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**Keynote Address at the 93rd Annual Meeting of the Indiana Academy
of the Social Sciences**

***Of Movements and Markets: Religious Competition and the Problem
of Black Church Relevance****

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ABSTRACT

Why do cross-denominational public religious movements such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference appear, despite the market-like competitive behavior of churches? Religious economy theory offers one set of explanations, based on a supply-side approach to the dynamics of numeric religious growth and decline. Namely, ecumenical movements are engaged by denominations, or religious firms, in membership decline. The history of national Black ecumenical movements, however, points to ways that religious economic theorizing fails to account for the multiple modes of social consciousness regarding church survival that motivate institutional religious activity. Black churches have existed not merely as a market but as a field where market consciousness transforms into movement consciousness at historic moments of perceived political opportunity. At such moments, unified public religious action on behalf of “the people” is understood as more important than the competitive dominance of individual firms in a private religious market.

KEY WORDS Black Church; African American Religion; Ecumenical Movements;
Public Religion; Religious Economies

On February 12, 2010, the National Council of Churches released its annual compendium of statistics on 227 religious denominations in the United States and Canada. Seven of the eight major African American denominations were listed among the top 25 religious bodies by membership. Together, the top seven historically Black denominations claimed 22,899,875 members. Statistics on these denominations have been notoriously unreliable. As of 2010, some of the denominations had not produced updated membership data in many years; others appear to have reported the same number every year. The National

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Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. was reported to have 8,200,000 members in 2000, although it had not updated its count since 1992. By 2005, it claimed 5,000,000—a nearly 40% loss. This indicated not that membership had fallen so dramatically but that previously exaggerated numbers had been tempered.

Despite the irregularity of Black church statistics, it was clear that these bodies were persisting well, especially relative to majority-White mainline denominations, whose decline Yearbook editors remarked upon annually, yet on February 24, 2010, just two weeks after the National Council of Churches released these statistics, the Black church was declared dead—not declining, but dead. In a Huffington Post article, Princeton religion scholar Eddie Glaude began by citing the most recent survey from the Pew Research Center Forum on Religion and Public Life, which revealed that 87% of African Americans identified with some religious group and 79% claimed religion was highly important in their lives. He then went on to note the death of the Black church, presenting the triptych of circumstances surrounding its demise. First, the prophetic, progressive, socially concerned and engaged tradition of Black *public religion* was being overpowered by theologically and socially conservative currents and by “prosperity” oriented churches, where a gospel of individual material attainment, rather than social transformation, prevailed. In the sociology of religion, public religion is understood as all of the civic activity engaged by religious bodies in societies where institutional religion and state are formally distinct. It is the socially and politically concerned activity of religious institutions trying to impact the world (Casanova 1994; see also McRoberts 2015). The idea of public religion presumes a contrary *private religion* that includes the sectarian ritual and spiritual activities of individuals and faith communities. Second, secular institutions and diversions, along with majority-White megachurches, challenged the Black church’s storied place as the center of Black life. Last, instead of working to make the church the prophetic center of Black life in the contemporaneous moment, Black religion increasingly resorted to a fierce veneration of the church’s prophetic past. What, Glaude asked, “will be the role of the prophetic black churches *on the national stage* under these conditions?” Where, he asked, “are the press conferences and impassioned efforts around black children living in poverty, and commercials and organizing around jobs and healthcare reform?”

The article provoked a storm of responses from a wide range of commentators from the religious field and the academy. In an electronic response, Reverend Dr. J. Alfred Smith confessed, “I am sick and tired of black academics who are paid by rich, powerful Ivy league schools, who have access to the microphone and the ear of the press, pontificating about the health of black churches that they themselves have outgrown, posing as experts on us when all they know about us is what they read and what they see on Word television. They do not know the majority of underfunded black churches who weekly give hope to the unemployed, the underemployed, the sick and the struggling, are led by pastors poor in material resources but rich in faith.” Lawrence Mamiya, a protégé and scholarly partner of the late illustrious Black religion scholar C. Eric Lincoln, echoed Smith’s sentiment, called Glaude’s portrait a “sweeping generalization,” and elaborated a litany of pastors, churches, and organizations that represented a thriving Black public religious agenda. “As Eric Lincoln and I knew from experience,” Mamiya chided, “you have to talk to the pastors in the trenches before you can make any valid statements about black churches.”

