

Fear of a Black Pulpit? Real Racial Transcendence Versus Cultural Assimilation in Multiracial Churches

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The growing literature on multiracial churches tends to take the position that religious values can be influential in promoting racially inclusive religious communities. Marti offers further evidence for this argument: cosmetic changes predominately white churches make to their worship, music, and leadership in order to attract/retain “race-conscious” black congregants. In this response, I argue that these churches do not cause blacks to transcend their race consciousness. They merely offer havens for those blacks who have already transcended their race enough to pursue membership in these religious communities. I conclude with a challenge to scholars in this line of research to add evidence of religion’s ability to promote racial transcendence for “race-conscious” white congregants.

INTRODUCTION

In January 2010, *Time* magazine published an article subtitled “Can Megachurches Bridge the Racial Divide.” The article highlights Chicago’s Willow Creek Community Church, a 23,000-person evangelical congregation, as an example of what Emerson (2006) might call “a harbinger of what is to come in U.S. race relations” (2006:6). The church narrowly meets Emerson’s definition of a multiracial church; nonwhites make up about 20 percent of the congregation. In an attempt to give some sense of the difficulties faced by churches like Willow Creek, the article affirms a common meme in the literature on multiracial churches: “Black and white Christianity have developed striking differences of style and substance. The argument can be made that people attend the church they are used to; many minorities have scant desire to attend a white church, seeing their faith as an important vessel of cultural identity” (Biema 2010:32).

This statement makes an argument that seems contrary to much of sociology’s general take on race and ethnic relations. In essence, these articles charge *African Americans’* inability to get past race as both the catalyst for and the primary culprit in the problem of segregated American churches. With this as a base assumption, countless books and articles have been published showing how historically white churches like Willow Creek have made what amounts to cosmetic changes in their worship, music, and leadership in order to attract or retain “highly race-conscious” nonwhite congregants (Becker 1998; Christerson and Emerson 2003; Dougherty and Huyser 2008; Marti 2009a). Whether the multiracial church has a 2 percent black population (Marti 2005) or a 65 percent black population (Edwards 2008), the challenge seems to be getting African Americans to ignore what is the ultimate challenge for these “diverse” congregations: that “the cultures and structures of interracial churches emulate those more commonly observed in white churches” and “the worship styles and practices mainly suit the desires of whites”

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(Edwards 2008:117). Therefore, if America is to move beyond Martin Luther King's belief that the 11 o'clock hour is the most segregated hour in the week, it seems African Americans must be able to transcend the idea—or as Becker (1998) refers to it, the “problem”—of race.

In his article, “The Religious Racial Integration of African Americans into Diverse Churches,” Marti (2010) continues this line of reasoning with the question “how do [African-Americans] overcome their racial alienation and participate in multiracial churches?” As he rightly points out, there are competing perspectives on whether religious racial integration is achievable. The more pessimistic view, promoted by Emerson (2006), Emerson and Smith (2001), and Edwards (2008), is that religion isn't very good at bringing blacks and whites together in truly integrated ways. Conversely, Marti (2005, 2008, 2009a) and others (Ecklund 2005; Garces-Foley 2007, 2008; Jenkins 2003; Warner 1997) argue that religious values can be influential in promoting racially inclusive religious communities. For the historically white churches at the center of this research, their desire to be multiracial churches hinges on their ability to attract nonwhites who, presumably, don't share their ethno-religious traditions. In order to manage this, they create religious “havens” that help nonwhite members become less race-conscious.

Black Race Consciousness—A Two-Way Street

In his article, Marti offers a case study that is quite different from the Mosaic case used in his earlier work. Unlike Mosaic, which only had a 2 percent black population, Oasis has a 45 percent black population. One of the ways Marti seeks to distinguish the blacks at Oasis from those he encountered at Mosaic is to describe the black congregants at Oasis as “highly race-conscious.” One might recall that many of the blacks at Mosaic—described briefly in the introduction to Marti's article—were successfully acclimated to the majority-white worship experience because they were raised in “Anglo-based American culture” (Marti 2005:163). They often rejected black religious traditions and preferred racially neutral nonblack ones. Depending on your definition of “race-consciousness,” this might suggest that they aren't highly race-conscious. In some ways, that would be like thinking Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist in Morrison's (1970) *The Bluest Eye*, was not “highly race-conscious” in her hatred of her black skin and desire for blue eyes. She, along with black congregants at both Mosaic and Oasis, is highly race-conscious; they just aren't always race-conscious in a way that privileges *their* race.

