Wylin D. Wilson

Economic Ethics & the Black Church

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To My Grandparents
Olivia Dassie and Wylie Dassie
Aggie Bell Lockett and Herman Lockett, Sr.

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CHAPTER 1

Poverty, Theology, and Justice Fifty Years After the War on Poverty

Poverty

Conversations about poverty in America can be heated. Individuals who want to point to poverty amelioration by both government and civil society argue that not only are Americans among the most prosperous people in the world but that even the most impoverished Americans are still better off than impoverished populations in developing countries. However, individuals who call attention to poverty's structural causes are not swayed by this argument that America's poor are somehow "better off." The controversy in discussions about poverty is not limited to its gradations and structural causes, but asks on whose shoulders the responsibility to the poor falls. Though governmental policy and social safety nets have ameliorated poverty in the USA they have not solved it.

In fact, Americans have fallen prey to the myth of a vast middle-class society, and poverty in America is driven further into inner cities and suburbs where it can remain invisible. Much like the poverty in suburbia, rural poverty is often masked not only because of social isolation but also because of how outsiders perceive rural contexts. Outsiders prefer to think of rural areas nostalgically as idyllic places where time seems to have stood still, where life is simpler, and where values and mores of a bygone era prevail. They perceive rural places to have remained somehow "unspoiled" by the individualism and fragmentation that characterize urban modern life. They value such rural places for their natural

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amenities and historical significance, as areas from which we obtain our food supply and the natural resources for fuel, water, and other raw materials needed to produce necessities of modern life. Macon County in Alabama, for instance, is home to the Tuskegee National Forest, which is over 10,000 acres of natural preserve. Poverty is not included in this picture of bucolic life. Instead, it is assumed to occur only in urban industrial environments, particularly those with large immigrant and minority populations.

Rather than being havens of pristine bucolic life, rural areas like Macon County are home to as much or more of the chronically poor than are urban areas. The severity of rural poverty surpassed that of urban poverty in the 1950s, with over 33% of rural residents in poverty compared to 18% in city centers.[1] With increased economic growth and out-migration from depressed rural economies, by the 1960s nonmetropolitan[2] poverty had fallen in relation to urban poverty[3]; despite this decline, the incidence of unadjusted rural poverty rates has been consistently higher than urban poverty since the 1960s.[4] The non-metro poverty rate rose again when the economic troubles of the late 1970s and early 1980s brought new increases in rural poverty. Social scientists Ann Tickamyer and Cynthia Duncan note that in the latter part of the twentieth-century nonmetropolitan populations had proportionately more of the nation's poor,[5] and Blacks and Hispanics were especially likely to be chronically poor.[6]

There was, however, an improvement in non-metro poverty rates at the cusp of the twenty-first century, following the period of economic expansion of the 1990s. Record rates of job creation and low unemployment increased economic growth by 4% per year.[7] However, economic growth alone was not enough to reduce poverty in the long term.[8] Non-metro poverty continued to outpace poverty in metro areas[9] and was much more acute in the South.[10] Over 40% of the nonmetropolitan population resides in the South,[11] and in 2011, poverty there was at 22%, compared with 15% in the metropolitan South; these rates remained essentially unchanged into 2015.[12]

America has been battling these regional poverty trends for decades now. We are fifty years removed from President Lyndon B. Johnson's declaration of "unconditional War on Poverty and unemployment in the United States."[13]

In his State of the Union Address in 1964, Johnson said that, "Our aim is not only to relieve the symptoms of poverty but to cure it and

above all prevent it. …We shall not rest until that war is won, we cannot afford to lose…" Fifty years later, poverty has been neither "cured nor prevented."[14]

The worst casualties in this War on Poverty continue to be felt in places like the Alabama Black Belt,[15] where the plight of impoverished African Americans has seen little change. Religious institutions, long on the front lines, continue to fight what seem to be losing battles in this war. One of the characteristics of the enemy—poverty—that makes it difficult to defeat is its various factors and multiple forms—factors related to race, region, and rurality, for instance.

This book is a case study of the relationship between race, religion, and economics within Macon County, Alabama, of which Tuskegee is the county seat. This text joins a long and broad conversation regarding economics, ethics, and religion. It specifically examines the economic ethics of Black churches in Macon County because of many African American congregations' claim to be a refuge for those experiencing economic deprivation. Many of these congregations have claimed a longstanding commitment to improve the well-being of their communities. Congregations in Tuskegee and broader Macon County, like most rural areas in America, have struggled on the front lines in the long battle against persistent and deep poverty.[16] Survivors can point to a grounding theological–ethical foundation that emphasizes *seeing* the poor—those whom society often seems to forget and treat as if they are invisible. But does this *seeing* move to *hearing* and *meaningfully engaging*? Does it move to *doing* justice? A morally adequate economic ethic will encourage such meaningful engagement.

