

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

LIBERATING THE NEOLIBERAL BLACK CHURCH: A THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE TO
THE IDEOLOGICAL INFLUENCE OF NEOLIBERALISM ON THE BLACK CHURCH

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2020

*For the ones whose love has sustained me:
My wife, Tammie,
and my children, Grace, Sydney, David II, Lauren, and Nina*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	viii
Introduction	
I. The Question and its Presuppositions	1
II. What is the ‘Black Church’?	3
<i>II.i. The Historical and Theological Norms of the Black Church</i>	4
<i>II.ii. The Neoliberal Black Church</i>	7
III. Ideology of Neoliberalism	9
<i>III.i. Economism of Neoliberalism</i>	11
<i>III.ii. Endogenous Theology</i>	12
IV. Economic Oppression	13
<i>IV.i. Communal Responses to Oppression</i>	17
V. The Response: Lazarlan Liberative Theology.	18
VI. Project Outline	21
Chapter 1: The Black Church and the Norm of Resistance	
I. Introduction	23
II. Critique: Legitimacy of the Black Church as Ecclesiological Category	26
<i>II.i. Argument for Universal versus Particular ecclesiologies</i>	26
<i>II.ii. Value of a black Church ecclesiology</i>	28
III. Goals of the black church ecclesiology	29
<i>III.i. Discerning Unifying Threads</i>	29
<i>III.ii. Critical Historical Considerations</i>	30
<i>III.iii. Discerning Norms for the Church</i>	31
<i>III.iv. Presupposition of this ecclesiological and theological Evaluation</i>	32
IV. Critique: Theological Deficiency of the Black Church	33
<i>IV.i. Concern regarding Christianity’s Introduction to the Enslaved</i>	33
<i>IV.ii. Additional Theological Disconnection</i>	34
<i>IV.iii. Theological Deficiency of the Black Church</i>	35
V. Re-Evaluating the Causes of Deradicalization	36
<i>V.i. The Receipt of Christianity</i>	39
<i>V.ii. Subversive Capacity of Christianity</i>	41

VI. Resistance and the Black Church	43
<i>VI.i. Question of Causation</i>	43
<i>VI.ii. Evidence of Resistance Prior to Christianity</i>	44
<i>VI.iii. Resistance and The Early Black Church</i>	47
<i>VI.iv. Resistance as a Norm of the Black Church</i>	50
VII. An Alternative Causation of Deformation	52
VIII. Case of Economic Causation During the Great Migration	59
<i>VIII.i. The Growing Influence of Economic Concerns</i>	59
<i>VIII.ii. Growing Ecclesial Competition</i>	61
<i>VIII.iii. Measuring Church Impact with Economic Criteria</i>	61
<i>VIII.iv. The Impact of Economic Agency on Black Churches in the South</i>	64
IX. Beginning Signs of Class Division	65
X. Question of Relevance: Resistance and Complicity	66
XI. Conclusion	69
Chapter 2: The Seduction of Neoliberalism	
I. Concern of Deradicalization	72
<i>I.i. Deradicalization As Theological Deformity</i>	74
<i>I.ii. Question of Foundation</i>	75
<i>I.iii. Choice of the Neoliberal Black Church</i>	77
<i>I.iv. Failure to Account for Economic Influence</i>	77
II. Protestantism and Capitalism	78
III. Protestant Theology and Humanity	81
<i>III.i. Objects of Human Worship</i>	82
<i>III.ii. Role of Rationality</i>	83
IV. The Homo Religiosus	84
<i>IV.i. The Homo Religiosus: Connections to the Divine</i>	86
<i>IV.ii. The Homo Religiosus: Understanding Human Freedom</i>	88
<i>IV.iii. The Homo Religiosus: Failures to Achieve Good</i>	90
V. The Competing Ideology: Homo Oeconomicus	92
<i>V.i. Origins of the homo oeconomicus</i>	93
<i>V.ii. The Place of Distinction for the Homo Oeconomicus</i>	95

VI. The Ideology of Neoliberalism	95
<i>VI.i. The Sovereignty of the Marketplace</i>	96
<i>VI.ii. The Freedom and the Individual</i>	99
<i>VI.iii. Neoliberalism Cooption of Freedom</i>	101
<i>VI.iv. Problems with Neoliberalism's freedom</i>	104
VII. Choice and Satisfaction	105
VIII. Critiques of Neoliberalism from within Economics	107
<i>VIII.i. Question of Resource Disparity</i>	107
<i>VIII.ii. Just How Free is a Free Market?</i>	109
<i>VIII.iii. Neoliberalism: A Governing Rationality</i>	109
Chapter 3: The Case for a Theological Rebuttal	
I. What is at stake?	113
II. Birth of the Neoliberal Black Church	115
III. The Danger of Economism's Embrace	117
IV. The Basis for a Theological Critique	122
<i>IV.i. Historical Connection of Theology and Economics</i>	122
<i>IV.ii. Alienation in Marxism</i>	124
<i>IV.iii. Marxism as Religion?</i>	127
<i>IV.iv. Religion According to Keynesianism</i>	128
<i>IV.v. Different View of Self-Interest</i>	129
<i>IV.vi. Religion According to Capitalism</i>	132
<i>IV.vii. Religion according to Neoliberalism</i>	136
V. Endogenous Theology of Neoliberalism	138
<i>V.i. Neoliberalism's Eschaton</i>	140
<i>V.ii. The Danger of an endogenous theology</i>	142
VI. Framework for Evaluating Neoliberal Deformity of the Black Church	143
<i>VI.i. Eschatology</i>	143
<i>VI.ii. The Individual and Sin</i>	144
<i>VI.iii. The Problem of Satisfaction and Choice</i>	148
<i>VI.iv. The Challenge of Community</i>	150
<i>VI.v. Problem of Disparity</i>	151
VII. The Theological Concern for the Church	151

Chapter 4: Crisis of Complicity

I. Restatement of the Concern	154
II. A Question of Proof	160
<i>II.i. Examining Preaching</i>	160
<i>II.ii. Commodification of Christian Education and Worship</i>	162
<i>II.iii. Another Possibility: Suburbanization</i>	163
III. Case of Suburbanization	166
IV. Suburbanization of the Neoliberal Black Church	172
V. Theological Challenge of Suburbanization	176
VI. The Endogenous Theology Neoliberalism at Work	180
<i>VI.i. Bearers of Tradition</i>	181
<i>VI.ii. Shaping Identity and Character</i>	183
<i>VI.iii. Contextual Interpretation</i>	185
VII. Possibilities for the Church	186
VIII. The Opportunity for the Neoliberal Church	192

Chapter 5: A Lazarian Liberative Theology

I. The Neoliberal Black Church's Need for a New Theological Framework	195
<i>I.i. Framework of a Lazarian Liberative Theology</i>	198
<i>I.ii. Biblical Framework</i>	200
<i>I.iii. Lazarian Liberative Theology's Goal</i>	202
II. The Condition of the Neoliberal Black Church	206
<i>II.i. Suburbanization</i>	206
<i>II.ii. Suburbanization as Weltanschauung</i>	209
<i>II.iii. The Invitation for the Neoliberal Church</i>	211
III. The Antidote: Lazarian Liberative Theology	213
<i>III.i. The Necessity of Liberation</i>	213
<i>III.ii. The Response to Hopelessness</i>	215
<i>III.iii. Resources for a Response to these Challenges</i>	220
<i>III.iv. Response to Irrationality</i>	225
IV. The Dialectic of a Lazarian Liberative Theology	232
<i>IV.i. Material Consequences</i>	234

<i>IV.ii. Communal Role</i>	236
V. Summary	238
VI. Next Steps	240
<i>VI.i. Effects of Economism on the Identity of the Neoliberal Black Church</i>	240
<i>VI.ii. The Neoliberal Black Church as Firm</i>	240
<i>VI.iii. Commodification</i>	241
<i>VI.iv. Development of the Lazarian Liberative Model</i>	241
<i>VI.v. Economistic Liberation Theology</i>	242
<i>VI.vi. Economism and Church Leadership</i>	242
<i>VI.vii. Re-narrating Black Church History</i>	243
Bibliography	245

Acknowledgments

This project is the fruit of the tremendous investment made by so many into my life. Accordingly, I do not have adequate space to fully express my thanks and appreciation to all who have blessed me through this process. However, let me begin with those at the Divinity School at the University of Chicago. I wish to express my profound thanks to my advisor throughout this program, Dr. Dwight Hopkins. From the time I sat down with Dr. Hopkins to explore the possibility of applying to the Ph.D. program at the university, throughout the many classes I have had with him, and during the countless meetings where he offered questions that challenged me and words to encourage me, Dr. Hopkins has been a persistent and relentless supporter of my scholarly pursuits. He has modeled for me a life within the academy that I now seek to pursue. His commitment to his community, profound impact on the lives of the many scholars under his care, and constant academic contribution to discussions critical to issues of importance to the black church are both a tremendous gift to the world and an example I hope to emulate. Along with Dr. Hopkins, I am deeply indebted to Dr. Rieger and Dr. Gamwell. Dr. Gamwell provided me the space to explore this interesting intersection between religion and economics. I benefited from the rich conversations in his classroom and on his couch, where he welcomed me with warmth, penetrating questions, and constant encouragement. Dr. Rieger has been a particularly important interlocutor. His long and distinguished commitment to exploring issues of religion and class provided a constant catalyst for me to think more deeply and broadly as I envisioned both the current conditions of the black church and the possibilities that

exist for those institutions. Dr. Rieger's graciousness with his time and insight have enriched me as he also reminded me of the significant work yet to be done.

It is said that all writing is autobiographical. This is certainly true with this project. The questions driving this work are born of my many years of service within the black church. As such, I am indebted to the many churches and church leaders that have left an indelible mark upon me. Just a few of those individuals and institutions are: Elder Robert Pruitt and Bethel Temple Church of Christ Holiness, Pastor Zan Holmes and St. Luke Community United Methodist Church, Bishop Paul Morton and Greater St. Stephen Full Gospel Baptist Church, Bishop Tommie Triplett and Southern Union Baptist Church, Pastor Frederick Davis and First Calvary Baptist Church, and Pastor Issac Singleton and Mt. Zion Baptist Church. I would be remiss if I did not express my particular thanks to Mt. Zion Baptist Church for investing in my life in the academy through its provision of financial support and of the time needed to pursue both my Ph.D. and my D.Min. degrees while I served as pastor. I would not have completed this journey if not for their kindness, encouragement, and support. My thanks also to Fifteenth Avenue Baptist Church for also allowing me the time, space, and support for completing this dissertation.

Finally, I wish to express my thanks to my family. To my father, mother, and sister, all of whom have entered into their eternal reward, they have my eternal thanks. Each of them contributed in invaluable and enduring ways to my life and were essential to my arrival at this point. My parents, although neither having a high school degree, birth within me a love of learning that continues to burn brightly.

To my wife, Tammie, whose constant support, encouragement, and overwhelming love overcame every obstacle and every doubt that darkened the horizons of my life through this journey. At so many points in this journey, it was her belief in me that gave me the strength to press on. She is the treasure that I do not deserve and the woman to whom I am eternally indebted. To each my five children, that have sacrificed so much that I might pursue this dream and serve the church, I thank you. You will never know the joy you have given me and the strength I draw from each of you. I will be forever grateful to each of you and the inspiration you have provided to me through your own successes and accomplishments.

Finally, to a God that has loved me more than I could have every imagined. I write this as an offering of gratitude for the love you have shown my life.

Introduction

I. The Question and its Presuppositions

The simple but profound question driving this project is: How can the black church be saved from its complicity with neoliberalism in oppression? This question contains several presuppositions. The first presupposition is that oppression, which has always been a part of human existence, has demonstrated the capacity to mutate in response to its environmental context. Oppression, which historically has taken many forms, in this current moment in American history, is economic in nature and results from neoliberalism. The second presupposition is that experiences of economic oppression are most acutely encountered by the poor and powerless and this group is most often constituted by black and brown faces. The burden of responding to these experiences of economic oppression falls upon the shoulders of all people of good conscience. However, the third presupposition is that, given that economic oppression is felt most acutely by black and brown communities, the challenge of responding to economic oppression falls more heavily on the shoulders of the people and communal institutions of these communities. It is this perspective that prompts this work's examination of the black church. The final presupposition is that the black church, as a responder to oppression, has somehow changed in a discernible way. Unfortunately, this change has produced complicity between the black church and economic oppression and results from the black church's embrace of the ideology of neoliberalism. This embrace of neoliberalism's ideology by the black church has

frustrated the church's ability to respond to the entrenchment of economic oppression experienced within communities of the poor and oppressed.¹

There are indeed many institutions and movements that make responding to the economic oppression of the poor a central concern of their identity.² Among those entities is the black church, whose proclaimed theological mission makes it a chief respondent to these concerns. It is critical that the black church respond to the spiritual and material conditions in which they and their constituents live and breathe. This makes it all the more tragic that, while some churches have diligently pursued liberation from oppression (economic or otherwise) for their communities, the overwhelming evidence suggests the significant realization of liberation remains a distant dream for growing populations of the poor. The realization of liberation (economically measured) has been stymied, despite the growing presence of the black church within poor and oppressed communities.³

This work seeks to address the perceived challenge of the economic oppression facing the black community, to link the black church's changing posture towards economic oppression to its immersion in the ideology of neoliberalism, and to provide a constructive theological response to the church's complicity. However, before a theological response to this challenge can be proffered, several additional issues,

¹ It is likely that one might discern other presuppositions animating the research question. Nonetheless, the aforementioned presuppositions represent those that are viewed as instrumental to the framing of this question and the response offered by this project.

