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# How Covid Reshaped the Black Church

**Black spiritual leaders are reimagining Black theology as more inclusive and accepting for women and the LGBTQ community**

By **MEAGAN JORDAN** 



**A woman raises her fist on June 1, 2020, during a "Black Lives Matter" protest in East Village of New York City.**

**Johannes Eisele/AFP via Getty Images**

Traditionally, Easter Sunday in the Black church is exuberant. From the Saturday following Good Friday to the day itself, Black hair salons are booked and buzzing as the smell of hair oils and smoke from hot iron combs permeates the air. Black children, tired from Easter egg festivities and or rehearsals for the church play, recite Easter speeches relentlessly for Sunday morning worship. And on that Sunday, as



about the resurrection of Jesus.

It's a day of reverence within the Black church, which, in its multiple denominations, was essentially formed out of resistance to racism and a need for community, a place where Black expression could safely exist outside of white gazes and threats. But that safety hasn't been extended to everyone within the community: **Christianity** is a **religion** whose sects of churches have spewed certain theologies that have been extremely violent and silencing to women and members of the LGBTQ community — and those theologies exist within the Black church as well.

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Over the past decade — in the wake of police violence, blatant racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and Covid — many Black millennials and Gen-Z Christians have questioned the theology and practices of their faith. But rather than turning away from Christianity, those who grew up in the churches of the Eighties, Nineties, and early 2000s are reimagining the Black church, resurrecting a theology that has room at the cross for all people.

For Candice Benbow — an essayist, theologian, educator, and renowned baker — that reimagining is the premise of her debut book, *Red Lip Theology: For Church Girls Who've Considered Tithing To The Beauty Supply Store When Sunday Morning Isn't Enough*. The book encompasses Benbow's creation story, tracking her spiritual journey from the time of her conception when her late mother, Debra Louise Benbow,



ways.

*Red Lip Theology* is not only a testament to Benbow's life, but also an invitation for other women, especially Black women, to seek God within themselves. "You might not wear lipstick at all. You might be a gloss girl, or somebody who's like, 'Carmex is all I need.' But to be a Red Lip theologian is to believe that who you are at your core is good, and that all of these ebbs and flows of your life are holy," says Benbow. "[But] it does require walking away from certain harmful theologies."

This reimagining of God is not a foreign or novel concept, especially within the Black church. For Black Americans, blending spiritual experiences based upon culture, identity, and lived experience has always been a way of curating diverse experiences of God. During enslavement, Christianity was largely whitewashed and forced upon enslaved Black ancestors, and although some Africans were already Christian when they were brought to the United States, Black Americans have reimagined themselves into the context of church, the Bible, and God — including some theologies seeing their Blackness differently through Jesus being a Black man with "wooly" hair, as depicted in Revelations.

Benbow and her contemporaries are continuing in that tradition by reimagining a more inclusive theology, one with reverence for female sexuality and acceptance for individuals in the LGBTQ community.

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That acceptance has, for some, been difficult to come by, as they've seen Christianity wielded more as a cudgel against them than as a comfort. In Jerrod Carmichael's recent HBO stand-up special *Rothaniel*, he announced he was gay and reflected on how he came out to his mother. "Last time I talked about being gay with my mom, she said I can't go against Jesus," Carmichael told his live audience. "This is a religion that

**Jerrold Carmichael in 'Rothaniel.'****HBO**

This process of reimagining theology within Black church spaces has accelerated in recent years due to sociopolitical issues in America and the effects of Covid-19. As services went online during the pandemic, it presented an opportunity for people to hear and discover theologies from different pastors and church spaces that was almost impossible before the world shut down. Still, while that opportunity did open new doors, many churches were focused on simply keeping their doors open, which didn't leave much room for exploring and wrestling with theology.



engage with the discrepancies of race, discrimination, and class within the United States. Black churches — especially those that didn't previously facilitate both physical and virtual worship — were left finding new ways to digitally rebrand in order to be accessible to their members. For many seeking spiritual refuge, they were at the intersection of needing a faith community but being unwilling to return to harmful theologies and ideas of God that were responsible for driving them from the church's steps to begin with. They were in search of a God that would truly welcome them as they were, because it was clear that the world they were living in didn't.

"I'm learning to look back on the pandemic with a certain measure of grace," says Benbow. "We all were out here trying to do the best that we could, but there were a lot of missed opportunities to address risk in our community. A lot of times it was, 'Let's just have the same church that we always have, but let's have it on Zoom.' At the same time, people who wanted to go to church but didn't feel welcome were able to pop in and out of services and not be seen. They were able to be a part of the church in ways that really mattered to them, and they didn't have to deal with the politics."

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The wide scope of theologies online is showing people there is more than one way to be Christian outside of the scope of their upbringings, and Benbow's new book follows that trajectory.

"The lynching of George Floyd and the racial reckoning and social-uprising moments that many people came together around, that exposed them to different ways of being religious that draw on the African American and African religious traditions," says Fadeke Castor, a professor and ethnographer and African diaspora studies scholar.

With the pandemic still in reach but presumably coming to an end, many churches are reopening their doors, and while it may be business as usual for some, many congregants are following those who have developed large digital spaces that focus on



Clubhouse, which took off during quarantine — are rethinking what God means to them and how to balance the beauty of Black church traditions with modern viewpoints of holiness.

