

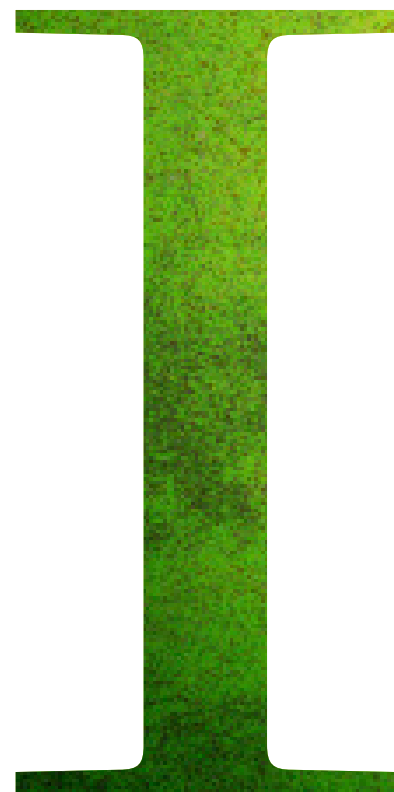


One
nation,
under
God...
but not
necessarily
in the
church

Shifting Faith

By Adrienne
Samuels Gibbs

ILLUSTRATION BY
BRIAN
STAUFFER



It's not that Marcus Brown doesn't love God. It's just that he really, truly dislikes going to church.

He's been either a "fire-and-brimstone" Baptist or an African Methodist Episcopalian since he was born, and he attended services nearly every Sunday until he turned 17. Finally, as an adult, he was able to make his own religious way. He wanted out. So he left.

What turned him against the tradition were the arguments and admonishments that stemmed from the so-called dark side of church: the congregation-splitting votes, the politics, the folks who idolize the pastor, the four-to-five hour worship services. It also didn't help that his dad rarely attended.

Once Brown traded rural South Carolina for urban Washington D.C., matriculated through Howard University and sampled a few other congregations, he found a new way. Now 34, he prays to God at least twice a day. He worships at home. He studies his Bible and other religious texts or commentary. Yet he is, officially, unchurched. And he likes it that way.

"The church is a vessel," says Brown, an IT professional. "After a while, all that pomp and circumstance wastes time. All that kneeling and walking to the altar. It's too much. It's not practical. ... As a Baptist, it was, like, half a day long. But He's there every hour of the day, every minute of the hour, so I don't need any one set time of the week to say, 'Oh, there's God.' I pray all day long. I feel like there's an always-open channel. God is always with me. It's not just a Sunday thing."

Brown is one of a growing number of people shifting the way they exhibit faith by worshipping outside of church, switching from a traditional denomination to one less common for Black folks or flat-out deciding to become "spiritual" and not "Christian" to accommodate a more modern lifestyle. Although not all Black congregations consistently report their membership numbers, more general reports back up the trend. In 2009, a majority



Religious groups that stand the best chance of surviving are those that respond to the changing needs of a congregation pressed by the demands of life outside the spiritual community. **Opposite Page:** Dr. Suzan D. Johnson Cook's Wednesday afternoon service draws those who want to maintain their spiritual ties.

of Protestant denominations reported membership losses, including the United Church of Christ's drop of 6.01 percent and the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church's 3.01 percent decline. Some of the larger Black denominations have not reported their membership numbers in at least a decade, but researchers who study such trends suggest these popular groups have flatlining memberships.

Meanwhile, the numbers of those who self-identify as nondenominational Christians have greatly increased since 1990, when fewer than 200,000 used the term. But as of 2008, that number had swelled to "[more than] eight million Americans," according to Trinity College's rather massive American Religious Identification Survey.

So why the shift? The reasons vary from dislike of church politics to disengagement from old-school traditions to the loss of the community church as our sole social gathering and political organizing space.

"It's a long-winded answer," says Eddie Glaude Jr., Ph.D., the chair of the Center for African American Studies and a religion

professor at Princeton University, who last year set off a religious maelstrom by publically stating that the Black church is dead. "The Black community is just more complex and people are finding other spaces to nourish their spirits. Some folks just aren't being fulfilled in churches."