² One of the questions prompted by this project is the degree to which the church should view itself in partnership with other social movements and organizations that, while sharing its commitment to the eradication of poverty and oppression, may not share its religious motivations.

³ Put another way, the case can be made that during a period of significant economic growth in this country there has not been a corresponding growth or improvement of the conditions of the poor and oppressed.

essential to the formulation of either this question or any theological response must be addressed.

II. What is the 'Black Church'?

I assert in the question above, that neoliberalism has had a deformative effect on the black church. However, clarity must be offered regarding the use of the language of the 'black church.' Reference to the black church should not be understood as referring to a single institution or a monolithic set of religious experiences, practices, or faith systems. Instead, this language describes a broad set of religious and theological perspectives that possess a common and unifying thread.

That unifying thread is that the institutions captured by this term,

emerge from the religious, cultural, and social experiences of black people. With its roots on the continent of Africa and in the Middle Passage, the black church is the institution providing structure and meaning for African people and their descendants in the Americas who struggled to survive the ravages and brutality of slavery and racial oppression.⁴

When speaking of the black church, this term encompasses institutions that possess, "distinctive characteristics and constitutive elements including key questions, symbols, rituals, ideas, and beliefs that are always subject to adaptation, improvisation, reinterpretation, and even abandonment."⁵ From the introduction of religion to blacks during slavery, and shaped by pre-existing religious commitments born of the

⁴ Floyd-Thomas, Stacey M. *Black Church Studies an Introduction*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007, xxiii. An abbreviated list of early commentators on the black church includes: Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Negro Church*. Atlanta, GA: Atlanta University, 1903; Frazier, Edward F. *The Negro Church in America*. New York: Schocken Books, 1964; Mays, Benjamin Elijah. *The Negroes God as Reflected in His Literature*. New York: Atheneum, 1973; Woodson, Carter Godwin, Bryan Sinche, and Bryan Albin Giemza. *A History of the Negro Church*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library, 2018; Mays, Benjamin Elijah, and Joseph William Nicholson. *The Negroes Church*. New York, NY: Negro Univ. Press, 1969.

⁵ Floyd-Thomas, Stacey M. *Black Church Studies an Introduction*, xxiv.

enslaved's West African heritage, a set of religious practices were formed and gave birth to what is at first referred to as the 'invisible institution'.⁶ These syncretic religious practices were later codified in what matures into the multiplicitous black religious institutions and denominations of this present moment. The black church spans religious and cultural perspectives, including Christian, Islamic, Jewish, humanist, and atheist faith traditions. However, while the black church is more inclusive than merely religious communities that participate in the Christian tradition, this project's focus is intentionally narrowed to an investigation of the Christian subset of the black church. This constraint in the scope of this project is driven by a formulation of the problem of neoliberalism and the theological response provided by this project which privileges a Christian theological lens. To explicate the perceived theological deformity and to offer a theological response requires an acknowledgment of a dependence on the warrants of the Christian faith

II.i. The Historical and Theological Norms of the Black Church

To speak of the black church is to acknowledge a segmenting of the Christian church based on shared racial and historical experiences. This delineation is an anathema to those who aver the universality of the Christian faith and its institutions. While adjudication of the issue of universality extends beyond the boundaries of this project, what is asserted is that the Christian church can bear the specific imprint of communities whose histories have shaped their theology and its expression in their

⁶ Floyd-Thomas, *Black Church Studies*, 11; Warnock, Raphael G. *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety, and Public Witness*. New York: NYU Press, 2014: 23.

praxes.⁷ The appeal to the black church accepts that the black church expresses “a self-appropriated identity over and against the inroads of external norms and standards” of the Christian tradition as defined by the dominant Christian community.⁸ The black church is a distinct expression of the Christian tradition and provides its constituents with a framework within which to encounter and understand their distinct experiences through the lens of Christianity.⁹

This project acknowledges that the church within the communities of African descent is distinct from the church of the dominant culture.¹⁰ The black church, like other strands of Christianity, participates in a dialectic between the theology undergirding the Christian church and the culture and history in which the black church is situated.¹¹ This dialectic gives meaning to the theological proclamations of the black

⁷ Floyd-Thomas, Stacey M. *Black Church Studies an Introduction*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007: xxiii.

⁸ Haight advances this idea of the diversity of ecclesiological expressions. While not applying it to issues of ecclesiological diversity as shaped by racial experiences in America, the logic of his construct has great applicability to this discussion. Haight, Roger. *Christian Community in History*. Vol. 1. New York: Continuum, 2004.

⁹ Bailey, Julius H. *Down in the Valley: An Introduction to African American Religious History*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016: xii.

¹⁰ This point is made throughout Raboteau’s examination of African American religious history. While the scope of his argument extends well beyond African American Christian experience, he nonetheless affirms the role of African American religion as a counter narrative to the religious and political posture of white America. Raboteau, Albert J. *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

¹¹ Haight affirms that the church has two relationships that define it. One is the institution’s relationship to God (theology) and the second is its relationship to the world (culture). It is the interplay of these two relationships that gives substance to the church’s self-understanding throughout various points in history. Haight, Roger. *Christian Community in History*. Vol. 3. New York: Continuum, 2004: 63-67.

church but can also be the source of distortions to its theology.¹² Externally influenced distortions to the theology of the black church, has resulted in a disconnect between the black church's historical and theological norms and its contemporary praxes. The historical and theological norms represent a self-understanding of the black church which privileges the historical realities that have shaped its theological commitments.¹³ The black church's praxes express the its self-understanding and concomitantly informs its theology. Therefore, the black church is the product of the dialectic between the historical and theological norms and the praxiological norms of the church.¹⁴ Dissonance between the historical and theological norms and praxiological norms is understandable. The praxiological norms of the black church negotiate with the historical and theological norms of the church and the church's need to express its theological self-understanding in response to contextual issues confronting the church.¹⁵ This negotiation ultimately shapes what becomes, in later periods, the continued historical and theological norms of the black church. In other words, the historical and theological norms of the black church are always growing and mutating in response to contemporary challenges to the church's self-understanding while also

¹² The possibility of cultural distortion of theology is not limited to the black church. "The church in history is never a pure church: it is constituted in a tension between the effects of the divine Spirit and the limiting and obstructing power of the world which remains an intrinsic dimension within it." (ibid., 63-64.) While there are many explications of the interplay and influence of culture on the Christian church and vice versa, a particularly compelling argument is found in: Ocallaghan, Paul. "Cultural Challenges to Faith: a Reflection on the Dynamics of Modernity." *Church, Communication and Culture 2*, no. 1 (2017): 25-40.

¹³ The use of the concepts of historical and praxiological ecclesiologies is borrowed from Roger Haight's approach to ecclesiology as found within his three volume work on the Christian community in history. While his work focuses on a broader understanding of the Christian community than dealt with in this project, his approach to ecclesiology is helpful to this undertaking. Haight. *Christian Community in History*.

¹⁴ The praxiological ecclesiology refers to the black church's understanding of itself as manifested in its lived commitments and praxes.

¹⁵ Haight. *Christian Community in History*: 496-498.

servicing as a theological north-star for the church in any moment in its history. This project understands the historical and theological norms to express the fundamental purpose of the black church and to provide a point of reference for evaluating the black church even as this reference point never remains fully static. This project seeks to call the black church back to its historical and theological norms, and to argue for a theologically justified support of communal resistance to the economic oppression faced by the black community.¹⁶ This also means a continued evolution of those historical and theological norms in light of the cultural and economic particularity of neoliberalism.

II.ii. The Neoliberal Black Church

The theological deformation of the black church is measured by the variance between its historical and theological norms and its praxes.¹⁷ This current variance results from the black church's immersion in and adoption of the ideological foundations of neoliberalism and a not-always conscious relinquishment of its theological commitments as expressed by its historical and theological norms. Neoliberalism, acting like a religion, posits alternative ideological presuppositions that compete with those undergirding the historical and theological norms of the black

¹⁶ Wilmore, Gayraud S. *Black Religion and Black Radicalism an Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2012.

¹⁷ This variance when positively correlated to the historical norms represents an evolution in the theological norms of the black church. This positive correlation continues the tradition of liberation but may deviate from a straight line progression. When negatively correlated, the current norm retreats from the historical norm of liberation and represents theological deformation for the black church.

church.¹⁸ Additionally, the religion of neoliberalism is at the root of the economic oppression experienced by the black community. The historical and theological norms of the black church call for the black church's pursuit of liberation. However, the economically fostered theological deformation of the black church creates the complicity by the black church expressed by its tacit participation and promotion of the ideas of neoliberalism that are often in direct conflict with the black church's historical and theological norms.

Given the range of institutions covered by the nomenclature of the 'black church', this project understands the problem presented by neoliberalism to impact a subset of the black church, which will be referred to as the 'neoliberal black church'. The neoliberal black church refers to those churches within the black church tradition that have increasingly appropriated neoliberalism's ideology in their self-understanding, viewing its community as, "a market made up of a set of current and potential customers" and itself as a "firm seeking to serve that market."¹⁹ This shapes the theological and praxiological direction of the neoliberal black church as it considers its success to be measured by its organizational structure, its revenue generating capacity, its products (or the commodification of its rituals), and its marketing (or

¹⁸ While it may sound strange to speak of neoliberalism as a religion, this application of theological language is designed to acknowledge that neoliberalism offers the human agent and the marketplace as the gods of its system. Neoliberalism articulates an understanding of both entities and their inter-relationship reliant upon presuppositions that are presented as objective and quantifiable truths. However, these truths are foundational statements requiring their acceptance by faith. As such, neoliberalism offers a system of belief not dissimilar, in structure, to the theology of other religious systems. The proponents of this economic religion (economists) serve as, "the priesthood of a modern secular religion of economic progress that serves many of the same functions in contemporary society as earlier Christian and other religions did in their time." Nelson, Robert Henry. *Economics as Religion: From Samuelson to Chicago and beyond*. University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009: xv.

¹⁹ Finke, Roger, and Rodney Stark. *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*. 2nd ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005: 9.

evangelistic) efforts.²⁰ Implicit is the presumption that neoliberalism mutates the theological commitments of the neoliberal black church, leaving the church with a religion that simply mirrors neoliberalism rather than offering a counter-narrative to its community through its praxes. This influence of the ideology of neoliberalism is posited in this work as the primary cause of the black church's deradicalization. This deradicalization represents the deviation of the black church from the historical and theological norm of resistance to oppression to an accommodationist posture that renders the neoliberal black church complicit with neoliberalism.

This project seeks to offer a constructive response to this theological deformation calling for a reclamation of the black church's historical and theological norms that can shape its praxiological responses in a theology of economic liberation. Such a response calls the black church to reject the economic religion of neoliberalism, which has given sustenance to the pervasive oppression facing the black community. However, given the centrality of the issue of economic oppression of neoliberalism to this work, let us attend to defining what constitutes neoliberalism.

III. Ideology of Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism, a late form of capitalism, is a general economic concept referring to an ideology that rose to prominence during the 1970s. Its foundational premise is that of the classical liberal idea of the free market as the best instrument for realizing and sustaining individual freedoms.²¹ The ideology of neoliberalism refers to its ideas which are understood as a "closely held set of values and feelings, [that] acts as the filter

²⁰ Finke and Stark. *The Churching of America, 1776-2005*, 9.

