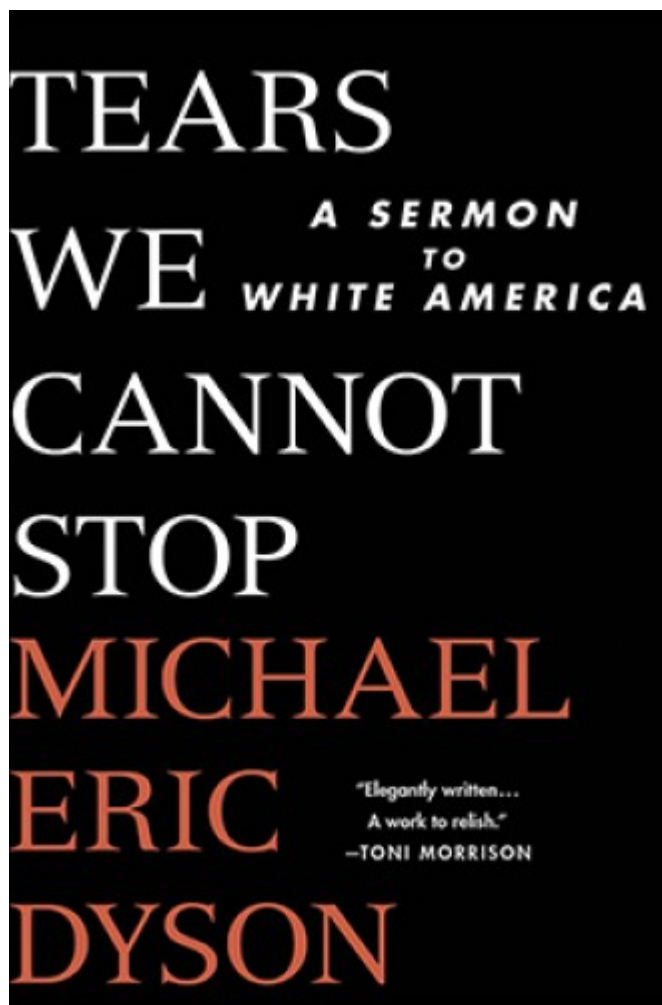


Michael Eric Dyson takes white America to church

## **Dyson's sermon on racism is inspiring, but will it speak to those who need to hear it most?**

by [Edward J. Blum](#) in the [April 26, 2017](#) issue

### **In Review**



### **Tears We Cannot Stop**

A Sermon to White America

By Michael Eric Dyson

St. Martin's Press

There once was a time when police forces bullied African-American men, when Americans heard almost daily news reports of black men murdered as groups of whites watched, and when local, state, and federal governments did little to stop the mayhem. That time is now.

That time was also 100 years ago. In the midst of World War I, the lynching of black men by whites two to three times per week, and rampant economic, social, and political discrimination, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote an incredible book. *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* contained a credo and a litany; it matched sociological analysis with bitter poetry; it provided new gospel stories of Jesus in the United States with insightful examinations of gender roles. *Darkwater* was and is difficult to classify. It was more than a book. It was art. It was poetry. It was prophecy. Du Bois claimed it came through him from God.

Michael Eric Dyson has produced a very similar work. *Tears We Cannot Stop* is history, cultural analysis, autobiography, a manifesto, and, at heart, a sermon. Dyson implores us to stop and listen. He identifies race, and especially the black-white divide, as the primary problem of American history, society, culture, and politics. He maintains that black people and white people occupy different universes and that the cancer of white racism eats away at the moral body of civil society. He spends most of his time identifying the disease before providing prescriptions for healing at the end.

The book is crafted in the form of a church service. It begins with a call to worship, and Dyson recommends songs to consider as hymns. After an invocation and scripture reading, there are two sermons. A benediction and offering follow the sermons.

But the content is unlike any church service I've attended. The hymn section begins with Dyson blaring N.W.A's "Fuck the Police" after a harrowing encounter with police officers (with his ten-year-old son in the car's backseat). "Sound of da Police" from KRS-One links police officers to overseers and maintains that "there could never be justice on stolen land." In "The Beast," Lauryn Hill of the Fugees compares politicians who cut social programs to the biblical beast of Armageddon.

