

OPINION

GUEST ESSAY

Beyoncé. Amen.

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By [Michael Eric Dyson](#)

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The truth is plain, but elusive: Beyoncé Knowles-Carter is not only the world’s greatest entertainer, a feminist and a principled advocate of Black culture, but also something of a religious prophet. Her method is admittedly unorthodox and not uncontroversial: She delivers philosophy in Versace, theology in heels on a stage. Each night near the beginning of her performance on her Renaissance tour — and in the eponymous documentary film released on Friday — Beyoncé declared that she wanted the people gathered in her name to find a safe space for liberation.

“After all that we’ve been through in the world, I feel like we all want a place to be safe and connected to other human beings,” she says in her documentary. “Everyone has a thirst for community.”

As a professor, I was delighted to hear an echo of the language of progressive intellectuals as we battle over race and our place in the academy. I’ve heard her language resonating three times now, in three concerts in three cities, each venue jammed with every type and stripe of humanity, from straight to gay to trans and all colors of the rainbow.

Conservative forces allied against “wokeness” find talk of liberation and safe spaces for minority groups as a bid to play the victim. Yet Beyoncé’s pride in her Blackness pops off the stage and the screen — it is an animating force of her performance, resonating in the music she sings, her dance moves, her choice of musicians, her vernacular, her swagger and her sense of humor. It is more than her art that draws folk to her concerts; her secular sites have offered spiritual nourishment, providing a venue for uplifting holy praise in thanks for the vibrant variety of life. I have been a Baptist preacher for nearly 45 years, and to me, those concerts recalled what church at its best should be.

I love the Black church and admire its noble commitment to moral ardor and social justice. But too often it has slacked on love and compassion for queer folk. It is a cruel irony that a church that is deeply invested in so many trans — transformation of life under grace, transmission of rituals of piety from one generation to the next, transition from lost to saved — stands so steadfastly against transgender identities, which highlight the fluidity of race and underscore the agency that is central to all forms of religious and Black identity.

So, for Black queers, Beyoncé’s stadium has become a sanctuary. Their presence at her concerts is a vivid reminder of what the church *should* do to welcome everyone who shares a desire to get better — by loving the best way they know how and by loving one another as if God’s reputation were at stake. The songs of “Renaissance” are rooted in Black queer house, disco and dance culture — and she dedicated the album to her “godmother” Uncle Johnny, a queer Black man who made her prom dress and introduced her to the music to which she pays homage.

Queer brothers and sisters have always made monumental contributions to Black community, and they've left their mark on the gospel music that soothes queer and straight souls alike. But Beyoncé's attitude suggests a seismic shift, by explicitly embracing the forces that have previously only secretly shaped the Black religious sensibility.

In a way, Beyoncé is what we call a process theologian: a theologian who believes that *becoming* takes priority over *being* and that temporal processes influence our understanding of God. "I feel like you see the show and it's so beautiful," Beyoncé announces in her documentary. "But I'm more fascinated in people seeing the process. I think the beauty is in the process." We can in turn see that Beyoncé's idea of renaissance — a profound rebirth through imagination — is simply a secular translation of the notion of redemption.

I had an opportunity to visit with her less than an hour before her performance in Charlotte, N.C., was set to start. She was casually adorned in a modest charcoal T-shirt that paid tribute to her world tour, attending to her children backstage, a moment of uncharacteristic calm, and she wanted to thank me for some things I'd written about her, which she said have helped her understand her impact on people. In her film, she talks about how when she gets overwhelmed, she closes her eyes in search of her safe space — but admits that the current is so powerful and turbulent, and the waves so strong, that she sometimes feels suffocated.

"I'm trying to navigate life and I'm treading water, and trying to gasp for the little bit of air into my lungs to keep me afloat, but then time pulls me back into the same routine," she says in the film. Time is both her relief and her burden; both her freedom and restriction. Robert Frost reminds us, as Beyoncé already knows, that freedom comes when you are "easy in your harness."

Beyoncé is too rarely acknowledged as an intellectual of great sophistication. It is a perception that seems to dog most Black performers; it may explain why Jann Wenner, a co-founder of Rolling Stone magazine, [couldn't find](#) a single Black artist in his mind that could match wits with the white male figures in his recent book of interviews with rock luminaries. But at the intersection of sound and sex, of groove and gender, of work and womanhood, Beyoncé soars as a thinker.

At the three concerts I gleefully inhaled, I could not help raising my left arm and gently waving my hand in a show of approval that is common in evangelical circles. Her concert tour and the film that documents it prove that Beyoncé provides a religious experience for those most in need of community. She is, as she rightfully brags, "One of one/I'm number one/I'm the only one."

The best most of us can do is simply say "Amen."

Michael Eric Dyson is a professor at Vanderbilt University and the author of "Entertaining Race: Performing Blackness in America," among other books.

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