



The Tragic Vision of Church in the Time of the Pandemic: Everything Is Going to Be Alright

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In his article “The Coronavirus Butterfly Effect,” Jonathan Kaiman suggests that COVID-19 is like an earthquake with aftershocks that will permanently reshape the world.¹ Telemedicine and localized clinics, private education with a focus on digital delivery, remote work, markets rewarding firms that achieve revenue, stockpiling food and medical supplies, and other biotechnology and healthcare-related changes are all possible effects. Using chaos theory, the author describes this as a “butterfly effect,” understanding that small changes can have unpredictable consequences. How might this pandemic reshape the church? What changes might need to occur as a result of this unpredictable virus that has swept the world, and what might this mean for the church?

An unsurprising emotional response to COVID-19 is grief, the normal but bewildering cluster of ordinary human emotions arising in response to significant loss, intensified and complicated by the relationship to the loss. God’s people have

¹ Kaiman, Jonathan, “The Coronavirus Butterfly Effect,” *Reason*, May 6, 2020, <https://reason.com/2020/05/06/the-coronavirus-butterfly-effect/>.

One central experience of African American Christianity is the “tragic vision,” a response to the traumas of its existence, and a means of coping with and surviving them. The deep faith and trust in God that it holds offers a vision of Christian community that can, in the midst of struggle, proclaim that “everything is going to be alright.”

experienced many losses during this unique time. They need a new and perhaps a creative way to live and to make meaning of their experiences. The same can be said about the church, and this may be an opportunity for reshaping the church.

This study proposes that in order to help God's people live during this current time, we need to develop new, creative ways of being the church. Understanding what Matthew Johnson calls the "tragic vision," a creative response to the human encounter with the abyss, this study proposes that embracing ambiguity with tragic vision leading to tragic wisdom and Spirit-manifested care infused with creative imagination will enable the church to assist God's people to live. Frames of meaning viewed with a tragic vision will enable humans to affirm life as worthwhile in the midst of anguish caused by loss, pain, or catastrophe—and even a pandemic.² This study concludes with a word of hope and assurance, based on the historical and lived experience of people of the African American church who have lived the tragic vision, suggesting, "Everything is gonna be alright."

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WHICH PANDEMIC?

Which pandemic are we talking about? As noted in a recent article by Rosenblatt and Wallace, although all families may struggle during the pandemic with the loss of family routines, the challenges of juggling work, childcare and child education, and the issues of getting older children a quality education and a proper orientation in terms of moving into a world of jobs and earning, COVID-19 combined with racism makes these even greater for Black Americans.³

African Americans have experienced pandemic and health crisis before. During the 1918 influenza pandemic, hospitals either denied African Americans admission or located them in segregated wards, often in unheated attics or damp basements. These circumstances, however, became opportunities, even if it was out of necessity. For example, African Americans created medical institutes and organizations for their own health professionals. African American communities, including churches, established self-help activities to improve health status. The

² Matthew V. Johnson, *The Tragic Vision of African American Religion*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 13.

³ Paul C. Rosenblatt and Beverly R. Wallace, "Impact of COVID-19 on Black America" (forthcoming).

closing of Black churches throughout the country forced the emergence of alternative forms of worship, including open-air worship, even then.

Today, the experiences of multiple pandemics arise anew. The COVID-19 pandemic requires social distancing, including the closing of face-to-face church services and other religious events, the movement of schools to distance education, the blocking or great restriction on visits to family members in eldercare, the pulling back from family members (particularly elders). The reduction or elimination of gatherings of family and friends, with the loss of physical touch, are, in part, a loss of support in a difficult time in a difficult society. This all is made even more difficult by racism.⁴

Wealth disparity is another factor. Even when families are not low-income, there are problematic disparities in the wealth needed to sustain families. Even those of middle-income status cannot afford the loss of income by staying home while ill. Every night on the news we see the stark disclosure of unequal economic realities, exposing differences between the haves and the have-nots.

The cost in lives and livelihoods; the mundane, extreme environmental stress of being Black in America; the rise of white supremacy and racism—it all adds to this grief. It makes losing important people especially difficult during this pandemic, because it includes the loss of their support and strength in dealing with racism.⁵ So, what is the role of the church?

WHICH CHURCH?

