

Black Religion / Womanist Thought / Social Justice



# The Tragic Vision of African American Religion

Matthew V. Johnson

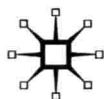


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*Matthew V. Johnson*



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## Acknowledgments

Since this is my first major effort to articulate some of my ideas in book format, I would like to take the liberty of giving some long overdue expressions of gratitude. The ideas in this book began to take shape early in my graduate career at the University of Chicago. They were a serious deviation from the prevailing norm for reflecting on African American religious phenomena and experience at the time. Black theologians showed little interest in phenomenological or philosophical analysis of African American religious experience. Those few individuals doing phenomenological and philosophical analysis of African American religious experience showed little interest in the theological implications of their insights. My intellectual pursuits fell somewhere between the two, a virtual no-man's land in the established academy. Yet, I persisted. I did so only with the encouragement of multiple people, who in the words of Langdon Gilkey, thought I was "on to something." Although he is now deceased, I owe him an immeasurable debt of gratitude for a right word placed at the right time. The impact of his encouragement continues to resonate throughout my intellectual pursuits.

David Tracy, by far, occupies the most prominent place in my sense of gratitude for my formation. It was David who first recognized the emergent pattern in my intellectual pursuits and helped me give them what coherence I could at the time, given so little contemporary work of a similar nature in the field. He has continued to encourage me to put my ideas in print. While the present effort is rather schematic, the encouragement I received from him will serve me well as I continue to develop my ideas. There were no African Americans on the permanent faculty during the most of my career at the University of Chicago Divinity School, but he served me well as both adviser and friend. I don't know that I could have found a more sympathetic ear or model of intellectual courage and devotion to the life of the mind. Likewise,

Donald Browning has sustained a sympathetic interest in my intellectual development far beyond my graduate years. He strongly encouraged me to persist in seeking an avenue of publication.

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To my wife of almost twenty-eight years, I owe more than a debt of gratitude. I owe twenty-eight years or more of life. I have lived between two worlds for most of my career, my body and soul lodged solidly in the church, but my mind firmly planted in the academy amid its questions and concerns. It was my wife, Arnetta, my children—Muriel, Nile, Selah, Matthew Jr., and Danube—and more recently, my son-in-law Jamil Drake, who kept me from being torn asunder. They listened to me wrestle endlessly with the challenges of the African American church, people, and culture. They've watched me agonize over the years and strained to understand my burden. It was Arnetta's voice, calm and soothing, that kept the floods at bay. Thank you.

Mama (Ethel Johnson), my paternal grandmother, and my mother (Muriel K. Johnson) are gone now. They did not live to see the publication of this book, which is the distillation of experiences pressed through their lives like a sieve until they ran over mine with the oil of strength, insight, and joy. Yet they are here in every hymn or gospel I hear sung at the hour of worship and each time I stand to preach or lecture. Papa (Eddie Johnson), my paternal grandfather, is gone too, but lives on in whatever native goodness or noble aspiration I possess, in the protective and loving care I extend to my offspring and my own grandchildren. Daddy is thankfully still with us. I thank him for his fierce courage, fearlessness, and strength, his unapologetic and uncompromised manhood, without which I may have surrendered. My sister Tracy, who I really believe thought me an oracle, was killed in a car accident. She thought everything I ever wrote was worthy of publication. I am so sorry she is not with me now. However I yet enjoy the love and support of my eldest sister Donna and for that, I am thankful. My brother, Travis "Shane" Johnson, will live on in me forever. Did he ever celebrate the pride and joy of life! Yet no one I know, or have known since his untimely death, ever knew more of its pain. He taught me more about the tragic than either Aristotle or Storm.

Having offered these expressions of gratitude, I must of course take full responsibility for whatever shortcomings this effort may prove to have in the eyes of others. May the ancestors forgive me for any errors I might have made.