THE SPLINTER FACTOR

Despite this burgeoning dissatisfaction with traditional church culture, African-Americans are among the most religious people in this country. We are not ditching God. Rather, we are choosing to worship God—or a higher power—much differently than our forefathers. That new worship could include praying at home with friends or out on the beach at sunrise or joining a multiracial church that eschews long services and fire-and-brimstone doctrine.

For those who believe the traditional church offers the only path to righteousness, the shift is a crisis for a number of reasons: Churches without new blood tend to become dead churches; the erosion of the Black church seems to coincide with the disappearance of the strong Black community; and last, ethics, humility and lawfulness fall by the wayside without churches to educate children on the spiritual importance of proper behavior. In fact, the absence of the church Black man has been cited by AME church leaders as a reason why Black families fail.

But for those familiar with Martin Luther, the father of Protestantism, this shift makes perfect sense. As people get to know God on their own terms, they will likely embrace new ways of worship, just as they did in the past.

"How many churches are the result of splits within congregations?" asks Glaude. "This goes back to the 19th century. Just think about AME and then AME Zion. This goes all the way back to the formation of Black denominationalism. There are always doctrinal and even personal dimensions to how one expresses, ecclesiastically, one's belief in Christ. This has always been a part of the Christian landscape in the United States."

A growing Black middle class contributes as well, according to President Bill Clinton's faith advisor Suzan D. Johnson Cook, also known as Dr. Sujay. With people working 80-hour weeks,

kids having four hours of homework daily and vacations few and far between, Sunday is not only a day of rest, it's the only day off.

This evolution of the American work ethic has necessarily led to people not being perturbed about missing several weeks worth of Sunday services. The changes have also led to different kinds of churches and services—such as Sujay's own Wednesday lunchtime church service in New York City—that evolved to meet the needs of Christians such as Brown.

"The rise of the middle class also means straying away from the very institution that got us through," says Sujay, who was nominated by President Obama to be the ambassador-at-large for the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom. "I've seen the shift. With the move to Ivy Leagues and [other middle-class trappings], people started moving away from their faith tradition. It's broken along the lines of class, as I see it. Black people don't want to talk about it. And I'll probably be criticized for it."

She goes on. She's the former president of the Hampton University Ministers' Conference. It's a group with about 10,000 preacher members, and it "hurts her heart" to say that most of them "go back to empty churches" after their meetings. But not the megachurch pastors—most of those nondenominational preachers have growing congregations.

One such example is Kingdom Culture Church, pastored by gospel music star Deitrick Haddon. Dubbed Detroit's fastest-growing church, it went from 400 to 2,000 members in just two years.

"Men are going to be men, and I don't think God should be judged for what men do," says Haddon, who believes the collective church is entering a season of more positive rebranding. "I think it's a good thing that people are breaking away from their religion and building a relationship with God."

Such approaches to worship just might church the unchurched.

"It's not only about thinking outside the box, but who says there has to be a box at all?" says Sujay. "This is an instant generation—microwave, YouTube, iPhone—they're not committed to sitting for long periods of time. ... My most successful service is Wednesday at lunchtime. It's never more than an hour and 15 minutes. We have an offering, a message and people leave there skipping. It's a midweek pick-me-up. It's about being relevant."



"I don't need any set time of the week to say, 'Oh, there's God.'"

—Marcus Brown



HEAVEN OR HELL?

"I probably won't figure it out until after I'm dead and gone," says Sean Fitzpatrick, 43, of Chicago, a married father of four whose children all attend church. Fitzpatrick, however, does not. He wanted out after becoming frustrated with Holy Rollers who said one thing and did another. "I know how I try to live, and I know how I carry myself. I'm not a drinker at all. I don't really hang out. I try to carry myself in a Christian manner. I try to live a Christian lifestyle without having to be tied into going to church every Sunday."

As for his soul? Church proper has little to do with that, he says.

"I think we have so many other options for faith and spiritual development in our culture—as well as competing activities for the sacred Sunday morning time slot—that folks no longer have to go to church to feel connected with God," explains Scott Thumma, a professor at the Hartford Seminary who is just months away from publishing the Faith Communities Today study, which is released every 10 years. "God can be our friend, our comforter, and flexible to our needs when that God image isn't attached to a brick-and-mortar church with a flawed human pastor and a congregation of less than perfect saints calling you to accountability and pointing out when you fall short."