The case study exemplifies the main argument of this book that Black churches' economic ethics are morally inadequate and in need of re-evaluation in light of: (1) the ongoing trend to offer charity rather than the justice that economic inequality demands; (2) the tendency to conceptualize well-being within racial considerations, to the exclusion of gender and class; and (3) the lack of critical examination and challenge of unjust American capitalistic norms and practices. At the heart of these limitations lies the ambiguity that marks the church's attitude toward and engagement with economic justice. The Macon County case study articulates a characteristic economic ethic based on data collected in Macon County in light of a liberationist economic ethic, yielding insights that can inform the actual praxis of congregations with hopes of moving beyond charity to justice.

Poverty in America is unequally distributed along not only racial, ethnic, and regional but also gender lines. When observed through the lenses of race and gender, poverty rates reveal further inequalities, with African Americans having the highest incidence of non-metro poverty and more than double the poverty rates for white non-metro residents; rates among female-headed families in non-metro areas are at 34.9%.[17] Why is this so?

Limited opportunity structure, social and economic development policies, and changes in the local, national, and global economy are at the root of this persistent and severe poverty in places like Macon County and throughout rural America.[18] Institutional and infrastructural factors disadvantage rural areas and leave many people without stable employment, opportunities for mobility, investment in the community, and lack of diversity in the economy and in other social institutions.[19] All this is coupled with rural America's increasing social and spatial isolation and vulnerability to adverse effects from structural economic change.

During my research in Macon County, numerous women and men provided me with an introduction to life in a persistently poor and predominantly African American rural county. Life in this community is visibly segregated along class lines. One elderly African Methodist Episcopal Zion church pastor in the county stated, "[Our community] is separated into upper, middle, and the poor class and they do not associate with one another." The poverty rate in this county seat is double that of the national poverty rate. Also, median household income is astonishingly low, less than $25,000, compared to almost $41,000 for Alabama and $49,000 for the USA. There have been sporadic government policies and programs to address such chronically impoverished areas but sustained efforts to meet the needs of economically vulnerable communities have consistently come from various religious organizations.

The Church's Responsibility to the Poor

Religious organizations have played a large role in addressing poverty in America. Each year, religious charities, congregations, and ministries provide billions of dollars in cash assistance and social services for the poor.[20] The average large urban religious congregation also provides over 5000 volunteer hours in support of those in need.[21] Statistics demonstrate that whether a person is "religious" influences giving and volunteering. In fact, religious people, those who attend service at least two or more

times a month, give over four times more and are more likely to volunteer than non-religious persons.[22] In 2015, of the more than 62 million individuals who volunteered through or for an organization during the year, religious organizations claimed the most volunteers, having a third of all volunteers.[23] Unfortunately, most congregational efforts continue to focus on charity instead of justice. Christians have long been involved in charitable acts such as caring for the vulnerable, impoverished, and oppressed, devoting time and energy to vocations and serving as responsible moral agents in matters of ecological stewardship and social justice. However, there is no consensus and indeed a good bit of debate on the theological or practical form these actions should and do take. Reinhold Niebuhr argues that social injustice hides behind the cloak of charity without regard for the task of achieving justice.[24] He contends that charity is merely an avenue to feel virtuous, and that stewardship is a notion used by the church to moralize power and privilege.[25] Historically, tension between charity and justice has marked religious engagement, a tension from which African American religion has not escaped in its relationship to Black economic reality, even though superior acuity at seeing and responding to the poor has historically been a proclaimed strength of the Black Church as well. The Church historically has understood itself to have a real responsibility to the poor. But what exactly is their responsibility to the poor depends in large measure on how people answer the question of *why* people are poor. A fifty-year-old female pastor of a working-class congregation in Macon County argues that, "there are some who don't have the opportunity who are poor, others don't make the best of the opportunities that are provided. …but then there are some, [for whom] the opportunities are just not there." Regardless of the reasons for poverty, the reality of impoverished persons in society is marred by disempowerment.