²¹ Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007: 2.

through which we see everything and everybody. In fact, these beliefs are often so close to us that we do not realize that they are there. We simply think that our beliefs are natural and obviously true.”²² Neoliberalism’s ideology organizes core ideas into truth-claims driving specific modes of living. It provides constructions of the ideas of freedom, choice, community, individualism, power, and many other concerns that are influential beyond merely economic actions. These neoliberal constructions seek to supplant or mutate similar truth claims within the Christian tradition and to reshape the church’s praxes. The church and its leadership, under the influence of the ideology of neoliberalism, become codifiers of these ideologies, legitimizing “certain political interests, and defend[ing] dominant power structures” to the detriment of the black church’s liberative mission.²³ The neoliberal black church is distinctive in its practice and promotion of a Christian theology formed in the image of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism’s ideological influence on the neoliberal black church manifests itself through an increasing emphasis within the church on a gospel message and praxes that esteems entrepreneurial values such as competitiveness, self-interest, and decentralization. This influence also is seen in the prioritization of revenue and expense as measures of church health or as primary drivers to church actions, at the expense of more theologically grounded criteria, such as the effect of the actions of the church on its mission of liberation for the poor and oppressed. This change in the criteria governing the church and its actions is what is of most concern here.

²² “An ideology is a set of beliefs that affects our outlook on the world. Our ideology is our most closely held set of values and feelings, and it acts as the filter through which we see everything and everybody. In fact, these beliefs are often so close to us that we do not realize that they are there. We simply think that our beliefs are natural and obviously true. Religion is one type of ideology, and religious belief affects a person’s views.” Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 12.

²³ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. 11.

III.i.Economism of Neoliberalism

The growing influence of economic ideology on the praxes and proclamations of the church is referred to as economism. This term was used by political scientists to describe what they perceived as the violation of the “political sphere's privileged presumption of autonomy” by economic considerations as those considerations became more important.”²⁴ This term is utilized within this project to reference the phenomenon of the undue influence of economic ideology on the neoliberal black church, and the increasing use of economic measures of success to informed the self-understanding and praxes of the neoliberal black church. Economism results in the elevation of self-interest and individualism (as the neoliberal black church views itself as an economic agent) as the governing criteria for the church. It encourages the trend towards the privatization of religious experience to the detriment of the community, and cultivates an entrepreneurial spirit within its corporate operation and leadership as models to emulate.²⁵

One of the practical examples of economism at work in the neoliberal black church that will be addressed in this project is the neoliberal black church’s suburbanization. By suburbanization of the neoliberal black church, I am referencing the trend of many neoliberal black churches to escape the confines of inner-cities through relocation to outer-ring communities beginning with the out-migration of blacks in the 1970s.²⁶ Suburbanization also captures the trend of neoliberal black churches in shifting

²⁴ Ashley, Richard K. "Three Modes of Economism." *International Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (1983): 463-96.

²⁵ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 13.

²⁶ This phenomenon coincides with the emergence of neoliberalism.

expansion or new campus plants to suburban communities.²⁷ Suburbanization reflected an embrace of economic criteria by the church, at the expense of the theological, in the church's decision making. The lens of suburbanization offers the space in which to speak concretely of the deformative embrace of economism in the life of the church and the consequences of that embrace for the church, its congregants, and communities of the poor.

III.ii.Endogenous Theology

The influence of economism on the church mitigated the neoliberal black church's ability to rightly see the issues confronting the poor, to meaningfully advocate on their behalf, or to materially impact the conditions of their oppression.²⁸ Instead, the church became a codifier of neoliberal ideology, legitimizing the political and economic interests of the dominant power structure, and setting the unrealistic expectation of participation in those power structures (unchanged by any theological critique) as the goal of the church, its congregants, and its community. Economism is the means through which the governing rationality of neoliberalism instantiates itself and extends

²⁷ Winsberg, Morton D. "Flight from the Ghetto: The Migration of Middle Class and Highly Educated Blacks into White Urban Neighborhoods." *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 44, no. 4 (October 1985): 411.

²⁸ It is true that neoliberalism advances the idea of charity as one way of responding to the needs of the poor. It can be argued that neoliberalism is consistent with, and encourages, the church's charitable activity. However, one of the critiques of the concept of charity that emerges in neoliberalism is that, as Alan Gewirth argues in *The Community of Rights*, even the charitable efforts are driven by market motivations and as such become an unreliable source to address the needs of the vulnerable and marginalized. The challenge of neoliberalism is that it offers the replacement of theological motivations with market motivations and potentially robs the church of consistency in its efforts. Gewirth, Alan. *The Community of Rights*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

its influence beyond the realm of the economic into every aspect of human existence.²⁹ Economism gives shape and form to the practices of neoliberalism and concretizes its fundamental conflict with Christian theology. Economism advances the belief system of neoliberalism and can be said to expand the 'endogenous theology' of neoliberalism. The endogenous theology of neoliberalism has shared characteristics with Christian theology, possesses an eschatology, a concept of original sin and theodicy, and an ideal of sacrifice, all of which are central concepts within Christianity.³⁰ Neoliberalism's theology is considered endogenous because it emerges from within the ideological paradigm of neoliberalism and is not imposed on it by an external source. It is this endogenous theology that fuels the economism operative in deformative ways in the neoliberal church.

IV. Economic Oppression

The idea of oppression is implicit in the question under examination, and the reality of economic oppression is considered a given throughout this project. However, a brief outline of the concept of oppression will help, given that this project will take the existence and operation of oppression as a given as we proceed. Early concepts of oppression are found in the writings of political philosophers such as Hobbes and Rousseau.³¹ In Rousseau's writings is an assertion foundational to the examination of

²⁹ Jackson Jr, John L, David Kyuman Kim, and John Comaroff. "The End of Neoliberalism? What Is Left of the Left." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 637, no. 1 (2011): 141-14; Brown, Steven R. "Consistency and the Persistence of Ideology: Some Experimental Results." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (1970): 60-68.

³⁰ These ideas are presented by Jung Mo Sung but not applied to the Christian tradition specifically but rather to religion broadly. Sung, Jung Mo. *Desire, Market and Religion*. London: SCM Press, 2007.: 12.

³¹ Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. ed. C. B. Macpherson. London: Penguin, 1985; Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, and Donald A. Cress. *Basic Political Writings*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987.

oppression in this project. Rousseau's writings draw a link between oppression and economics when he asserts that oppression requires, as one of its conditional elements, the capacity to store or retain the value created by another in the "artifice of money."³² This early link between oppression and economics in Rousseau's writings blossoms in subsequent interrogations of oppression and hints invites theological institutions committed to responding to oppression into a discourse on economic oppression.

Despite this embryonic link, overwhelmingly during the period of the sixteenth to the eighteenth-century, oppression remains primarily engaged by political philosophers focused on political repression and domination.³³ By the eighteenth century, the concept of oppression was increasingly linked directly to the idea of economic exploitation by a sovereign. Often, this economic exploitation occurred through taxation or exploitation of labor.³⁴ Ann Cupp rightly suggests that the concept of oppression during this period both culturally and analytically understood, "can be summarized by saying that classical modern liberal theorists thought of domination, tyranny, and oppression as synonyms connoting rule by an arbitrary or opposing will and resulting in abrogation of liberal political rights, **economic deprivation**, and physical brutality."³⁵

³² Rousseau and Cress. *Basic Political Writings*, 77.

³³ Locke, John. *The Second Treatise of Government*. ed. C.B. Macpherson. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1980; Locke, John and James Tully. *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (HPC Classics Series). Hackett Publishing, 1983.

³⁴ Hume, David. *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*. ed. Thomas Hill Green, Thomas Hodge Grose. London: Scientia Verlag, 1964: 370.

³⁵ The emphasis in this quote is my own. Cudd, Ann E. *Analyzing Oppression*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006: 7-8.

In the nineteenth century, one continues to see a broadening of the concept of oppression. Oppression, as exercised by a ruler, expands to recognize social forms of oppression as experienced by and through social groupings. This transition emerged as the concept of ruler or sovereign grew to embrace the idea of a majority within a democratic construct, and the concept of oppression embraced the idea of “mistreatment of the minority by the majority in a democracy.”³⁶ However, an additional shift in the understanding of oppression emerges in the nineteenth century and is of consequence for our consideration of economic oppression. Karl Marx deepens the understanding of oppression as an economic or class phenomenon. Marx’s analysis of capitalism avers systematic exploitation of the working class and posits that this exploitation is not political as prior political philosophers had described. For Marx, the ability of one class to exploit another class’ labor and the product or profits of that labor was the grounds for a division of labor and gave rise to the exploitative capacity of capitalism.³⁷ Marx ushers in an understanding of oppression as concretized in economic life that will be essential (and unanticipated by Marx) to theology’s embrace of the endogenous theology of neoliberalism as a place of theological critique. Marx offers a classic understanding of economic oppression and there is concurrence between Marx’s understanding of economic oppression and the critique of neoliberalism which precipitates the call for a reformation of the neoliberal black

³⁶ Hamilton, Alexander. *Federalist Papers*. Dover Publications, 2014.

³⁷ Marx, seeing life as defined by class struggle, may be among the first to offer a description of gender exploitation by suggesting that the exploitation of women arises from what he understands as, “the first division of labor [which] was originally nothing but the division of labor in the sexual act.” Engels builds upon this idea in a later essay in which he argues that, “the first class antagonism which appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamian marriage, and the first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male.” Marx, Karl, Friedrich Engels, and Robert C. Tucker. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978: 158, 739.

church's theology. However, it is vital to keep in mind that the critique offered in this project emerges not from Marxist economic theory but from a theological understanding as expressed through the historical theological norms of the black church.

The idea of oppression begins as a way of capturing the deleterious actions of rulers that produced physical or material harm. The liberalism of the modern era introduced social categories of persons and concomitantly expanded the idea of the harm that could be experienced by these persons. The nineteenth-century gave life to the concept of oppression as experienced through the interactions between social groups and included physical and social harms. It also made a stronger case for understanding the economic dimensions of oppression. While economic or material harm was always present in interrogations of oppression, they are elevated throughout the nineteenth century. Upon this foundation, twentieth-century thinkers "begin to take note of the injustices of sexism, colonialism, and capitalism ...[and came] to use oppression to refer to unjust violence, and economic, social, political, and psychological injustices suffered by a wide variety of social groups."³⁸

What one should not lose sight of, throughout the evolution of understandings of oppression throughout history, is that oppression often is grounded in "unjust social institutions."³⁹ The language of 'institution' should be understood to encompass formal or informal structures within a society that maintain or constrain behaviors. When examining oppression, one's attention must turn to how religious, social, or economic

³⁸ Cudd, Ann E. *Analyzing Oppression*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006: 20.

³⁹ Haslanger, Sally. "Oppressions: Racial and Other." In *Racism in Mind*. Levine, Michael P., and Tamas Pataki. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004: 104-107.

institutions serve as sources of oppression or facilitate its maintenance. There are countless examples of dominant social groups enforcing or maintaining their oppression of other social groups through their domination of institutions which affirm and render their oppressive exploitations normative. Oppression intersects with and operates through communal structures and discourses of power. It influences social dynamics and the group identities for both the oppressed and the oppressor. Oppression shapes and is shaped by its reproduction within a community and the social institutions facilitating that production.⁴⁰ Experiences of oppression give urgency to this examination of the neoliberal black church.

IV.i. Communal Responses to Oppression

This discussion of oppression prompts an examination of responses to oppression, which implies that there is ongoing resistance to oppression through which the oppressed community seeks mitigation of the conditions of oppression in the hope of liberation. While oppression has been a persistent element of human experience, it is equally true that where there has been the experience of oppression, there has also arisen responses to that oppression.⁴¹ Within the historical and theological norms of the black church is the instinct of nurturing a response of resistance to the oppression

⁴⁰ For an examination of practices that contribute to the production and reproduction of systems of oppression see: O'Connor, Peg. *Oppression and Responsibility: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Social Practices and Moral Theory*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002.