This is evidenced by the very first section of analysis, titled “More Than Just Black.” Members' objections to Black Churches were not solely a function of their desire for a diverse community of believers. Nearly all of Marti's respondents seemed to have had negative experiences with culturally black religious worship experiences. Like blacks at Mosaic, black congregants at Oasis reduced the Black Church experience to caricatures of black preaching and religious traditionalism. There is little evidence in any of his interviews that his respondents were actively seeking some remnant of the “nostalgic memories” of the Black Churches they had all attended. Like much of the extant literature on Black Churches, these black congregants reduce Black Church worship to a supposedly unique, and apparently unappealing, experience of DuBois's ([1903] 1969) “preacher, music, and frenzy.” This rejection of Black Churches says as much about the respondents' racial attitudes while seeking a church home as it does about the attitudes that keep them at the church they found.

Marti's congregants aren't alone in holding these attitudes. In Emerson's Wilcrest Church, many of the original nonwhites who joined the church when it was predominantly white joined it because they “wanted to be in a white church context” (Christerson, Emerson, and Edwards 2005:42). For one of its longest attending black members, it wasn't the church's diversity that attracted him to Wilcrest. It was partly his “negative memories of attending Black Pentecostal churches growing up” that led him there. He, like blacks at Mosaic and Oasis, is drawn to and retained at multiracial churches because they are havens *from* black culture as much as they are supposed havens *for* diverse cultures.

Diversity Havens and Diversity Consciousness

As an addition to the affinity havens that mark Marti's (2005) contribution to this literature, he introduces a new arena of interaction in this article: the "diversity haven." He suggests that the emphasis on diversity in this congregation, a phenomenon that both black and white members are drawn to, makes Oasis a place where people who value diversity feel connected and welcome. This "diversity-consciousness," an attribute of what Emerson (2006) refers to as "sixth Americanism," is what sustains members' commitment to a church that, like others analyzed in this literature, is more multiracial in makeup than multicultural in behavior. I suspect Oasis's success is more a function of black members' "sixth-Americanism" than anything the church does. This suspicion is not undone by the section on Oasis's attempts at reinforcing ethnicity.

While they certainly value their distinctiveness as black Americans in this diverse congregation and appreciate the ways Oasis "provides recognition for blacks" (Marti 2010:208), it is not clear that this recognition is a necessary condition for their continued membership at the church. There is little evidence in this article that Marti's respondents would leave Oasis if there weren't the occasional "just-for-fun" moments when the band incorporates hints of black music in worship. The messages about racial harmony don't seem to be explicitly about blackness and it isn't clear that, in their absence, people like Cherise and Ben would leave the church. Oasis's black congregants are drawn to it because it is *not* a Black Church, so I'm not entirely convinced from the evidence given here that the black aspects of it continue to keep them there. In fact, I'm not certain that all of the ways churches like Oasis are credited with recognizing black distinctiveness are anything other than artifacts of a stereotypical understanding of what exclusively white and exclusively black worship services look like.

Not Just Your Momma's Music Anymore

The best example of this is the role music allegedly plays in reflecting multiracial churches' commitment to diversity. In this line of research, music is often described as a means by which multiracial churches integrate nonwhite culture into their worship services. This appreciation for the role of music in making multiracial churches comfortable for nonwhites is usually expressed by black congregants themselves. As I suggested earlier, in many ways, black members of both Oasis and Mosaic reduce the Black Church experience to the three attributes Dubois ([1903] 1969) saw in slave religion: the preacher, the music, and the frenzy. Of these three, the only attribute that continues to be embraced is the music. But are black members of multiracial churches actually embracing "black music?"