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## Introduction

### “Yet Do I Marvel!”

*Yet do I marvel at this curious thing;  
To make a poet black, and bid him sing!*

Countee Cullen

This book grew out of a long and sustained engagement with the African American journey through the Christian faith. While the insights garnered along this path far exceed what can be manageably shared in any one book, I think the present work shares some of the most basic. This engagement was, and continues to be, no less experiential than academic. I was born into and bred in the traditional faith of my African American mothers and fathers. I have been in the ministry since the ripe old age of seventeen, and the church has been the source of some of my greatest joys, deepest angst, and profoundest frustrations. Yet there is no aspect of my life—intellectual, social, political, or personal—that has not been processed through my faith and amid my ongoing struggle to come to terms with its strengths, deficits, continuities, failures, and fragmentation. This particular book, however, is a labor of love, driven and motivated by what may be the casual passing of one of the most glorious and disclosive testimonies to the power of the human spirit at life's limits, where, I believe, its relation to the divine is worked out amid the storms that rage at our extremities.

My pastoral journey, now in excess of twenty-five years, and my intellectual struggle and academic pilgrimage have run parallel through my entire adult life. To call the two trajectories simply parallel, however, is somewhat misleading. They indeed provide the



warp and the woof, the very loom on which the fabric of my existence is spun, a life that has always been and shall remain essentially a spiritual journey. My intellectual explorations and the problems I brought to my research were, in part, generated by my experiences in the church, and my intellectual pursuits have nourished, challenged, and often taxed my experience of the Christian faith. Through it all, I have struggled to maintain a creative tension. Many of my intellectual concerns and curiosities may seem to exceed those traditionally accepted as relevant to contextual religious matters. However, for me, it all comes to bear. The hard-and-fast divisions that roughly correspond to "appropriate" academic disciplines drawn by many in the field of religion, particularly African American religion, have always struck me as artificially, narrowly, and, in the end, destructively ideological, even refractory.

Throughout my graduate and postgraduate experience I focused on philosophical theology. It offered the methodological space for my varied research interests and my interdisciplinary intellectual orientation. I was attracted to the kinds of questions raised and problems posed in the discipline and the methods employed in pursuit of answers and solutions. The problem of evil in its classical formulation was never far from my mind, nor was the question, What is the relation of God to human anguish? I focused on the genteel metaphysical tradition, particularly its personalist and process orientations. Both schools sought the philosophical version of the "theory of everything" and remained concerned with the challenges and opportunities presented by modern science as they sought a relatively adequate solution to the "riddle of the Universe."

My preoccupation with human suffering, on the other hand, fueled a deep and abiding interest in psychoanalysis and its various schools of thought. I think psychoanalysis has a lot to say about the nature of human experience, which remained very much at the center of personalist metaphysical preoccupations. The confluence of these interests suggested to me another formulation of the problem of evil as it is classically formulated, or the problem of excessive suffering and pain, as I prefer to call it. Consequently, I formulated the question with a different philosophical nuance. "What kind of God or vision of ultimate reality does the nature of human experience, suffering, and the religious response to it imply?"

Due to my immersion in process thought (Alfred North Whitehead/and Charles Hartshorne) and personalism (Edgar Sheffield Brightman and Peter A. Bertocci), Langdon Gilkey, my

PhD co-advisor, suggested I drop one or the other side of the dyad, because in his words, if I did not, I "wasn't likely to learn a damn thing" from my dissertation research. By then my focus had clearly become the tragic themes in those philosophical systems' views of both penultimate and ultimate reality and their theological offshoots and implications. Gilkey suggested I pick up Nicolai Berdyaev, for whom the tragic was a central motif, and his use of literary sources for religiously inspired philosophical reflection. This contrasted nicely with the other thinkers' emphasis on the findings of science for the purposes of philosophical theological reflection and deepened and enriched the element of human experience. It was love at first read. It was suggested by David Tracy, my PhD co-advisor, that it was my own religious tradition that made these questions particularly poignant for me. I was struck by the immediate gravitas of the obvious that drew the full weight of the implicit into an explicit orbit. Suddenly, my intellectual/spiritual Du Boisian "two-ness" collapsed into a philosophical, theological, and existential "oneness" that I have been working to articulate ever since. My engagement with the philosophical questions and my struggle with various formulations, with notions of divinity, and with abstract discussions on human nature and subjectivity are a clear case of "thinking in the dark." Moreover, discomfort with the treatment of religious folk experience and the methodological orientation to African American religious experience in the various versions of black theology which, even in its more contemporary forms, consists more of a going back than a going deep, left me out at sea.<sup>1</sup>