⁴¹ It has been argued that oppression, understood as a particular use of power, is always in relationship with the reaction to its use. If one uses the language of resistance to capture one of the responses to power then Foucault raises the question of whether the response arises independently from the use of power or whether the response is itself anticipated by power. This understands the response to power, in this case that of resistance, to be a constitutive element of the use of power and suggests a circularity to the dynamic of power and resistance whereby one is only understood in light of the other. It is this the dynamic of power that might be explanatory when applied in this project to the relationship of the black church, as a facilitator of the response of resistance to oppression and their role as a legitimizer of the very oppressive power they once sought to eradicate. Foucault, Michel, and Colin Gordon. *Power/knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980.

experienced by blacks. While the response of resistance is neither the only nor dominant response promulgated by the black church, it has been a consistent element of the black church's response to the oppression faced by its community. While the black church has played a significant role within the black community in providing breath and form to the response of resistance from this community, the responses of the black church have grown more varied under neoliberalism. It is in the confluence of economic oppression and the immersion of the neoliberal black church in neoliberalism's ideology that leads to this examination of the deformation within the neoliberal black church.⁴²

V. The Response: Lazarian Liberative Theology.

Under the economism of neoliberalism, the neoliberal black church has experienced a theological deformation that is evident in its decreasing focus on problems such as poverty. This theological deformation is all the more evident when the neoliberal black church is examined against the backdrop of the historical theological norm of the black church. The historical and theological norm of resistance for the black church requires that the neoliberal black church overcome the influence of neoliberalism and break with the incessant individualism rampant in the theology of too many churches. To do so is made all the more difficult by neoliberalism's instantiation in the very modes of thinking governing and guiding these churches. This, however, does not lessen the need for the church to play its role in responding to communal oppression. This requires a theological framework that can operate within the context

⁴² Chapter One will lay the ground work for a discussion of the response to oppression as shaped by religious institutions. Later, in Chapter Four, we will examine the ways in which religious communities have played an accommodationalist or complicit role in the support oppression, counter to the theological foundations upon which they rest.

of neoliberalism without succumbing to its worse influences. I offer a theological framework called the lazarian liberative theology.

The lazarian liberative theology shares a kinship with the rich history of the many generations of black liberation theology.⁴³ I focus on the first generation of black liberation theology with the belief that the challenges facing the neoliberal black church in confronting economism find their best resources for response in this period of black liberation theology where black and white clergy wrestled with the universalizing tendencies present in theological discussions. These same tendencies have re-emerged through the neoliberal black church's immersion in neoliberalism.⁴⁴ Even within the first generation of black liberation theology, there was significant variance in the formulation of the theological framework. I am intentionally most reliant upon the

⁴³ It should be acknowledged that when one speaks of black liberation theology, one is not speaking about a monolithic set of theological suppositions. Instead, one is speaking of the body of knowledge that has emerged after multiple generations of preachers and theologians have interrogated its pre-suppositions. Later generations of black liberation theologians would expand the field of questions to which liberation theology sought to respond beyond that of race to include issues such as gender and sexuality which were not the primary objectives of the first generation of liberation theologians. For example, one might consider the following as examples of the evolution of black liberation theology: Griffin, Horace L., *Their Own Receive Them Not: African-American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches*, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010; Hopkins, Dwight N., *Walk Together Children: Black and Womanist Theologies, Church and Theological Education*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010; Anderson, Victor, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African-American Religious and Cultural Criticism*, Continuum New York, 1995.

⁴⁴ I am concerned that more contemporary scholars grappling with the implications and application of black liberation theology have, at times, muddled the theological waters by not adhering to the essential elements of the theological construct. While black liberation theology is open to critique, scholars such as Anthony Bradley and Alistair Kee, in spite of their best intentions, appear to fundamentally misunderstand (or redefine in ways that I consider problematic) the fundamental objective and efficacy of the theological project black liberation theology attempts to perform. Bradley, Anthony B. *The Political Economy of Liberation: Thomas Sowell and James Cone on the Black Experience*. New York: Peter Lang, 2012; Kee, Alistair, *The Rise and Demise of Black Theology*, London: SCM Press, 2008.

model of liberation developed by James Cone.⁴⁵ Cone's christologically grounded formation of black liberation theology is an efficacious foundation for articulating a theological framework grounded in the lived experiences of the oppressed.⁴⁶ I will also emphasize in this theological framework, how this framework, once embraced by the neoliberal black church, can be understood as an ongoing dialectical process. The community and the church serve as both objects and agents of experiences of liberation. Finally, I will present a theological framework that emphasizes its distinctive biblical foundation. The lazarian liberative theology espoused here utilizes the gospel of John's depiction of the resurrection of Lazarus to shape its vision of the black church as engaged in the proclamation of a Christ-centered liberty to those held captive by oppression.

While this embryonic approach to both this problem of the theological deformation of the church and the solutions offered, create more questions than are answered, I believe that what follows provides a fresh look at a challenge facing the

⁴⁵ This is not to ignore the blind spots in the first generation's writing. Many of them were silent on issues that would emerge in later iterations of black liberation theology. However, the first generation addresses the invisibility of the church's complicity in oppression that is of value to this discussion. Some of those writings constituting the first generation of black liberation theology include: Cone, James H. *Black Theology and Black Power*. New York: Seabury Press, 1969; Cone, James H. *God of the Oppressed*. Rev. ed. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997; Roberts, J. Deotis. *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*. Rev. ed. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994; Cone, Cecil Wayne. *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology*. Rev. ed. Nashville, Tenn.: AMEC, 2003; Wilmore, Gayraud S. *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*. 3rd ed., rev. and enl. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998.

⁴⁶ I am not insensitive to the tremendous contributions that Latin liberation theologians have made to the discourse on liberation, particularly when dealing with issues of class. However, because of the ways in which both race and class continue to exert its influence on the experiences and understanding of oppression within the American context, I have chosen to rely on James Cone (the shortcomings of his theological framework notwithstanding) as the starting point for my theological formulation. This is also a function of my being deeply concerned about the issue of liberation for blacks as understood through the lens of economics. One of many treatments of the deteriorating economic conditions of blacks over the last few years is found in: Leiman, Melvin M. "Chapter 2: The Economic Facts of Life" In *The Political Economy of Racism*. Chicago, Ill.: Haymarket Books, 2010: 88-145.

church over the last fifty to seventy-five years. This challenge has been misunderstood because of a lack of focus on its economic drivers and influences present. This work seeks to change that and provide a new way of examining both the black community and the black church. This effort will proceed as follows.

VI. Project Outline

Chapter 1: The Black Church and the Norm of Resistance

I will offer a counter to traditional readings of the early history of the black church by identifying a norm of resistance to the oppression that emerges within the early history of black religious traditions. However, beginning with the Great Migration, scholars note a transition in the self-understanding of the black church. This is what Gayraud Wilmore notes in his description of the deradicalization the black Church. However, this chapter will explain how what is described as deradicalization and attributed to theological deficiencies (such as other-worldliness or the loss of the militancy inherent in black folk religion) is better described by the influence of economic ideology on black churches and their congregation.

Chapter 2: The Seduction of Neoliberalism

Having argued for an acknowledgment of the influence of neoliberalism on the black church beginning during the Great Migration, this chapter explains the challenges present in neoliberalism by examining its placement of the individual and the satiation of self-interest as the primary goal of neoliberalism and the concomitant commitment to a particular construction of individual freedom which is necessary for the individual's satisfaction. These claims, as represented in the image of the *homo oeconomicus*, are at the root of the deradicalization described by scholars of the black church.

Chapter 3: The Case for a Theological Response

This chapter will respond to objections to theology's critique of neoliberalism and elaborate on the divergence of theology and neoliberalism first presented in Chapter Two. This chapter will also make the argument that neoliberalism operates as a religion and that this has aided its infiltration of the black church but also provides the foundation for a theological response.

Chapter 4: The Crisis of Complicity

This chapter asserts that the black church has been frustrated in responding to economic oppression because of the black church's embrace of the religion of neoliberalism. This embrace can be seen in the historical encounter of the neoliberal black church with suburbanization. This chapter will articulate the ways in which the embrace of economism, examined through the lens of suburbanization, was injurious to the poor, and muted the facilitation of resistance by the church.

Chapter 5: Lazarian Liberation

Given this construction of the theological problem of the religion of neoliberalism and its ideology for the black church, this chapter seeks to provide a theological model that might liberate the neoliberal black church from economism and aid in its participation in the liberation of its community. The lazarian liberative framework seeks to reclaim the historical and theological norms of the black church to resist the deformative effects of neoliberalism.

Chapter 1: The Black Church and the Norm of Resistance

I. Introduction

As early as the 1960's, sustained and systematic interrogation of the history of the black church emerged as a field of formal academic inquiry.¹ Scholars in this field examined the history of black folk religion from which the black church developed and scrutinized the black church's communal role in light of the many existential threats facing blacks across a variety of early historical periods.² Within early examinations of the black church persisted critiques either of its perceived theological or leadership deficiencies or of its role within black communities as those communities struggled to

¹ For purposes of this project, the black church is understood as those institutions which, "emerge from the religious, cultural, and social experiences of black people. With its roots on the continent of Africa and in the Middle Passage, the black church is the institution providing structure and meaning for African people and their descendants in the Americas who struggled to survive the ravages and brutality of slavery and racial oppression." Floyd-Thomas, *Black Church Studies an Introduction*, xxiii.

² A pejorative use of the phrase "folk religion" as utilized by Joseph Washington in his critique of the black church and black religious traditions is not intended here. Rather, the use of this term points to the content of religious practices formed within the social and historical contexts in which blacks sought meaning and identity through religious engagement. Washington, Joseph R. *Black Religion: the Negro and Christianity in the United States*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964.

find their voice.³ Other critiques questioned the legitimacy of the black church as an ecclesiological category.⁴

While other critiques have been lodged against the black church, these aforementioned concerns are notable for their recurrence in scholarly and religious discourse.⁵ These critiques persisted in spite of the incompleteness of the descriptions of the black church upon which they drew and their insufficient appreciation for the uniqueness of the contribution of the black church to any understanding of the universal church.⁶ More problematically, these critiques generally failed to account for the impact of economic forces on the black community and on any perceived deficiencies of the black church. While some consideration of economic influences have been a part of

³ An example of such a critique is found as early as 1966 when the National Committee of Negro Churchmen offered the following: “Too often the Negro Church has stirred its members away from the reign of God in this world and to a distorted and complacent view of an otherworldly conception of God’s power.” (The National Committee of Negro Churchmen. “Black Power.” in Cone, James H. and Gayraud S. Wilmore. *Black Theology: a Documentary History*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004: 27.) This critique of the otherworldliness of black religion, which shall be examined in greater detail, has been one of the persistent criticisms lodged against the black church. The resiliency of this critique is evident in its continued presence in more contemporary interrogations of the black church or black theology. See: Warnock, Raphael G. *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety, and Public Witness*. New York: NYU Press, 2013.

⁴ In spite of these critiques, the value of the black church as an ecclesiological category and a contributor to our understanding of the Christian church, and the black community, is well documented. One essay that speaks to this issue is: Smith, R. Drew. “The Church in African American Theology.” in Cannon, Katie G. *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology*. Vol. 1. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014: 228.

⁵ Hans A. Baer. “Black Mainstream Churches; Emancipatory or Accommodative Responses to Racism and Social Stratification in American Society?” *Review of Religious Research* 30, no. 2 (1988): 162; Barber, Kendra. “‘What Happened to All the Protests?’ Black Megachurches’ Responses to Racism in a Colorblind Era.” *Journal of African American Studies* 15, no. 2 (June 2011): 218; Fields, Bruce L. “The Continuing Task of Black Theology: The Challenges Emerging from the Contemporary Black Church in the United States.” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 44, no. 1 (2018): 4.

⁶ Andrews, Dale P. *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002: 7.

previous analysis of the black church, they primarily have functioned descriptively.⁷ While theologians engaged in embryonic critiques of economic forces, rarely were those forces considered for their institutional and theological impact on the black church.⁸ Further, theologians failed to examine the effect of the church's adoption of economic practices without critical examination of those practices in light of the church's theological commitments.⁹ Finally, theological inquiry into the black church often failed to examine the history of the black church in light of economic history. Doing so would have resulted in a re-narrating of the history of the black church and offered different understandings of both the black church's success and failures over time. This omission has resulted in a history of the black church that is, at best, incomplete. I seek to correct this theological oversight by examining the influence of capitalism, which in its current

⁷ Drake, St. Clair, and Horace R. Cayton. *Churches and Voluntary Associations in the Chicago Negro Community*. Works Projects Administration District 3, 1940; Ellison, Christopher, and Darren Sherkat. "The 'Semi-Involuntary Institution' Revisited: Regional Variations in Church Participation Among Black Americans." *Social Forces* 73(4), 1995: 1415-437; Lincoln, Charles Eric and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005: 5; Mays, Benjamin and Joseph Nicholson. *The Negro's Church*. Institute of Social and Religious Research, 1933; Nelsen, Hart M. and Anne K. Nelsen. *The Black Church in the Sixties*. University of Kentucky Press, 1975; Reddie, Anthony G. "African American Theology and the Global Economy" in Cannon, Katie G. *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology*. Vol. 1. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014: 402; Wilmore, Gayraud S. *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Introduction of the Religious History of African Americans*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998: 19.