This church-folk debate led the Rev. James Ellis to write an essay entitled "The Black Church Is Alive (Don't Call It a Comeback)." He thinks we all have fallen short because the trappings of the world have weaned us away from church. He also agrees that some Christian soldiers can be "crazy."

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Congregations are growing smaller as the faithful seek out alternate means of spiritual fulfillment.

"We've become even more capitalistic and more consumer-centric, and that has invaded the church," says Ellis, the associate campus minister at Morehouse College. "You see a lot of people saying 'I love God, but I don't get down with those crazy church folks.' It's a valid criticism in the way the church has struggled with meeting the needs of the community and what the gospel proclaims in terms of salvation. At the same time, it's a package deal. You have to take one with the other. If you say you love God, you also have to love your neighbor."

But even with his AME and Baptist roots, Marcus Brown doesn't get into all these arguments and he's not stressed about it. Church has its pros and cons. In the end, he feels the shift could become the awakening.

"Martin Luther broke away to make this new entity that's become steeped in its own traditions," says Brown. "And now we're coming back full circle. It's time to start reforming again." ■

Test Your Religious IQ

Courtesy of The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life

1. Which Bible figure is most closely associated with leading the exodus from Egypt?

- a) Job
- b) Elijah
- c) Moses
- d) Abraham

2. What was Mother Teresa's religion?

- a) Catholic
- b) Jewish
- c) Buddhist
- d) Mormon
- e) Hindu

3. Which of the following is NOT one of the Ten Commandments?

- a) Do not commit adultery
- b) Do unto others as

you would have them do unto you

c) Do not steal

d) Keep the Sabbath holy

4. When does the Jewish Sabbath begin?

- a) Friday
- b) Saturday
- c) Sunday

5. Is Ramadan ...?

- a) The Hindu festival of lights
- b) A Jewish day of atonement
- c) The Islamic holy month

6. Which of the following best describes the Catholic teaching

about the bread and wine used for Communion?

- a) The bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Jesus Christ.
- b) The bread and wine are symbols of the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

7. In which religion are Vishnu and Shiva central figures?

- a) Islam
- b) Hinduism
- c) Taoism

8. Which Bible figure is most closely associated with remaining

obedient to God despite suffering?

- a) Job
- b) Elijah
- c) Moses
- d) Abraham

9. What was Joseph Smith's religion?

- a) Catholic
- b) Jewish
- c) Buddhist
- d) Mormon
- e) Hindu

10. According to rulings by the U.S. Supreme Court, is a public school teacher permitted to lead a class in prayer, or not?

- a) Permitted
- b) No, not permitted

11. According to rulings by the U.S. Supreme Court, is a public school teacher permitted to read from the Bible as an example of literature, or not?

- a) Yes, permitted
- b) No, not permitted

12. What religion do most people in Pakistan consider themselves?

- a) Buddhist
- b) Hindu
- c) Muslim
- d) Christian

13. What was the name of the person whose writings and actions inspired the Protestant

Reformation?

- a) Martin Luther
- b) Thomas Aquinas
- c) John Wesley

14. Which of these religions aims at nirvana, the state of being free from suffering?

- a) Islam
- b) Buddhism
- c) Hinduism

15. Which one of these preachers participated in the period of religious activity known as the First Great Awakening?

- a) Jonathan Edwards
- b) Charles Finney
- c) Billy Graham

One Love: The Journey Home

A DEVOTED SPIRIT FINDS THE PATH TO ETERNAL, INTERNAL PEACE

BY SUSAN L. TAYLOR



THE BELIEF THAT we are separate from our Source is the root of all our anxiety. Seeing ourselves

as separate from God makes us "self-conscious." I often wonder if this wasn't the point of the fall from grace in Genesis—self-consciousness instead of God-consciousness. Seeing ourselves as separate from our Source, we feel naked, exposed and vulnerable. Doubt, dread and panic come. In any of its many forms, fear is a powerful emotion—every challenge, every unanticipated change is seen as a threat. Fear will cause us to shrink back from loving, trusting, creating, giving in life. Distracted by the shadows, we miss the whole point of our existence: honoring ourselves and all in creation, bringing our love and joy to the world and sharing our innate Divine energy with everyone we encounter. Love is what we come from. Fear is what we have learned. In fear, we accumulate things to provide a false sense of security. We overvalue the physical and undervalue the spiritual—the oneness of God that is us. Heart-wrenching loneliness and fear put me on a path to discovering this truth.