My preoccupation with the tragic was due in part to the incitement of a particularly provocative footnote in Cornel West's *Prophesy Deliverance*<sup>2</sup> that referred to African American experience as a sort of tragic, Good Friday state of existence. This became something of an intellectual mantra for me because of its deep resonance with something profoundly intuitive about my experience of the Christian faith within the framework of my tradition. It resonated with the way I experienced worship in the African American tradition, evoked the modes of experiencing life and faith in my community, and reflected the descriptions I encountered in my research on the historical nature of African American religious experience and expression as codified in cultural forms. These cultural forms ranged from the spiritual and traditional gospel, through the blues to the folk preaching on which I was spiritually bred—the moaning, the shouting, the weeping, and the wailing and outbursts of paradoxical joy as men and

women shrieked and smiled through tear-stained eyes—even on to modern R and B.

While working through this material I became interested in the concepts of mourning, loss, longing, and desire as articulated in psychoanalytic thought and psychologies of meaning as categories to help get at the substance of African American religious experience and its polyvalent significations. It wasn't long before I came to a particularly provocative intellectual and existential intersection. The hymns I heard raised throughout the church during worship and revivals with a particular poignancy in places such as Chicago and South Carolina, the “folk” preaching, which for me *was* preaching, the weekly negotiation and working out of our pained existence through the unique liturgical style of the African American Church, all seemed to indicate a spirituality profoundly at variance with the traditional theological categories and categorical abstractions imposed on the experience, often by its own practitioners. Even the partial emergence of Liberation theology in some churches with seminary-educated pastors still did not do justice to the rich, polyvalent signification of African American religious experience. This suggested the necessity of a phenomenological orientation grounded in a philosophical hermeneutical approach. This book, then, is an examination of African Americans' experience of the Christian faith as they struggled to manufacture meaning out of the raw material of their pain and what their experience may suggest about the nature of ultimate reality as conceived within the framework of a transfigured Christian faith.

It is my position that Africans and their biological, and no less spiritual and cultural, progeny in the New World, African Americans effectuated nothing less than a spiritual transvaluation of the Christian faith they were introduced to in the New World. This occurred as they availed themselves of the faith in the context of their marginalized existence. This “state of being” entailed, among other things, a distinctive mass experience of loss and longing, of marginalization, chronic mourning, and pain. All of this was constitutive of a traumatic field that provided the existential context for the emergence of African American religious experience. African Americans found a powerful tool of expression, as well as a tool of spiritual and cultural adaptation, in the resources of a biblical faith. Their version of biblical faith was shaped by a dialectical interaction between key biblical themes, paradigmatic figures, events and situations, and their circumstances. While the adoption of some of the themes and so forth were obviously, at the very least, partly conscious, they did

not set out self-consciously to create an alternative version of the faith. I think it safe to say that they believed that the expression of the faith as they created and experienced it was the *legitimate* one. However, the transvaluation went a lot deeper than the theological position that the God of the Bible was the God of material or political liberation.