Throughout her book, Benbow presents reflections from her years growing within the church, being a sexual Christian woman and an academic. She credits her mother for making her the critical thinker she is, and she also notes in her book the theological clashes she and her mother underwent. “For many, to question God’s maleness is to question the power of men. And when Black men have found an unlimited supply of power within the Black church, what could possibly get them to give that up? It’s not difficult to find women who support them and justify their positions. To tell the truth, this was one of the areas where my mother and I fought constantly,” she writes.

“I knew that if I was feeling this way there were other sisters feeling this way as well,” says Benbow. “Unfortunately, literature in the Christian space already has few Black women writing, but the kinds of Black women who write make it seem like there’s only one way to be a Black Christian woman, and that just isn’t true of me.”

It also isn’t true for Danyelle Thomas, the pastor of the Unfit Christian digital space. Similar to Benbow, Thomas is currently dedicated to decolonizing Christianity. She grew up in the Black church and in 2016 launched her digital platform on Instagram. There, she shares knowledge with her 22,000 followers about decolonization, touching on topics ranging from bible scriptures to analyzing misogyny to the ways sex and sexuality have been presented from pulpits.

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“The work I seek to do is to remind us that there is room at the cross, no matter how radically different our approach to God is,” says Thomas. “The Black church is the cornerstone of the Black community, whether we like it or not, and has been for time





necessarily as Black queer and trans folks.”

*Red Lip Theology* is a curation of Benbow’s spiritual journey with diverse theologies like Black Liberation Theology, Mujerista theology — which focuses on Hispanic women’s experiences with God — Womanist theology, one that focuses on Black women’s experiences with faith, and Process theology, which is “the understanding that God is moved by us in the world just as God moves us in the world.” Benbow also used astrology as a component of understanding. “My spirituality is very robust and diverse,” she says. “So many people believe that these systems can’t exist in concert with each other because of how they view God and how they recognize the spirit move. But I’m somebody who believes that spirit can and does move in all things. Creation is an interdependent project.”

This might explain why Black Americans as a whole remain more religious than any other demographic in the United States, although younger generations attend traditional church services at significantly lower rates in comparison to their elders. Despite damaging theologies, many of the components of the church remain sacred and birthed through traditional African experiences from descendants of enslaved Africans who understood the general principle of God and were able to spiritually adapt.

“There’s a reason why African American religion is distinct from other ways of being religious,” says Dr. Monica Coleman a theologian and Christian minister, who is also an initiate in the Yoruba religion Ifa, a West African spiritual system that requires a special initiation. “We’ve always had a different way of being Christian. Africans were practicing before they came to the U.S. There are traces of Islam and multiple traces of the traditional African religions. We didn’t think of it as being religious, it was just, ‘This is what my grandmother did, so I did.’ There have long been traditions of older people who went to church and then went to see a conjurer or the Obeah man [people who know how to work spirits] and didn’t sit around and think, ‘Does this contradict Christianity?’” says Coleman.

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The irony in leaders like Benbow and Thomas, who are working in modern times to center Black and marginalized people's faith, is that although universal change has been slow, evidence of Black people reimagining themselves in scripture and in God is seen in every generation and in numerous art forms such as Beyoncé's 2016 album and film *Lemonade*, when her costuming and lyrics embodied the Ifa love deity Oshun. The blending of African traditions and Christianity can also be seen in Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust*, which turned 30 in December.

"This is something that actually rolls around every generation, or maybe twice in a generation, like every 10 years," says Castor. "It's not new; it's always been there. It's just that we have new popular cultural references, new media references."

Benbow's *Red Lip Theology* chapters are named after the application process in which Benbow puts on her makeup: From "Skincare" and "Primer" — which is emblematic of her early experiences with God and church — to "Setting Spray," where she currently and confidently stands within her theology today. This passion for makeup, which forms the foundation in Benbow's critique for reformed theological practices, is very much rooted in Benbow's own Christian traditions, like Easter Sunday, showing that both tradition and evolution is necessary and possible.

"The first time my mama let me wear heels and make up was Easter Sunday. That was huge! I'm happy so many of us have the opportunity to lean into that and experience it," says Benbow.

In the King James version of Ecclesiastes 1:9, the scripture states that there's "no new thing under the sun," and while true, each generation presents new faces and an advancement in culture and ideas. Those who study scripture, understand scripture based upon the culture and audience of a given biblical writer's time. But in the year 2022, could God be doing a new thing, and will Black churches and preachers in these spaces adapt? After all, it's common in Black churches to say God is omnipresent. Being present in all things and situations, could it be like the Old and New Testament? That yet again, God is doing a new thing? Benbow and Thomas seem to believe so.





“To imagine a future without the Black church experience is akin to throwing out the baby with the bath water for me,” said Thomas. “I challenge the theological frameworks that do not serve to liberate all Black folks out of an unyielding love for an indisputable cultural institution and a passionate belief that it is worthy of saving for generations to come. We’re in a time of reckoning, and if the church refuses to evolve it will inevitably be left to self-destruct.”

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