⁸ One example of this form of economic consideration is found in: West, Cornel. *Prophesy Deliverance!: an Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003. It is important to note that West does not consider himself a theologian and would likely reject the classification of his work as a theological critique. Additionally, his critique emerges from a Marxist perspective and ignores that a critique of economic forces can be found within black theology itself. For such a critique, see: Marable, Manning, and Leith Mullings. *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy, and Society*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2015.

⁹ Additionally, theological inquiry often failed to see an economic critique emerging from within black religious thought (as opposed to arising from a Marxian critique). As such, it failed to consider what the theology of the black church had to say regarding economic agency or capitalism. As we will return to many times throughout this project, the goal is not to place economics in opposition to theology. Rather it is to suggest that a sound theology of the black church has something to say regarding the proper role of economic agency as a function of Christian identity.

stage is represented by neoliberalism, on the theology of the black church.¹⁰ This evaluative lens has been missing from theological discourse on the black church with two possible exceptions: the work of Manning Marable and Cedric Johnson.¹¹ Marable's work, while theological, does not focus on the implications on neoliberalism for the black church but rather its implications for the black community. Johnson's work focuses on the trauma blacks have endured as a result of neoliberalism and he examines the available communal mechanisms for resistance to the deformative tendencies of neoliberalism. The communal institutions considered include the meaning-making capacity of religious organizations as a source of resistance. However, neither author focuses on the deformation of the religious institution resulting from its immersion in neoliberalism. It is this consideration I seek to address.

II. Critique: Legitimacy of the Black Church as Ecclesiological Category

II.i. Argument for Universal Versus Particular Ecclesiologies

One of the critiques of the black church centers on the claim that speaking of the 'black church' represents a contradiction in the classic understandings of the Christian church.¹² Efforts to express the distinctive identity and praxes of segments of the Christian community, such as the black church, often demonstrate an ongoing struggle within the western tradition. The struggle begins within the tradition with the theological implications of universality or understandings of Christian ideas, such as the church, that transcend the uniqueness of groups or individuals. This universality is often

¹⁰ Dumenil, Gérard, and Dominique Lévy. *The Crisis of Neoliberalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011: 7-33.

¹¹ Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*; Johnson, Cedric C. *Race, Religion, and Resilience in the Neoliberal Age*. Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2016.

¹² Dulles, Avery C. *Models of the Church*. New York, NY: Image Books; Doubleday, 2002. *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church*. New York: Routledge, 2008.

appealed to in understandings of Christ that emphasize the universal nature of his work and mission.¹³ This is often contrasted with constructions of Christian ideas that emphasize particularity as the lens through which to explicate the distinctiveness of the Christian faith. Such an approach considers the human context as a starting point from which sound theology emerges.¹⁴ While this tension is most evident in Christology, it also impacts understandings of the Christian church. Concomitantly, there has existed within the western tradition an idealized universal church understood as a single transcendent organism subsuming all fragmented ecclesiological expressions arising from the contextual experiences of human communities within historical periods.¹⁵ Any emphasis on those fragmented ecclesiologies often has been perceived as elevating particular metaphors for the church and falsely presenting them as representatives of the universal church.¹⁶

In contrast, the discussion of the black church recognizes that there exists a uniqueness of human experiences, socially or culturally constructed, that gives birth to an important ecclesiological fragment that participates in understandings of the

¹³ “Schillebeeckx realizes that all revelation comes through human experience, in contingent history. He raises the challenging question as to how it is possible for us to see the uniqueness and universality in Jesus who is human and existent in a limited historical context. Liberation theology looks to the Jesus of history as the embodiment of the king of heaven. It focuses, as does Schillebeeckx, on his praxis and how he made the kingdom present and real.” Morris, John R. “Chalcedon and Contemporary Christology: A New Direction for An Ancient Christology.” *Angelicum* 75, no. 1 (1998): 33.

¹⁴ This is one of the primary arguments proffered by James Cone when anchoring his understanding of Christ in both his lived experiences and Jewishness and his connection to the lived experiences of the oppressed. Cone, James H. *Black Theology and Black Power*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997: 35-37.

¹⁵ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 26.

¹⁶ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 26; Rodríguez, Pedro. “Theological Method for Ecclesiology.” in Granfield, Patrick, and Peter C. Phan. *The Gift of the Church: a Textbook on Ecclesiology in Honor of Patrick Granfield, O.S.B.* Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000: 129–56.

universal church without being consumed by it.¹⁷ This alternative asserts that without these fragmented ecclesiologies, one is left with an idealized universal church that makes,

only tangential contact with historical realities...and [presents a church] whose operations rarely impinge on anyone's life, a church that never really knows change because, in its idealized world, it is already complete and perfect.¹⁸

Within such an universalized ecclesiological construct, discussion of the social, cultural, and historical particularity of black religious traditions remained possible, but only if it submitted to the demands of the universal ecclesiology.¹⁹ This perspective resisted any elevation of ecclesiological particularity, prescribed limits on ecclesiological examinations, and ultimately rendered discourses on the black church nonsensical unless those discourses were subordinated to the dominant universalized ideal church.

II.ii. Value of a Black Church Ecclesiology

The tension between these two perspectives, and the importance of creating space for a discussion (and more importantly critical examination) of the black church is relevant to this work for two reasons. First, as J. Cameron Carter rightly points out, the language of universality within the western theological tradition serves as a signifier for white Christian traditions to the detriment of black religious traditions and institutions.²⁰ While there is something transcendental about the universal church that is not fully captured in a close examination of its underlying fragments, there is something lacking

¹⁷ This point is implicit in Roger Haight's argument regarding an ecclesiology from above. Haight, *Christian Community in History*, 18-25.

¹⁸ Ormerod, Neil. "The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology." *Theological Studies* 63, no. 1 (2002): 5.

¹⁹ Haight, *Christian Community in History*, 18-25.

²⁰ Carter, J. Kameron. *Race: a Theological Account*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

in the universal when the fragmentary ecclesiological threads are ignored. The black church is one such fragment worthy of investigation and it makes more than an instrumental contribution to the ecclesiology of the universal church. The black church provides a witness to a unique manifestation of God as embodied in its particularity. Additionally, an embrace of the uniqueness of the black church, without over-reliance on a universalized ecclesiological perspective, affords the theologian the space to both celebrate and critically examine the black church. The reliance on the universalized ecclesiological perspective not only diminishes the importance of the black church but also allows the black church to hide in the universal church narrative without a serious examination of its fidelity to its historical and theological foundation and praxes. It is this critical examination of the black church and its interplay with neoliberalism that is of interest to this project.

III. Goals of the Black Church Ecclesiology

III.i. Discerning Unifying Threads

The ecclesiology of the black church articulates its institutional identity and theological praxes from its emergence from syncretistic black religious practices as informed by their African precursors.²¹ One of the goals of black church ecclesiology is to organize the array of theological and religious praxes that are concretized in a variety

²¹ Raboteau, Albert J. "The Death of Gods" in Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003: 239-284.

of institutional forms and displaying a plethora of theological pre-commitments.²² This is done with the hope of finding unifying threads within the institutional history of the black church that might guide the church as historical context and societal forces change. One such thread emerging from a historical ecclesiological review of the church is that the black church is indelibly shaped by its African roots and its unique experiences born of the captivity and subsequent tortured integration of blacks into the American cultural, communal, economic, and religious mosaic.²³

III.ii.Critical Historical Considerations

The strength of the ecclesiology of the black church is demonstrated in its capacity and confidence to engage in critical self-examination. Examination of the various, “perspectives and interests, agendas, and polemics” evident in the history of the black church articulates the theological and praxiological possibilities for the black church and provides a road map to ensure that subsequent generations of the black church remain aligned with the church’s historical and theological purpose.²⁴ Failure to engage in this critical historical examination creates the conditions in which the church can drift from its purpose. A critical examination of the black church considers topics as

²² Historically, study of the black church was restricted to the study of either black institutions found in predominantly white religious communities (Catholic, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist), independent black churches in predominately black religious fellowships (National and Progressive Baptist, AME, AME Zion, COGIC, or other Pentecostal/Holiness fellowships) or increasingly independent black religious communities outside of an ecclesial fellowship or structure. However, more recently, attention has been paid to black religious experiences in non-Christian religious communities (Islam, Buddhists, humanist, or even atheists.) Floyd-Thomas, *Black Church Studies*; Lincoln and Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*; Welchel, L. H. *History and Heritage of African American Churches: A Way Out of No Way*. Paragon House Publishers, 2011; Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

²³ Long, Charles H. "African American Religion in The United States of America: An Interpretative Essay." In *The Collected Writings of Charles H. Long: Ellipsis*. London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.

²⁴ Ormerod, “The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology,” 6. While Ormerod does not have the black church in mind, his understanding of the purpose of a critical historical evaluation of the church has direct applicability to this analysis.

diverse as the role of religion as promulgated by slaveholders and the hermeneutics of slaves exposed to religion; examination of the birth and rise of the institutional black church; the impact of Jim Crow and segregation following emancipation on the theological and praxiological evolution of the black church; the emergence of the Civil Rights movement and the influence, or lack thereof, of the black church among the leadership of the movement; and the transformation of the black church following the Great Migration.²⁵ It is only through a critical evaluation of the history of the black church that one is able to construct an ecclesiological understanding of the black church that might speak across generations.

III.iii.Discerning Norms for the Church

Its ability to speak generationally results from the capacity of the ecclesiology of the black church to discern those norms which serve as the basis for evaluating the consistency, contribution, and conformity of contemporary constructions of the black church relative to its historical instantiation.²⁶ Such an ecclesiology critically interrogates the black church as it emerges from specific historical and social contexts to identify, “constitutive elements of the church that transcend its particular instantiations.”²⁷ This

²⁵ There are many treatments of the origins and the history of the black church. A selected sample of readings demonstrating the breath of research on the black church include: Pinn, Anne H., and Anthony B. Pinn. *Introduction to Black Church History*. Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2002; Raboteau, *Canaan Land*; Lincoln and Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*; Du Bois, W. E. B. and Alton B. Pollard. *The Negro Church: Report of a Social Study Made under the Direction of Atlanta University*; Together with the Proceedings of the Eighth Conference for the Study of the Negro Problems, Held at Atlanta University, May 26th, 1903. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011; Raboteau, Albert J. *Slave Religion the "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; Johnson, Sylvester A. *African American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2015; Packard, Jerrold M. *American Nightmare: The History of Jim Crow*. New York: St Martins Press, 2002; Chappell, David L. *Stone of Hope - Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow*. Chapel Hill, NC: University Of North Carolina, 2005.

²⁶ Ormerod, “The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology,” 9.

²⁷ Haight, *Christian Community in History*, 19.

allows for the identification of the norms that express, “the limits or frontiers beyond which are defective embodiments of the church.”²⁸ The ecclesiology of the black church seeks to answer whether subsequent instantiations are, “properly oriented to the goal of the church and the incremental realization of the kingdom of God.”²⁹ While tethered to historical and social contexts, this ecclesiology defines the normative standards against which contemporary instantiations are critiqued. This function of an ecclesiological framework will be critical to this project’s evaluation of the contemporary black church’s response to economic influences.

III.iv.Presupposition of This Ecclesiological and Theological Evaluation

The ecclesiological challenge facing the black church emerges from the influence of neoliberalism on the church. Both this understanding of the challenge facing the church and potential responses to this challenge hold the theological tenants of the Christian faith as its indispensable hermeneutical lens. As we proceed through this discussion, a critique of the church we will encounter relates to a perceived deficiency in its theological foundation and/or leadership. While the question of theological deficiency will be addressed, and an alternative causation offered, the problem, its causation, and possible remedy all privilege a Christian theological lens. I acknowledged that the persuasiveness of this argument may hinge on one’s acceptance of a Christian theological lens, without which much of what proceeds may not be convincing.

²⁸ *ibid.*, 19.

²⁹ Ormerod, “The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology,” 9.

Throughout this discussion, when speaking of the black church I have a uniquely Christian expression of that church and its theology in mind.³⁰

IV. Critique: Theological Deficiency of the Black Church

IV.i. Concern Regarding Christianity's Introduction to the Enslaved

The critique of the black church related to the perceived deficiency of its underlying theology suggests that this deficiency first arose during Christianity's introduction to the enslaved in America. From the very beginning, Christianity was about "the sacrifice of all freedom, all pride, all self-confidence of spirit [and] at the same time subjugation, self-derision, and self-mutilation."³¹ Christianity was used to inculcate a subservient and submissive disposition within blacks and to insemminate within their psyche an acceptance of whites as divinely ordained in their position of power.³² Slaves encountered a Christianity stripped of its liberative capacity and offering what would later become known as an "other-worldliness".³³ Other-worldliness represented an emphasis away from material and temporal concerns in the pursuit of eschatological reversal and reward. The Christianity of the slaves, and later of the black church, was considered unable to break free of its roots in accommodation of and passivity towards

³⁰ I also recognize that the category of Christian theology remains broad and I direct the reader back to the introduction's assertion of a Protestant theological framework being used when reference is made to a Christian theology.

