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OPINION

Reading about N.C.'s religious experience

March means basketball tournaments, and that's the closest many of us ever get

Does North Carolina have a state religion? Officially, the answer is "No."



D.G. MARTIN

But this month we know better: For many North Carolinians, March is the month of pilgrimages to "holy" sites, where they will join 20,000 or so other pilgrims in "worship." Some will be wearing costumes and uniforms to show their loyalty.

Some will have their faces and other parts of their bodies painted to frighten the evil spirits and opponents.

They will sing and shout and jump up and down more than the most enthusiastic "holy rollers." Even those who cannot take the pilgrimages will go through all kinds of rituals designed to bring about favorable outcomes.

This "religion" is, of course, basketball.

For those few North Carolinians who have not yet been introduced to the state religion, I recommend three outstanding new books. Each of them helps its readers begin to see why basketball is so special in our state and how the rivalries and loyalties lead some of us to actions that appear to be either religious fanaticism or insanity.

In the first book, "Blue Blood: Inside the Most Storied Rivalry in College Hoops," veteran reporter and sports writer Art Chansky lays out the history of the Duke-Carolina basketball rivalry.

"Blue Blood" is comprehensive and full of details about hiring and firing coaches, arguments and fights, and the strategy and tactics of important games. In some ways it is an encyclopedic history of college basketball since the 1950s. Although it centers on Duke and Carolina, their stories overlap with those of the other teams both schools played regularly.

"Blue Blood" has an index, which makes it easy to look up specific people. For instance, if you want to know about former Duke star Bobby Hurley, you can look him up quickly. Then you can read how and why he signed at Duke, even though his father, a high school coach, had been a long-time admirer of Carolina and Coach Dean Smith. Chansky explains how the Hurley family's new connections with Duke closed down important Carolina recruiting opportunities in the New York area.

These kinds of details and the convenient index make Blue Blood not only a good read, but also a necessary reference book for every sports writer or fan who follows Duke or Carolina.

Will Blythe's brand new book wins the longest title award. "To Hate Like This Is to Be Happy Forever: A Thoroughly Obsessive, Intermittently Uplifting, and Occasionally Unbiased Account of the Duke-North Carolina Basketball Rivalry" might also be one of the best book titles ever.

The title lets you know that it is a personal memoir, as much about the author as it is about basketball. Blythe opens his book with, "I am a sick, sick man. Not only am I consumed by hatred, I am delighted by it."

In a compelling explanation of the sources of this hatred that delights him, Blythe charts a pathway for his readers to deal with their own unreasonable passions about basketball and the teams they love and love to hate.

To illustrate his explanations, Blythe weaves together hundreds of wonderful basketball related stories about himself, his family, and his friends.

In one of them he writes, "A former teacher of mine, a great scholar of Southern literature, believes that he can control games by maintaining the same posture throughout the contest and by doing some kind of weird voodoo gesture with his fingers every time an opposing player shoots a free throw."

To find out who this teacher is, you have to read a third book, "Off the Rim: Basketball and Other Religions in a Carolina Childhood" by Fred Hobson, the same former teacher whose posture and gestures Blythe describes. "Off the Rim" is also a memoir. Hobson tells us of his growing up in the mountain foothills of Yadkin County, playing high school basketball there, and making Carolina's freshman team as a "walk on" in the early 1960s. The story of Hobson's later conversion from athlete to scholar is engaging and poignant—especially since the scholar, like his student Blythe, still goes crazy when Carolina plays Duke.

Which one of these three books should you read? If you want to understand North Carolina's "state religion," get all three of them.

D.G. MARTIN is the host of UNC-TV's North Carolina Bookwatch, which is taking a break during "Festival" and will return in April.



Silent epidemic of school dropouts

If you listen carefully, you still can't hear it. It's the sound of a third of high school students dropping out before receiving their diploma.



GEORGE E. CURRY

For people of color, the figure is almost 50 percent and that has profound implications not only for the students, but for the society that failed them.

"The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts" is an important report on the dropout problem told from the viewpoints of true experts—the students themselves. The study, which focuses on polling and focus groups, is a joint project by the Civic Enterprises and Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

In 2003, about 3.5 million youth 16 to 25 did not have a high school diploma and were not enrolled in school.

The report begins with "An Open Letter to the American People" that gets directly to the point: "There is a high school dropout epidemic in America. Each year, almost one third of all public high school students—and nearly one half of all blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans—fail to graduate from public high school with their class. Many of these stu-

dents abandon school with less than two years to complete their high school education."

And society has plenty of reasons to care.

"The decision to drop out is a dangerous one for the student," the report continued. "Dropouts are much more likely than their peers who graduate to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, in prison, on death row, unhealthy, divorced and single parents with children who drop out from high school themselves."

The report on this silent epidemic allows us to listen to what those who quit say about their predicament.

"The central message of this report is that while some students drop out because of significant academic challenges, most dropouts are students who could have, and believe they could have, succeeded in school," the study said. "This survey of young people who left high school without graduating suggests that, despite career aspirations that require education beyond high school and a majority having grades of C or better, circumstances in students' lives and an inadequate response to those circumstances from the schools led to dropping out."

We tend to think of high school dropouts as being incapable of handling the academic workload and there is some evidence that supports

that view. For example, 35 percent of those polled said "failing in school" was a major factor in the decision to drop out. And 32 percent had repeated a grade before dropping out.