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A public panel discussion entitled “Is the Black Church Dead?” including Glaude and several other academic and church figures was held at Atlanta’s Ebenezer Baptist church, the pastoral home of Drs. Martin Luther King Sr. and Jr., and the iconographic home of the Black church as the cradle of prophetic insurgency for social justice. It was from Ebenezer’s pulpit that Dr. King Jr. himself, speaking some 47 years earlier as the chief organizer of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), fiercely decried the social and political apathy, *the irrelevance*, of Black clergy concerned mainly with growing their own churches. “I’m sick and tired,” he proclaimed that morning,

of seeing Negro preachers riding around in big cars and living in big houses and not concerned about the problems of the people who made it possible for them to get these things. It seems that I can hear the almighty God say, “stop preaching your loud sermons and whooping your irrelevant mess in my face, for your hands are full of tar. For the people that I send you to serve are in need, and you are doing nothing but being concerned about yourself.” Seems that I can hear God saying that it’s time to rise up now and make it clear that the evils of the universe must be removed. And that God isn’t going to do all of it by himself. The church that overlooks this is a dangerously irrelevant church. (Ebenezer sermon, March 4, 1963 [Branch 1989:695–96])

The danger, as King would preach at Ebenezer three years later, was not only that Black people’s suffering would increase and that America would drift even further from its call to justice but also that the church would die. Numerical die-off was not at issue here; instead, the very favor of God was at stake. Black churches might or might not survive in great numbers as something akin to social clubs competing for members, but, “[y]ou see, the church is not a social club, although some people think it is. They get caught up in their exclusivism, and they feel that it’s a kind of social club with a thin veneer of religiosity, but the church is not a social club. The church is not an entertainment center, although some people think it is. You can tell in many churches how they act in church, which demonstrates that they think it’s an entertainment center. The church is not an entertainment center.”

The people of the church needed fully to realize its activist, world-mending function, because “we don’t want the funds of grace cut off from the divine treasury,” King declared. Without these funds of grace, without the ongoing investment of God’s living spirit, the social-club churches might live, even thrive, but the Church as the divine instrument of God’s will to justice would surely die.

Perhaps it is peculiar to Black religion that the survival, *the very life* of the church should, in certain quarters and at particular historical junctures, so strongly be identified not with the number of members and congregations or the size of denominational budgets but with its aggregate relevance to social concerns on a national scale. Historian Barbara

Dianne Savage reasoned that this dynamic had led to a rather unfair characterization of Black churches as ideologically and organizationally unified, ever ready to mobilize for some political cause. She attributed this characterization to the memory of the civil rights movement. Against the backdrop of the civil rights mythos, the day-to-day round of churchly activities oriented toward private religion—ritual production, member recruitment and retention, and congregational survival more generally—appears banal, but historically, Savage argued, the very diversity of churches, not to mention their common want for material resources, had led them generally to resist national unification around theological, ecclesiastic, and public religious goals. Coordinated church movements like the SCLC have been glaring exceptions to a much broader historical pattern of resistance—resistance not to social injustice but to movement coordination itself. From this perspective, the history of Black public religion is a stream of quotidian activities and disappointed movement expectations dotted with rare glowing feats of political mobilization, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s being perhaps the most dazzling dot of all, but a dot nonetheless.

Dr. King’s homiletic references to “the funds of grace,” “the divine treasury,” and the “investment of God’s living spirit” evoke a Divine economy, where the church “died” only when it failed to rise to the public religious demands of the time. That Divine economy implied by contrast an earthly religious economy, even a market, where churches worried about actual money and membership, and actively competed for these assets by producing the right private religious goods. King dismissed as “social clubs” those churches preoccupied with the vicissitudes of the market. The purpose here, of course, is not to dismiss any religious activity but to point out that the ordinary, private religious life of churches can be described in terms of the competitive, survival-oriented activity of a diverse set of organizations in a market.

