

Celebrating the Spirit of Sunday

“**T**HE CHURCH, among black people, has been a social cosmos,” Kelly Miller, the pioneering Howard University sociology professor, maintained in 1908. “It has provided an emotional outlet, a veritable safety valve for people caught up in the whirling storms of life.”

Thomas Roma’s photographs capture the sublimity of the beliefs of people who are most “caught up in the whirling storms of life” today, working-class black people for whom the cultural, or ritual, aspects of Sunday worship are secondary at best; no, these are people who believe in a living God, in manifestations of His Spirit, in the power of the Word. . . .

If the Holy Ghost is anywhere to be found on a Sunday morning, it is in these churches, among congregants for whom the worship service climaxes in the visitation of the Holy Ghost, manifested by possession, by the Holy Dance, and by the Speaking in Tongues. God and His religion unveil themselves in these holy spaces. And even if a blue-eyed, blond Jesus haunts these storefront walls, the Holy Spirit shows up weekly in blackface, in the fullest range of the resonant think-

ers of the African American voice, embodying absolute fear and terror, but also absolute joy.

The black church, come Sunday, is where the sublime and the uncanny meet. Sheer joy. As James Baldwin, himself once a born-again child preacher, put it, “To be with God is really to be involved with some enormous, overwhelming desire, and joy, and power which you cannot control, which controls you. God is a means of liberation and not a means to control others.”

The photograph and text are from the book Come Sunday: Photographs by Thomas Roma, which accompanies an exhibition of the same name at the Museum of Modern Art through June 18. Thomas Roma will be professor of practice at Columbia University beginning in July. The text is by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a professor of the humanities and chair of the department of Afro-American studies at Harvard University. The book is published by the Museum of Modern Art and distributed by Harry N. Abrams Inc. Copyright © 1996 by the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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