black Church. For instance, in his research on the history of the Black Church, [Carter G. \(Woodson \[1921\] 2017, p. 167\)](#) states that, "Through the Negro churches, and these alone, have the Negroes been able to effect anything like a cooperative movement to counteract the evil influences of such combinations against the race . . . The National Association for the Advancement of Colored people would be unable to carry out its program without the aid of the Negro Church". [Lincoln and Mamiya \(1990, p. 9\)](#) made similar claims about the overlap between Black Churches and Black civic organizations when stating, "The important fact about the development of these secular institutions such as the NAACP or National Urban League is that they were often founded with the help and support of Black Church leaders, their memberships also often overlapped with Black Church membership".

The socio-political efforts of the church were evident during slavery and reconstruction but were particularly prominent during the Civil Rights Movement. In his classic text *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, Morris charts out the foundational role that Black Churches played in the early years of the movement. Seeing the Black Church as the “institutional center” of the movement, Morris (1984, p. 4) notes, “Churches provided the movement with an organized mass base; a leadership of clergymen largely economically independent of the larger white society and skilled in the art of managing people and resources; an institutionalized base through which protest was financed; and meeting places where the masses planned tactics and strategies and collectively committed themselves to the struggle”.<sup>8</sup> Here, Morris draws attention to how the leadership and organizational skills developed by religious leaders were effective outside of the church house and were particularly transferable to political leaders. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990, p. 212) additionally argued that “Black churches were the major points of mobilization for mass meetings and demonstrations, and Black church members fed and housed civil rights workers from SNCC, CORE, and other religious and secular groups”.

The socio-political function of the Black Church was also evident in decades after the Civil Rights Movement (Barber 2015). For instance, Brown and Brown (2003) found that church attendance alone did not impact if Black Christians engaged in political activities, such as voting. Conversely, the study reveals the factor that contributed most to rates of Black political engagement was whether or not the church offered civic resources, such as political discussions and opportunities to join committees. Additionally, research by Pattillo-McCoy (1998) and Barnes (2005) has further revealed the diverse ways Black Church culture has been replicated in the broader Black community for political purposes. Ultimately, Black Christianity in America can be considered a political artifact precisely because the Black American experience has and continues to involve a struggle for power, status, and resources, and the Church has been involved with these struggles in both explicit and implicit ways.

### 2.3. Socio-Economic Functions

The third prominent function the Black Church has historically offered the Black community was socio-economic resources. Black Churches, via the mutual aid societies they helped found, operated as the first Black banks and insurance companies. Frazier (1974, p. 41), in his analysis of Black Christianity from slavery to the great migration, found that “these benevolent societies grew out of the Negro church and were inspired by the spirit of Christian charity. They were supported by the pennies which the Negroes could scrape together in order to aid each other in time of sickness but more especially to insure themselves a decent Christian burial”. This function, like many of the others, emerged because racist politics disguised as social norms prevented Black Americans from utilizing the white businesses that offered these same resources. The Black Church, then, remained adaptable to meet the various needs of the community.

It is not all that surprising that the Black Church offered economic functions for the Black community considering historically it was the “most economically self-sufficient institution in the Black community” (Allen 2019b, p. 2). As many Black congregants faithfully tithed portions of their income to Black churches, these institutions became economically independent, allowing them to purchase property and evade white influence—actions that were less common among individual Black households. Woodson ([1921] 2017, p. 157) further articulates the socio-economic power of the church when stating, “these church groups, large and small, have held together for decades, and even generations, in the sacrificing effort to purchase houses of worship for which some of them have well paid two or three times because of thieves within and thieves without— that fact alone is evidence of the development of the power of the consolidation among Negroes”. Evidently, the history of the Black Church is fundamentally a history of social work within the Black community. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990, p. 243) illustrate this when noting that, “From their pulpits many Black preachers preached the moral messages of saving for a rainy

day, learning to read and write, getting an education, finding a job and working hard, supporting the family, and raising the children respectably and industriously". Here, they also draw attention to the last major function.

#### 2.4. Socio-Educational Functions

The fourth and final function I identify is socio-educational. The Black Church, in more ways than one, filled the educational void within the community. Early education efforts within the Black community often had explicit religious aims. For instance, [Frazier \(1974, p. 42\)](#) notes how "the first real educators to take up the work of enlightening American Negroes were clergymen interested in the propagation of the gospel . . . the purpose of education was primarily to transmit to the Negro the religious ideas and practices" of Christianity. [Lincoln and Mamiya \(1990, p. 251\)](#) similarly found that "Sunday schools were often the first places where Black people made contact with the educational process, first hearing, then memorizing, and finally, learning to read Bible stories" ([Lincoln and Mamiya 1990, p. 251](#)). Black churches, alongside the Freedman's Bureau, and in some cases white philanthropists, played formidable roles in establishing schools for Black children and young adults, including many historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

As Sunday schools became day schools, which then eventually evolved into Bible schools as well as prominent HBCUs, the educational content also shifted away from its initial focus on religion ([Frazier 1974; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990](#)). [Woodson \(\[1921\] 2017, p. 157\)](#) described the Black Church as "the school of experience for the Negro community. The Church furnished the opportunity for this experience and the people . . . learned how to discriminate, how to think for themselves, how to take care of themselves in a critical situation, in short, how to be self-sufficient". In this way, the Church provided educational resources, at both professional and cultural levels, for Black Christian communities across age cohorts.