It is interesting that black congregants at Oasis described the music as having a "black sound" because of its "danceable rhythm that invites people to stand, clap, move, and 'groove' as they worship" (p. 16). Occasionally referred to as "Vineyard" or "Hosanna" music (Edwards 2008; Marti 2005, 2009b), the songs are likely drawn exclusively from the Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) catalog, a catalog that includes songs that reflect contemporary evangelicalism's avoidance of the high liturgical trappings of mainstream Protestant churches (Balmer and Todd 1994). If one has ever watched commercials for the annual compilation of the year's best CCM performances, "Wow Worship," it is clear that this music is not intended to be listened to in silence and pious contemplation. It is a fundamental misunderstanding of the evolution of religious music to mistake these songs, written by white artists and performed by white musicians, as "basically gospel" simply because of their instrumentation or beat. Steve's description of the only-occasional moments when something explicitly black is performed suggests that the normal selection isn't really Black Church music as a member of a predominantly Black Church might describe it. Do white congregants at Oasis describe the music as "Gospel" or do they perceive it, correctly, as racially-neutral contemporary soft-rock worship music?

Ironically, the place one is most likely to encounter the kind of diverse sampling of religious music that multiracial churches claim to provide is at predominantly Black Churches. CCM music, particularly the music used in today's nonmainstream white congregations, is also used quite frequently in predominantly Black Church worship services. On any given Sunday, black worship directors are mixing songs from both the CCM Worship catalog and the Gospel catalog into their worship repertoire. Both predominantly white and multiracial churches, particularly those with white leaders, seem less capable of doing so (Chaves 2004; DeYoung et al. 2003; Edwards 2008).

In fact, some multiracial churches may find incorporating "black music" into the worship rotation to be challenging because they stereotype black music as much as their congregants stereotype black preaching and black worship services. An example might be helpful here. I briefly attended a multiracial church that is part of the quickly growing Calvary Chapel movement. Like Mosaic and Oasis, the music tended to be "Vineyard" music. The music sounded kind of like Kirk Franklin, but never actually included any Kirk Franklin. When asked how he shops for worship songs, the director of music told me that he picks music the congregation is accustomed to. When pressed on that point, he argued that gospel music was, ultimately, "the music of a specific people, of their specific struggle" and the bulk of the people in this proudly multiracial congregation wouldn't understand it. His sense that black music was alien to this diverse, young, middle-class congregation constrained his music options in ways that hampered any real attempts at racial reinforcement. I suspect Oasis's music director makes similar choices.

Religion-Based Racial Transcendence or Just Cultural Assimilation?

As Marti's article is not a longitudinal study, it is difficult to accept the assertion that, somehow, multiracial churches transform congregants who have a strong black-identity-based appreciation for black religious traditions into "racial transcendents" for whom race takes a back-seat to their religious identity. Unfortunately, we cannot randomly assign 50 black congregants to a diverse church and see if it is church practice (i.e., reinforcing racial identity or transcending it) that allows members to stay comfortably in that environment. Without that kind of sample, one can't help but wonder if the blacks who switch from Black Churches to predominantly white multiracial ones arrive having already transcended some important aspects of their racial identity. It may be the case that churches like Mosaic and Oasis do not have to reinforce black switchers' racial identities because these are the kinds of people who, like Tia, "refuse to do anything other than participate in diverse situations" or, like Franklin, are so transcendent on race that they can "forget" that this remarkably multiracial church is diverse. I therefore think Marti gets it wrong when he states that "this ethnic reinforcement attracts highly race-conscious participants who move towards a process of ethnic transcendence" (Marti 2010:201). According to his "Not Black Enough" section, highly race conscious blacks—if defined as people with a positive regard for their racial identity and its traditions—*avoid* these churches. Churches like Oasis may be related to the evolution in race relations only as petri dishes for that evolution; they aren't necessarily catalysts for it. Circumstances outside of these churches may, in fact, be leading to what we see inside of them.

While it is still true that many people live life along lines of race, living in different neighborhoods, attending different schools, working in different jobs (Edwards 2008), it is also true that many people do not. As some growing subset of black Americans begins to look more like their white peers, they are going to be drawn to congregations with those white peers. They're going to be recruited to them and feel as welcome in them as they feel at their culturally white places of employment or education. For the last 40 years, middle-class blacks have been doing that in practically every other avenue of their life. Both Marti's Oasis and Mosaic are, essentially, culturally white in any meaningful measure of church life and worship. So are a majority of colleges and universities. So are most workplaces. So are many recreational and leisure activities. Therefore, examining how young, middle-class, college-educated blacks transcend race in order

to attend historically white, predominantly white, or “ethnically diverse” congregations doesn’t seem like a monumental shift in our understanding of race relations.