THE RELIGIOUS MARKET

Why, then, do cross-denominational public religious movements like the SCLC appear, despite the market-like competitive behavior of churches? Religious economy theories as developed by Roger Finke, Rodney Stark, and William Sims Bainbridge offer one set of explanations, based on a supply-side approach to the dynamics of numeric religious growth and decline. According to Finke and Stark in their book *The Churching of America*, ecumenical movements invariably are engaged by denominations, or religious firms, in numerical decline. Churches that have ceased making demands upon the lives of members, have stopped asserting their uniqueness vis-à-vis other organizations, have released their tension against the world, and have subsequently lost market share will band together to bolster themselves. Thriving denominations, by contrast, will avoid any gesture at merger or collaboration. Finke and Stark use the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America (FCCC) *cum* National Council of Churches (NCC) as the primary example. Thriving evangelical and sect-like denominations were excluded or had no interest in joining, anyhow. Finke and Stark conclude that “1. growing churches perceive substantial religious differences between themselves and others (which justifies their efforts to bring in new

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members). 2. Growing churches do not want to merge. 3. Churches that are shrinking see merit in mergers” (p. 233).

While it is true that the mainstream White denominations that formed the FCCC and the NCC were shrinking, especially relative to the growing evangelical churches, religious economic explanations for their ecumenism do not adequately account for what they seemed to think they were doing. Rather than banding together against the cold reality of decline, they were, at the possible risk of losing more members, joining forces to guide a secular social order toward principles that they sincerely took to be just. Finke and Stark dismiss as irrelevant the ideological and political purpose of the FCCC, and they ignore altogether the purposeful interaction between this ecumenical body and the federal government, which is where much of its activism was brought to bear.¹ The NCC was instrumental in mobilizing White churches behind the civil rights movement and other progressive causes; such mobilization took place in full knowledge that it might disaffect portions of the White religious market of shares (Findlay 1997; Hollinger 2013).

“GET THE STICKS TOGETHER!” THE SHIFT FROM MARKET TO MOVEMENT

The religious economic perspective is helpful in describing what churches do when they are behaving as a market. When they behave as a market, the organizational survival of particular churches and particular denominations is paramount. Black religious discourse foregrounds competition between denominations, within denominations (which has produced many schismatic moments), with majority-White denominations, and with secular entities that might drain membership from organized religion. Thus, from the first decade of the 20th century onward, the annual conferences of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and National Baptist churches featured the reports of official church statisticians, who tracked the relative numeric fates of the different denominations and stimulated debate about alternative paths to church growth. Some warned that if churches failed to meet people’s material and political needs, they would lose members to competing denominations or non-church institutions. Others argued that if their churches became too socially relevant, too “worldly,” they would ultimately lose the private, sacral textures that distinguish churches from secular associations.

The market metaphor is less helpful when the churches are behaving as ecumenical movements. When churches band together to behave as a social movement, African Americans appear in churchly discourses not as a source of market shares but as a singular people whose survival is at stake. The Black church then appears as a single entity, whose primary function is to be relevant to that survival, lest the church and the people as a whole suffer. The death of the Black church would then not represent a market failure but a failure of public relevance.

I have already highlighted the tones of this logic in Dr. King’s language in the organizing of the SCLC, but this logic also appears in the organizing of both the earliest and the most recent instances of Black ecumenical movement. When Eddie Glaude declared the Black church dead on February 24, 2010, he did not know that only a few weeks prior, the heads of seven major African American denominations had descended

upon Miami to resurrect the movement. Actually, for two years, a number of religious leaders affiliated with the Institute for Church Management and Administration had been working to gather the Black churches into a force capable of confronting Black social ills in the age of President Barack Obama. The Miami meeting, convened under the thematic auspice “Celebrating the Ecumenical Legacy of the Black Church,” would incorporate the board of directors for a Conference of National Black Churches, initiate conversations with a variety of secular collaborators in the corporate and nonprofit sectors, and begin planning for December 2010 a major national gathering in Washington, DC. In abundance at the two-day meeting were proclamations of joy and gratitude that the scattered, competitive churches were forming once again, at a pivotal moment in history, a singular wave of movement activity, the power of which could save a race, perhaps even a nation.

