

“A Qualitative Study of Black Atheists: Don’t Tell Me You’re One of Those”

Speaker: Daniel Swann, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Goucher College

On October 2, 2020, Dr. Daniel Swann, an assistant professor of sociology at Goucher College, sat down with 25 scholars, students, community leaders, and other guests on Zoom to present his project, “A Qualitative Study of Black Atheists: Don’t Tell Me You’re One of Those.” Swann’s research provided insight on what it means to be a Black Atheist in America, with special focus on how this label may influence their relationships with others or their perception of society and religiosity. In this study, Black Atheists found significant meaning and connection between their identities as Black and Atheist but oftentimes found these two affiliations conflicting with one another, leading Black Atheists to feel marginalized and/or unsupported in Black communities, which tend to be highly majority religious, and broader Atheist communities, which tend to be majority white. The stigmatization they felt from these communities first suggests potential misconceptions Americans may hold regarding Black individuals’ religiosity—that Black Americans are expected to participate in some religious tradition. Second, in feeling alienated in these communities, Black Atheists questioned the authenticity of their experiences being Black and/or being Atheist. Respondents claimed never feeling “Black enough” or “Atheist enough” to truly belong in these spaces.

Black Atheists, resultingly, felt the need to employ closeting strategies to combat broader stigma they faced in US society tied to being a racial and religious minority. This included non-disclosure of their Atheist identity and/or performing the role of a religious person despite their beliefs. Swann’s research and findings are significant for our society as they uncover how Black Atheists can feel disconnected from their social networks and sources of support, especially given historical maltreatment of both Black and Atheist groups in the United States.