The transvaluation of the Gospel took place at other levels and calls for some subtle yet fundamental adjustments to be made at the level of self-conscious reflection on the meaning of the faith and its role in human spirituality, which is the domain of theology proper. It is my further conviction that any attempt to articulate a theology that purports to be grounded in African American religious experience in any meaningful sense must, of course, begin with reflection on the experience of the community of faith. Different communities, for different reasons, have expressed themselves religiously in various ways that correspond to their deepest needs and presuppositions about reality. Granted, when it comes to religion, these presuppositions are supplied by the faith itself; but given the broad birth of context and the nature of human interaction with reality, as well as the nature of the hermeneutical process, there will always be variations on key themes and a plethora of alternative visions that are grounded in the inherent polysemy of texts and contexts. While I do not believe in an absolute or essentialist interpretation of the faith, I do believe in more relatively adequate renderings or expressions of its meaning(s) and that the different renderings are open to examination and evaluation.

There are at least two levels at which this criterion of relative adequacy should operate in a project such as this. First, there is the issue of whether or not the explication of the faith of a group is accurate with relevance to its particularity. One must examine a particular expression with tools of inquiry appropriate to the subject matter to get at the experience itself. One must labor to uncover or lay bare the dynamics that constitute the experience in order to give it discursive articulation. Second, once one has uncovered the formative dynamics of the experience and given articulation to the living faith, then one may proceed to examine and evaluate the theological vision in light of normative concerns. There is, of course, a whole set of sticky methodological issues concerning normativity given the always already historical nature of the faith taken as a whole; but these difficulties must never be an excuse to shrink from the task of clarifying what it means to be *Christian*, what it is to be *Christian*, and more particularly in this case, what it means to be an African American Christian.

Although this text is by no means exhaustive (nor is it intended to be) and there is much more room for expansion and clarification, it aims at no less than providing a new foundation for practicing theology in an African American key, and given its link to the larger and ongoing tradition of Christianity, it is a challenge to reconsider some central issues of the faith taken as a whole. The condition of the modern world, or postmodern world if you choose, has opened up new windows of opportunity for viewing the faith. The challenge thus posed must be taken up by the Christian tradition if it is to preserve any sense of integrity or relevance and remain a viable option to future generations. The faith can no longer be held hostage to the imperialistic pretensions and chauvinism of the European and European American, whether these pretensions are militaristic, economic, or cultural. Either the Christian faith is a faith of, and open to, all peoples or it is a farce, an ideology, with no legitimate status in the academy or the church.

In chapter 1, I attempt to articulate the elements of the tragic experience. While defining the tragic in any exhaustive sense may be as difficult as defining religion, there are some fundamental dynamics that help us to more effectively identify it, particularly as it manifests itself in African American religious experience. Hopefully, the meaning of the tragic will continue to unfold and strengthen as the argument develops throughout the text in a mutually correlative mingling of other sources with the substance of the experience itself. These elements combine in such a way as to yield a distinctly tragic view and experience of the universe. I want to make the argument that the tragic is ontological. It is fundamental to human experience. It may not always be recognized as such, for this painful and deeply disturbing view of human existence and ultimately reality can be and is often evaded through foreclosure, that is, the imposition of artificial closure on the fundamental uncertainty of reality through closed belief systems.

The ontological claim also indicates that the tragic vision is logically prior to tragedy as a genre, with its earliest manifestations perhaps in religion. The tragic vision is a consequence of the encounter with nonbeing, which always carries with it the threat of meaninglessness for the human subject. I argue that the tragic vision is not the encounter with the threat of meaninglessness or the perception of the "horror" of existence *per se*, but rather the always already aesthetic representation of the encounter, which preserves its terrible truth in a transfigured vision of existence. Hence the tragic vision is life

affirming while at the same time the facilitator of the recognition and embrace of the darker, more fundamental truths of life.

The vision entails the fragmented nature of our historical existence and a concomitant affective response. The apprehension of the tragic vision is transformative and has the effect of predisposing the subject or subject community to be receptive of ambiguity, encouraging resistance to the foreclosure so characteristic of the fundamentalisms of our age. The tragic vision is a different mode of knowing. It provides a different epistemological posture. In this sense, a tragic Christianity encourages a healthier, tolerant, and more creative spiritual life, and the tragic vision is almost a necessary presupposition of an authentically democratic culture and society.