Nearly half of the former students—47 percent—quit not because of the academic challenge, but because they found classes uninteresting.

"These young people reported being bored and disengaged from high school," the report said. "Almost as many (42 percent) spent time with people who were not interested in school. These were among the top reasons selected by those with high GPAs and by those who said they were motivated to work hard."

An even larger number of students—69 percent—said they were not motivated or inspired to work hard. In fact, two-thirds said they would have worked harder had it been required of them.

Naturally, there were other real life factors that caused some students to drop out. Approximately a third said they had to get a job and make more money, 26 percent said they became a parent and 22 percent said they had to care for a family member.

It became clear that the decision to quit school was not a spur of the moment choice. Rather, it was a culmination of growing disengagement and frequent absences

from classes.

There was also a significant number of students who fell behind in the early years and never felt they caught up—or could catch up—with their classmates.

Among the recommendations made in the report:

- Provide a more supportive academic environment at school and at home that would improve the student's chances of remaining in school;
- Improve the teaching and curricular to make school more relevant and engaging;
- Offering tutoring and summer school for struggling students;
- Operate a more disciplined classroom;
- Make sure that students have a strong relationship with at least one adult in the school and
- Improve communication between parents and schools.

And parents need to improve their communication with their children.

"The majority of parents were not aware or just 'somewhat aware' of their child's grades or that they were about to leave school," the report said. Clearly, we all need to be more involved.

GEORGE E. CURRY is editor-in-chief of the NNPA News Service and BlackPressUSA.com. To contact Curry or to book him for a speaking engagement, go to his Web site, www.georgecurry.com.

Conundrum of consciousness, capital

Two dynamic brothers, Chike Akua, of Atlanta and Amefika Geuka, of West Palm, Fla., were guests on Brother Keidi Awadus LIB Internet Radio Program (www.libradio.com) in February. Among the many interesting points made was Chike's assessment of Black consciousness and Black capital.

In short, he noted that many conscious brothers and sisters have little capital and many black folks who have a lot of capital have little consciousness. Thus, we must raise both consciousness and capital.



JAMES CLINGMAN

Subsequent to that particular conversation, Brother Amefika, who agrees with the basic premise of black folks needing both consciousness and capital, shared with me the reality of our situation when it comes to raising the consciousness of Black folks who have capital. With few exceptions, few of us that have both consciousness and capital and are doing good and well at the same time. He mentioned Walter Lomax of Philadelphia as being among that exceptional group. Amefika pointed to the difficulty and near futility of trying to raise consciousness

among the so-called Black elite.

You know, I believe he is right. WEB DuBois tried it with his Talented Tenth theory and failed. Forty-five years after he advocated the concept he said, "In my youth I underestimated the power of selfishness over sacrifice." Who in the world do I think I am to believe I can accomplish that lofty feat?

I believe both Chike and Amefika are right in their conclusions, and I also believe in what DuBois discovered at a late age. Well, I am at a somewhat "late" age, with no time to waste; I definitely understand the power of selfishness over sacrifice. So, here is what I have come up with.

Marcus Garvey told us time after time that Black people are a nation within a nation. That being true, he argued, we must act as such. Other groups in America have no problem demonstrating their nationhood within the borders of the U.S. Black folks seem to have some reservations about doing it, maybe because many of us are still trying to assimilate and be "accepted" by White people. It's great for people to love and accept us, but should we spend our every waking hour trying to force them to do so?

Acting as a nation naturally reflects nationalistic thinking and nationalistic action, just as we see the Chinese,

the Greeks, the Italians, the Koreans, the Indians, and others conducting their affairs in a nationalistic manner. Those folks are indeed nationalists. They take their resources and take care of themselves first. They are conscious capitalists and conscious nationalists. What are we?

Unless Chike or Amefika offer something else, my plan is to concentrate on those of us who are nationalistic in our thinking and our actions. We may not have much individually, but we do have a great deal collectively. I am sure if given the right leadership and marching orders, nationalistic brothers and sisters will do what it takes—they will make the necessary sacrifices to empower our people. I know they will use whatever resources they have to do the right thing for our people.

Considering the current and, in some cases, impending geopolitical and macro-economic ramifications of this country's policies, Black Americans, the ones who are most oppressed, most imprisoned, most insecure, most mis-educated and uneducated, most unemployed, most impoverished, most neglected, and who suffer the most disease and illness, I am convinced, and have been for a long time, that only by the work of our own hands, as Martin Delany told us, will

be successful.

Thus, I am reissuing a call for you, readers of this column all across this country, to join the Blacknations Million Dollar Club (BMDC). No, it is not a panacea, but we have many other brothers and sisters who are working on other initiatives in other areas of collective and cooperative economic empowerment. My call is for the BMDC. I know full well that there are at least 200,000 black folks who read this column in more than 200 publications throughout the U.S. I also know there are millions of black folks online, many of whom will also read this. You are the ones to whom this call is made.

Consciousness demands nationalistic action by those who claim to be conscious. Of course, we need capital and, as Maria Stewart said, we have plenty but we spend most it on "nonsense." So what's it going to be? Yes, I would love to see our capital-rich brothers and sisters get involved, and the bridge that has been built over the years is still intact; I sincerely hope and pray they will at least meet the conscious ones in the middle of that bridge and commit to making a few sacrifices too.

JAMES E. CLINGMAN is a professor at the University of Cincinnati and former editor of the Cincinnati Herald newspaper.