#### 2.5. Church Functions as Social Gospel

[Lincoln and Mamiya \(1990, p. 17\)](#) referred to Black American Christianity as the "Black Sacred Cosmos" because it "permeated all of the social institutions and cultural traditions of Black people". The historical extra-religious functions discussed above certainly substantiate this claim. It is important to note that each individual Black church was not able to provide all of the aforementioned functions, all of the time. Rather, some churches only offered one or two, while others primarily focused on providing the expected religious functions of a church. [Billingsley \(2003, p. 11\)](#), in his study delineating the ways in which Black churches have prioritized social reform, found that the Black church moves "beyond its purely spiritual or religious or privatistic mission to embrace its communal mission, provided that the church, as an organization, is strong, stable, and resourceful and provided that the minister, as leader, is strong, charismatic, innovative, and community oriented". In this way, he clarifies that only churches with extensive resources, as well as leadership committed to a "social gospel"<sup>9</sup> that sees Black community development as a permanent item on the church's overall agenda, were situated to offer extra services to the community. More pointedly, Social Gospel Theology sees social inequality as "society's sin" and as a result prioritizes efforts that will contribute to establishing "social salvation" through social reform ([White et al. 1976; Evans 2017](#)). Among Black churches, these efforts often materialized in non-religious functions.

Although these secular functions were most commonly ascribed to protestant churches, there is also some evidence that other Black Christian denominations met community needs in innovative ways as well. While most of the scholarly literature on Black Christianity centers the experiences of protestant denominations, there is also a limited discussion of the extra-religious functions prevalent within Black Catholicism as well, acknowledging how some parishes offer adherents socio-cultural and socio-political resources ([Winstead 2017](#)). Altogether it is clear that, historically, the Black Church was foundational in supporting the Black community's transition from slavery to Jim Crow and again through the Great

Migration and the Civil Rights Movement. However, as new legal protections were introduced to society via the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, many components of the U.S. social landscape began to evolve, and in some cases were perceived as deteriorating—one of such cases is the prominence of religious institutions and Christian ideological influence on American culture. In the following section, I further discuss the major components of religious change in America and its implications on perceptions of contemporary Black Church functions.

### 3. Racializing Religious Change among Millennials

Perceptions of whether or not religion remains a stronghold in American culture have shifted over the last few decades. Much consideration has been given to the secularization thesis, which contends that as a society modernizes and advances, religion will become an increasingly insignificant social institution (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014; Voas and Chaves 2016; Schnabel and Bock 2017). Scholars have conceptualized shifts in religious expression in a variety of ways, framing it as “lived religion” (Ammerman 2014, 2016), “public religion” (Lichterman 2012), and even “digital religion” (Campbell 2012; Gault 2022). Sociologists of religion, though, have become particularly fascinated with disaffiliation and growing demographics, such as the “nones” and “dones”.

Religious “Nones” are defined as individuals who report having no religious affiliation. Baker and Smith (2009) characterize “nones” as those ascribed to a lifestyle of religious nonbelief and/or nonbelonging. They go on to identify three categories of non-religiosity: atheists, agnostics, and unchurched believers and then use nationally representative data to demonstrate that “there are distinctive differences between these categories when it comes to private religiosity and spirituality, as well as the level of opposition to religion in the public sphere” (Baker and Smith 2009, p. 731). Religious “dones,” despite reporting as unaffiliated with organized religion, maintain their religious beliefs and ideologies (Packard and Ferguson 2019). For this reason, Packard and Hope (2015, p. 14) refer to “dones” as the “dechurched,” claiming “they’re done with church. They’re tired and fed up with church. They’re dissatisfied with the structure, social message, and politics of the institutional church, and they’ve decided they and their spiritual lives are better off lived outside of organized religion”.

These scholarly conversations are rarely disaggregated by race and have also failed to fully explore how religious change materializes among younger generational cohorts, such as Millennials. More importantly, inquiries surrounding why people continue to affiliate with religious institutions, at a time when not doing so is more commonplace, have not been fully explored. Together, these limitations engender a particular need for additional research on the contemporary religious experiences of Black Millennials whose “racial and cultural scripts dictate the way they engage with prominent social institutions like religion” (Allen et al. 2020, p. 481). Pew Research Center’s (2021) “Faith Among Black Americans” study found that Black Millennials are less likely to report affiliations with a church institution than older Black generations, such as Boomers and the Silent Generation, yet are more likely to report believing in God when compared to the general U.S. public. Even within the COVID-19 era, Black Millennials’ distinctive religiosity led Jones (2022, p. 55) to characterize them as “the champions who have advanced Black faith into the furthest reaches of the online arena”. These data suggest that although Black “dones” are a growing population, Christian faith remains strong in the Black community, suggesting that many Black Christian Millennials are critical yet still engaged with religious institutions (Mitchell 2018; Parker 2018). How, then, have perceptions of and engagement with the Black Church shifted across generations and what does this indicate about the resilience of Black Christianity? The present study explores this further.

### 4. Methods

This study examining the resiliency of the Black Church is part of a larger project exploring how Black Millennials make sense of race and faith during Black Lives Matter.

The Millennial cohort, also referred to as Generation Y, includes individuals born between 1981–1996 (Pew Research Center 2010) and is particularly known for its progressive politics and disillusionment with prominent social institutions (Howe and Strauss 2000; Milkman 2017; Risman 2017). Scholars argue that Black Millennials are culturally distinct from their generational cohort mates of other races and ethnicities in both their standpoints and social experiences (Allen 2019a; Allen et al. 2020). The present study specifically focuses on the subjugated knowledge of Black Christian Millennials to fully assess what role the Black Church plays in the Black community today and how this compares and contrasts with the functions it has historically provided.

Here, I specifically draw on data from semi-structured, in-depth interviews that were conducted between March 2019–July 2020, amid the current and ongoing Black Lives Matter movement. Altogether, I spoke with 65 participants who were recruited with flyers posted on social media and then through the snowball, convenience sampling technique. On average they were 30 years old at the time of the interview. Respondents were ethnically diverse, identifying as Black Americans (descendants of American slavery; 75%), African and Caribbean immigrants (20%), and bi/multiracial Black (5%). Additionally, the sample was predominantly women (57%), heterosexual (89%), non-Denominational (52%) and highly educated (92% reported having earned a Bachelor's degree).