The voices of the most economically vulnerable members of society are often absent or ignored. The persons that set the agendas, those who have power to shape our social lives together, do not seem to value the contributions, experiences, and opinions of the poor for those agendas. It seems as if when society sees the poor, it is seeing the surface, shrouded by prejudices. Or does anyone see beyond the surface, which results in real engagement in the lives of impoverished individuals? Does anyone listen to the stories of "the least of these"? Not only does society seem not to *really* see or hear, but the actual praxis of religious institutions often likewise seems to turn a deaf ear and blind eye

to economically vulnerable individuals. Is the proclaimed acuity at seeing the poor driving churches to do justice? Even though there are biblical and theological injunctions to care for poor members of society, do churches' interpretations of these injunctions result in the actual deeds of justice?

The Church broadly and the Black Church specifically have a wide spectrum of theological and normative perspectives and attitudes toward the poor and the "underclass" in urban and rural persistently impoverished communities in America. For some congregations, theological and normative foundations of the post-Civil Rights Black Church play decisively into their responses to the poor as well. However, the indictment remains against the Church for its lack of responsiveness to issues which African Americans within poor communities face on a daily basis, issues such as classism, economic injustice, sexism, and sedimented inequalities which keep individuals trapped in persistent poverty. In communities like Macon County, poor and working poor Black women and their families certainly are in the pews of many congregations (though a great proportion of the poor are absent from congregations) yet much of churches' praxis toward impoverished individuals focuses on charity. Why is this? The justification of charitable acts (or lack thereof) toward vulnerable populations lies in theological traditions. This work focuses specifically on the three predominant ones—the self-help/social uplift, prosperity gospel, and liberation theology traditions. Before discussing the theological traditions, it is important to address opposition to the construct of the Black Church.

Black Church

There is long-standing opposition to this construct. Key contemporary opponents include religious scholars such as Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., William D. Hart and Barbara D. Savage. For instance, Savage argues that the construct of the Black Church offers a false sense of unity and homogeneity while "masking the enormous diversity and independence among African American religious institutions and believers."[26] Additionally, Hart argues against the "standard narrative of Black religion" which renders the Black Church and Black religion synonymous, while simultaneously, masking the complexity of Black identity. Indeed, one among several fundamental reasons why the notion of a Black Church poses problems for critics is the presumption of essentializing Black identity. In his analysis of pragmatism and politics in Black America, Eddie

Glaude highlights the complexity of African American religious life and the problem of reducing that complexity to a particular political reality along with a fixed stable notion of Black identity and perception that history contains answers to current problems.[27] A significant claim in this book is the importance of avoiding essentialist notions of Black identity. I acknowledge that social, political, and cultural diversity is present not just between but within congregations. In fact, there is no unified Black Church within the study site because of this reality. However, these religious institutions understand themselves to have a responsibility, specifically, if not singularly, to an African American population (even if only a romanticized understanding). These institutions understand that African American communities have claims on them—claims, which to a large degree, individuals understand as continuing to shape how these institutions perceive themselves and their mission within a community. However, the acknowledgment of this fact does not lead, necessarily, to the essentialization of Black Christian identity.

Within this project, the Black Church as it has evolved within a particular social context is examined with respect to economic justice. Black religion is understood to be beyond the Black Church, however, the engagement of economic justice by representative religious institutions within a specific context is fundamental to this project, and leads to the concentration on mainly Christian Protestant African American congregations representative of this specific rural southern context under study. Within the study site, there is a predominance of Protestant African American churches. In urban areas such as Omar McRoberts' Black religious district in his work, *Streets of Glory: Church and Community in a Black Urban Neighborhood*, the influx of diverse populations has often been sufficient to change the religious landscape of the community. However, in areas such as Macon County, which is predominantly rural, immigration of individuals has not been adequate to change the religious landscape in a lasting, measurable way. This fact partly explains the predominance of Protestant African American churches in these areas, mainly, Baptist, Methodist and varieties of non-denominational or interdenominational congregations, and Pentecostals. This phenomenon within the rural South is in contrast to some suburban or urban settings where the extent of the population diversity is such that it has measurable relevance for the religious landscape of the community, such as the Four Corners religious district in McRoberts' study. Also, within many rural communities that do not experience high volumes of migration, the

population that is there has a substantial number of individuals who have been in the community for generations—and many of these individuals often remain within congregations likewise. For example, it is not unusual for congregants in Macon County to have been a member of their faith community for more than 50 years, and by the same token, for their parents to have been lifelong members also.

In this study, it is evident that even within a context where homogeneity may be the perception of many residents, the focus on economic justice helps to demonstrate the diversity, within and among various church traditions. This work acknowledges the historical and current internal theological, political, and ideological diversity within the Black Church and independence among these African American religious institutions. However, does acknowledgment of this diversity point to the fact that a Black Church no longer or never did exist?