The church has a particular role to play in the time of this pandemic. Religion and myth attempt to define for us who and what we are. During a crisis, the church may be called upon to help facilitate acceptance and summon the necessary resolve to chaotic and sometime untenable situations.⁶ Chaos is the dissolution and disintegration of the abiding sense of stability and order. The church can function as a barrier against chaos. Religion, and by extension the church, can provide meaningful context and structure for life. However, when talking about the church in the time of a pandemic, to which church are we referring?

This 2020 pandemic is new, but African Americans and other people of color have experienced pandemics before and survived; we are attempting now to survive this current one. But the fact that we are here is evidence that our forebears lived through such chaotic times and survived. For African Americans, it has been the Black Church that historically assisted in our survival, even when facing the possibility of nonexistence.

⁴ Rosenblatt and Wallace, “Impact of COVID-19 on Black America.”

⁵ J. D. Aten, “Consequences of COVID-19 in African American Communities: An Interview with Dr. Rodlescia Sneed on Her Research in Flint, Michigan,” *Psychology Today*, October 2, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/4fu4fdcb>.

⁶ Johnson, *Tragic Vision*, 16.

The Black Church is a unique expression of the church experience, developed in response to racial tension and prejudice.⁷ There is not space here to describe fully the Black Church experience, but works by Gayraud Wilmore, Manning Marble, C. Eric Lincoln, Lawrence Mamiya, William Pinn, and others do a good job describing the Black Church. There are, however, some pertinent aspects of the Black Church that need to be understood.

It is important to understand one aspect of the Black Church, namely its pluralism and plurality. For example, Gayraud Wilmore describes the Black Church as the most conservative and the most radical institution at the same time. Lincoln and Mamiya describe in detail a dialectical model of understanding the Black Church. Dialectical tensions, such as that between the Black Church's priestly and prophetic functions in engagement, go far in understanding the diversity within what is known as the Black Church. Interestingly, Manning Marble calls the Black Church the "ambiguous Black Church." C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya also highlight the plight and the potential of the Black Church, and the need for freedom for the Black Church in order that Black people's potential and humanity can be realized.⁸

But as Cornel West suggests, the African American experience is often tragic, a Good Friday state of existence.⁹ Mourning, loss, longing, and desire are all part of the African American religious experience. But this experience embraces what is called Black sacred cosmos or the religious worldview, which envisions the whole world as sacred. Forged out of their conversations or perhaps their remembrances of their experience with the Holy during slavery and its aftermath, they work out their pained existence.¹⁰ Polyvalent significance of African American religious experience, as suggested by Matthew Johnson, helps to make meaning of their pain.

Johnson calls this "the tragic vision." This tragic vision is a creative response to the human encounter with the abyss. The African American experience is an encounter with and the experience of abyss—seeing the potential of being viewed as a non-being, not human, death. Johnson suggests that the tragic is ontological and fundamental to *all* human experiences, not just African American ones. But because of the historical experience of African Americans, the vision of facing death and non-being, of facing the abyss, Johnson reminds us, is real.

The tragic vision is a consequence of the encounter with the non-being—the threat of meaninglessness for the human subject. Yet the tragic vision is life-affirming and, at the same time, the facilitator of the recognition *and* the embrace of the fundamental truth of life. But as Johnson suggests, it drives home the truth

⁷ Anthony B. Pinn, *The African American Religious Experience in America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006), ix.

⁸ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 16.

⁹ Cornel West, *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

¹⁰ Lincoln and Mamiya, 2.

of the utter aloneness and vulnerability of being abandoned, of “I know not what,” and of the human reliance on God.¹¹ When encountering the tragic vision, a heavy fog has been lifted.

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African American religiosity is a response to and a reflection of the reality of this life and death. The gospel provided a resource for its expression and in turn was transfigured into something beautiful and powerful and expressive of the nature of existence. The African American church experience includes adaptation to prevailing conditions that helped to facilitate what Johnson concludes to be “psychic survival.” It is an African American Christian consciousness that rendered the suffering bearable—not to be endured, but real. It is human interaction with reality.

RESHAPING THE CHURCH AS THE RESULT OF THE PANDEMIC

Pastors and leaders in churches and in the community are called into the reality and messiness of experiences in the world where formulaic constructions too often fail. This was the calling even before the pandemic. Pastoral leaders and churches could help members acknowledge *the tragic vision*—their grief and understanding that something has been lost, and help them begin to acknowledge the psychological pain of the loss. God’s people must then adjust to an environment in which that aspect of who you thought you were is missing, invest in new relationships, develop a new sense of identity that includes experiences of the loss, and reevaluate the relationship to what was lost. This pandemic offers a unique opportunity for the church to provide this care.