As a sociologist, I believe it is important to acknowledge how one's social positioning impacts the studies they construct and the data that they have access to. In this regard, my identity as a Black Christian Millennial certainly influenced the present study's methods, data, and analysis. I believe that sharing the same broad racial and religious identities with the study population ultimately allowed me to recruit participants, informed what questions to ask and how those questions were worded, and also positioned me to probe efficiently throughout the interview conversation for deeper revelations. Being part of the population studied additionally allowed respondents to feel comfortable sharing with me the nuanced ways their Christian faith impacts their social and political lives. I acknowledge that studying religion qualitatively involves an important and ethical responsibility, or what Small and Calarco (2022) refer to as "cognitive empathy," to honor the intimate secrets of participants' faith journeys that are shared throughout the interview process. Because I am part of the Black Christian Millennial demographic, I am equipped to fulfill this responsibility.

Scholarly literature suggests that respondents are more likely to disclose intimate data when they feel connected to the researcher; however, when the researcher is very similar to the respondent, there is also a risk that important data might appear ordinary and familiar and thus go uncritically examined (Sprague 2005; Reyes 2020). To ensure this was not the case, I enhanced the study's analytic strategy by triangulating the interview data with quantitative surveys and researcher memos. Triangulation refers to the methodological strategy of applying multiple methods to the study of one phenomenon in order to strengthen the overall analysis. The purpose of this approach is not to suggest that qualitative data are insufficient in and of themselves. Rather, triangulation simply allows scholars to contextualize their data further by adding extra dimension(s) to the study. Additionally, triangulation assists with research validity as the use of multiple methods can compensate for the limitations of any one method alone (Denzin 2015).

The transcription excerpts analyzed below respond to the following interview prompts:

1. What role does attending church play in your life? If you currently have a church home, what do you like about your church?
2. In your opinion, what value do you find in attending church?
3. What do you think the Black Church should look like today?

Responses were recorded, transcribed, and then thematically analyzed. Specifically, I read each transcription to establish an inductive coding strategy. That is, I allowed themes to emerge as I assessed each interview transcript. Saldaña (2016) defines thematic coding as identifying descriptions of behaviors, explanations, and cultural meanings. This coding strategy allowed me to ascertain how study participants perceive and articulate

the contemporary functions their churches provide. The major themes are discussed in the following sections. Pseudonyms, selected by the participants themselves, are used to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

## 5. Black Millennials' Contemporary Perceptions of the Black Church

Black Millennials' relationship with the Black Church is complex (Mitchell 2018; Parker 2018; Jones 2022) and this study captures to what extent their perceptions of the church's role in the community contrast with the ways previous generations engaged with the church. The Black Christian Millennials I interviewed reveal that some functions have remained constant while others have evolved or become defunct in their experience. Lastly, the data suggest that a new function has emerged.

### 5.1. Continuous Functions

I refer to functions that exist in a similar fashion both historically and contemporarily as continuous functions. Historically, the Black Church provided socio-cultural resources to Black people by offering a space where Black sociality could be fostered. When talking with study participants about what role attending church plays in their lives and the value that they assign to maintaining affiliation with a church at a time when many are opting out of congregational membership, several of the Black Millennial respondents similarly cited social network and community development as a contemporary benefit of going to church. For instance, Angelica, a 30-year-old Ghanaian woman who lives on the West coast, shared:

In [my city], which is a city that's mostly white, more than probably 80% white, there are fewer Black Churches. And I kind of really wanted to be in a Black Church because I was around white people all day. I was the only Black person at work. And one of my friends was kind of bragging about her church and how great it was but she mentioned that it was interracial and I was like, 'no, I gotta be around Black people', you know? And that has nothing to do with God necessarily, it was just the external environment and feeling like I needed to be around my people at least once a week, you know?

As a young Black professional living in a western city with a relatively small Black population, Angelica shares that attending a Black church is particularly important to her because she otherwise would not see any other Black people throughout the week. Just as previous generations of Black Americans relied on the Church to create opportunities to meet and socialize with Black people in addition to operating as a space of refuge from violent white society, Angelica demonstrates that this is still the case for Black Millennials as well. More pointedly, Angelica uses her church membership to engage in what Karyn Lacy refers to as strategic assimilation. Lacy (2004, p. 910) argues that "many middle-class Blacks with access to majority white colleges, workplaces, and neighbourhoods continue to consciously retain their connections to the Black world" through engagement with Black spaces and Black organizations, such as churches. When stating that her decision to attend a Black church had "nothing to do with God" but rather was in response to her living in a predominantly white "external environment," Angelica illustrates how the tendency to make religious decisions based on racial and cultural politics and priorities has remained constant across generations of Black Christians.

Not only did the interviews confirm that Black Millennials leverage their Black church membership as a way to access Black space and culture, the data also revealed that study participants specifically wanted to meet individuals who were religiously compatible as well. Historically, Black Christians utilized the church to replicate social events and positive racial identity development. However, in the present moment, there are many opportunities to enhance one's sense of Black pride and culture outside of the church via museums (Brooms 2011), affinity groups and other voluntary associations (Kimbrough 2003; McClure 2006; Robinson 2019), and most popularly online in virtual community spaces (Graham and Smith 2016; Brock 2020). What is particularly difficult in the current moment, where religion is perceived as less prominent in society, is finding other Black people

with comparable ethics, values, and beliefs. As a result, many respondents mentioned participating in their church's small life groups which they considered important for cultivating a "like-minded" community.

This topic came up during my conversation with Shuri, a 27-year-old Black and Mexican biracial woman from the West coast. When I asked her to identify what benefits attending church brings to her life, she stated:

making friends at church— sometimes friends that turn to family. And just having a support system, kind of like a group of like-minded people. Like, you can go hang out with these people and it's not going to get crazy or anything like that.

