Who Counts?

INSIDE THE ACADEMY'S BATTLE TO RIGHTLY DIVIDE AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY.

BY TED OLSEN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUSTIN CLEMONS
“I’m not trying to be argumentative, but there are obvious differences,” says Jason Shelton, a sociologist at the University of Texas at Arlington. He repeats his concern: “I don’t want to be provocative.”

Shelton, 42, grew up in the black church in the 1980s and 90s. Now he’s quickly becoming one of its most prominent researchers. In 2012 he wrote (with Michael O. Emerson) a widely praised book on how black and white American Christians differ from each other. Now he’s reshaping the way American Christianity is studied and discussed by turning his attention to significant differences within the black church itself.

“As a kid who grew up in the black Methodist tradition and also went to a large Pentecostal church, I can say there’s a lot of distinctiveness between these traditions,” he says. At the same time, he says, shared experiences as black Christians in America unite black Methodists, black Pentecostals, and other black Christians in a special way. As he argued in the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion last summer, “Our black churches, the legacy of racial discrimination and inequality in America overshadows consequences of contrasting denominational affiliations.”

In that journal article, Shelton (with his UT–Arlington colleague Ryon Cobb) proposed a coding scheme for dividing African Americans into nine religious streams. Half a decade ago, it might have been received with helpful nuance to the dominant way that sociologists, political scientists, pollsters, and others study American religion. But questions of unity, diversity, and division in the American church are not merely academic at the moment. Asking whether black Christians are the same page with each other—let alone the same page as white Christians—seems more challenging. What unites black Christians with each other? What separates them? What unites and divides American Christians, or Christian practitioners in the American church, beyond their white or black identity?

To what degree are terms like “the black church,” “evangelicals,” or “mainline Protestants” helpful labels that identify real traditions? To put it another way: How do we identify ourselves? Whom do we think of as our closest family members? As Paul asked the Corinthians, is Christ divided? Or in our attempts at unity, have we papered over real differences?

These are significant questions among Christians right now. It’s hard to find a major Christian conference not wrestling with them; they’re also at the center of church board discussions about congregational makeup and evangelical efforts. Likewise, it’s hard to find an academic conference on religion not wrestling with these questions. In a panel on “Who Gets to Define Evangelicalism?” at the American Academy of Religion in Denver focused in part on questions of whether whites and ethnic minorities could be considered part of the same movement. At the same time, the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion was publishing a series of articles debating whether the most common way of quantifying American religious identification had distorted Americans’ understanding of evangelicals and black Christians specifically and Christians more broadly. It was the key respondents in that series: Jason Shelton.

DO BLACK AND WHITE CHRISTIANS DIFFER?

Shelton’s 2012 book, Blacks and Whites in Christian America, had its origins in the hiring of an administrative assistant when he was a postdoctoral fellow at Rice University. He was working with Michael O. Emerson, the leading sociologist studying multiracial congregations. (Emerson is now provost at North Park University.) An African American candidate for the position, a woman we’ll call Sharon, talked openly about how she “had to talk to the Lord” before her interview—just as she does several times a day, whenever she “needed some extra strength.” She even ended the interview asking for the Lord’s mercy as she drove home in the rain. After she left, Shelton realized that her openness and faithfulness and her frequent prayer were not unusual among churchgoing African Americans. But he didn’t know the white experience well.

“How many white Sharons are out there?” he asked Emerson.

“ Probably not too many,” Emerson replied. “Perhaps a few evangelicals.” Soon they set out to find out: Do black Christians really pray more often than white Christians? If so, why? What other differences in faith and practice might there be? And what would that say about Christianity?

To find out, they drew from two of the most respected academic surveys, the Portraits of American Lives Survey (PALS) and the General Social Survey (GSS), along with focus groups and in-depth interviews with black clergy. (Shelton and Emerson could not get white pastor respondents for their survey of “black clergy.”) In short, yes: Black Christians pray more than other Christians. In fact, controlling for other background factors, Shelton and Emerson found that black Protestants pray nearly three times more often than white Protestants. So he and Cobb created a “black reltrad” that identifies black Christians and reckons with the ways in which they practice Christianity.

For the last two decades, social scientists studying American Christianity have almost universally rallied to one tenet in particular: a database code, abbreviated as reltrad, that uses survey respondents’ denominational “religious preference” to sort them into “religious tradition” buckets. For example, Wesleyans are coded as evangelical, United Methodists are coded as mainline, and Baptist Church in America and Episcopal Church attendees are coded as black Protestants. The other traditions in the reltrad schema are Catholic, Jewish, “other faith,” and “none/filiation.”

Race doesn’t usually factor into the count. If you’re white but attend an African Methodist Episcopal church, you’d get classified as “black Protestant.” But race matters in reltrad when respondents say things like they’re “Methodist, but they don’t go to church.” And African American Baptists are counted as black Protestants even if they say they’re Southern Baptists or American Baptists. “Most blacks who belong to these denominations attend predominantly black Baptist churches,” and the black sociologists, led by Brian Steensland. “And most black Baptist churches in the American and Southern Baptist Conventions have a dual affiliation status with other black Baptist denominations.”

