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, “For blacks, 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 Cobbs) 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 on 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 Christians who belong to one black Christian diversity division? To what degree are terms like “black church” or “mainline Protestants” helpful labels that identify real traditions?

“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 to answer that question, do we recognize all 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, shared her worries 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 shared that her openness and frequent prayer were 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 work, “black reltrad” needs big datasets with a large number of black Protestants, especially in groups where they are a minority. To that end, Shelton and Emerson interviewed 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 Christian, and Laporan Christian diversity division. To what degree are terms like “the black church,” “evangelicals,” or “mainline Protestants” helpful labels that identify real traditions?

DO BLACK AND WHITE CHRISTIANS DIFFER?
Shelton still firmly believes that black Christians have more in common with other black Christians than they do with white Christians in their own denomination. That claim is a sociological truism at this point. When Shelton is getting attention is in his proposal to measure the diversity among the multiple streams in the “Greater Black Church.” For the last two decades, social scientists studying American Christianity have almost universally rallied to one tool in particular: a database code, sometimes referred to 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 Baptists are coded as black. The other traditions in the reltrad schema are Catholic, Jewish, “other faith,” and “nonaffiliated.”

Research 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, “I am a Methodist, but they don’t know which kind.” And African American Baptists are counted as black Protestants even if they say they’re Southern Baptists or African American Baptists. “Most blacks who belong to these denominations attend predominantly black 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 Protestantism 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 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 survey’s might only indicate whether a respondent was a Protestant, Catholic, 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 Cobbs created a “black reltrad” that identifies nine categories for identifying African American: 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 some of its generalizability, says Tobin Grant, a political science professor at Southern Illinois University and editor of the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion. But there are plenty of large-scale studies like the GSS ready to be mined. The real test for black reltrad, Grant says, will be in its explanatory power and in its ability to find real differences between those categories.

“If black reltrad just said historically these are different...
groups, but empirically I couldn’t find any differences, I prob-
bly 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 black evangelicals that the partisists 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. Nondenom-
inationals, Presbyterians, Holiness/Pentecostals, and members
of historically white evangelical denominations are far more
likely to have conservative views on sexual morality than Bapt-
ists, Methodists, and blacks in historically white mainline
Protestant denominations. In the Baptist, 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 didn’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 histori-
cally white mainline Protet-
stant denominations and the
more conservative groups,
like Holiness/Pentecostals,
nondenominational Protes-
tants, and members of his-
torically white evangelical
denominations.

Maybe for smaller sur-
veys where there aren’t
even black respondents
to divide into nine categories,
Shelton and Cobb ventured,
it might be possible to col-
apse the categories down to
three: “liberal, moderate, and
conservative.” But this would potentially conceal a lot of
the meaningful differences that black retracted was created to
detect.

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.

Black Protestants and white
evangelicals practice their
Christianity in very dif-
ferent ways at very differ-
ent levels. But they’re both
practicing Christianity.

Darren Sherkat, an influential sociologist of religion at South-
ern Illinois University, does not think that retracted is the
greatest thing since sliced bread. In 2016 he posted a work-
ing paper (coauthored with Derek Lehman, now at Tarleton
State University) called “After the Resurrection: The Field of
the Sociology of Religion in the United States.” On his blog,

Christianity. But they’re
Christianity in evangelicals
Black Protestants

Darren Sherkat, an influential sociologist of religion at South-
ern Illinois University) called “After the Resurrection: The Field of
American Protestantism—emphasizing denomina-
tional families. Episcopalians and liberal Protestants
make up one end of the spectrum; moderate Protes-
tional families. Episcopalians and liberal Protestants
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 ethnicity and shared history of oppression and
another that emphasizes theological unity and shared ecclesial
identity—both have validity, says Grant, the journal editor. But unity and difference can
be tricky things, he says.

