

HUMANISTS IN THE HOOD

Unapologetically Black,
Feminist,
and Heretical

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~~existence depend on your erasure~~ To subscribe to a human-centered notion of morality, ethics, and justice as a Black woman is an outlier position that carries social, political, and professional risks. Much of the emerging literature (including blogs and thought pieces) on Black atheist and humanist experience chronicles the perils of Black folks'

rejecting theism. According to the Pew Religion Research Forum, 87 percent of African Americans are religiously identified, making them among the most religious ethnic groups in a nation that is itself majority religious and Christian. Given these daunting stats, faith is a strong prerequisite for political viability in the United States overall and in the African American community in particular. The only contemporary national-level politician of any ethnicity to declare his atheism while in office was former California congressman Pete Stark (who waited for several decades before doing so and was voted out of office five years later).

Although a handful of whites in national office have since proclaimed their humanism or refused to identify a theistic belief system, running for public office as an openly identified humanist nonbeliever of African descent is political suicide. For generations, fledgling and veteran Black politicians have relied on a robust network of Black churches and faith-based organizations to help launch or sustain their careers. Megachurch congregations like West Angeles, Faithful Central, and First AME in South Los Angeles are frequent pitstops for African American and white politicians looking to curry favor with Black voters. When former President Barack Obama began campaigning in 2007 he strategically emphasized his Christian religious beliefs and membership in Chicago's Trinity United Church (Trinity's pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, was subsequently accused of making racist comments—allegations that conservatives used to try and discredit Obama). Obama's eagerness to do so was viewed as a way to dispel rumors that he was an atheist or Muslim. It was also perceived as a bid to establish "race cred" with African American voters dubious of his biracial, African and European American background.

During the 2020 presidential race, Senator Kamala Harris, the first Black female Democrat to run for president since Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm in 1972, announced her candidacy to a crowd of ecstatic supporters with the declaration that she had "faith in god." Insofar as faith is shorthand for being considered authentically Black, god-fearing Black politicians are exempt from the knee-jerk suspicions associated with nonbelievers, because being a Christian

believer is reflexively linked to having moral values in the American mainstream.

Would Harris' supporters have reacted as enthusiastically if she'd said she had faith in humans and that this naturally superseded faith in god? It's all but guaranteed that she would have been vilified in the press, hounded off the stage, and kicked to the curb politically, branded as damaged goods. How dare a Black woman candidate profess anything but unswerving devotion to Father God, Jesus, Him? And yet, nothing in Harris' platform required god belief or a theistic outlook on the world. Indeed, a feminist humanist perspective on the social construction of inequality, justice, and morality is critical of faith-based belief systems' capacity to articulate a moral universe precisely because of the arbitrary nature of deity worship. As secular scholar Phil Zuckerman writes in his book *What It Means to Be Moral: Why Religion Is Not Necessary for Living an Ethical Life*, the intensely subjective, changeable, and highly interpretive nature of god-based morality (like certain animal species, there are hundreds of different deity-based belief systems in the world) makes it impossible for humans to know with absolute certainty what "God's will" is and what he/she/they/it deem to be ironclad, "beyond question" mores.