During this pandemic there is a need for adaptation in an inherently ambiguous environment fraught with uncertainty and pain. But as Johnson suggests, it is *the tragic vision* that destabilizes the tragic event, problematizing it to become transformative, and positions the community to live the ambiguity. The “existential genius” of the formation of the Black Church facilitated life and ambiguity, fragmentation and pain, which embrace truths without the lapse into denial. This tension creates space for both sanity and hope.¹² All churches that embrace the reality of a tragic vision, especially during a time of pandemic, can facilitate care for God’s people even in the midst of this current reality.

¹¹ Johnson, *Tragic Vision*, 2, 25.

¹² Johnson, *Tragic Vision*.

Again, the tragic vision is the creative response to this human encounter with the possibility of non-being.¹³ In the experience of COVID-19 there is uncertainty of life, and life itself. In embracing *the tragic vision*, one is receptive to ambiguity, tolerant, and healthier, and one creates the opportunity to engage in a more creative spiritual life—a necessary presupposition of an authentically democratic culture and society, as Johnson suggests. This authentic way of existing can be a model for shaping the church anew. Living the ambiguity, embracing tolerance, creative spirituality, ritual and sacred spaces, and approaching the *Mysterium* will be briefly explored as ways the church can be reshaped to facilitate life in the midst of this pandemic.

LIVING THE AMBIGUITY

The need for meaning is a human desire. Meaning organizes a person's reality and redefines one's place in the world. Human beings have a need to fit life and reality into categories that render their experience meaningful and secure. The loss of certainty creates anxiety. Religion helps with this. The church can do so, too.

The church should be the place where people can explore the anxieties of the unknown, being assured with hope of the resurrecting God. It should also be a place that assists people's grieving, knowing that even Jesus wept. Grief research notes, however, that lack of external encouragement in grieving impairs the grief process. How might the church be that place of support that assists people in embracing the life cycle that includes uncertainty?

Humans' need for control and intolerance for pain are other impediments to the human experience of grief and loss. This is extremely difficult when the experiences, such as in the time of this pandemic, are ambiguous. *Ambiguous* is defined as "vague, unspecified, and uncertain in meaning." Pauline Boss in her work on ambiguous loss suggests that those who are intolerant of pain have the most difficulties with ambiguity. Johnson, quoting the African American theologian Theophus Smith, says that the African American church is where ambiguity is taken for granted and even promoted, as the church's theological stance is characterized by contradictions and ambiguity.¹⁴ I have also suggested elsewhere that African Americans have always lived with ambiguity.¹⁵ If we are truly honest, we all live with ambiguity but are afraid to acknowledge this.

Ambiguous loss theory suggests that persons not comfortable with ambiguity experience confused perceptions, hopelessness, depression, passivity, and ambivalence. People who appropriate ambiguity have the ability to live with uncertainty and unspecified meaning. The theory also suggests that persons whose principal

¹³ Johnson, *Tragic Vision*, 21.

¹⁴ Johnson, 28.

¹⁵ Beverly Wallace, "Absence and Presence—Living the Mystery: Conceptualizing a Model of Care for African American Women Using the Theory of Ambiguous Loss" (forthcoming).

worldview does not embrace mastery and control are able to live with such uncertainty. Faith and spirituality assist them in living with the unknown.

During the current COVID-19 pandemic, the ambiguous nature of whether and how African Americans and other communities of color will live and/or die is transparently real. Who will contract this disease and who will not? Living with the stress of this not-knowing is apparent. What communities of color *do* know is that they are being impacted more than any other group of people in terms of contracting this deadly disease.¹⁶ Living the ambiguity might be something that churches can stress in order to ease the tension and embrace the tragic vision.

EMBRACING TOLERANCE

As noted, the African American church's theological stance is characterized by contradictions and ambiguity. But this characteristic of the Black Church could also be characterized as tolerance. The African American church has a breadth of acceptance for the wounds and difficulties of others, enabling them to absorb community-destroying tensions without recourse to bad-faith or self-deceptive defensive strategies, such as denial or rationalization.¹⁷ Being tolerant, wearing masks, and caring for the other should be things that the church promotes.