One of the most characteristic features of the tragic experience as articulated in chapter 1 is the *sparagmous*, or the rending to which humans are subject when the tragic is encountered. In chapter 2, entitled "Sparagmous, or The Crucified," I detail the tragic rending to which African Americans were subjected on multiple levels. In a word, I try to give articulation to the structured instantiation of the tragic world of the African American, thereby grounding the emergence of her uniquely tragic vision and response firmly in historical experience.

In chapter 2, the significance of trauma for understanding the emergence of African American religious experience takes on a particular poignancy. The nature, profundity, and ubiquity of the trauma and the persistence of the tragic-traumatic field would have sustained the *sparagmous* and the fragmentation and disturbed anything like subjective or intersubjective coherence. Once you factor in the nature and impact of trauma and the emergence of this field, especially one as thoroughgoing as that undergone by the Africans and African Americans, both during and after slavery, the equation changes dramatically. Mechal Sobel makes the most systematic and coherent case for the emergence of a coherent religious worldview based on the Western philosophical assumption that interlocking beliefs or sets of assumptions provide existential coherence, that is, (implicitly) *ideas*, in this case, in the form of beliefs, can provide the antidote for trauma-induced toxins. However, I take issue with Sobel's case for the emergence of a coherent African American Baptist or any other worldview based on African retentions, not because there weren't significant retentions<sup>3</sup> but because they could not and would not bring about the kind of existential wholeness or coherence implied. In addition, her thesis runs the risk of, perhaps inadvertently, numbing the

comprehension and appreciation of the dark, titanic forces tearing away at the African American subject and subjectivity, and consequently actually serves to provide a perception that mitigates the depth and uniqueness of African American anguish as they underwent their sparagmous or protracted crucifixion as a race. Yet her work is very insightful and remains exemplary partly because its systematic presentation and clarity of argument helps to bear out the difficulties and dangers of these approaches.

In chapter 3, "A Look beneath the *Souls of Black Folk*," I interrogate this classic text as disclosive of the "mood structure" of African American tragic experience. The articulation of the mood structure is disclosive of a key element in the tragic consciousness of African American religious experience. My intention is not to give an exhaustive account of Du Bois's views of religion, which of course developed over time. My intention is rather to articulate the vision of African American religion as it emerges in his efforts to frame African American life in lived experience. Clearly, *Souls* was written to reveal the inner dynamic of African American life in the midst of the struggle to come to terms with the harsh realities of their existence against the backdrop of their striving to preserve the viability of their humanity. I connect both the content and form to the dialectic of hope and resignation identified in chapter 2 as constitutive of the tragic vision and laud Du Bois's singular achievement in the melding of content and form to capture just that. It was an amazing literary achievement, which, in its peculiar form, preserved the sense of the experience in potentia, rendering the "movement" and feel of this singular lifeworld available with each new read and reader.

*Souls*, however, is not the only source of this mood structure, nor is it a theoretical articulation. I employ other sources and methods for the purposes of explanation and theoretical articulation, but it remains supremely illustrative as a literary and historical document. Sigmund Freud's classic phenomenological description of "Mourning and Melancholia" in his metapsychological papers, as well as other psychoanalytically informed modes of analysis, provide rich resources for looking at how the impulses of affirmation and resignation are essential parts and primary indices of the mourning process. Chronic mourning and irretrievable loss are key elements to understanding the emergent subjectivity and intersubjective universe shared by African Americans that provided an essential contextual component for the formation of African American religious experience as, in, and through the tragic. It provides significant theoretical grounding