³¹ While this statement was not made regarding Christianity's introduction to the enslaved in America, it is nonetheless an appropriate description of Christianity's function during that period. Nietzsche, Friedrich. "Beyond Good and Evil" in *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*. New York, 1972: 432.

³² Fountain, Daniel L. *Slavery, Civil War, and Salvation: African American Slaves and Christianity, 1830-1870*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2010; Olaudah Equiano, et al. *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal: An African American Anthology*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000; Berry, Faith. *From Bondage to Liberation: Writings By and About Afro-Americans From 1700 to 1918*. New York: Continuum, 2001.

³³ Calhoun-Brown, Allison. "While Marching to Zion: Otherworldliness and Racial Empowerment in the Black Community." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37, no. 3. 1998.

oppression.³⁴ As a result, Christianity was viewed by ensuing generations of blacks as irreparably damaged and as never possessing the subversive theological or intellectual tools needed to facilitate blacks' pursuit of value, dignity, and equality.³⁵

IV.ii. Additional Theological Disconnection

The impoverishment of theological tools available to the black church was exacerbated by a perceived disconnection between the Christianity operative in the black church and historical Protestant theology.³⁶ This disconnection was attributed, in part, to the impoverishment of ecclesial leadership within the black church.³⁷ Given the understandably low levels of formally-educated clergy within the black church and the

³⁴ This was one of the criticisms lodged by Malcolm X regarding the Christianity embraced by blacks. "The greatest miracle Christianity has achieved...is a miracle that 22 million black people have not risen up against their oppressors – in which they would have been justified by all moral criteria, and even by the democratic tradition! It is a miracle that a nation of black people has so fervently continued to believe in a turn-the-other-cheek and heaven-for-you-after-you-die philosophy!...The miracle is that the white man's puppet Negro 'leaders', his preachers and the educated Negroes laden with degrees, and others who have been allowed to wax fat off their black poor brothers, have been able to hold the black masses quiet until now." X, Malcolm, and Alex Haley. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: with the Assistance of Alex Haley*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1992: 67.

³⁵ Hill Fletcher, Jeannine. *The Sin of White Supremacy: Christianity, Racism, and Religious Diversity in America*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2017; Driscoll, Christopher M. *White Lies: Race and Uncertainty in the Twilight of American Religion*. New York: Routledge-Taylor & Francis, 2016; Chapman, Mark L. *Christianity on Trial: African-American Religious Thought Before and After Black Power*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1996.

³⁶ This presupposes the centrality of Protestantism to black religious traditions. It is acknowledged that there are rich religious traditions within the black church that are neither Protestant nor Christian. However, the Protestant tradition represents a significant portion of the black religious community and provides a rich context for this project. Essays that speak to both the diversity of black religious experiences in America and the scope of the Protestant tradition within the black religious tradition can be found in: "Special Issue on Black American Religion in the Twentieth Century" *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 29, No. 4, (Jun., 1988).

³⁷ The impoverishment of ecclesial leadership was viewed as a by-product of the low levels of educational attainment by black clergy. Educational attainment of black clergy would be an enduring problem for the black church, particularly given that "the historical evangelical background of Baptist, Methodists, and Pentecostals did not have stringent educational demands but only required evidence of a personal call from God to the ministry." However, the problem would ultimately be addressed as growing numbers of black clergy gained access to seminaries and other educational methods of preparation. Lincoln and Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 130; Marx, Gary T. "Religion: Opiate or Inspiration of Civil Rights Militancy Among Negroes?" *American Sociological Review* 32, no. 1 (1967): 65-67.

emphasis on emotionalism within the practices of the black church, the church was seen as devoid of the leadership or theological depth necessary to navigate the complex contextual realities blacks faced or to assert and advocate for the autonomy of its constituents in a society accustomed to their subservience.³⁸ This concern would grow over the decades but also would be mitigated by the establishment of schools dedicated to educating blacks and growing the ranks of educated black clergy.³⁹

IV.iii. Theological Deficiency of the Black Church

What was important in this critique was its acknowledgement of the connection between the theology of the black church, the theological resources available, and the praxes for fostering resistance to oppressive systems. This critique expressed the concern that either the black church was bereft of the theological tools necessary for fostering resistance or failed to deploy their theological and material resources to facilitate liberation. This perception was captured by Gayraud Wilmore who described the norm of the black church as “acceptance of protest and agitation as theological perquisites for black liberation and the liberation of oppressed people.”⁴⁰ In making this statement, Wilmore acknowledged the centrality of the black church to the formulation of responses of resistance by the black community in its confrontation with oppression (agitation and protest) and its experience of liberation. Wilmore sought to make explicit the diminishment of praxes of protest within the black church in spite of the continued

³⁸ Lincoln and Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 130-131.

³⁹ Swift, David Everett. *Black Prophets of Justice: Activist Clergy Before the Civil War*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989; Lincoln and Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 115-135.

⁴⁰ As this project interrogates the role of the black church in response to the oppression embodied within neoliberalism, both the deradicalization of the black church and the dechristianization of protest will be themes to which we will return. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, ix.

presence of oppressive systems encountered by blacks. Wilmore did so through his use of the language of the 'deradicalization' of the black church.⁴¹ Deradicalization refers to the ways in which the black church is believed to have adopted an increasing accommodationalist posture as oppose to resisting the systemic forces that threatened both it and the black community. This language of deradicalization pointed out the diminishing role of the black church in resisting systemic oppression while acknowledging the resilience of resistance within the broader black community. That resistance to oppression increasingly took on institutional forms outside of the traditional Christian institutions of the black community.⁴² Wilmore's assertion reflected the complex relationship between the black church and responses to systemic oppression. The assertion also reflected a misunderstanding of the drivers behind the shift in praxes of protest in the black church which appeared over time.

V. Re-Evaluating the Causes of Deradicalization

The perceived driver of deradicalization was rooted in the black church's historic acceptance and promulgation of a Christianity that fostered accommodation of and capitulation to oppressive systems.⁴³ Christianity, as first disseminated on plantations

⁴¹ I believe that while the assessment of change in the practices of the black church relative to its engagement with oppressive systems is accurate, the cause for this deradicalization provided by Gayraud Williams and other scholars is incomplete. This will be discussed in greater detail below. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, ix.

⁴² *ibid.*, 163-195. Wilmore refers to this phenomenon as the dechristianization of black radicalism. *ibid.*, 196-221.

⁴³ Many scholars reject the idea of the black church as a significant facilitator of resistance to societal issues or concerns. Lincoln, C. Eric. "The Power of the Black Church." *CrossCurrents* 24, no. 1 (1974): 3-21; Clayton, Obie. "The Churches and Social Change: Accommodation, Moderation, or Protest." *Daedalus* 124, no. 1 (1995): 101-17; Baer, Hans A. "Black Mainstream Churches; Emancipatory or Accommodative Responses to Racism and Social Stratification in American Society?" *Review of Religious Research* 30, no. 2 (1988): 162; Baer, Hans A., and Merrill Singer. *African-American Religion in the Twentieth Century: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation*. Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1997.

and later through segments of the black church, did more to suppress the instinct of resistance among blacks than to encourage it.⁴⁴ This was accomplished through a theological reliance on the 'other-worldliness' mentioned above. This other-worldly perspective redirected the concerns of blacks away from resistance and towards acceptance of suffering in the hope of eschatological relief and reward. Other-worldliness was seen as supporting a contempt for the needs arising from this-world.⁴⁵ This encouraged the enslaved and later generations of blacks to accept the conditions of their life and to focus on reward in the life to come. Those rewards were understood to be determined by obedience to and acceptance of the divinely-ordained superiority and sovereignty of whites. The black church was routinely criticized for its promotion of the other-worldliness perceived as inherent in Christianity.⁴⁶

Dwight Hopkins argues that the promotion of this Christianity and its other-worldliness was for the socialization of, "the entire black race into an abject, groveling

⁴⁴ For example, E. Franklin Frazier suggests that the introduction of Christianity to blacks depressed any instincts of resistance by offering blacks, "the blind conviction or the trembling hope that somewhere, beyond these earthly shadows, there [was] a world of light eternal, where obstinate questionings of the mind would be answered and the heart shall find rest." Frazier suggests that attempts to read acts of resistance into slave religious practices through recontextualization of those praxes is in error. Frazier and Lincoln, *The Negro Church in America*, 18-19.

⁴⁵ "The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly a struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion." Karl Marx. "Introduction to Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right." In *The Marx-Engels Reader*. ed. Robert C. Tucker. New York: W. W. Norton, 1978: 54. "If one shifts the centre of gravity of life out into the beyond . . . one has deprived life as such of its centre of gravity." Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *The Anti-Christ*. [Auckland, N.Z.]: Floating Press, 2010: 155.

⁴⁶ Critics, such as Martin Delany, faulted the church, "for teaching excessive otherworldliness that expected spiritual means to equip folks to compete with whites in the moral and physical areas of life... God did not provide mystical solutions for the hard problems of power and self-realization, nor did he expect blacks to accept white definitions of reality when those definitions presumed white jurisdiction over black progress." Nancy Weiss describes this behavior as the result of, "the commonly accepted principle of social science that a submerged group must reach a certain plateau before it can begin to rebel, and most Negroes of the Wilson era were still struggling towards that level." Weiss, Nancy J., *The Negro and the New Freedom* in Weinstein, Allen, and Frank Otto. Gatell. *The Segregation Era: 1863-1954: A Modern Reader*. Oxford: Oxford U.P, 1970: 194.

state of absolute obedience...not to teach the individuals faith in Jesus Christ, but to mold slaves into believing in and acting as if the white race were God on earth.”⁴⁷ The black church was perceived as instilling within,

the masses the idea of a 'natural' or 'God-given' character of existing structures and social relations (private property, the family), the importance of transcendental concerns over everyday, 'earthly' collective action, the 'moral' virtues of poverty and meekness, and the sacrosanct nature of all forms of established authority.⁴⁸

This resulted in the cooption of religion as a tool in the subjugation of blacks through the church's capacity as a critical disseminator of the ruling group's ideology.⁴⁹ Christianity, as a tool of suppression, was augmented by other equally effective methods of systematically rendering blacks fearful of whites and inculcating into the black community and their religious institutions a belief in the God-ordained omnipotence of whites.⁵⁰ This critique of Christianity and the black church, as dampening advocacy of resistance to oppression, is not limited to the period of slavery. During the early twentieth century, Wilmore described the black church as primarily interested in “community betterment, cultural enrichment, and only mild opposition to the most

⁴⁷ Hopkins, Dwight N. *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000: 84.

⁴⁸ Boggs, Carl. *The Two Revolutions: Antonio Gramsci and the Dilemmas of Western Marxism*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984: 176.

⁴⁹ Anderson, Perry. "The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci" *New Left Review*. I no. 100 (November – December 1976): 5–78; Baer, "Black Mainstream Churches," 162.

⁵⁰ Additionally, the, "institutionalizing [of] an oppressive theological language" to mitigate what plantation owners recognized as "the subversive language of body and spiritual liberation embedded in the Christian gospel" augmented their efforts to replace the image of Jesus with that of whites as the intermediary between blacks and God and cement the position of whites as divinely ordained. Baer, "Black Mainstream Churches," 85-86.

destructive aspects of white racism.”⁵¹ It is this critique of the black church and its relationship to Christianity that has dominated academic considerations of the black church. While there is much to commend regarding this perspective, it is also incomplete in its assessment of the black church and the church’s engagement with Christianity.

V.i. The Receipt of Christianity

While capitulation to forces of oppression, both historically and in the current moment, remains a relevant consideration in evaluations of the black church, this narrative also merits critical examination. During slavery, the transmission of Christianity, intended by plantation owners to facilitate and reinforce the enslaved’s subjugation, did not occur in a vacuum. Instead, the enslaved encountered Christianity as informed by their African religious experiences.⁵² The religious instincts of blacks did not begin with their arrival in slave ships or with the efforts of white ministers seeking to

⁵¹ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 163-195. For example, the lack of resistance evident in the actions of black clergy, “was consonant with the ethics of white Christianity by which they were increasingly influenced. The picture of the self-effacing patiently suffering Jesus held up by conservative evangelicals and revivalists at the turn of the century became for many black preachers the authoritative image of what it is like to be a Christian.” Frazier and Lincoln, *The Negro Church in America*, 168.