TRAGIC WISDOM

Tragic vision leads to tragic wisdom; wisdom rises from what Johnson calls "the ruins of woe." An encounter with the abyss that this pandemic affords us enables new understanding about life, about reality, if one chooses to embrace it. Life at its rootedness allows us to experience the abyss without denying reality. Such an encounter will facilitate an authentic encounter with life, especially at the point where humans tend to move into denial in order to stave off spiritual dissonance, psychic pain, painful alienation, or complete breakdown.¹⁸ This can be seen regarding some of the limitations of the COVID-19 experience.

The power of the tragic vision leads to tragic wisdom. This power resides in its capacity to sustain sanity and meaningfulness and the value of experience while at the same time preserving a kind of what Johnson calls "radical objectivity," or "morally courageous realism."¹⁹ This is a delicate and dynamic tension. But it is this tragic wisdom that comes to life with the creative and always immense tension of life's polarity. Engaging the abyss with the tragic vision that leads to wisdom is something that this pandemic offers.

¹⁶ Rosenblatt and Wallace, "Impact of COVID-19 on Black America."

¹⁷ Johnson, *Tragic Vision*, 135.

¹⁸ Johnson, *Tragic Vision*, 25.

¹⁹ Johnson, *Tragic Vision*, 26.

CREATIVE SPIRITUALITY

The goal of care within the church and the community is to bring about union with God. The goal is to assist God's people with their relationship with God. To walk with people to explore more fully their relationship with God and deepen their spirituality is paramount during this pandemic. But this pandemic also offers the church the opportunity to engage in creative religiosity and spirituality.

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Not only has the pandemic caused the church to move out of its edifices but it has also created the necessity of being even more creative. Worshipping outside of church walls is not new to African Americans. Historically, because African Americans were not allowed in some church edifices, nor allowed to worship without the oversight of those who bought and sold them, Black folks developed their own church. Using their creative spirituality, the African American people created hush harbors. Hush harbors were secret places where enslaved Black people created church for themselves, in the woods and in spaces outside of what some would consider church.

Worshipping outside church buildings in the time of this current pandemic is, again, not new. During this pandemic, what African American churches have done was to create what are being called "digital hush harbors." Some of these digital hush harbors existed even before the pandemic, but it has increased their prevalence out of necessity. These digital hush harbors, crafted and created online, profess a Black hermeneutic of survival. Quoting Mia Lowheim, Melva Sampson suggests that digital media offers new means of constructing religious identity.²⁰

Within the African American community, these churches in virtual spaces offer rituals for the collective healing of a marginalized community and have been born full of promise and purpose. As Dickerson suggests, these digital hush harbors are politically, theologically, and discursively liberative at their core.²¹

Using the example of one digital hush harbor, "Pink Robe Chronicles," Dickerson says this digital congregation gives Black women and men care utilizing a radically redemptive ethic. This particular sacred space, although virtual in nature, centers faith and spirituality utilizing the womanist tenets of redemptive

²⁰ Melva Sampson, "Going Live: The Making of Digital Griots and Cyber Assemblies," *Practical Matters*, October 16, 2019, <http://practicalmattersjournal.org/2019/10/16>.

²¹ Dianna W. Dickerson, "'Don't Get Weary': Using a Womanist Rhetorical Imaginary to Curate the Beloved Community in Times of Rhetorical Emergency," *Journal of Communication and Religion*, 2020, <https://www.academia.edu/44789570>.

self-love, critical engagement, radical subjectivity, and traditional communalism. In this sacred space, the pastor gives members “self-permission” to feel emotions, encouraging the virtual congregation not to grow weary even in the spirit of the horror.

Such ways of doing church breathe life and imagination, and renegotiate the boundaries of the church for the African American community. These new church forms are reparative and disruptive, as Sampson writes, providing care, tending to disregarded people, seeing these new ways of being church as salvific. Created in the midst of the pandemic, virtual church spaces such as these are examples that can be used by all churches in the midst of this ambiguous time.

RITUALS AND SACRED SPACE

When we attend church for worship, our soul is longing for something. A question to ponder is, for what is our soul longing? How might the church, in new ways and even amid the pandemic, assist individuals, families, congregations, and communities to begin to articulate that longing and find new meaning? Rituals are necessary—or perhaps paying special, new attention to rituals.