Other portions of the church service follow a similar path as Dyson takes readers through his travails in white supremacist America. There is the college president who doesn't believe that young Dyson was admitted to Princeton. There are police officers who harass him and his family. There are down-and-out black men who try to mug Dyson. There are young girls who use the "N" word when they meet his children. His personal stories sound familiar to anyone acquainted with the daily experiences of African Americans.

Beyond the personal, Dyson takes readers through the main racial events of the past 25 years. In some ways, reading *Tears We Cannot Stop* feels like flipping from channel to channel. The case of O. J. Simpson surfaces as if we've passed by ESPN. The murders of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown appear as if we've turned to CNN. Many other obsessions of the day come up, including Colin Kaepernick's refusal to stand during the national anthem, *Avenue Q's* music, and FoxNews personalities.

The first sermon, "Repenting of Whiteness," contains an intellectually intriguing section on "the five stages of white grief." Dyson asserts that whites suffer from a debilitating disorder that he calls C.H.E.A.T.: chronic historical evasion and trickery.

This illness reveals itself when whites confront racial realities and experience grief in several stages. First, they plead ignorance about black life, culture, and history. Second, whites deny that they had anything to do with it or that race should still impact black people today. Third, whites appropriate blackness, either by taking elements from black culture (such as music) or by creating parallel claims to hardship. Fourth, whites try to alter the history of race. They argue that slavery did not cause the Civil War or that African Americans benefited from slavery by getting away from Africa. Fifth, whites minimize what African Americans experience by claiming that all people experience bullying, harassment, difficulties, and deaths of loved ones.

These stages of grief keep whites in a state of privileged denial where they can feign innocence while reaping the rewards of whiteness. I, as a white male, do not feel anxious or nervous when a police car drives by. I rarely worry whether banks will fix financial mistakes if they make them. Heck, if I forget my wallet and buy a coffee, I trust that the business owner will allow me to come back to pay. I've done this.

The most inspiring portion of the book comes in the benediction, where Dyson proposes a plan of action for concerned whites. Much of it is not new. He encourages

whites to become educated in black history, to visit African Americans, to teach other whites about racial justice, and to participate in protests. Dyson also suggests ways to participate tangibly in reparations. He calls for affirmative action by ordinary whites. Pay African-American employees more. Tip to black workers more. Select, purposefully, a black accountant or hairstylist or financial planner or wedding florist.

At times, Dyson's prose seems condescending. He begins some sections with phrases like "beloved" and "my friends." Perhaps he includes this language to remind readers that we are in a church service; or perhaps he is trying to soften his edge and recalibrate to the terrain of mutual care and concern. But I found it distracting and patronizing.

More concerning are the instances in which Dyson overgeneralizes. For example, he reduces the extraordinary complexity of the latest presidential election to whites' rage over the election of Barack Obama. Without doubt, this played a role. Donald Trump gained considerable traction from his questions about Obama's birthplace. But millions of white Americans voted for Obama, and millions of white Americans voted against Trump.

And although Dyson's emphasis on white-black issues sheds considerable light on difficult topics, at times it can hide other racial problems. For instance, he mentions debates surrounding O. J. Simpson but never discusses tensions between African Americans and Asian Americans that were occurring at the same time.

Dyson concludes with a prayer that is more a declaration toward God than a submission to God. He tells God, "We will not surrender. . . . We will not surrender because blackness is a gift that has blessed the world beyond compare." The prayer ends by saying that "if we are to understand America we must understand blackness."

This racial consciousness contrasts with the embrace of humanity expressed in *Darkwater's* opening creed. "I believe in God, who made of one blood all nations that dwell on earth," Du Bois writes. "I believe that all men, black and brown and white, are brothers." The credo goes on to express racial pride:

"I believe in the Negro Race" and "I believe in Pride of race and lineage and self." Then Du Bois moves to a focus on action: "I believe in Service—humble, reverent service." Acknowledging the existence of evil performed by those who "work to narrow the opportunity of struggling human beings," Du Bois relies upon "the Prince

of Peace.” He prophesies that “wicked conquest” will rebound against those who perform it and lead to “the death of that strength.”

For me, Du Bois’s creed is more powerful than Dyson’s prayer because it has something for people of all races. I cannot imagine white conservative Christians accepting, let alone reading, Dyson’s work—but I can imagine them pondering some of Du Bois’s. Furthermore, Du Bois did more than offer ideas and words. He helped build a secular organization with moral impact: the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. What seem to be needed now are not sermons against racism, but churches and institutions against it.