As a Black Christian Millennial, Shuri has cultivated a distinct personal ethos and desires to surround herself with a friend group that understands her lifestyle and thus are able to support and encourage her. In noting that she wants to be able to hang out while not having to worry about things getting too "crazy" she reveals just how significant her religious beliefs are in shaping her social behaviors. She specifically seeks friendship at church because she believes these relationships will align with her religious convictions. This process is consistent with research that suggests most social networks are homophilous in nature as people tend to organize their lives in such a way that they are most often surrounded by people similar to them (McCabe 2015). For many Black Christian Millennials, religious identity is just as salient if not more salient than their racial identity. Using religious beliefs as a factor in organizing one's social network is a form of value-based homophily (McPherson et al. 2001). In retaining church membership as a tool for maintaining close ties with other Black Christians, Millennial study participants like Shuri engaged in this process.

Nathan, a 24-year-old Black man from the West coast similarly discussed the value of a homophilous church community. He shared:

So for me, I've just seen the value of being in community in terms of enriching my faith experience. Talking with people who I built relationships with and knowing that there's a sort of mutual investment in each other's lives. I think for me, that's kind of what brings the value of church and knowing that there are other people who are hearing the same sorts of things that you're hearing and you can sort of bounce questions off of— I think just the communal experience still kinda maintains value to me. Especially as an adult, like, yo, making friends as an adult is hard! Like it's really hard. So to know that there's like-minded people or to some extent, like-minded people who you're going to encounter in the church environment [is nice]. Also, for me as someone who got married at a young age, [church has helped with] finding mentor couples who were older than I was. And, people who are just at different stages of life who I felt like could help me as I was trying to navigate life and also navigate faith. I think, for me, that makes the church community experience an irreplaceable one.

Here, Nathan acknowledges the complexity of navigating life as a young Black man who is Christian and married. He admits that making friends has been hard because his lifestyle varies significantly from most of his peers. As a result, Nathan relies on his church family to reconcile the friend deficit he experiences. He found that not only can other church members serve as friends but they also operate as marriage mentors and life coaches as well.

Nathan and Shuri's comments illustrate that a primary reason Black Millennials continue to affiliate with the Black Church is so that they can bond with other "like-minded" individuals. As religious adults in a society that increasingly trivializes organized religion,<sup>10</sup> some Black Christian Millennials find it challenging to make and maintain friendships with other Black believers. Attending church helps with that. Here we see that some Black Christian Millennials engage in what Todne Thomas refers to as kincraft. She argues that Black religious communities "use their spiritual relationships as a mode of kincraft that speaks to their religious aspirations for Christian relationships and their lived material experiences with racialization, spatial mobility, and social mobility" (Thomas 2021,

p. 2). More specifically, kincraft draws attention to the distinct sociality cultivated among Black Christians which often mirrors kin-based relationships.

Ultimately, I contend that the socio-cultural function is a continuous function because the Black Church still operates as a space of refuge from dominant society where the racialized religious ontology of Black Christians is not always legible. Black Christian Millennials, a demographic with the highest levels of religiosity among their generational cohort, value being part of a church community where congregants share cultural resources with one another—resources like opportunities to see Black people, to cultivate faith-based friendships, and to identify marriage mentors. While extant literature suggests that Black Millennials are highly critical of the church and disillusioned with many other prominent institutions (Allen 2019a; Allen et al. 2020), this study provides evidence that criticality does not necessarily lead to disengagement. Black Christian Millennials still value church affiliation and see the community and culture it offers as an “irreplaceable” component of their lives.

### 5.2. *Evolving Functions*

I refer to functions that existed historically but manifest differently in the contemporary moment as evolving functions. While Black Christian Millennials acknowledge that the church continues to offer political and educational resources, their perceptions of these resources differed from the descriptions of how these functions manifested historically.

For earlier generations of Black Christians, the majority of their political engagement was cultivated and conducted in the church. Churches were able to operate as political mobilization centers because they were economically independent and therefore free from white influence. This independence also engendered a general level of trust between Black people and the church. However, it appears that younger generations may not trust the politics of the church in the same way. Some Black Christian Millennials reported feeling like the Church was not doing enough, politically, in the current moment. According to Shannon, a 31-year-old Black woman from the South:

The Black Church has been non-existent with Black Lives Matter. I mean, don't get me wrong, there might be a sermon or two when it comes to that, but the majority of the sermons are talking against what the younger generation is doing, or [how we] are reacting. I feel like [the church has] been non-existent and I feel that the churches today hide under the umbrella of the fact that they have 501(c)(3) [status] and I feel that they're afraid to speak up . . . And if a church is getting donations from somewhere, they're afraid of ruining that, you know? I feel like it's a money thing, like more so like a business [than a church] . . . if you're going to be radical and you really want to invoke change, you can't be safe.

Shannon, like many other respondents, was disappointed in the Church's limited political reach. She perceived that contemporary Black Churches are not willing to take risks but instead are playing it “safe” and are “afraid to speak up”. Shannon was particularly critical of many churches' 501(c)(3) tax exempt status, which allows them to receive charitable donations from individuals and entities wanting (and needing) additional tax deductions. These donations often result in a transference of power to the donors, allowing them a particular type of influence over the organization. Additionally, this status comes with particular political restrictions, such as the inability to endorse political candidates or participate in certain political activities. Aware of this matrix of power, Shannon recognizes how contemporary Black churches with 501(c)(3) status have their hands tied in such a way that limits their political impact, which starkly differs from the political role that early Black churches played. Shannon draws attention to how this difference is in part due to the fact that contemporary Black churches are no longer economically independent and therefore are not protected from external influence as they were historically.

In mentioning that she has heard “a sermon or two” that were political in nature, Shannon, confirms that churches are indeed still, to a certain extent, providing political resources to congregants. However, when discussing the sermons, she perceived a genera-

tional divide within the church community, noting that the political sermons problematized “what the younger generation is doing”. Considering generations tend to have distinct standpoints as a result of their “generational habitus” (Allen et al. 2015), it is not surprising that Black Christians across generations hold disparate attitudes about social inequality and varying beliefs about how to respond to it. In fact, this divergence likely mirrors a long-standing tension in Christian communities between this-worldly and other-worldly ideologies.<sup>11</sup> Younger generations, such as Millennials, are more likely to embrace this-worldly ideologies.

