

Sociology 150 (Social Psychology)

The Social Hierarchy Within a Black Church

Growing up in the African-American church, I was often motivated, mystified, and at awe at the powerful influence this institution reign(s) in my life. My parents were very religious; so church attendance every Sunday was mandatory. I frequently participated in the choir so of course “praise and worship” were my favorite part of the service. As a child, the most dreadful part to me happen(ed) to be my parents main purpose for attendance, the “sermon”. The “sermon”, usually given by the reigning pastor, included principles of the Bible and how they applied to everyday (trials) and tribulation(s). Of course, it included a lot of hooping, hollering, and dancing-the only part I seemed to enjoy. It was the closest thing many people got to reading the Bible, including my parents. Not due to lack of literacy but lack of time and interest since the pastor was seen as the authority in heavenly relations and his regurgitation of God’s words was enough to satisfy everyone’s hunger. It was not until I began to experience life’s unexpected turns that I personally looked for comfort in my weekly dose of God. I realized that was the reason everyone else was there. I was raised to never d(o) two things: doubt God or question the preacher. However, since becoming engaged to a minister, I have begun to realize that ministers are merely men--not mini-gods. So it is this connection with the black church that has led me to study the power structure of the ministers. Unlike the ushers or choir members, admission is exclusive and very selective. For three months I studied _____, a predominantly black church in Sacramento, California. There are approximately 600 members including all church officials. Although it is considered a non-denominational church, the mood of the service is very high spirited as in Pentecostal churches. The church statement delegates Jesus Christ as the head of the church and the Holy Spirit is given full reign during services. Therefore, passing out “under the spirit”, shouting, dancing, and laying of hands is a common practice at _____. I have attended this church for over two years and have quite a few friends there. However to maintain the objectivity of this study, I had to spiritually remove myself from the services. I was amazed to see the norms, folkways, values and symbolism initiated and controlled by the ministers during the service. Acts that I usually thought were “spiritually lead” were actually norms carefully reproduced and reinforced every Sunday. For example, at the cue of a particular song, I found that the pastor’s wife would run around the church, ushers following diligently after her. With the ending of the song, she would fall out somewhere near the pulpit at which the pastor would command everyone to stand up and “praise the Lord”. This happened almost every Sunday, which would induce the congregation into a “spiritual” uproar of shouting, stomping and crying. Observations like these lead me to the conclusion that African-American churches are not only an outlet for life’s frustrations, but a source of inspiration and stability to its member’s lives. It is a training operation in the values, beliefs, and standards of the black community. Based on a highly structured hierarchy system headed by the deity of Jesus Christ, church leaders such as pastors and ministers are seen as the spiritual manifestation of God. Therefore their elevated...

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