

SundayReview | CONTRIBUTING OP-ED WRITER

Love and Terror in the Black Church

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AT the sprawling Friendship-West Baptist Church in Dallas one day last spring, I was met by five men with earpieces who escorted me to the pastor's office. As I prepared to preach that morning, a rolling phalanx of bodyguards shadowed my every move — when I greeted parishioners in the church's spacious narthex and even as I made a stop at the men's room. We walked from the church study into the 4,200-seat sanctuary, the security team whispering into their wrists.

I was entering a sanctuary, a sacred space to speak the word of the Lord and to lift the spirits of God's people. But I was also entering a black church, a site of particular power in this country, and a site of unspeakable terror.

That is what the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., became on Wednesday, when a young white male wielding a .45-caliber handgun unloaded his rage on nine souls, and that is why for the foreseeable future we will enter our houses of worship wary of violence.

Sites and spaces of black life have come under attack from racist forces before, but the black church is a unique target. It is not just where black people gather.

In too many other places, black self-worth is bludgeoned by bigotry or hijacked by self-hatred: that our culture is too dumb, our lives too worthless,

to warrant the effort to combat our enemies. The black sanctuary breathes in black humanity while the pulpit exhales unapologetic black love.

For decades, these sites of love have been magnets for hate.

In June 1958, a dynamite bomb rocked the Bethel Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., led by the Rev. Fred L. Shuttlesworth, a civil rights luminary. It would take more than two decades to bring the white supremacist perpetrator to justice. In 1963, four girls were killed when the 16th Street Baptist Church in the same city was bombed. As the drive to register black voters heated up during Freedom Summer in 1964, nearly three dozen black churches in Mississippi were bombed or burned.

The hatred of black sacred space didn't end in the 1960s. In July 1993, the F.B.I. uncovered a plot to bomb the First A.M.E. Church in Los Angeles, wipe out its congregation with machine guns, and then assassinate Rodney G. King in hopes of provoking a race war. In 1995, several men took sledgehammers to the pews and kitchens of black churches in Sumter County, Ala. A year later, the Inner City Church in Knoxville, Tenn., was bombarded with as many as 18 Molotov cocktails as its back door was splashed with racist epithets.

President Clinton appointed a task force in 1996 to investigate church fires, which by 1998 had singled the holy legacies of 225 black churches. In November, 2008, three white men set the Macedonia Church of God in Christ in Springfield, Mass., ablaze hours after Barack Obama was elected the nation's first black president.

And this wasn't the first time Emanuel A.M.E. Church, founded in 1816, faced racist violence. After Denmark Vesey, one of the church's founding members, plotted a slave rebellion but was foiled in the effort by a slave who betrayed his plans, Emanuel was burned to the ground by an angry white mob.

Despite this history, black churches are open and affirming of whoever seeks to join their ranks — unlike white churches, which have often rigidly divided along racial lines. The A.M.E. church was born when the founder Richard Allen spurned segregation in the white Methodist church and sought to worship God free of crippling prejudice. Early church leaders took seriously the scripture in Acts 17:26, which claims of God: “From one man he made all

the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth,” even as they embraced the admonition in Hebrews 13:2: “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.”

That is how it is possible that the doors of Emanuel were open to a young white participant who, after an hour of prayer, raised a weapon and took nine lives. Sylvia Johnson, a cousin of the murdered pastor, the Rev. Clementa C. Pinckney, said one of the survivors told her that the gunman argued: “I have to do it. You rape our women and you’re taking over our country, and you have to go.” The vortex of racist mythology spun into a plan of racial carnage.

The black church is a breeding ground for leaders and movements to quell the siege of white racist terror. From the start, black churches sought to amplify black grievance against racial injustice and to forge bonds with believers to resist oppression from the broader society. The church’s spiritual and political mission were always intertwined: to win the freedom of its people so that they could prove their devotion to God.

Some critics see black church leaders as curators of moral quiet in the face of withering assault. Religious people are accused of being passive in the wake of social injustice — of seeking heavenly reward rather than earthly action. In truth, the church at its best has nurtured theological and political resistance to white supremacy and the forces of black hatred. The church has supplied leaders and blueprints for emancipation — whether in the preaching of Frederick Douglass or Prathia Hall or in the heroic activism of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

But the church is also the place where black people are most vulnerable. Oddly, stereotypes of the sort the killer nursed are unmasked in such a setting. It is not murderous venom that courses in black veins but loving tolerance for the stranger, which is the central moral imperative of the Gospel.

I recall an instance of such generosity when I led a dialogue for a black men’s group at another Dallas church a few years ago. A white man entered the church and joined our group. We introduced ourselves, and welcomed him. He sought to counter my message of affirmation for gay men and

lesbians. After he had his say, I asked him if the tables were turned could such a thing occur: Could I, as a black man, show up at his white church and be received with open arms and permitted to publicly denounce the teachings of the white male lecturer? He at least had the honesty to admit it could never happen. Yet no black man asked him to leave our ranks.

Adherence to the moral imperative to treat strangers kindly may have led to the black parishioners' death in Charleston. The shooter exploited the very kindness and humanity he found before him. The black folk gathered in that church were the proof that he was wrong; they were the living, breathing antithesis of bigoted creeds cooked up in the racist fog he lived in. It is not their barbarity, but the moral beauty of black people that let an angel of death hide in their religious womb.

Its openness and magnanimity are what make the black church vital in the quest for black self-regard. When I stand in the house of God to deliver the word I embrace the redemption of black belief — a belief in self and community.

In a country where black death is normal, even fiendishly familiar, black love is an unavoidably political gesture. And that is what happens in our churches: The act of black love, which seems to make our houses of worship a target of hate. It is a political act in this culture that must remind the nation, once again, as hate and terror level our community, that black lives matter. Michael Eric Dyson is a professor of sociology at Georgetown, an ordained Baptist minister and a contributing opinion writer.

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