Other respondents similarly addressed this disconnect between the desires of older church leaders and the needs of the broader Black community. For instance, Dubois, a 28-year-old Black man residing in the Midwest, shared:

What I realized, too, is that it’s a generational gap. So a lot of the older people who be in church, who a lot of times be the religious leaders, have this mindset like ‘we just trying to survive.’ While Millennials, I would say, have this mindset—most of us have this mindset like, ‘yo, we trying to do more than survive. We trying to flourish’ . . . the church be like, ‘we just trying to make it’ and just tell you stuff to keep you going. And Black Millennials are like ‘we need more than that from a church. I need more than just something to keep me going’ and Black Lives Matter was doing the [work]. Also [the church’s lack of engagement] is probably based on who [the BLM movement] is led by— women and LGBTQ people which goes against a lot of the stuff from Black Churches because they have a terrible history with those affinity groups.

Dubois’ comments echo Shannon’s point about the differences in political ideologies across generations. Dubois draws attention to two points of distinction between older Christians and Black Christian Millennials: (1) politics surrounding race and ethnic relations and (2) politics surrounding gender and sexuality. First, in mentioning that older Black Christians just want to “survive” while Black Christian Millennials want to “flourish,” Dubois insinuates that younger generations have embraced a more radical and transformative politic. More specifically, he suggests that in order for Black people to not just survive but also thrive, major changes are needed in the social structure and racial hierarchy so that Black communities can have access to the opportunities and resources necessary to be successful.

Dubois additionally pointed out disparities in gender politics across generations. When stating that Black Churches have a “terrible history” with women and queer folk, he is complicating narratives about the trust between Black churches and the Black community historically. More specifically, Dubois implies that the Black community is now able to critique the church in ways that it could not before because it was the institutional epicenter of Black life. This, in turn, compelled those on the margins to engage with the institution despite the fact that it may be harming them. However, now that the Black community’s dependence upon the Black church has weakened, Black people are able to critique the ways that Black Christianity perpetuates cis-heteropatriarchal values (Higginbotham 1993; Gilkes 2001) and as a result, some Black Millennials do not view it as an institution equipped to champion Black liberation when it does not even embrace liberatory politics within its own organizational spaces and cultures.

Other respondents had specific ideas about how the church could support present-day Black liberation efforts. For instance, when discussing how he perceives the church’s involvement in the Black Lives Matter movement, Jerome, a 26-year-old Black man from the Midwest, stated:

I think folk in our generation, because of church hurt or whatever, are very hesitant to let the church sort of be involved. Cause let’s be honest, sometimes when the church gets involved with stuff, it just takes over [with] its agenda. I’ve seen it happen . . . Sometimes we got to learn how there are different roles that can [and] need to be played. So, for example, the [church] that I’m at, it served as a housing center for folks when the protests happened. And that was just a space. There was no forum, there was no speaker to come through to pray over

the people. It was just like, ‘our doors are open. It’s safe here. No one’s really gonna mess with it cause it’s a church. So you’re welcome to come here.’ And so, I think the church should definitely be involved and I think if it is, it should look to come humbly as a servant and not say, ‘yo, we have it all figured out and we are the ones who are going to make it happen.’

Jerome similarly acknowledges the generational divide within the Black Christian community while also reflecting on the ways in which he sees the Church showing support for the movement. In drawing attention to “church hurt,” or the adverse experiences one has within a church environment and/or by people affiliated with church organizations, Jerome identifies one reason individuals have grown apart from the church. His comments also suggest that Black church leadership do not know how to adequately respond to their lesser dominant role in the community as they tend to “take over” with their own “agenda” assuming they “have it all figured out” rather than working collaboratively with other community organizers and Black voluntary associations. Jerome believes that one way for Black churches to rebuild trust is for them to “come humbly as a servant” as his church did when they offered housing to BLM protestors. While this is certainly a different role than the central one Black churches played historically, this does demonstrate that they are still political organizations, even if those politics differ across generations.

The socio-political function was not alone in manifesting differently in the present moment than it had historically. Findings additionally suggest that the socio-educational function has also evolved. Historically, the church was a major contributor to scholarly efforts throughout the Black community. Supporting literacy and establishing secondary and post-secondary schools, Black churches stepped up to provide academically where the federal government had neglected Black people. In the contemporary moment, Black people do not need religious institutions to provide supplementary scholastic resources because desegregation provided access to a wide array of academic institutions. Subsequently, contemporary churches have shifted to nearly exclusively focusing on religious education, which has produced a desire among Black Christian Millennials, who are part of the most educated generation, to be “spiritually fed” with innovative and meaningful sermons.

I spoke with Lanae, a 31-year-old Black woman in the South about how she benefits from attending church. She noted:

The pastors at my church are teachers. They don’t talk at you, they teach you the Word. And one of the things that I really admire is that we have Bible series. So right now we’re in [the book of] John and we will spend 15–20 weeks in John and we will go literally, you know, scripture by scripture and the pastors will dissect each word. They explain what’s happening currently and how it relates to what’s going on so you’re able to connect the dots. Especially for somebody like me who, I don’t know the Word like that. I want to but I just kind of came in [to the faith.]

In categorizing her pastors as teachers rather than preachers, Lanae signifies that learning is a primary component of the culture of her church. She describes how the church leaders take their time to break down the religious lessons “scripture by scripture” because they are passionate about ensuring their church members are able to “connect the dots” between the Bible and their everyday lives on their own. This experience was particularly impactful for Lanae who was raised as a Jehovah’s Witness and had only recently switched to identifying as non-Denominational and thus engaging with a new translation of the Bible.<sup>12</sup> As such, she was not confident in her ability to study and understand the Word of God and sought out a church that could help strengthen that component of her faith journey.

