Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion

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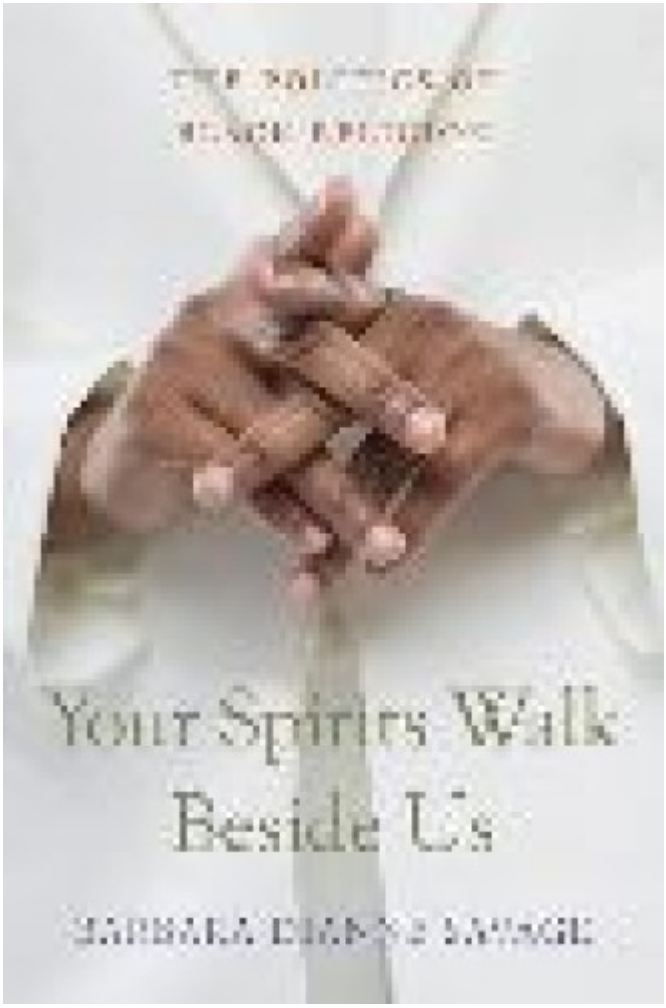

Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion

Barbara Dianne Savage
Belknap

For a brief moment in the early months of 2008, Americans cared about the connections between African-American religion and politics. Segments of Jeremiah Wright's sermons were splashed all over television and computer screens. With one click, he could be heard shouting "God damn America." On every news station, he exclaimed that Jesus was a black man who was executed by whites. Wright mattered nationally and publicly because one of his congregants, Barack Obama, was running for president. Americans had so many questions: Why is Wright so angry? What is black liberation theology? Does Obama the politician share the views of Wright the prophet? Scholars of African-American religion were called on to provide sound-bite answers to these monumental concerns. But two minutes here or one magazine story there could not possibly answer the questions in full.

Barbara Dianne Savage makes the attempt. In *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us* she suggests that the questions we ask and the answers we give about African-American religion and politics are rooted in sociological works from the early 20th century. Savage maintains that a small set of scholars established the parameters for thinking about African-American religion by downplaying complexity. According to Savage, before the modern civil rights movement, academics saw black churches as a hindrance to black politics. The civil rights movement, which she characterizes as a religious rebellion, altered the terrain; academics began to see black churches and black politics as joined at the hip. The divide between Obama and Wright, Savage concludes, exposed the myth of black uniformity that had persisted amid realities of political and religious diversity and conflict.

Savage commences her account with the opening decades of the 20th century, when luminaries W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter Woodson and Benjamin Mays prodded black churches to become vibrant centers of collective political action. Expressing dismay that black religion was failing to provide political leadership, they specifically blamed uneducated ministers and worried that there were too many black churches providing too many spiritual services and too few social services. But Savage points out that these authors ignored women, focused on middle-class and elite African Americans and downplayed internal diversity.

The early part of the century also saw a struggle between sociologists and anthropologists. Savage analyzes how sociologists Charles Johnson, E. Franklin Frazier, St. Clair Drake, Horace Cayton and Gunnar Myrdal celebrated what they supposed was the waning influence of black churches. These scholars saw black

Protestantism as an inhibiting force and searched for political empowerment through other means. Against this tide of sociological overgeneralization, a group of ethnographers fought back. Zora Neale Hurston, Hortense Powdermaker and Arthur Fauset found diversity where others had found uniformity. They found women powerful in presence, spirit and number, and they found multiple varieties of black religion informing a wide gambit of political ventures big and small. Savage makes clear her preference for the anthropological approach, with its ethnographic focus on particularity and diversity.