I was raised Catholic and attended Catholic schools. The nuns instilled obedience and discipline, and they also taught that only those who conformed to a very narrow, rigid doctrine were worthy of salvation. I was afraid my father would burn in hell. Devoted to his business, Daddy put in long hours, six days a week in his women's clothing store in Harlem. Weary, he didn't go to church every Sunday, and when he did go to worship, it

was to the Methodist church of his family's tradition—sins that, according to my Catholic education, damned his soul to hell.

I learned to fear God and grew up reaching out to a distant, punishing savior. But as a young mother, fleeing a volatile marriage with my newborn baby girl, I was forced to be on my own. On a rainy Sunday morning, I thought I was having a heart attack. The doctor in the emergency room determined it was an anxiety attack, told me to relax and sent me on my way. Relieved, I stepped into the damp, chilly air and began walking up Broadway, just north of Harlem, and was drawn through the big brass doors of Rev. Ike's church, the Palace Cathedral, where the Rev. Alfred Miller preached a sermon that would ease my suffering and change my life.

He said that with our minds we build our world. That negative thoughts create fear, anxiety, hopelessness. He declared, "God is alive in you!" Rev. Miller's words seemed rather simplistic, but I was at the edge and not sure I could hold on. So I surrendered. That day, a deeper understanding of

"CEREMONY AND OUR PROFESSIONS OF FAITH—THEY ARE RITUALS. HOW WE LIVE OUR LIVES MOMENT TO MOMENT IS OUR RELIGION."

our existence began unfolding in me. I started testing what I had heard. Could we be much more than we can see, Godlike, possessing a mystical creative intelligence? Every time a negative thought would arise, I'd shut it down by focusing on my blessings and seeking solutions to the challenges I was facing. Slowly, the belief that I was inadequate and broken began melting away. The more devoted I became to my spiritual practice, the sweeter my life became. When my Shana and I moved downtown, I discovered other Christian congregations that believe in our oneness with God. Over the years, a host of wise souls representing a breadth of faith traditions have influenced my spiritual journey. The Sunday morning meditations of Olga Butterworth and lectures of Eric Butterworth at Unity Center of New York City were a salve to my soul. They helped save my life and seal my faith. And so I settled there for more than 25 years.

My learning from many masters hasn't displaced my Christian faith; it has deepened it and fed my spiritual appetite and instilled in me a trust in God's benevolence and a serenity I never knew. My spiritual practice involves making time each day for 10 to 20 minutes of meditation—simply sitting in silence, listening to my breath. In silence, what's hidden in the physical world is revealed. We understand what we are "growing" through—and why! We see the Divine Hand always working on our behalf. Life is a journey to this truth we are born trusting. Even when it appears that things are falling apart, God is in the crisis waiting patiently to be seen. We are

being called home to sanity, to live, love, be at peace and align our lives with this truth: There is only One Power, One Presence, One Love. Each of us is an individualized expression of Love, the "allness" of God. This is the master principle, missed due to our illusion of separateness.

Learning to live at a pace of grace that makes space in our life for our God-self, for quiet time, clarity and balance, for wellness in body, mind, spirit and community—this is all our challenge. Inner peace and fulfillment cannot be found through stress and struggle.

Ritual is one thing; religion is another. Ceremony and our professions of faith—they are rituals. How we live our lives moment to moment is our religion. When Black faith communities gather, we must be devoted to more than ritual and raising money. We must also raise up our children and communities that are dying outside the sanctuary doors. We are called to come to our moral senses, to love and mentor our vulnerable young to academic and social success. Can't lose a second generation—not on our watch! This is spiritual warfare, a battle, as Dr. King would say, between our higher and lower selves. We are called to stand strong for justice and in unity and love. Social justice and love—this is what Jesus lived for. ■

Susan L. Taylor is the CEO and founder of the National CARES Mentoring Movement and the editor-in-chief emeritus of Essence magazine. To learn more about National CARES, log on to caresmentoring.org.

ANSWERS: 1.c; 2.a; 3.b; 4.a; 5.c; 6.a; 7.b; 8.a; 9.d; 10.b; 11.a; 12.c; 13.a; 14.b; 15.a

REGINA FLEMING