Stokely, a 32-year-old Black man residing in the South, similarly valued that his church leaders were capable of intriguing the intellectual part of his personality. When describing what he loved about his church, he told me:

Not only are we a Black church, we are an open and affirming Black church, which kind of blew my mind . . . And so, I came back to the faith or came back to going to church regularly, around the idea that there’s actually a church that

aligns with how I think intellectually. I think it has everything to do with the co-pastors—it's a man and woman and they're trained! They're trained to do preaching . . . and [one has] a PhD in the Hebrew Bible . . . They can talk about the Bible being a book that's not right about everything. (laughs) They can talk about the culture that informs the writing of the Bible, they can teach it in ways that still help us hold up in the faith. So I came [to this church] based off of this kind of socio-political understanding of the world that I wanted to see reflected in theology.

For many Black Christian Millennials, it is important that they see their politics reflected in the religious educational content they consume at church. Stokely had given up on attending church regularly because he was uninterested in being exposed to intolerant interpretations of Christian theology that he considered inconsistent with his understanding of the faith. It was not until he found a church that (1) was open and affirming of gender and sexual minorities and (2) had pastors equipped to wrestle with the Biblical inconsistencies he perceived, could he commit to church membership again.

Stokely and Lanea's experiences reveal to what extent the educational experience has shifted over time for congregants of Black churches. Desegregation ultimately had a dual effect on the socio-educational function. While on one hand it freed Black churches from providing general education to the community, allowing them to instead focus predominantly on religious education, on the other hand it engendered a highly educated Millennial generation that now has high standards and expectations for the type of religious educational experience they desire to receive, including preferences about preaching and/or teaching style and theological interpretations.

### 5.3. *Defunct Functions*

I refer to functions that existed historically but are no longer prominent in the contemporary moment as defunct functions. Findings suggest that Black Christian Millennials have not experienced Black churches in the present moment providing economic resources in the way that older iterations of Black Christian communities did. Instead of money coming in so that it can go back out to the community to support families and political efforts, study participants perceived that the process had been corrupted overtime and now money was coming in and staying in the church.

Raven, a 30-year-old Black woman in the South shared her frustrations with me, stating:

One thing that bothers me a lot is when events happen in a church, I guess I understand that things cost, but sometimes I think some churches are becoming more corporate-based and having different events but then charging for them or other different things. I feel like it's becoming more corporate-based than anything.

From Raven's perspective, churches today are not prioritizing the need to economically support their members. While Black churches of the past served as the first Black banks and mutual aid societies, Raven sees that contemporary churches only want to make money by taking it from their members for events that should be free. Raven describes the economic culture as "corporate" and business-like rather than community focused.

M.T., a 35-year-old Black man living on the East coast, complicated Raven's perspective when sharing:

I have heard that, statistically, those older generations, not only do they come to church, they give! They give to church, they give money. It's just part of who they are. Our generation, not so much. (laughs) So it's interesting being a Millennial who's a pastor in an established denomination with an older congregation. It's pretty clear to me who pays the bills, you know, and stuff like that. And people say, 'Oh, it's not about money.' Well, yes it is 'cause we're a business and we got bills to pay. And I have a commercial insurance policy that I have to pay for just like you have an insurance policy on your car that you gotta pay for it. So it also

is complicated by that. And some of us will say, 'Oh, we don't need that to have God,' which is true. And that sort of creates a interesting tension at times.

As a pastor who is intimately familiar with the church finances, M.T. knows that many churches, like his, are barely staying afloat financially. He discloses that older congregants tithe consistently whereas Millennials do not, thus drawing attention to the fact that the generational difference among Black Christians extends beyond politics and into the realm of economics as well. Many Black Christian Millennials, such as Raven, perceive that churches are too focused on making money. They have witnessed megachurch pastors promote prosperity gospel theology for their own personal profit and as a result have become highly critical of churches' propensity to be money hungry. When they perceive this to be the case, Millennial congregants often withhold their tithes and offering as a form of resistance. M.T. notes how this creates an "interesting tension" because churches are businesses with "bills to pay". Ultimately, it is not surprising that, according to study participants, the socio-economic function has become defunct in the contemporary moment considering only a fraction of the church membership pays their tithes which in turn is used to primarily cover operational costs. Under these conditions, there is not much left over in the church budget to offer free events or other economic resources to the community that would represent the social gospel that many Millennials want to see from religious organizations.

While the respondents in this study described the economic function quite differently than how it has been characterized in the literature, it is important to note that these data stem from a convenience sample in which the findings reflect the perceptions, experiences, and meaning-making processes of the selection of Black Christian Millennials I spoke with. In other words, a representative sample-based study might reveal differing perceptions of the economic resources exchanged between churches and the Black community in the present day that is more reflective of the broader Black Christian Millennial demographic. This study remains noteworthy, though, in that even among this sample of Black Christian Millennials who consider the Church's economic politics to be more focused on securing funds from congregants and corporations rather than on sharing economic resources with the community, participants still overwhelmingly valued church membership and affiliation, which further complicates the narrative that criticality alone leads to and/or explains religious disaffiliation.

#### *5.4. Emergent Functions*

I refer to functions that were not prominent historically but have emerged in the contemporary moment as emergent functions. Several of the Black Christian Millennial respondents reported that attending church helped them to better manage their emotions, to navigate interpersonal relationships, to process and de-escalate conflict, and to strengthen their capacity to be self-reflexive. Together, these resources constitute the socio-emotional function, which has emerged more recently. Mental health has become less stigmatized in recent years, creating a new opportunity for churches to meet the needs of their members. This is not to say that mental health was not a concern for previous generations of Black Christians; rather, this emergent function acknowledges how the Millennial generation has successfully advocated for the need to make resources for psychological well-being more readily accessible.

My conversation with Dubois also addressed this benefit of church affiliation. He described how his church helps him socio-emotionally when stating:

When I think of my religion, my Christianity, it's really about how to be the best version of myself. And so I see church almost like a workshop where I can go and workshop myself. And so I can go to church and think about the different ways I can negotiate difficult relationships, how I can negotiate my personal life, my work life. How I can negotiate feelings of anxiety. Like it doesn't replace therapy and I think the pastor at my church now would even say you still need to go to therapy, but hearing other people relate and tell you stories about how they've

dealt with stuff and how they're still dealing with stuff and the strategies they use is never not helpful.