“We are reinventing ourselves in the 21st Century,” the late AME bishop John Adams remarked in the opening session. “It is an idea whose time has come. I am so delighted. I don’t know if we know what God is going to do with us now. We have a Black president but things are as hard as ever. The church is being called to act.” The language of calling, of the “idea whose time has come,” evokes the force of *Kairos*, the holy moment outside of ordinary time (*Chronos*) when the need for a particular type of action or change obviates a previous pattern of behavior (McRoberts 2020). The action being called forth at this *Kairos* moment was church unity on behalf of, rather than in competition over, a people.

At the December 2010 gathering, entitled “For the Healing of Our People,” many of the presentations drew on scripture to frame a movement of churches overcoming their own competition to save a singular people. There were references to Ezekiel 37:1–14, where appears the parable of the dry bones. Here, the churches, rather than banding together to prevent death, were depicted as already dead in their irrelevance; the new banding together, the new movement represented a coming to life out of the dry bones. Also referenced was Ezekiel chapter 36, where the prophet is instructed to write “Judah,” “Joseph” on another stick, and then told to bind the sticks together in a gesture of a united Israel. “Maybe I’m not reading this right,” preached Dr. James Forbes in his address to the conference, “ ‘But, Lord, I’m a Baptist! But, Lord, I’m a Methodist!’ Get the Baptist stick and link it up with the Methodist stick, and tie it together with the Pentecostal stream, and do it with the independent ecclesiastical organizations. . . . Are we getting the sticks together? Oh, that they might know that I am the One God, although I have allowed denominational demarcation, I have one people. I, in a time of need, will bind the two sticks together!” Forbes also noted how competitiveness had made it difficult to bring the churches together in previous decades. “Some of us,” he said, “were not even willing to make our Rolodex available, lest somebody raising an offering for the Conference of National Black Churches (CNBC) would in some way diminish the collections.”

Similar framings of ecumenical movement as the revitalization of churchly relevance to a struggling people appear in the formulation of the first Black ecumenical movement, the Fraternal Council of Negro Churchmen (FCNC). Founded in 1934 in the midst of the Great Depression and Franklin Roosevelt’s first New Deal, the FCNC set out to address the perception that churches in general were under siege by critical and competitive tendencies at a time of widespread Black desperation. From without, African

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American churches faced attack by the forces of secular blackness, which threatened to peel members away from organized religion, especially in the northern cities. Secular Black intellectuals and cultural luminaries such as W. E. B. Dubois,² Carter G. Woodson,³ and Langston Hughes⁴ occasionally appeared by name as examples of this self-destructive movement away from God. Meanwhile, Black religious elites were painfully sensitive to criticisms leveled by certain maverick clergy, such as Adam Clayton Powell Sr., pastor of the behemoth Abyssinian Baptist in Harlem, New York. In one particularly inflammatory sermon, Powell denounced rampant “sexual perversion and moral degeneracy” among Black church leaders. The *National Baptist Voice* recapitulated the sermon and in subsequent issues published numerous hotly defensive responses from angry readers (“Dr. A. Clayton Powell Denounces Degeneracy in the Pulpit” 1929).⁵ Such controversy deepened the sense among certain clergy that broad, bold, ecumenical church action would be necessary to demonstrate and protect the unique relevance of organized religion in Black life. FCNC leaders stated the unequivocal need to set aside significant doctrinal differences and competition for members in order to confront the problems besetting Black people, lest the churches perish as a whole.

