The black church is the real guardian of Christian America

By Benjamin J. Dueholm
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In years and decades to come, we'll remember the last two weeks. The Emanuel A.M.E. massacre, the sudden shift away from the Confederate flag, the Supreme Court's reaffirmation of the Affordable Care Act and its extension of same-sex marriage to every state. Last Friday there was an awesome funeral service for Clementa Pinckney, the pastor of Emanuel and one of the victims in the shooting. And all of it while once again black churches have been burning, some under suspicious circumstances.

For all of America's secularization, actual and expected, each event was resonant with religious significations—and each prompted a wave of public theology. And none more so than Pinckney's funeral, which saw a small army of clergy, a massive choir, an arena full of mourners, and the president of the United States in the pulpit for the eulogy.

Obama's oration was instantly and rightly hailed as one of his finest, and quite unexampled in the history of presidential addresses. He celebrated the heroic heritage of the African American church, from worshiping in secret before abolition to singing praises publicly after it, from sheltering travelers on the Underground Railroad to housing the foot soldiers of the civil rights battles. Black churches are "places where children are loved and fed and kept out of harm's way," he said,

> and told they are beautiful, and smart, and taught that they matter. That's what happens in church. That's what the black church means. Our beating heart. The place where our dignity as a people is inviolate.

Rare is the political figure—and rarer still the president—who has been able to say anything so profound about the role of the church in their community. For Stacia Brown, it demonstrated the need for the black church in a country where white churches tend to ignore the reality of racial oppression. "No one at my [white] church mentioned" the killings of Trayvon Martin or Jordan Palmer, Brown writes. "Not before the service or after. No one spoke their names."

The president swept wide and high over American history, and he touched on numerous public issues. He quoted Marilynne Robinson and sociological research. But he also took care to speak the name of each Emanuel martyr.

The contrast with the response to the same-sex marriage ruling could not be more stark. In a panicked and splenetic *Time* op-ed, Rod Dreher notes a tectonic shift under the feet of Christian conservatives. In the coming persecution, the First Amendment will offer only "the barest protection to religious dissenters from gay rights orthodoxy," Dreher writes. Christians will have to build "resilient communities" that can "live as exiles in our own country."

This is not a new theme for Dreher and a growing cohort of Christians disenchanted with the direction of American culture and politics. What is remarkable is the proximity of this fresh oracle of doom to *a literal slaughter in an American church*. Dreher had written very recently on the Charleston shootings and the horrors represented by the Confederate flag, but somehow that sharp analysis couldn't quite find its way into an argument about persecution.

This is the terrible self-involvement, the hobbling arrogance of sorting out the possibility of drooping to a minority status "in our own country"—note Dreher's possessive—without consulting or acknowledging the experience of actual religious or racial minorities. Ross Douthat was more perceptive when he wrote, after Charleston, that among African American Christians "there just isn't the same sense of dispossession, the same fear of the unknown" as among white Christian conservatives—"because far greater dispossession and far darker fears have defined the experience of black Christianity in this country going back hundreds of years."

It is the tacit, wounded claim of ownership over the culture that marks every failed attempt at holding the center of American religion. First it was the Protestant mainline, later the Christian right, and still later the "Theocon" movement around Richard John Neuhaus—each claiming that the heart of American Christianity was truly theirs, each dethroned by its own demographic inadequacies, intellectual stagnation, and internal contradictions.

So perhaps it's time to acknowledge that the black church is more than a necessary home for black Americans. It is, in fact, the true guardian and keeper of Christian America altogether. Pinckney's funeral featured not only elements native to black-church tradition but also others shared with white evangelicalism, most notably the

president’s own rendition of “Amazing Grace.” Coming from a place of exclusion and marginalization, the worship service stood in the center of the public square in a way that no magisterial tradition with its universal claims possibly could.

It was an event that witnessed to the power of faith to weather tragedy—not a legal setback, but a terror attack—without retreating, hiding, or declaring defeat. It was a testament to the secret truth of American history—of all history, perhaps, and the heart of Christianity, too: that the center may only be seen truly from the margin, that the dominant culture does not know itself but is known by the oppressed.

If Christianity has a future in American public life, it will look more like that mounting surge of song and prayer than like anything before.