Like many of the historical functions, the socio-emotional function caters to both the sacred and secular needs of church members. When Dubois compares attending church to a self-development "workshop" it becomes evident that he finds value in the fact that his church cares about him holistically. Navigating a culture that encourages emotional intelligence, Dubois continues to attend church because it offers a free supplement to his traditional therapy sessions, which together equip him with both faith-based and research-based strategies for managing anxiety and depression.

Rainelli, a 29-year-old Black man living on the East coast, also relied on his church affiliation to manage his emotions. He shared with me:

[Attending church offers] a chance to hang around young adults, discuss young adult issues concerning Christianity, and Christians in the world. And then we'd go to service and I get spiritually replenished. Like if it's been a draining week, [church] is my refill station. When I would get to church [I'd be] like, 'ahh, I needed this message,' even if I didn't know I needed it. 'Cause sometimes I walk in, I'm like, okay God, I need you to tell me how to fix this problem' . . . it's such a replenishing feeling before going back into the work week. And I remember there was a time that I did disengage from the church, not because the church was doing anything bad, it was more of a personal issue . . . But in that six weeks of me waiting to get my new car, not having that weekly refilling was incredibly draining. I remember, it was literally one point in like week four or week five, where I was just sitting in my bed, I was crying. I was like, I just want to go back to my church.

In some ways the socio-emotional function overlaps with the socio-cultural function of providing Black Christians access to a community of like-minded people. Church members find it particularly comforting to be around people with similar values and beliefs. However the socio-emotional function is distinct in that it draws attention to how the communal worship experience yields specific psychological benefits. In Rainelli's case, through his church attendance and interactions with other congregants and with God, he was able to feel "spiritually replenished" each week. He believed that through church, God could (and would) use his pastor and his church family to speak directly to what was going on in his life. Rainelli's Christian praxis continues a long tradition of Black Protestantism which believes that individual Christians can have direct access to God through the Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup>

Rainelli demonstrates how churches are able to continue to meet the distinct needs of their members. His church offered an elevated spiritual experience that he was not able to achieve on his own when practicing the faith independently.<sup>14</sup> Not only did he report feeling empty when unable to attend church for 6 weeks due to car issues, like he had been "drained," but he also felt sad. In sharing that missing church for over a month led him to tears, we can see that church affiliation has a direct impact on members' mental and emotional well-being.

## 6. Conceptualizing Religious Resilience

Public discourses assessing and critiquing the Black Church have led some to perceive it is a dead, or at least dying, institution. In comparing descriptions of Black churches historically to perceptions of Black churches today, this study has found variations in and across the diverse functions offered by Black religious institutions which ultimately serves as evidence of vitality. Through this vitality, I identify the concept of *religious resilience*.

Religious resilience refers to a religious artifact's capacity to withstand changes in the social, political, and racial landscape that would otherwise undermine its value, yet instead the artifact maintains its perception as a significant component of society that fundamentally influences the lives of individuals and groups. Religious artifacts are situated across institutional, ideological, and individual/interpersonal levels. Conceptually,

religious resilience offers a framework to examine a number of topics, including why certain religious leaders are able to fill pews and convention centers even after continuous reports of their indiscretions (e.g., Hillsong United) and why certain theological beliefs and spiritual tenets are reified despite new forms of contrasting evidence from scholars, cultural experts, and in some cases other religious leaders (e.g., depictions of Jesus as white with blonde hair and blue eyes). Ultimately, this concept identifies the various ways religious artifacts reduce the negative implications of social critique. Additionally, religious resilience compels us to ask, “who benefits?” when certain religious artifacts are reified. In the case of the present study, religious resilience responds to critiques of the Black Church as a “dead” or “dying” religious institution, by capturing how the various functions it has offered the Black community over time have, and continue to, fluctuate, and reads the, at times, inconstant nature of these functions as evidence of livelihood rather than evidence of death.

Ultimately, the concept of religious resilience extends McGuire’s (2018, p. 321) notion of religion’s afterlife which he uses to describe “religion’s reach beyond physical institutions”. Religious resilience not only considers how individuals carry faith and spirituality beyond physical space but also considers how religious continuations exist among various social actors, social locations, and socio-historical contexts. Religious resilience accounts for how religious entities respond to factors that might undermine their influence by serving as an analytic tool that examines how religion recalibrates itself amid shifts in the social climate. More pointedly, religious resilience considers how the value of religion as a social institution is renewed among new iterations of society and why.

This concept equips us to examine what impact structural changes (such as COVID-based shelter-in-place mandates) and cultural changes (such as Trump-based political backlash) has had on religious institutions and religious praxis, particularly among racialized religious communities. As spiritual technologies and opportunities to perform Black Christianity individually and/or virtually are ever expanding (Allen 2019b; Gault 2020), the concept of religious resilience draws attention to why offline, or traditional, modalities of religion, such as church attendance, remain impactful to many. To put it clearly, religious resilience allows us to acknowledge that church membership is in decline while also asserting that the Black Church is not dead. While rising demographics, such as “nones” and “dones”, may lead some to that conclusion, the concept of religious resilience compels scholars to reconsider how religious entities, like the Black Church discussed here, may be leveraging a cross over effect between this-worldly and other-worldly needs to maintain vitality—a reality that is not being captured in extant research due to survey measures and operationalizations that do not fully reflect the diverse motivations toward and modalities of religious expression available today.

## 7. Critical but Engaged: Conclusion and Implications

The Black Church’s dynamic role in the everyday lives of Black Americans is undeniable. Historically, it offered the community many secular services and resources in addition to providing its customary religious functions. Scholarly literature suggests that engagement with religious institutions is in decline, yet little is known about how macro-level religious change has manifested at the micro-level within the Black community, one of the most religious demographics in the country. To address the gap regarding how the Black Church resonates with Black Christian communities who have witnessed major changes in the American religious landscape, the present study explores to what extent the historic functions of the Black Church (i.e., socio-cultural, socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-educational functions) are still prevalent among Black Christians today.

