

Black America's true religion: Optimism

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□ There they go again.

Don't they know any better?

African Americans as a group continue to be battered worse than any other Americans by the nation's three-year-long-and-counting economic crisis. In both stand-alone and comparative terms, from the top to the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, they've suffered a severe loss of the little wealth they possessed and have almost no protection against a future economic shock.

For example, their unemployment rate, now at 15.7 percent, has been in double digits (nearly double that of whites) since the Great Recession began three years ago. They're more likely than whites to be trapped among the long-term unemployed; and the housing and foreclosure crisis has pushed the black homeownership rate down to its level of 15 years ago and left more than 20 percent of African American homeowners in danger of losing their homes.

And yet, in a survey released late last month, blacks by a large margin declared themselves – in sharp contrast to whites – full of optimism about their financial standing for the present and the future.

The survey, conducted by the Washington Post, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University, found that 85 percent of blacks are "optimistic" about their future, compared to 72 percent of whites; that 65 percent feel "financially secure;" and that 59 percent of blacks believe that "when it comes to the availability of good jobs for American workers ... the best times are yet to come. Only 40 percent of whites think that is so.

Latino Americans, though less confident than blacks, are also markedly more optimistic on most measures than whites.

The survey marks at least the fourth time in the last year that a major study has reached the same conclusion: Blacks (and Latinos), though significantly worse off than whites, are significantly more optimistic about the country's future and their own. So said a study by Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, faculty members at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. So stated a white paper on the impact of the Great Recession released in June by the Pew Research Center, and a January 2010 report also released by Pew. The title of the latter – "Blacks Upbeat About Progress, Prospects" – accurately reflects the psychological state of the majority of black Americans now, despite the economic

devastation they've endured and are likely to face for years to come.

In articles on the findings of the previous studies, I've dismissed assertions made by some that blacks are simply misperceiving the seriousness of their predicament. These studies' other findings indicate blacks are fully aware of how unequal and precarious their economic standing remains. Further, the Pew survey of January 2010 reported that more than 80 percent of blacks, compared with about a third of whites, believe that racism remains a significant factor in American life. Nonetheless, the surveys also found that blacks, and to a lesser extent Latino Americans, feel that under a Democratic administration, they have a chance for improvement.

In other words, blacks aren't in a swoon now that the president of the United States is a black American. Instead, I've explained it as a matter "equanimity" born of historical experience and "faith."

Those explanations apply to the findings of the Washington Post-Kaiser-Harvard poll as well. They stem from the most sustaining root of black Americans' society – their profound religiosity. The last finding of the Post-Kaiser-Harvard poll revealed that 83 percent of blacks (compared to 50 percent of whites and 61 percent of Latinos) count "religion or faith in God as very important in helping them get through tough financial times.

They lead one to conclude that, whatever their denomination, black Americans have an over-arching common religion: Optimism.