Rituals are called for because our soul communicates things that are translated as a *need*, a *want*, or an *absence*. Rituals are necessary so that the church may grieve, and ritual spaces are necessary in which the soul in concert with the Spirit can make meaningful and healthy choices. Ritual experiences facilitate life. They help to contain and even quiet the destructive forces that rearrange the will and destroy the capacity of God’s people to envision an alternative world.

It is hard to create a ritual space without calling the Spirit, which is our channel through which every gap in life can be filled. Malidoma Somé, in *The Healing Wisdom of Africa* writes:

The person hears the pain, the suffering as creative action connecting that person with his or her highest self, which prescribes an alternative to spiritual death.²²

Know that the spirit realm will not take care of the pain without our conscious participation. Therefore, our collaboration makes us central to the act. We have to be conscious about what we are engaging in when we enter into and create the ritual space. Imagination and religion, specifically the church, can be tools to bring to life a previously unseen reality.

The church therefore has an opportunity during COVID-19 to create or recreate ritual spaces. In the grief and in the loss of security, the pain teaches us something. Perhaps it is a call to rebirth, opening up something in the hearts and spirits that have been forgotten or that the communities of faith could barely remember. Perhaps it is that the Spirit during this pandemic is calling the church.

²² Malidoma Patrice Somé, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose through Nature, Ritual, and Community* (New York: J.P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1999), ##.

APPROACHING THE *MYSTERIUM*

There was a time, prior to the time we claim to know. How we see the world is often viewed as though we know, and know with certainty. The truth is we do not know. *Autopoiesis* is a Greek word that refers to a system capable of reproducing and maintaining itself by creating itself. Humans do not have that power. Know too that what is seen with the eyes does not represent the world outside the living organism but rather what we fabricate as an image of the world through the internal/neurological processing of information. But what about the ambiguity of life? Again, what we think we know might not be. It is mystery.

We live in a world where things happen because of natural forces and for reasons that have nothing to do with humanity.²³ Sometimes these events are complicated by the historical realities of the unjust treatment of God's people. Sometimes events are tragic. The tragic religious experiences encourage God's people to face the truth of the mystery. The church has always been called to hold the *mystery*. Approaching the Holy, the *mysterium*, beyond our apprehension and comprehension, we should recoil in wonder. Embracing the uncertainty and mystery calls us to rely on God.

The songstress Diane Reeves notes in her song "Testify" that God and time are synonymous. In time, God reveals all things.²⁴ The lyrics suggest that in time, what is unknown will be revealed. She goes on to say that we are to "be still, stand in love, and pay attention." Perhaps this is wisdom for the church. Letting go of certainty will make room for God's people and God's church to trust God and stand in love and pay attention, even in the unknowing. Observing the reality, we recognize our shared pain and shared reality. Paying attention and embracing a tragic vision with the recognition of the abyss, we might become better attuned to the Spirit's voice, better able to see and hear what the Spirit is doing and saying. Paying attention, we might see the wounds experienced by God's people and stand in love by engaging in a creative spiritual process that this present world desperately needs. Perhaps the change would be to engage in reconceptualization of a reality that started long ago with an unrecognized, or perhaps forgotten, mystical trajectory.

Can the church live with the ambiguity of living during this current pandemic? Can God's people live with a tragic vision in the trauma of this present time moving toward the unique but health-yielding dynamics of the *tragic vision*? Perhaps this time might be an opportunity to explore more fully one's relationship with God, to listen with open ears and to hear what God wants and demands of God's creation. Such imaginative speculation would drive us to dream, as Kenyatta Gilbert suggests, of a new yet unsettled future.²⁵ African Americans have always lived with all of what might be considered ambiguity, but have also had models

²³ Somé, *Healing Wisdom of Africa*, 30.

²⁴ Diane Reeves, "Testify," *Bridges* (1999). Lyrics at <https://genius.com/Dianne-reeves-testify-lyrics>.

²⁵ Kenyatta Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011).

of understanding and care that have worked to mitigate times and circumstances of uncertainty.²⁶ Paying attention to the lived experiences of African Americans could refine and clarify the continued healing work necessary to mitigate ambiguous existence during this pandemic and in this oppressive society, and perhaps provide a learning opportunity for all. The African American Christian church-consciousness bored out with the tragic vision potentially marks the most spiritually mature and authentic expression of the Christian faith. It is a full theological articulation of the Christian faith, one that could be a blessing to the whole church. With a hope-filled affirmation, we know that everything is going to be alright. ☩

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²⁶ Wallace, "Absence and Presence."