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The Black Church: Pastor Margaret... Martyrdom or Ministry

James Baldwin's, *Amen Corner* was written in 1954 yet makes a bold statement that has contemporary application to the Black Church. This dramatic presentation provides a mirror for us all to examine the role that religion plays in our lives. The following essay provides a discussion of African American religiosity and will include a brief review of the historical framework of Afrocentric cosmology, as well as an investigation of the various ways that the Black church in America has provided a foundation for coping and empowerment (e.g., resistance, social justice, altruism, religious consolidation, commitment to beliefs, prayer and meditations, rituals, and maintaining of African aboriginal customs and traditions) as the setting for this play. Then, this essay will explore spiritual bypass and negative and positive religious coping practices and how they are relevant to the experience of the main character and spiritual leader, Pastor Margaret. Finally, the practical application of the themes will be explored for women pastors who are juggling the balancing act of service and self-care.

Historical Framework of the Black Church

Historically, organized religion in the United States has been highly segregated at the congregational level. Massive amounts of African Americans were initially converted to Christianity in Baptist and Methodist churches during slavery post chattel slavery, the Black Church became the primary preservationist of the African American helping tradition. These institutions have been foundational in the cultivation of liberation theology, which emphasizes social activism and spiritual accountability. The Black church was at the forefront during the Civil Rights Movement and advocated for the uprooting of many discriminatory laws and policies (Barber, 2011).

The Black Church is so unique that it must be defined as the set of religious institutions where the majority of the congregation and leaders identify themselves as African American. By definition, the Black church is not a specific church; in fact, it includes a multifaceted population of churches across America, which are distinct in origin, denomination, worship culture, spiritual expression, size, class, and doctrine. The Black church has been a valuable resource for the development of leadership, activism, empowerment, and community connection. The Black church was influenced by African worldviews, African traditional religions, and Islamic and Christian faiths, establishing a unique sense of spirituality. The Black church also provides a distinctive environment for the addressing of race-related issues directly. Yet, it's important to note that the Black church is not homogenous, but there are common traditions and cultural expressions that allow its collective definition as "the black church".

The Black church has preserved within its systems and practices many fragments of African tribal life. The Black church experience may often include spontaneity, excitement, the responsiveness of the congregation, rhythm, interest in the dramatic, personification of inanimate objects, love of magic, and psychic elements that transcend the human experience. Religiosity can be demonstrated in various ways among African Americans, including libation, singing, call and response (e.g., the congregation verbally responds the Pastor), reading sacred texts, meditation, prayer, community service, dancing, shouting, passing out in the spirit, testifying, glossolalia (e.g., speaking in unknown tongues), offering sacrifices, respect for elders, altar creation, nature veneration, and ancestral reverence. The *Amen Corner* is a common feature of the Black Church because of the call and response nature which comes out of African tradition. Further, the Black church has preserved and emphasized the core values of African culture, which include racial collectiveness, equality, freedom, and justice. The Black church has traditionally been the refuge from racial oppression and has served as a supportive environment

for sustaining psychological strength in the face of racial stress and civil unrest. In essence, the Black church has provided a platform for African Americans to have a confident and empathetic connection with the Divine and other humans. Accordingly, in times of racial stress, the Black church serves as a place of refuge from the external world of oppression by providing solace and education on coping with the hardships of life. This is the context of the congregants and leaders depicted in the *Amen Corner*. Thus, the Black church is both spiritual and religious by enhancing a sense of confidence despite a tumultuous past, encouraging optimism that racial injustice can be defeated, and assuring congregants that God aligns with the oppressed. For instance, the African American church has an active helping tradition that has played a crucial role in the advancement and survival of African American people. Many of these institutions have been instrumental in social justice movements and serve as “home-base,” meeting the educational, financial, social, and health needs of communities and individuals. The Black church is connected to all spheres of life because the concerns that impact that community are foundational to the mission of the church. In many ways, the Black church serves as the nucleus of the black community. The Black church system often functions like extended family in alignment with the core African value of harmony in relationships.

In summary, the Black Church has enhanced the life experiences of congregants with the following benefits: (a) connection to higher power; (b) interpersonal relationship with God, self, and others; and (c) liberation from oppression. The role of the Black Church is particularly essential given the time that *Amen Corner* was written. At this time, Black Church served as the hub of the African American community.

Religious Coping with Stressors

The experience of coping with life stressors fluctuates widely within the Black Church. Despite the diversity with the Black Church, based on factors such as denomination and

leadership style, there are common components of coping within the collective context of the church experience. Through the religious and spiritual experience, the participants in the Black Church have the opportunity to escape the present reality. So beyond the experience of prayer, reading scripture, and singing of the typical religious or spiritual experience, African American religious and spiritual participation may provide unique coping tools through various mechanisms, including: (a) a firm sense of social support; (b) specific coping resources when encountering stress; (c) positive sense of identity; (d) experiences of validation and esteem; and (e) love and hope (Ellison et al., 2008). A significant component of the religious and spiritual coping often included serving the physical, mental and spiritual needs of the larger community (Taylor et al., 2000). The sense of connected that is experienced in the Black Church supports spiritual well-being of participants by providing participants with an interpretive framework that creates the ability to make meaning of difficult life experiences and oppressive conditions. Thus, religion and spirituality may elicit euphoric mental states that may serve to mediate negative experiences, which is commonly characterized in Black protestant church as “catching the Spirit”.