Foundational to the use of Black Church in this project is the historical reality that birthed the institution—hence, the Black Church exists because of White domination and racism which created social stratification along racial lines that cut deep into American social life, even religious life. Thus, this project retains the idea of the Black Church because of dealing directly with the contextual reality of institutions that were established with a clear mission that includes spiritual nurture and care beyond the spiritual, to a group of historically vulnerable and marginalized Black individuals. It is clear from interviews with both clergy and parishioners that this initial mission still defines many of the Black churches within Macon County. The community and members of these institutions have claims on these churches that the leadership and laity within these diverse institutions accept—claims that move beyond the spiritual care of individuals within their constituency. However, acceptance of these claims—does not mean that churches carry out their perceived and expected responsibilities to individuals within the community adequately or at all. Have the claims of those suffering economic deprivation within communities of Black churches influenced their engagement with economic justice? The argument is that this engagement spans a continuum between accommodation and liberation.

Economic Justice and the Black Church: Accommodation and Liberation

Within Black religious discourse, there are criticisms of the liberation—accommodation binary that is associated with the standard narrative of Black religion.[28] A fundamental objectionable characteristic of this standard narrative for Hart is equating Black Church and Black religion; wherein the church becomes the template for understanding what Black religion is.[29]

Criticisms of the standard narrative beyond the exclusion of expressions of Black religiosity that are beyond the Black Church[30] include: having an inadequate class and gender analysis, being theocentric, and putting forth "ideas of blackness antecedent to the actual experiences of black individuals."[31] Within this standard narrative, the usefulness of the accommodation-liberation binary to categorize the practices of the Black Church with respect to responses to racism is a long-standing debate.[32] The argument is that this binary fails to capture the complexity of the faith experiences of practitioners nor does it capture "the fluid interaction of political and ideological meanings represented within the church's domain."[33] In her poignant analysis of Black women's spirituality, Marla Frederick also contends that the liberation-accommodation binary is inadequate for capturing the complexity of the lives of women, in and outside of congregations, in her work.[34] Furthermore, Evelyn B. Higginbotham argues that this binary is limiting. She contends that accommodation may have a submissive tone but it also has a subversive quality that is not explicitly evident in the concept.

Although liberation and accommodation do not capture the complexity of the lives of women in Frederick's study, this binary serves as an important starting point for locating individuals and congregations within Macon County with respect to their engagement with economic justice. For the current analysis of economic justice within the rural South, the assumption is that the construct of Black religion is expansive enough to include this standard narrative with a binary of accommodation and liberation, as well as narratives outside of this standard.

Thus, this book continues to engage and critique this binary, highlighting its merit for a specific context. It is clear that within many of the congregations in this study, a static notion of Black history really matters for individuals, and this history is often appealed to for possible

"solutions" to the current economic, social, and political problems within the community; however, this belief is marked by a thoughtful realism, not an idealistic naiveté. This binary and Gayraud Wilmore's and Lincoln and Mamiya's interpretive framework are employed in this project due to the specific context of Macon County, Alabama. Further, the majority of the participants in the study churches connect to the divine through their understanding of the standard narrative of Black religion which appeals to a "static tradition".[35] Hence, the use of Wilmore's and Lincoln and Mamiya's framework is useful because this project is grounded in the context of the study churches and their understanding of and praxis with respect to economic justice.

A significant claim in this book is that, like the construct of Black religion, the constructs of Black Church, liberation and accommodation have revisionist seeds embedded within. Indeed, these constructs will remain limited if we do not expand them to capture the complexity that manifests in everyday Black faith experience; which is why the current analysis employs womanist and liberation theology to inform and critique the Black Church's agency with respect to economic justice in the rural south. Another criticism of the liberation-accommodation binary is the presumption regarding African American agency. The problematic presumption for Glaude is that African American Christian agency is oriented toward a liberatory praxis.[36] In contrast, this book does not presume such an orientation, rather it critiques the study churches' mainly accommodationist agency with respect to economic justice and appeals to insights from liberation and womanist theology to critique their praxis. This book acknowledges the political, theological, and ideological diversity of the Black Church with its various traditions that are the foci of this project.

The most predominant theological tradition found within the rural context under consideration is the self-help/social uplift tradition. However, the prosperity theology, another accommodationist tradition, has gained popularity and is evident in this context also. The self-help/social uplift tradition, as one predominant form of theological engagements with economic justice, is significant because of its prevalence within local churches; the prosperity gospel is noteworthy because of its noticeable strands and growing influence within local churches; and liberation theology, because of its potential contribution to and insights that can guide a re-evaluation of churches' current economic ethics.