To illustrate religious diversity among female leaders, Savage contrasts the lives of two powerful women: Mary McLeod Bethune and Nannie Helen Burroughs, political leaders with distinct religious and political positions. Burroughs held steadfastly to the Republican Party and worked primarily within the National Baptist Convention. Bethune was a Democrat, led an organization that embraced black women from all faith backgrounds, and ultimately gravitated to the universalistic Moral Re-Armament movement.

Savage contends that the civil rights movement was a religious rebellion in which some young African Americans sought new ways to express their diverse spiritualities, while others found faith within the movement. A new genre of writing emerged, the movement memoir, wherein activists narrated the birth of their political and religious consciousness. The movement, Savage concludes, created the notion of a permanent link between black religion and black politics.

Savage identifies a master narrative of black religious studies in the 20th century, in which the flawed ideas of the first authors were passed down to subsequent generations. Exposing the unspoken assumptions, she articulates clearly the whispered concerns of many scholars of black religion. She shows how scholarly works can create parameters of discussion that can blind us to a variety of people, places, events and realities.

But the parameters that Savage identifies and criticizes seem to determine the approach of her own book; she points out the pitfalls of previous authors only to fall headfirst into them. For example, Savage denounces previous scholars for failing to appreciate the wide variety of African-American religious expressions, yet the characters in Your *Spirits Walk Beside Us* are extremely similar to one another. Almost all are highly educated. Most are middle class in some way. Most came from Protestant backgrounds and continued to affiliate with Protestant churches. In all,

there are only 20 or 30 individuals discussed in this book, and Savage strains to present them as diverse and conflicted.

To present greater variety in black religion, Savage would have had to read more widely and diversely. Hundreds of church histories and autobiographies were written in the first half of the 20th century. She could have addressed the rise of the Nation of Islam, the experiences of black Jews, and the preacher wars between Methodists and Baptists.

Or consider gender. Savage criticizes W. E. B. Du Bois for neglecting women in his early-century work on black churches. But women were essential to and celebrated for their contributions to Du Bois's classic *The Negro Church*. First published in 1903, the volume was part of a broader sociological survey of African-American life that incorporated the works of hundreds of men and women. Mary Church Terrell, an educator and founder of the National Association of Colored Women, was a coeditor of the volume. Other female educators, including Annie Marion MacLean, a sociologist from the University of Chicago, and Anna Wade Richardson, a teacher in Georgia, provided information and analysis for it. In this case, it is Savage who hid a history, not Du Bois.

Most telling of the power of parameters is Savage's form and approach. While she champions the works of anthropologists and ethnographers, her work has much more in common with the sociological and historical texts she rejects. Anthropologists like Hurston and Fauset sought to capture religious diversity with vivid portrayals, thick descriptions of peoples and places, and an eye for nuance. Savage's characters seem heartless, devoid of faith or feeling. She never joins them in the joy and pain of everyday life. She never lifts her voice to sing with them, falls to her knees with them or mourns with them. She fails to see the spirits of history walking beside her at every step, and thus she replicates the mistakes she criticizes. Ultimately Savage bases her big claims on little research. She cloaks just as much as she uncovers.

At its best, Your *Spirits Walk Beside Us* is a call to action. Like Curtis Evans's brilliant recent book *The Burden of Black Religion*, it encourages historians to investigate the ways that African-American religion has been presented and how these presentations inhibit us from seeing reality. Unlike Savage and more like Evans, we should set our gaze on artists and authors as well as academics and activists. Savage's questions could lead to new studies of the novels of Richard Wright and

James Baldwin; they could lead to new assessments of the art of Jacob Lawrence, the music and acting of Paul Robeson and the athletic politics and faith of Arthur Ashe. In all of them, we would find representations of and challenges to reigning visions of African-American religion and politics.

There may never be a time to discuss black religion and politics as appropriate as the days after Wright's sermons became national news, but we can thank Savage for making it more difficult to resort to overgeneralizations, sound bites and simple answers. Perhaps that's the trick. Savage forces us to admit that there are no simple answers to the complex phenomenon that has been and is black religion in the United States. Perhaps it is just that complexity that has made black religion such a vibrant object of attention in the past and will continue to in the future.