for the palpable pain attested to throughout the literature on the texture of African American religious life. Moreover, it provides a theoretical grid beyond the Christian faith for an experience that is more fundamental and at least logically prior to its articulation through the available Christian categories. In chapter 4, "Deep Calls unto Deep: African American Christian Consciousness Pt. 1," I make several challenging claims about African American religion. I argue that it was a mode of adaptation to prevailing conditions that helped to facilitate psychic survival. That may not appear to be as challenging initially. That argument is not new. Yet it is where I situate the claim in the overall assessment of the nature of African American Christian consciousness as it took shape under the exigencies of the situation. It was the need for adaptation in an inherently ambiguous atmosphere fraught with uncertainty and pain that led to a unique fusion of European and African elements into the creation of the "bittersweet" tragic soul life of the African American. As such, it was both a response to and a reflection of their reality. The Christian Gospel, as it became available, provided a resource for its expression and in turn was transfigured into something uniquely beautiful and powerful and supremely expressive of the tragic nature of existence. The "existential genius" of the formation was that it facilitated life amid ambiguity, fragmentation, and pain, while embracing its terrible truths and without the lapse into denial. This tension created space for both sanity and hope.

Here I put the experience in conversation with Nietzsche's classic text on the tragic vision, *The Birth of Tragedy*, not incidentally initially subtitled *From the Birth of Music*. Nietzsche's text reads like a running commentary of the titanic struggle of African Americans expressed through their rich soul life in spite of it being a classic "European" text aimed at glorifying the achievements of the Greeks through their "creation" of the tragic vision. It is an inadvertent affirmation of the magisterial achievement of African Americans in their embrace and spiritual articulation of the tragic in the formation of African American Christian consciousness.

In chapter 5, "Life within the Veil: African American Christian Consciousness Pt. 2," I continue my analysis of the African American Christian consciousness and case for the tragic as it crystallizes in music and religious expression. I thicken the analysis by attempting to show how the mood structure was given concrete expression more particularly through the resources of the Christian faith—its symbols, paradigmatic stories, and images. I explore the effectual work of the



African American aesthetic in the emergence of the expression of the tragic and argue for its authenticity as a rich and unique contribution to the family of Christian faith expressions despite its tragic nature. With a deeper understanding of the tragic, I strain to show that its contribution transcends the confines of African American culture to speak meaningfully to a Christian faith struggling to remain viable in a meaningful way in what some call the postmodern era. I, however, see postmodernity as the emergence of the underside of modernity and the maturation of its implicit themes.

I use Du Bois's categories of the "essential" characteristics of the African American Church—the preacher, the music, and the frenzy—because they provide very basic and useful phenomenological categories for exploring the depth dimension of the "worship" experience. Du Bois has a lot more to say about the African American Church and American Christianity,<sup>4</sup> but this particular tripartite division of what he identified in *Souls* as the essential components are particularly useful for my purposes of getting at the manifestation of the tragic, its expression in the liminal space of worship, and the work of worship in transfiguring both the African American experience of suffering and the Christian faith. In a word, the choice was phenomenologically pragmatic. I place the explication of the experience in a deeper conversation with Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* because I think Du Bois's position in *Souls* bears perhaps a little more than a family resemblance to the spirit of Nietzsche's work. Although I cannot say with anything like scholarly certainty that Du Bois was directly influenced by a reading and subsequent application of the text, I think the time he spent in Germany as well as the subject matter, language, and poetic allusions he employed in the text suggest a strong connection.

Finally, in chapter 6, "From Strength to Strength: Toward a Theology of African American Christian Consciousness," I explore what the tragic vision of African American religious experience might have to say to us about a theology grounded in a deeper understanding of it. I am to some extent in agreement with Schleiermacher that theology should be the articulation of the church's consciousness, although I obviously get at that consciousness in a different way. One key difference would be the positing of a theological unconscious. I pointed out earlier my perception of a certain incommensurability of the theological abstractions imposed on African American religious experience and what the experience itself suggests. I don't think that the theological consciousness is transparent to itself any more than consciousness in general is. Asking what early church thinkers