There are other ways to divide American Christians into groups. Many public opinion polls break out evangelical Protestants by asking, “Do you consider yourself an evangelical or born-again Christian?” then omit any Catholics or African Americans from those who said yes. Other surveys (like those from Barna and LifeWay) ask a series of questions about theology and religious practices. But when scholars talk about religious data today, they almost always separate black and white Protestants in some form. And reltrad has become, in many researchers’ words, the gold standard.

“Reltrad itself is the greatest thing since sliced bread for a nerdy academic like me,” Shelton says. But as an African American, he says, reltrad’s lumping together all black Protestants is its “biggest limitation.” Just as old surveys might only indicate whether a respondent was Protestant, Catholic, a Jew and miss the complexity in various traditions, when you split Protestants into evangelical, mainline, and black, “you’re missing a lot of the unique traditions and distinctions,” he says.

So he and Cobb created a “black reltrad” that identifies nine categories for identifying African Americans: Baptists, Methodists, Holiness/Pentecostals, historically white mainline Protestant denominations, historically white evangelical Protestant denominations, nondenominational Protestants, Catholics, other faiths (including Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses), and respondents with no religious affiliation.

To work, “black reltrad” needs big datasets with a large number of black respondents. That will limit what some of its findings mean. But the study itself is a major step in globalizing the American black church, and it has opened up new territory that other sociologists, led by Brian Steensland. “And most black Baptist churches

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groups, but empirically I couldn’t find any differences, I prob-
ably wouldn’t use it in a study,” he said. And the differences
matter. “If you tell me that the Pentecostals are more likely to
believe in miracles, to happen today, or that the Catholics believe
in adult baptism, you’re not telling us much.”

But Shelton and Cobb are already finding significant
differences, including a kind of mirroring of the evangelical-
mainline split among historically white churches. Noniden-
tational Protestants, Holiness/Pentecostals, and members of
historically white evangelical denominations are far more
likely to have conservative views on sexual morality than Bap-
tists, Methodists, and blacks in historically white mainline
Protestant denominations. In fact, the Baptist and Methodist
and blacks in white mainline churches seem not to differ in
their sexual ethics from African Americans who don’t have a
religious preference, Shelton and Cobb found a similar split on
abortion.

But on other measures, Shelton and Cobb think that
there’s less of a split between conservative and liberal black
Protestants and more of a spectrum. Baptists and Method-
ists don’t differ from each other on many of the issues
the researchers looked at so far) occupy a kind of “moderate
Protestant” middle between the black members of histor-
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enominational denominations and the more

conservative groups, like Holiness/Pentecostals, noniden-
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The question at the heart of that suggestion—how many
groups can you reasonably condense American Protestants
down to without misrepresenting reality—is at the heart of a
heated argument that has long been simmering in the field of
the sociology of religion. And in late 2018, the fight went public.

Darren Sherkat, an influential sociologist of religion at South-
ern Illinois University, does not think that reltrad is the
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In his black reltrad article, Shelton seemed to start leaning
the other way. Against the conclusions of his earlier book, he
suggested there may be “limits to the established conclusion
that black Protestants have more in common with one another
than they do with white Protestants.”

I asked him where he is on the question now. “We still might
find those limits,” he says. “I want to leave that door open. But
when you compare, for example, black Methodists and white
Methodists, they’re so far apart it’s crystal clear statistically
that the black Methodists have more in common with other
black Protestants.”

But that might be changing, he says. Affiliation with histor-
cially black denominations is falling rapidly, from 57 percent
to 45 percent. “The black Methodist tradition is losing people
left and right,” he says. “Out of 100 black adults, only 4 are
members of the black Methodist tradition now.” non-denominational affiliation is up. A forthcoming paper
from his colleague, Ryan Cobb, is showing that African Amer-
icans with a college degree and whites with a college degree
are now far more likely to attend racially integrated churches
than they were a few years ago.

The two schools of thought on the black church—one that
emphasizes ethnic unity and shared history of oppression and another that emphasizes theological unity and shared ecclesial history—both have a lot of truth to back them up, Sherkat says. The question in all this is whether the methodological differences that are emerging today could be tricky things, he says.

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In the paper, he describes a cabal of religious sociolo-
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of religion to “otherize” particular types of religious believers. In his telling, modern scientific surveys in the late 20th century helped to rescue the field from religious sociologists. “Yet, the ascendency of the field had not purged it of the sources
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evolutionary and scientific surveys in the late 20th century helped to work for a ‘narrative of a ‘collapsing middle’ and that the narratives through which those experiences become personal meaningful. The intent, rather, is to generalize and thus reinforce the otherwise tenuous idea that the religious ‘middle’ remains and permanent aspects of religion that generated these identities,” the sociologists promised, “will likely forge identities,” the sociologists promised, “will likely forge the

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Around Southern Illinois University, where he teaches,
about a dozen of the 70 churches are historically black con-
meteries that are bound up in religious traditions,” they

The working paper sat online mostly as a jere-
mied for a few years, but last summer a significantly
reworked and less caustic version appeared in the peer-
reviewed Journal for the Scientific Study of Reli-
gion (JSSR) with Lehman listed as the primary author.

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