Importantly for the religious economies or market perspective, none of the FCNC member denominations were actually shrinking at that time. Between 1926 and 1933, the Black Methodist denominations grew by 403,108 members and the Black Baptists gained 383,917. As market share is concerned, in 1933, the Baptists shepherded a whopping 69% of the faithful belonging to FCNC denominations. If membership decline or low market share were truly a prerequisite for denominational interest in ecumenism, the Black Baptists certainly would have avoided the FCNC.⁶ Denominations that joined the FCNC saw ecumenical activism as a way to forestall the demise of Black religion and Black people as a whole. Meanwhile, its leadership presented the numerical strength of the unified Black churches as evidence not of its market power but of its *political* power. In a resolution delivered to President Roosevelt at a meeting with him in 1935, the FCNC stated,

[T]he last census of religious bodies reported 42,585 Negro churches in the United States, owning more than \$250,782,600 worth of church property which includes 6,543 parsonages. They have an income of over \$43,024,259 per year. The church is the only really national organization which the Negroes have, support and control, and is still the chief organization of sentiment making, and the chief institutional of moral spiritual, social and civic leadership. It is not only strong in the larger cities, but it is almost the only voice of the inarticulate millions on the farms and in the rural districts and small towns of the nation. We come as the representatives of these people to speak to you what, we feel, is best for them and for our country. (“Committee Representing Race Churchdom Received By President Roosevelt” 1935)

CONCLUSION

What we call the “Black church” is a like a figure/background gestalt; at times, the movement comes into view, and at other times, it recedes into the background. It is a realm of discourse regarding the very meaning of survival for both church and people. The history of national Black ecumenical movements points to ways that religious economic theorizing fails to account for the various modes of social consciousness regarding that survival that motivate institutional religious activity. Black churches are indeed competitive—historically, they have competed with each other, with White religious alternatives, and with a host of perceived secular institutional threats over the private devotions of Black people. But major instances of nationally organized Black ecumenical activism have emerged as (a) efforts to change secular culture and politics that, (b) by virtue of their ecumenicity, did not represent the market ambitions of a particular church and (c) coalesced not for the sake of survival as the control of relative market shares but for the sake of public religious relevance in a struggle for race survival. The implication is that the Black churches have existed not merely as a market but as a field where market consciousness transforms into movement consciousness at *Kairos* moments of perceived political opportunity. At such moments, unified public religious action on behalf of “the people” is understood as more important than the competitive dominance of individual firms in a private religious market.

ENDNOTES

1. Indeed, the final Census of Religious Bodies, which Finke and Stark famously rely on for their analysis of denominational fates between 1890 and 1936, was executed only because the FCCC pressured President Franklin Roosevelt to fund it after Congress failed to do so.
2. See, for instance, the editorial “Disgusted With God” appearing in the January 17, 1931 (16:2, p. 3) issue of the *National Baptist Voice*. Here, the editor responds to DuBois’s article, published in his own *Crisis* magazine, in which he imagines a Black Virgin Mary expressing her disappointment with a God who would abandon her people in their time of oppression and leave her pregnant and alone, to boot. DuBois’s relationship with religion and spirituality were, in fact, more complex than many of his religious critics recognized. (See Edward J. Blum, *W.E.B. DuBois, American Prophet*.)
3. Carter G. Woodson, historian and educator who founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and who inaugurated Black History Week (later Black History Month), created a tremendous flap by organizing a conference that would subject the Black church to an “acid test” of its relevance in Black life (“Carter Woodson Flays Church for Winking at Corruption” 1931; “The Church and Doctor Woodson” 1931). Elsewhere, Woodson had already criticized Black churchdom for maintaining too many physical plants, harboring corruption at the congregation level (this criticism was leveled especially at the Black Baptists), preferring ritual vanity

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over social activism, and perpetuating sectarianism when Black ecumenical action was in order (see correspondence in CHS, CBP).

4. “In his poem, ‘Ozie Powell, Ozie Powell,’ read during the recent Negro Congress in Chicago, in February, Langston Hughes Declared, ‘Now we know God does not Care.’ It was a bold denial of the existence of God. . . . God does care, Langston, else you would not be here. Our people have suffered enough to have perished from the earth. Two Hundred and Fifty years of exasperating slavery; lynched and driven about like dumb cattle. Yet we have survived it all. The Christian religion has given us a technique of survival” (Barbour 1936:20).
5. Defensive responses tended to brand Powell and other “critics of the church” as grandstanding, fact-twisting enemies of the most powerful and holistically benevolent institution under Black control.
6. Figures are derived from the table “Membership Statistics of the Larger Religious Bodies” (Reverdy [1936] 1975:10).

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