When coping resources are exhausted due to ongoing traumas, it could result in ineffective coping mechanisms in response to other critical events. We see this in the life of Pastor Margaret as she struggles to maintain her faith in the midst of mourning the loss of her child. Her pain has caused her to dismiss her husband whom she blames for this tragic loss because of his secular musical career. In this case, her allegiance to her faith has created disharmony in her family and even results in her misleading her congregation about the reason that her husband has left. Thus, a positive religious coping response may be helpful in one situation and harmful in another. Pastor Margaret is experiencing an internal spiritual struggle which the church cannot remediate. Spiritual struggles are experiences of uncertainty and

contradictions between relationship with God and understanding of faith, and are connected to reduced levels of psychological well-being (Faigin, Pargament, & Abu-Raiya, 2014). This experience of confusion and detachment from spiritual identity can be very stressful for those experiencing it and those connected to them, particularly when the individual struggling is the leader with the Black Church. Thus, the impact of spiritual struggles can result in destructive behaviors and abrasive religious leadership. We see this as Pastor Margaret encourages one of her congregants, who come for prayer for her sick baby, to leave her husband. We witness Pastor Margaret engage in spiritual bypass.

Spiritual bypass is a religious/spiritual coping mechanism that may be employed in times of crises. Fox, Cashwell, and Picciotto (2017) defined spiritual bypass as a "defensive psychological posture cultivated by a tendency to privilege or exaggerate spiritual beliefs, emotions, or experiences over and against psychological needs creating a means of avoiding or bypassing difficult emotions or experience" (p. 275). In this experience, individuals may overspiritualize their appraisal of stressing events to prevent a psychological crisis. The practice of spiritual bypass may be particularly prevalent in the Black Church experience in response to ongoing pain and trauma. Pastor Margaret employs this coping mechanism by spending the majority of her time at church to avoid the pain of her relationship crisis and loss of her child. In this case, spiritual bypass may actually have prevented Pastor Margaret from attending to her personal needs for love. Instead she prioritized her calling and purpose and denied herself the love she truly desires. Thus, it seems that religiosity provided emotional support and spiritual empowerment that likely elevated Pastor Margaret's sense of self-worth and intrinsic mattering during a very difficult time.

Negative impacts of religious coping. Religious coping may have both positive and negative impacts on stress management. The negative coping strategies identified in this study in

response to race-related stress were self-blame, anger, and passive acceptance. In fact, church-based support can be associated with increased use of these negative coping strategies (Hayward & Krause, 2015). As such, the critical and judgmental tone that is sometimes prevalent in the Black Church experience might enhance the experience of negative coping experiences which may result in maladaptive behaviors. Also, negative religious coping, such as rigidities to dogmatic beliefs, discord between the lived experience and spiritual expectation, and frustration with the sacred that manifest through negative reappraisals of God and self, may be associated with immediate psychological distress but might result in transformation and evolution through the process of coping (Pargament et al., 2011). For example, Pastor Margaret experienced a profound intimacy with God but may feel abandoned by God when her child died. As a religious leader, the pressure for perfection could have prevented her from managing this pain in an authentic and transparent manner. As a result, her pain was channeled through denial of self and ministry to others.

Positive impacts of religious coping. Positive religious coping involves a transcendent, secure relationship with the sacred and optimism about the positive meaning of life. Positive coping for African Americans may include positive cognitive restructuring, stress management, problem-solving, and evaluating past and current threats (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2006). One of the most profound ways that African Americans have used religion to cope with race-related stress is through the development of liberation theologies from the black perspective (Calhoun-Brown, 1999; Noel & Johnson, 2005). Religiosity thus serves as a source of coping, as participants come to view God as being concerned and involved in their well-being. The church then becomes a safe space for both brokenness and healing to coexist, as congregants engage in testimonies and mutual support into sensitive matters of concern for the African American people. Due to this, the clergy holds a trusted space within the black community and are

frequently used as counselors when African Americans were experiencing family, social, and mental health issues.

However, James Baldwin makes a bold statement to the world but presenting a character who is neither who is trusted but unable to be authentic. Her pastoral calling requires that she mask both her femininity and her flaws in order to be deemed as “set apart”. As a result, the very calling that is supposed to give her life requires that she mask her imperfections to be accepted as a leader. In fact, this blind faith results in her loss of everything. Pastor Margaret makes a profound statement with this quote “ I just found out what it means to love the Lord”. Pastor Margaret learns that martyrdom was never required for ministry... only love was.

Similarly, Margaret’s 18-year old son David son faces an internal conflict as he wrestles with playing gospel music or secular music. This demonstrates the complex relationship that exists between a devout religious life and a more balanced life experience. Thus, the theme of inauthenticity for the sake of religion is repeated in David’s life as he follows the path of his estranged father Luke in his passion for jazz music. Traditionally, the Black church has controlled congregants by forcing them to choose between their love of God and others. However, true love allows us to have life abundantly and does not come out of place of control or religious domination, but from a place of surrender and transparency.

If we all come to experience the Black Church experience with this perspective we will have better balance in the way that we serve. This realization requires that we focus on family rather than being obsessed with church duties. Pastors and spiritual leaders will encourage parishioners to spend time with their families, take vacations and even miss church occasionally for quality time. Pastor Margaret’s story ushers us into a new way to “do” Black Church. A way that that allows us to be balanced, free and enjoy life. A Black Church that permits pastors to be human. I am reminded of 3 John 1:2 – “I wish above all things that you prosper and be in health, even as your soul prospers”. In essence, to live as whole beings and prosper means that laughing

at comic strips is not sin and may actually be the fullness of joy that is needed to make it through difficult times. May we all come to know God in this pure way.

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