Around Southern Illinois University, where he teaches,
about a dozen of the 70 churches are historically black con-
gregations, he says. “They formed a black ministerium and
met a lot. Then one guy made the mistake of suggesting they
have Communion together and the whole thing fell apart.
People said, ‘Yeah, we’ll have lunch with you.’ But once one guy says,’I’m not having Communion with you,’ it’s going to fall apart.

“We know the particulars matter if we’re trying to under-
stand anything about religion,” Grant says. “The question in all
of this is how we capture which particulars really matter.”

Ted Olsen is editorial director of Christianity Today.

A Warning, From a Sociologist of Religion

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thinking about religion using numbers and percentages
and notions of what is typical and what is atypical
might be possible to take for granted, but it is important to recog-
nize how recent this development is. It is only in the past
half-century that it became possible to think of something
called American religion in these ways, being bombered
with new information frompollsters on a daily basis is more
recent than that. In earlier times, faith would have been a
matter of conviction grounded in the age-old teachings of
particular traditions. It would have seemed strange to think
of religion as public opinion. ... But the polling industry’s impact on American religion
has been more significant than easy acceptance or quick
dismissals would allow. As a nation, we know far more than
previous generations did about what people believe, what
they do to nurture those beliefs, and how those beliefs influ-
ence their opinions on important issues of the day. At the
same time, polls are ill suited to capture the most meaning-
ful aspects of our personal lives, let alone about the depth,
superficiality, and complicated relationships we may have
with religious traditions and practices. They rarely probe
in depth the experiences underlying religious beliefs or the
narratives through which those experiences become per-
sonally meaningful. The intent, rather, is to generalize and
thus reinforce the otherwise tenuous idea that the religion
of an entire nation can be aptly and succinctly described.

“evangelical” or “born-again Christian” as religious
identifiers and defended their use of “sectarian” as
an alternative, even as they acknowledged that most of the
people they put in that category would find such a label
pejorative. If the shoe fits, they argued. “The ‘essential’
and permanent aspects of religion that generated these
identities,” the sociologists promised, “will likely forge
the next white Christian nationalist identity marker.”
In their response, retracted authors Steensland,
Woodberry, and Park questioned “treating entire
denominational families as monolithic rather than
acknowledging the diversity within them.” Are Ameri-
can Baptists sectarian exclusivist just because they’re
Baptists? Are Orthodox Presbyterian liberals because
they’re Presbyterians? Belrand, by contrast, acknowled-
ges the “history, institutional ties, beliefs, and prac-
tices that are bound up in religious traditions.” They
said the authors failed to appreciate the benefits of having
multiple classification schemes available to scholars.

Princeton’s Robert Wuthnow from Inventing Amer-
ican Religion: Polls, Surveys, and the Trueous Quest for a
Nabion’s Faith. Copyright Robert Wuthnow and published by
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Read sympathetically, this is the core of what [Lehman and
Sherkat] sought to do.”

Stensland and his retracted coauthors had one more cri-
tique. Unlike retracted, in the new proposal, “one of the most
important social signals of African-American life and progress
is rendered invisible.”

Sherlat, who was also invited to respond to the JSSR
forum, was not quite so critical, but said retracted does a better
job of accounting for the power of race in American religion.

It’s not a perfect scheme, he said, and Lehman and Sherkat’s
scheme does “suggest that the religious ‘middle’ remains
intact.” But for now, he said, retracted remains the gold standard.

Sherkat added that the retracted “in talks with the
Lehman/Sherkat scheme, he concluded that there is “strong support for the classic assertion
that black Protestants have more in common with one another
than they do with white Protestants—including those of the
same denomination.”

In his black retracted article, Shelton seemed to start leaving
the other way. Against the conclusions of his earlier book, he
suggested there may be “limits to the established conclusions
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 clearly statistically
that the black Methodists have more in common with other
black Protestants.”

But that might be changing, he says. Affiliation with histori-
cally 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.” Methodists,
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.

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