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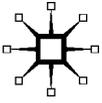
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The Tragic Vision of African American Religion

Matthew V. Johnson

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THE TRAGIC VISION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN RELIGION

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For Moriah and Nya

*Loud he sang the Psalm of David!
He, a Negro and enslaved,
Sang of Israel's victory,
Sang of Zion bright and free.*

*In that hour, when night is calmest,
Sang he from the Hebrew Psalmist,
In a voice so sweet and clear
That I could not choose but hear,*

*Songs of triumph, and ascriptions,
Such as reached the swart Egyptians,
When upon the Red Sea coast
Perished Pharaoh and his host.*

*And the voice of his devotion
Filled my soul with strange emotion;
For its tones by turns were glad,
Sweetly solemn, and wildly sad.*

*Paul and Silas, in their prison,
Sang of Christ, the Lord arisen.
And an earthquake's arm of might
Broke their dungeon-gates at night.*

*But, alas! What holy angel
Brings the slave this glad evangel?
And what earthquake's arm of might
Breaks his dungeon-gates at night?*

"The Slave Singing at Midnight," Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

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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.

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