I am not surprised to see Cherise, Jerome, and Steven at Oasis; homophily is a powerful organizing principle (Blau 1994; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). I believe the mistake is made in measuring homophily in these churches as a function of racial categories. Clearly, Jerome and Steven have more in common with white congregants than with some of the black visitors who find Oasis “not black enough.” If our focus is going to continue to be on black members of multiracial congregations, a finer filter is necessary. Marti gets it right when he explains that blacks have varying degrees of closeness to their black identities. An argument that these churches structure themselves in ways that reinforce congregants’ (nonwhite) racial identities requires a sharper distinction between blacks who need that kind of reinforcement and blacks who have—prior to joining the church—transcended a need for it. Only then can this research truly clarify where the credit for the success of multiracial churches lies.

A Final Question: Is There Ever Racial Transcendence for Whites?

Multiracial churches, in spite of their composition, retain mostly white characteristics even when whites are outnumbered by other racial groups (Christerson, Emerson, and Edwards 2005; DeYoung et al. 2003). Why then are only nonwhites (and, particularly, blacks) assumed to be consumed by the dominating influence of race? Why is the analytical lens almost exclusively focused on the power of race on nonwhites’ religious behavior?

For example, in Emerson’s account of the historically-white Wilcrest Church (Christerson, Emerson, and Edwards 2005), he states that whites and nonwhites differ on why they chose to stay at this church located in a neighborhood that has gone from completely white to barely (10 percent) white. We would expect white flight from such a church; we’ve seen it before (Edwards 2008). That Wilcrest managed to retain a 40 percent white membership is an anomaly, yet the author(s) chose to focus on nonwhite congregants’ attraction to the church. The pastor was a biracial Chinese man, the neighborhood was 90 percent nonwhite, and the most interesting question is “why do Latinos and African immigrants join this church?” Really? Shouldn’t the real question be, “who are these persistent white members and why don’t they leave?”

Ultimately, continuing to do research that starts with the question “how can multiracial churches attract more blacks” assumes that only churches with predominantly white memberships have multiculturalism or a diverse membership as a goal. Inadvertently, this research privileges whiteness by placing yet another white religious institution at the center of the conversation, relegating both black congregants and most Black Churches to an analytical other-ness. Is it really the case that the only religious adherents with a “race problem” are nonwhites? Do only white congregants reach out to their black co-workers and classmates, imploring them to visit and ultimately join their churches? Are Black Churches so out of the mainstream that none of them could hope to attract whites in a country that has made Michael Jackson, Oprah Winfrey, and now Barack Obama cultural icons? Of course not. Therefore, it behooves scholars who want a complete understanding of the forces that keep the 11 o’clock hour segregated to begin to focus their attentions on whites who seek out multiracial and/or predominantly Black Churches.

If he’s right, Marti’s argument that churches can play an integral role in undoing the U.S. racial divide should give us a roadmap for future study. For starters, in order for diversity-conscious whites to be happy at nonwhite churches, must those churches also seek to reinforce white ethnicity? How might a “Black Church” do this? As I suggested in my statements about music, they already incorporate white music into their worship. One need only flip through television channels on a Sunday morning to see that black preachers look very much like their white evangelical counterparts with their professorial demeanor and their PowerPoint outlines projected on screens behind them. Why aren’t these churches approaching 40, or even 20, percent white membership? If there is this growing desire by white congregants to be in diverse religious

communities, to experience “authentic” multicultural worship and ministry, why do they only seek those things in predominantly or historically white congregations? I would be interested in seeing more research on Black Churches, led by black pastors, which have successfully managed to attract white members and—if this process is truly a function of church effort—gotten them to transcend whiteness. For blacks, race seems easily overcome as a “dominating characteristic”; many voluntarily participate in predominantly white institutions. Multiracial, and even predominantly white, churches just become another example of that phenomenon. We must begin to switch the target of our analysis so that we focus on white congregants who do the unexpected: join culturally Black Churches or remain in historically white congregations that have become multiracial. Otherwise we’re left with a lopsided, and not entirely convincing, story of the ways religious involvement might move “race-conscious” people to “racial transcendence.”

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