⁵² “Africans and African American brought their own commitments to previous concepts and visceral lifestyles, a comprehensive spirituality, into the rituals and regularities of slavery churches. Slaves and masters could hear, repeat, and swear to the same biblical text, catechism, or sermon but think, feel, and interpret differently.” Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*, 109.

save the heathens' soul.⁵³ This human cargo brought the gods and religious practices of Africa with them.⁵⁴ This runs counter to the myth that the enslaved had no history, no past, or no connection to their homeland except through the influence of primitive savagery from which slaves were allegedly delivered by the Europeans.⁵⁵ Rather than blank slates upon which the other-worldliness of Christianity was inscribed, enslaved Africans brought with them the remnants of West African religious world-views that provided them with the capacity for reinterpretation and recontextualization of the

⁵³ The evangelistic instincts of white religious adherents is evident in a review of the writings and particularly the sermons of the time. For example, the sermons of George Whitefield, who is neither an antislavery nor proslavery advocate, asserts the christianization of slaves was a moral imperative and the withholding of the gospel from Africans contrary to biblical mandates. However, Whitefield's embrace of the humanity of slaves does not explicitly or intentionally include the earthly overthrow of the social and civic inequality of slavery. His religious pre-commitments speak to some aspects of slavery but limits the application of divine reversal of the institution of slavery. (Young, Jeffrey Robert, *Proslavery and Sectional Thought in the Early South, 1740-1829: An Anthology*. Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2006: 69.) However, the possibilities of divine reversal evident in the religious teaching of Whitfield and others like him was not lost on slaveholders and provided eschatological hope for slaves. The possibility of divine reversal, or worse a concomitant earthly equality, dampened the receptivity of many slaveholders to the preaching and teaching of the gospel to slaves. This reaction was prominent enough to cause Whitefield and other ministers to vehemently deny that Christianity would result in any change in the social order. What is also interesting is that economic interests ultimately alter even the advocacy offered by Whitfield. "Later in the decade the prophetic edge had all but disappeared from Whitefield's admonitions. Under the threat of economic disaster he offered a somewhat different perspective upon human bondage; by 1747 he was contriving a scheme to bail his orphan house out of financial difficulty...His solution for Bethesda's mismanagement and lack of productivity was inauguration of a colony plantation in South Carolina where slave labor could be utilized legally." Stein, Stephen J., George Whitefield on Slavery: Some New Evidence, *Church History* 42, no. 02, 1973: 245.

⁵⁴ One example of this is witnessed in Sylvester Johnson's depiction of the interplay between Christian merchants and the enslaved within Gambia. While this example is outside of the American context, it does describe the complex way in which West African religious traditions were intermingled with Christian practices and concepts. Johnson, *African American Religions, 1500-2000*, 56-106; Frey, Sylvia R., and Betty Wood. *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998; 35-62; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 8-9, 13; Pinn, Anthony B. *Introducing African American Religion*. London; New York: Routledge, 2013: 24-28.

⁵⁵ For an insightful discussion of slave encounters with Christianity and its influence on black religious traditions as codified in the *invisible institution*, see: Hopkins, Dwight. "Slave Theology in the Invisible Institution." In West and Glaude, *African American Religious Thought*, 790-830; Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*; Herskovits, Melville J. *The Myth of the Negro Past*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1990.

Christianity to which they were exposed.⁵⁶ Even if one accepts that the other-worldliness of Christianity served as a suppressant to resistance, it would be a mistake to assume that it did not undergo the same transformation as other elements of Christianity as it encountered the existing religious experiences and perspectives of the enslaved.⁵⁷

V.ii.Subversive Capacity of Christianity

The Christianity believed to promote an other-worldliness resulting in passivity was the same Christianity considered subversive of the very power structures seeking to ensure their success through its use.⁵⁸ The subversive nature of Christianity is witnessed in the reality that many plantation owners were wary of religious instruction for their slaves.⁵⁹ Other hints at Christianity's subversive nature are found in examples of the rituals of Christianity serving as mechanisms for the reconstruction of identity on the part of the enslaved.⁶⁰ Rather than rendering the sense of self or material

⁵⁶ Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*, 109. An example of the unique hermeneutics that the enslaved brought to the Christian practice of biblical interpretation is found in: Oshatz, Molly. *Slavery and Sin: The Fight against Slavery and the Rise of Liberal Protestantism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012: 70-72; Saillant, John. *Black Puritan, Black Republican: The Life and Thought of Lemuel Haynes, 1753-1833*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. Examples of the unique approach of the enslaved to other Christian practices is found in: Floyd-Thomas, *Black Church Studies*, 4-10; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*.

⁵⁷ Raboteau details the ways in which the content of sermons were reinterpreted by the slave audiences to address the realities of the slaves' state in slavery and yet affirmed the justice they believed eventually would be visited upon their plight and that of their oppressors. Raboteau, Albert J. "The Death of Gods" In West and Glaude, *African American Religious Thought*, 239-284; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*.

⁵⁸ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 151.

⁵⁹ Stein, *George Whitefield on Slavery*, 245.

⁶⁰ For example: "Though legally restricted from learning how to read, black chattel subverted this mechanism of power (that is the holy scriptures employed as a false instrument anchoring oppressive sermons, catechism, and ethics of the master and his paid clergy) by reappropriating and claiming the biblical word from their vantage as those at the bottom of the plantation society...African American workers could deploy the Bible as a technique of constituting the black person's self-initiated being. Surreptitiously reading the biblical story enabled them to know the world for themselves, to be made whole by expressing their intellect, and to master the sacred text." Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology*, 120.

awareness of the enslaved impotent, Christian practices served to resurrect, “black intellect from the hell of whiteness and ignorance” which was an important step in the liberation of the individual on a cognitive level.⁶¹ This presented the possibility of experiences of liberty even as one struggled against the bonds of captivity.⁶² It is this capacity of Christianity that will be essential in envisioning the work of the church in the midst of the changing nature of oppression faced by the black community.⁶³

While the religious practices of the enslaved did not always manifest in active resistance to oppression, it would be a mistake to believe that Christianity did not ferment any forms of resistance. The other-worldliness of Christianity extended the vision of slaves beyond their temporal boundaries allowing them to, “relocate themselves into the novel horizons beyond the demonic clutches of those who would snuff them out.”⁶⁴ In understanding Christianity and the other-worldliness introduced to slaves, both of which were influential to the theology of the black church, scholars made the grave error of believing that Christianity only served to foster accommodation of systemic oppression while discounting its capacity to incite forms of passive resistance.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*, 121

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church*, 75-116. Regarding the changing nature of oppression, see: Haslanger, Sally. “Oppressions: Racial and Other.” in *Racism in Mind*. Levine, Michael P., and Tamas Pataki. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004.

⁶⁴ Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*, 122.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 122. James Cone acknowledges the problem as the ‘white lie’ of Christianity not Christianity itself when he asserts that, “the most corrupting influence among the Black Churches was their adoption of the ‘white lie’ that Christianity is primarily concerned with otherworldly reality.” Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 121.

The eschatological reversal of other-worldliness also, “whetted the appetites for what everyone knew whites were undeservedly enjoying in the here and now.”⁶⁶ In rejection of the status quo, other-worldliness fueled blacks’ belief that the conditions they faced required change and neither removed the possibility that they might become agents of active resistance nor diminished the importance of passive resistance which embraced and promoted their human dignity and value. These experiences of and responses to oppression were contextualized within an eternal pursuit of reversal, reward, and vindication. The eternal nature of this pursuit did not rule out temporal action, it merely provided the hope that reversal not realized temporally would be realized nonetheless. While there remain different understandings of the influence of other-worldliness on the facilitation of resistance by the black church, Christianity did promote acts of active and passive resistance to the pervasive efforts of whites to denigrate and subjugate the humanity of blacks from the time of slavery until now.⁶⁷ Instead of being understood as a theological deficiency of the black church, Christianity demonstrated an equal capacity to serve as a source of resistance both during slavery and in the historical periods that followed.

VI. Resistance and the Black Church

VI.i. Question of Causation

There are three questions to be addressed in an evaluation of the black church. The first is whether there is a theological deficiency within the black church. The second question is, if one accepts the idea of a theological deficiency within the black church,

⁶⁶ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 101.

⁶⁷ “Even now, many suggest that the nature of black Protestantism, especially its otherworldly orientation, depresses efforts to maximize African American political and social influence...[However] no form of religiosity depresses racial empowerment...Other-worldliness strongly predicts support for separatist-oriented means to empowerment.” Calhoun-Brown, “While Marching to Zion,” 427.

what is the cause? The third is what is the remedy for this deficiency? The critique of the black church has posited that there is a theological deficiency and we will return to this issue. For now, let us examine the second question regarding causation, as this will be instrumental in both understanding the proposed theological deficiency and in the formulation of a remedy. Critics of the black church perceived the theological deficiencies of the church as grounded in Christianity's promotion of passivity on the part of blacks.⁶⁸ However, this conclusion diminishes the religious agency of the enslaved and ignores their demonstrated capacity for recontextualization, reconstruction, and redeployment of theological concepts.⁶⁹ This conclusion places far too much weight on the goals of the paternalistic promulgators of Christianity and gives too little weight to the documented capacity of the enslaved to reinterpret the Christianity they encountered.⁷⁰ This reinterpretation of Christianity seems evident in the many examples of resistance to slavery that was not diminished, but in some cases, strengthened by the encounter with Christianity.⁷¹

VI.ii.Evidence of Resistance Prior to Christianity

Though there is sufficient historical witness to the embrace of Christianity by the black church, Wilmore rightly rejects that religious passivity as the norm within black

⁶⁸ Pinn, *Introducing African American Religion*, 55.

⁶⁹ Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology*.

⁷⁰ "Enslaved Africans gradually merged their composite African religiosity with western notions of Christianity through complex cultural processes of enculturation, adaptation, and assimilation." Floyd-Thomas, *Black Church Studies*, 5; Sobel, Mechal. *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-century Virginia*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987; Creel, Margaret Washington. *A Peculiar People: Slave Religion and Community-culture Among the Gullahs*. New York: New York University Press, 1988; Wood, Peter H. *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina From 1670 Through the Stono Rebellion*. New York: Norton, 1975.

⁷¹ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 289-315.

religious communities.⁷² Rather, the black church has always been concerned with oppression and the material realities in which blacks existed.⁷³ Out of this concern for the lived experiences of blacks, the black church demonstrated resistance to oppression as normative to the black church. However, this norm was not the result of religious instincts alone. Well before there were the manifestations of resistance as supported by Christian instincts, there was evidence of blacks' very human response to the ruptured reality resulting from their violent theft from their homeland and concretized in the Middle Passage and burgeoning slave trade.⁷⁴ From the moment the voices of the captured breached the heavens from the bowels of congested slaves ships in desperate cries to their ancestors and gods, one sees strains of the all too human response of resistance to oppression. The men, women, and children of the African continent who found themselves trapped in the emerging hell of the Middle Passage engaged in forms of resistance against the conditions violently imposed upon them by the will of their captors.⁷⁵ This human instinct of resistance to oppression would serve as one of the many catalysts for the contextualization of Christianity within the enslaved and

⁷² Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 108: 101.

⁷³ Evidence is seen as early as West African religious experiences and repeatedly manifest itself in African American religious experiences. Johnson, *African American Religions, 1500-2000*, 59, 273; Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. --, et al. *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.

⁷⁴ Mustakeem, Sowande M. *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage*. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2016; Rediker, Marcus. *The Slave Ship: A Human History*. New York: Penguin, 2008; Smallwood, Stephanie E. *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.

⁷⁵ Stephanie Camp provides a particularly vivid depiction of the ways in which enslaved women found passive and active ways to resist the dehumanizing reality of slavery. She charts a pattern of resistance that consistently describes the enslaved as "subtle agitators who inspired more overt acts." This practical resistance, well before the emergence of the black church, speaks to the human instinct within blacks which inspired actions as varied as escape to slave revolts. Camp, Stephanie M. H. *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2006, 26.

subsequent generations of the black community.

Hopkins notes that slaves engaged in active forms of resistance through suicide which was consistent with West African ideas of returning home.⁷⁶ These tragic acts represented active resistance to the commodification and denial of inherent human value slavery represented.⁷⁷ For example, “upon arrival, certain Ibos brought to the North American mid-Atlantic shores turned around and walked back into the waters headed for Ibo land.”⁷⁸ These actions were just a few of the ways in which the instincts of slaves to re-constitute and maintain a sense of their humanity were on display during the earliest vestiges of slavery.⁷⁹ Not every enslaved individual found the capacity or the opportunity to manifest a form of active resistance to their captors. Often, the mere shock of circumstances, the magnitude of brutality, the disorienting experience of separation from what was known and familiar, or the overwhelming presence of death

⁷⁶ Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*, 129.