Data from in-depth interviews with 65 Black Christian Millennials revealed that the socio-cultural function has remained constant, while the socio-political and socio-educational functions have evolved from the perspective of study participants. The socio-economic function has become defunct and the socio-emotional function has emerged. Ultimately, I introduce the concept of religious resilience which accounts for the afterlife of

religious institutions, ideologies, and individuals that one might expect to be negatively impacted by changes in society's religious landscape yet somehow maintain their powerful influence on individuals, groups, and culture, and contend that the Black Church is a prominent exemplar of this concept.

This study extends the literature on religious change by demonstrating how and why younger generations can simultaneously critique and value the church and, more importantly, why criticism of religious organizations does not always lead to disengagement for demographics like Black Christian Millennials. Just as complex religion theory (Wilde and Glassman 2016) offers a framework for thinking through the co-dependent relationship between religion, race and power, this study demonstrates why sociology of religion research must examine the meaning-making processes of racialized religious groups, especially those socialized into a social gospel-based Black Christianity.

This study has many implications for future research. First, because this study relied on a convenience sampling technique, it is plausible that additional functions exist and that there may be heterogeneous perspectives of the functions discussed above. Future research should focus on other lesser discussed functions of the Black Church, such as family socialization and the governing of sexual identity and expression (via purity culture and critiques of it).<sup>15</sup> Scholars might also consider assessing the nuanced ways Black Christianity spans across institutional, ideological, and interpersonal levels in the present moment so that we can gain a better understanding of the mechanisms and machinations of religious resilience. How other prominent social institutions remain resilient amid societal change is also worthy of study. Scholars should consider the "afterlife" of changing institutions, such as marriage and family, education, and even media and technology.

Additionally, examining religious resilience among other religious communities, such as white Christians, Muslims, and Black Hebrew Israelites, will crystalize what religion's future role in the public sphere might look like. While comparative studies are not always necessary, and at times are problematic as they often normalize white groups and "other" the experiences of marginalized ethno-racial groups, future studies assessing religious change and religious resilience could utilize a comparative analytic strategy to demonstrate how religion and religious institutions continue to operate differently across racial lines. Finally, considering the many references to generational tensions between older and younger Black Christians, how Black Christian Millennials merge their Christian theology with their radical politics is in need of further exploration as well. Despite speculation that the Black Church is dead, or dying, this study has shown that it is perpetually capable of revival as it attempts to adapt to the needs of its members and the Black community at large.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the University of Cincinnati Human Research Protect Program and Institutional Review Board (Study ID: 2018-6963, 12 December 2018) for studies involving humans.

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**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) *Black Feminist Thought* for more on the matrix of domination.

<sup>2</sup> I align my racial capitalization practices with that of Du Bois who considered "the use of a small letter for the name of twelve million Americans and two hundred million human beings a personal insult" (Tharps 2014). More specifically, I follow in the tradition 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” (Crenshaw 1991, p. 1244).
- 3 Some portions of the Black community, namely Black women and Black LGBTQ folx have, and remain, critical of the cis-heteropatriarchal ideologies perpetuated through the church (Higginbotham 1993; Gilkes 2001; Barnes 2013).
- 4 Throughout this article, I draw on frameworks prevalent in extant sociology of religion literature and use “Black Church” and “Black Community” to “reflect the collective nature of these predominantly Black institutions” (Du Bois [1903] 2003, p. xvii). However, these terms should not be interpreted as if there is no heterogeneity across Black America, and within Black Christianity specifically. In this regard, I similarly use “Black church” when referencing a specific institution and “Black Christianity” as an umbrella term to encompass the denominational and theological pluralism reflected among the many Black Christians across time and space in America.
- 5 Du Bois ([1903] 1995, [1903] 2003) argues that the Black Church, as a social institution, actually predates the Black family because the Black family was subjected to white influence, and more pointedly white disruption, as a result of the racial capitalistic politics of U.S. chattel slavery. Black religion, though, was permitted and therefore provided Black America its first institutional space to cultivate a distinct identity and culture.
- 6 Scholars have complicated the Black American Christian tradition by noting that enslaved Africans were spiritual people prior to the trans-Atlantic slave trade. While they eventually came to embrace white protestant Christianity by infusing many of their native African spiritual practices into it, the Black community was nonetheless forced to convert to the Christian faith within the coercive political conditions of U.S. chattel slavery (Raboteau [1978] 2004).
- 7 See Mansbridge and Morris (2001) for more on oppositional consciousness.
- 8 To further elucidate *how* Black Church culture proved useful for the movement, Morris (1984, p. 4) notes, “The Black Church supplied the civil rights movement with a collective enthusiasm generated through a rich culture consisting of songs, testimonies, oratory, and prayers that spoke directly to the needs of an oppressed group”.
- 9 See Dorrien (2015, 2018) for more on the Black social gospel.
- 10 See Gault (2018) for more on the policing of Black Christianity.
- 11 This-worldly ideologies contend that Christians have a responsibility to address social issues as part of their religious praxis, while other-worldly ideologies suggest that Christians should see their time on earth as temporary and focus more on preparing for eternal life in Heaven.
- 12 Jehovah’s Witnesses use the New World Translation Bible which greatly differs from prominent translations, such as the King James Version, New King James Version, and the New Living Translation, which have lots of overlap.
- 13 Some scholars have linked the contemporary practice of spiritual in-dwelling to native forms of African spirituality that were carried through the middle-passage and infused into Black Christian religious expression during slavery (Costens 1993; Raboteau [1978] 2004).
- 14 A prominent Bible verse within Black Christian communities is Matthew 18:20 which states, “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (New King James Version). This verse is often cited as evidence that corporate worship (worship performed with community) is distinctly more powerful than individual worship experiences because one can see and learn more about the character of God through observing how He moves in the lives of other people.
- 15 See Cooper (2018) and Benbow (2022).

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