

## Why most Black millennials who leave church don't give up on faith

When Black Americans leave organized religion, the majority of them still retain some degree of faith in a higher power, a new Pew study shows. The central role religious institutions played in securing civil rights is one reason why, say experts.

By Kathryn Post, Religion News Service, *The Christian Science Monitor*, Feb. 21, 2024

When Black Americans leave religion, it's rarely a clean break.

Take Rogiér's Fibby, a self-described agnostic, atheist, and secular humanist who grew up in the Moravian Church. The head of the Washington, D.C., chapter of the Black Secular Collective, Mr. Fibby also considers himself "culturally Christian."

"I know all the lingo, the theologies of different denominations, the theological distinctions, how to move in those different spaces theologically and interpersonally," he told Religion News Service.

Or take Felicia Murrell, who served in church leadership across a range of denominations for over two decades. Today she thinks of herself as "interspiritual," but she also told RNS, "Christianity is my mother tongue."

Then there's William Matthews, longtime Bethel Music recording artist who left the church for about six years, starting in 2016. Today he's the music director at New Abbey, a progressive, LGBTQ-affirming church in Los Angeles where evangelicals and religious "nones" regularly attend.

"We don't have the privilege to not need God, or some type of God or spirituality," Mr. Matthews, who now identifies as Christian, told RNS about Black Americans. "It's always been our backs against the world."

Of the roughly 20% of Black Americans who are religiously unaffiliated—or nones—about one-third believe in the God of the Bible, and over half believe in some other higher power, according to a January Pew study. Eighty-eight percent believe humans have a soul or spirit, 71% think of themselves as spiritual, and by nearly every other religious or spiritual metric—belief in heaven and hell, daily prayer—Black nones come across as more religiously enmeshed than other nonaffiliated groups.

"They are not affiliated with a religion, but that does not mean they don't have various devotional practices, various spiritual beliefs," said Kiana Cox, senior researcher on the Race and Ethnicity team at Pew Research Center, who also pointed out that Black Americans generally are more likely to engage in religious practices than other racial groups.

According to some experts, the central role religious groups played in securing civil rights is part of why Black nones retain elements of religiosity.

"When we think about the Civil Rights Movement, when we think about Reconstruction and African Americans coming out of slavery, it was important to identify with these institutions for social reasons and for economic reasons," said Teddy Reeves, curator of religion at the National Museum of African American History & Culture. "It was a way of safety. It was a way of community. It was a way of creating meaning out of what was going on in their everyday lives."

For Ms. Murrell, some of her most formative memories are of her grandmother starting each day sitting in her chair, Bible in her lap, glasses slipping down her face. The stories about God's deliverance that have been handed down from generation to generation, Ms. Murrell said, are deeply rooted in the Black American experience.

"I do think a lot of the overcoming of hardships, a lot of the way that people endured, was through their belief in God, that God would make a way somehow," said Ms. Murrell. At testimony services in the Black church, Ms. Murrell said, it's common for folks to share stories about tragedy happening in their life, and then to say "but God!" to indicate how God intervened on their behalf.

Jason Shelton, author of the forthcoming book *The Contemporary Black Church: The New*

*Dynamics of African American Religion*, added that some historical denominations can seem overly  
45 formal or outdated.

“There’s still a sense that you have to dress formally. There’s still the sense of the detachment of the preacher in the pulpit far away,” said Mr. Shelton, who was raised in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and is now part of the United Methodist Church. “It’s an old choir, and that organ, good God!”

50 Some churches’ theology, too, can feel hostile to those who are queer or LGBTQ-affirming. That was the case for Mr. Fibby, who in the late aughts was working as a church musician in both a Black Baptist church and Afro-Caribbean Seventh-day Adventist Church in Brooklyn, New York. While the two churches differed wildly on much of their theology and polity, “the one thing they agreed on was the homophobia part,” said Mr. Fibby. As a queer Black man, he said the anti-  
55 LGBTQ rhetoric he routinely heard from the pulpit is part of what made him skeptical toward claims of the faith.

Given the prominence of religious institutions in Black culture, disaffiliating from religion can leave a void in terms of community. In response, according to Mr. Reeves, who created and produced the documentary *gOD-Talk: A Black Millennials and Faith Conversation*, Black  
60 millennials are gathering elsewhere, from meeting up at music festivals such as Coachella, AfroTech, and Afropunk to getting together for brunch regularly. Social media, too, has become a hub for connection, he said, and some Black nones looking for spiritual fulfillment might turn to online leaders such as the Rev. Melva Sampson of the Pink Robe Chronicles and Tricia Hersey of The Nap Ministry.

65 After Ms. Murrell first left the church due to an experience of “church hurt” in 2014, she began teaming up with her husband to host the “Brunch Bunch,” monthly gatherings centered on food and discussion with about five other families who’d left church. Ms. Murrell also finds regular community with her Girls Nite Out group, women who, she describes in her forthcoming book, *And: The Restorative Power of Love in an Either/Or World*, are “as likely to tell you about the tarot  
70 cards she pulled or gift you a crystal as another is to pray for you and give you a prophetic word.”

In some places, Black-centered institutions offering community and activism have emerged. Around 2010, Mr. Fibby used social media to connect with other Black Americans who, like him, were looking for belonging on the other side of religion. Many of those online connections have translated to long-term in-person friendships. And as the leader of the D.C. chapter of the Black  
75 Secular Collective, Mr. Fibby connects with like-minded individuals through regular meals, volunteer work, and participation in marches and protests.

Mr. Shelton also voiced the need for institutions to galvanize Black people around issues of racial inequality.

80 “When Black folks leave organized religion, and they have their reasons for doing so, no question about it, but what does that mean for African Americans and mobilization to address long-standing disparities?” he asked.

While Mr. Reeves echoed concerns about the importance of physical meeting spaces for social change, he also said it’s an “amazing time for Black faith.” It’s a season of change, and perhaps a time of reckoning, he said, as millennials refuse to put themselves in spaces that no longer serve  
85 them.

“This generation is following spirit,” said Mr. Reeves. “And if spirit is leading them outside the walls of our churches, and outside of the walls of our temples, and outside of the walls of our mosques, it begs our institutions to figure out: Are they listening to spirit and the new ways this spirit may be moving?”

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