⁷⁷ “Suicide suggested an ultimate determination to remove an unpaid labor commodity from the slavery system and consequently, was a blow against macro-political economy.” *ibid.*, 129.

⁷⁸ Hopkins notes this idea as presented in *Daughters of the Dust* as directed by Julie Dash. *ibid.*, 129.

⁷⁹ Whether represented by the cries of the varied tongues of the many tribal identities present within the putrid bellies of cargo holds, or by the many lives willingly self-sacrificed as captured slaves flung themselves over the sides of ships into the icy grip of the Atlantic ocean, believing death to be better than captivity, one witnesses the many instantiations of resistance to the insanity of capture and subsequent enslavement. Slave mortality provides one lens through which one might begin to estimate the degree to which slaves resisted their imprisonment during the Middle Passage. Mortality rates resulted from many factors such as the design of slaves ships, the knowledge of the ship’s crew regarding issues of health for slaves, the speed of the transportation of slaves from Africa to their eventual place of purchase, etc.. However, slave mortality also resulted from slave suicides during the passage as evident in the written records of ship captains and crew. Prior to 1680, it is estimated that close to fifteen to twenty percent of slaves died during the trip from Africa to Brazil and of the 1.1 million slaves purchased along the African coast by French Traders approximately 150,000 of them died in transit. Writings available from slave traders detail the occurrences of slaves sacrificing themselves to avoid further bondage and it is estimated that ten to fifteen percent of the mortalities resulted from suicides. Stein, Robert. *Mortality in the Eighteenth-Century French Slave Trade*. *The Journal of African History* 21, no. 01 (January 1980): 35; Coughtry, Jay. *The Notorious Triangle: Rhode Island and the African Slave Trade, 1700–1807*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981. Cohn, Raymond L. “Deaths of Slaves in the Middle Passage.” *The Journal of Economic History* 45, no. 03 (1985): 685-92.

surrounding the captured, left many simply seeking to survive their conditions through some form of surrender to their captors.⁸⁰ However, even passive responses to the trauma of the Middle Passage and slavery demonstrated that the human capacity for survival through capitulation also can be understood as a form of resistance.⁸¹ Resistance manifested itself prior to the influence and impact of religion or the black church. The history and fear of slave revolts is well-documented and emphasizes the history of resistance to the violent and brutal oppression blacks confronted since their introduction to America.⁸²

VI.iii. Resistance and the Early Black Church

Over time, the communal instinct of resistance to oppression met the embryonic religious praxes of the enslaved as they were introduced to Christianity. Religious praxes expressed resistance within the constraints of slavery through the birth of the 'invisible institution.'⁸³ Slaves would clandestinely gather using syncretized forms of religious rituals to engage in what would evolve into the foundation of black religious experience.⁸⁴ These early forms of religious expression demonstrated that, even at this

⁸⁰ Kolchin, Peter. *American Slavery, 1619-1877*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1994; Mullin, Gerald W. *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-century Virginia*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972.

⁸¹ An example of passive resistance during slavery is seen in: Tucker, Veta Smith. "Secret Agents: Black Women Insurgents on Abolitionist Battlegrounds." In Frederickson, Mary E., Delores M. Walters, and Darlene Clark Hine. *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013: 77-98, 99-114.

⁸² The history of slave revolts, and more importantly, the fear of slave revolts, is well-documented. Aptheker, Herbert. *American Negro Slave Revolts*. New York: International Publishers, 2013: 209, 211, 234. For additional treatments of slave revolts see: Genovese, Eugene D. *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006; Greenberg, Kenneth S. *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁸³ Floyd-Thomas, *Black Church Studies*, 11.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 12.

stage in their encounter with Christianity “the mindset and philosophical inclinations of the oppressed Christian were diametrically opposed to those of the oppressor.”⁸⁵ The birth of clandestine gatherings manifested the resistance within blacks that would eventually inculcate itself into the black church. In spite of being inundated with religious teachings that suggested the state of slavery as the proper and divinely determined state for the enslaved, the enslaved actively sought out religious experiences that provided them with the theological, spiritual, and emotional context for enduring their current conditions while also reaching forward to the day when their gods would orchestrate the divine reversal of their fortunes.⁸⁶ The enslaved’s recontextualization of Christianity in these secret worship experiences created space for those who were denied the ability to lay claim to any space.⁸⁷ These instincts would provide the basis upon which the black church would be born.

An example of the resistance embedded into the very fabric of the early black church is witnessed in the Free African Society founded in 1787 by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones. The Free African Society resulted from the forced removal of Absalom Jones, along with other black members of St. George’s parish, as they knelt in prayer at the altar.⁸⁸ Absalom Jones and his followers petitioned the Episcopal Church to remain

⁸⁵ Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*, 136. Given the great fear permeating throughout the ranks of plantation owners regarding the possibility of slave revolts, gatherings of slaves were either heavily monitored or violently punished to discourage participants from fomenting more active resistance. Nonetheless, segments of the slave communities sought out opportunities to engage in religious practices that affirmed their self-worth and that were faithful to their understanding of the spiritual world and its connection to their plight in slavery.

⁸⁶ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 211-219.

⁸⁷ Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*, 135.

⁸⁸ Floyd-Thomas, *Black Church Studies*; McKinney, Richard I. “The Black Church: Its Development and Present Impact.” *Harvard Theological Review* 64, no. 4 (October 1971): 457.

members of the Episcopal Church but to operate as a separate parish, free of white control.⁸⁹ This petition resulted in the establishment of the St. Thomas African Episcopal Church, the first independent black church in the Philadelphia area. Jones went on to become the first black Episcopal priest in the nation when ordained in 1805.⁹⁰ The experience of these parishioners, in being a part of a church which continued to deny them the full expression of their humanity through fellowship across racial lines, was not an experience unique to Jones, Allen, and his fellow congregants at St. George. In fact, the widespread nature of cultural and religious segregation, along with the inspired resistance exhibited by Allen and Jones, led other religious groups of blacks to follow suit and form their own congregations with some seeking out Allen for leadership and guidance.⁹¹ This resulted in the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denomination as the first black denomination in the United States in Philadelphia in 1787. Over-time, this process repeated itself, yielding the formation of many black churches and denominations.⁹² These movements were both religious and secular in that they created, "...the classic pattern of religious commitment that has a double focus: free and autonomous worship in the African American tradition, and solidarity and social welfare of the black community."⁹³

⁸⁹ This spirit of resistance on display in the, "the independent church movement among blacks during and following the period of the Revolutionary War, must be regarded as the prime expression of resistance to slavery-in every sense, the first black freedom movement." Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 103.

⁹⁰ Pinn, *Introducing African American Religion*, 55-57.

⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁹² Lincoln, C. Eric, and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black Church and the African American Experience*. Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1990: 49-68.

⁹³ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 108.

VI.iv. Resistance as a Norm of the Black Church

It comes then as no surprise that resistance is understood as fundamental to the black church given that its birth was forged in blacks' resistance to religious and social domination by whites. With the end of slavery and the emergence of Jim Crow, these religious institutions took on the role of sustainer of the black community and assumed a critical role in the organization and operation of the black community.⁹⁴ The black church played the role of disseminator of information critical to the success of the black community. Equally important, the black church provided pastors and priests who served as the first role models for the burgeoning black middle-class.⁹⁵ As threats to the existence of the black community emerged, the black church played an instrumental role in the formulation of responses to these threats. This is evident in the history of the black church following emancipation. Given the perceived advancements of blacks during Reconstruction, segments of the white community felt as though their place in the South was being threatened.⁹⁶ Whites turned to a variety of methods to support their continuing subjugation of blacks. The rise of the terroristic actions of the Ku Klux Klan and increased lynchings of blacks in the South served as examples of white efforts to suppress blacks.⁹⁷ As the black community struggled to find ways to respond to the

⁹⁴ The development of black colleges, fraternities and sororities, along with institutions such as the NAACP and the National Urban league, or black newspapers all developed with the help and leadership of the black church. Lincoln and Mamiya. *The Black Church and the African American Experience*, 8-9.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, 115.

⁹⁶ Wilson, Charles Wilson. "Reconstruction." In *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 10: Law and Politics*, ed. Ely, James W. and Bond Bradley G. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008: 266-71.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

threats facing them, the black church was instrumental to the formation and execution of responses to this oppression.⁹⁸

From the time of slavery, blacks displayed the capacity to internalize many of Christianity's tenets and demonstrated their agency through reinterpreting those beliefs in light of their African religious experiences.⁹⁹ While Christianity was offered to the enslaved for its perceived domesticating capacity, the enslaved's capacity for passive and active resistance was encouraged by their encounter with Christianity.¹⁰⁰ These experiences were integral to the eventual birth of the invisible institution, itself an act of resistance. The invisible institution represented a claiming of space to engage in religious praxes that affirmed the humanity of the enslaved, spoke to the injustice of their enslavement, and encouraged their resilience in the cruel clutches of their circumstances. From the invisible institution, and out of the "travail of slavery and oppression," the black church, which was also a direct response to the refusal of white religious communities to create spaces of equality was born.¹⁰¹ The subversive nature of Christianity presented a fundamentally theological problem for those who sought to maintain the illusionary superiority of whites, particularly within religious settings and communities. The resistance by whites to expressions of black humanity and equality, intrinsic to blacks' encounter with Christianity, led blacks to establish increasingly autonomous places and communities of worship.

⁹⁸ McKinney, "The Black Church: Its Development and Present Impact," 466.

⁹⁹ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 211-219.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 289-318.

¹⁰¹ Frazier and Lincoln, *The Negro Church in America*, 106.

In later periods, the black church continued to express the norm of resistance as it converted thousands, stabilized the black family, established insurance and burials societies, founded schools and colleges, commissioned missionaries to the far corners of the world when most blacks had trouble buying a ticket on a steamship, and at the same time, petitioned governments for the abolition of slavery, fomented slave uprisings, organized the Underground Railroad, promoted the Civil War, developed programs of political education and action on behalf of citizenship rights, and provided social, cultural, economic, and political base of the entire African American community in the United States.¹⁰²

VII.An Alternative Causation of Deformation

The centrality of the black church, its uplift of its community, and its resistance to forces seeking to keep blacks subservient are on full display through this second historical chapter of the black church.¹⁰³ However, this norm of resistance was not recognized by all. Lincoln suggests that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we witness the death of the ‘Negro Church’ in the “moral and ethical holocaust of the black struggle for self-documentation.”¹⁰⁴ Lincoln asserts that Christianity was “first and foremost a call to human dignity and therefore logically inconsistent with the limitations of Negro-ness.”¹⁰⁵ Lincoln believed that the very nature of the Christianity promoted by the ‘Negro Church’ had neither the capacity to respond

¹⁰² Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology*, 218.

¹⁰³ The first historical chapter of the black church would be its birth in the form of the invisible institution during slavery.

¹⁰⁴ Frazier and Lincoln, *The Negro Church in America*, 106.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*

to the calls for self-determination engulfing the black community nor the theological power to provide substantive support for and promotion of black identity.¹⁰⁶ However, the story of the black church during this period is more complicated than the determination by Lincoln and other scholars suggest.¹⁰⁷ There is a norm of resistance to oppression evident within the early history of the black church in which the church understood its essential role in the uplift of its community under oppressive and trying circumstances that dates well before the black awakening of the 1960s.¹⁰⁸ It is equally true that in the early twentieth century, and certainly leading up to the period of the Civil Rights Movement, a picture emerges of the black church that supports the critiques of the church as increasingly deradicalized.¹⁰⁹ Unfortunately, many religious scholars have described this disconnect of the black church with the aspirations of its community as the result of an impoverishment of the church's theology and/or its leadership. I want to suggest another possibility of causation.

VII.i. The Great Migration

Another possible explanation reveals itself in an examination of the black church centered around the period referred to as the 'Great Migration'. The Great Migration was a time of significant social, political, economic, and religious transformation for the black community and the nation.¹¹⁰ During this period, legions of blacks made the journey from the rural communities of the South to the urban centers of the North and

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Washington, Joseph. "Are American Negro Churches Christian?" in Cone, James H. and Gayraud S. Wilmore. *Black Theology: a Documentary History*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004: 95.

¹⁰⁸ Floyd-Thomas, *Black Church Studies*, 69-106.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, 80-81.

¹¹⁰ Clayton, "The Churches and Social Change," 107; Baer, "Black Mainstream Churches," 162.

West. This migration began during the period of World War I as blacks increasingly left southern communities in numbers that exceeded their out-migration from the south in the previous four decades combined.¹¹¹ This out-migration “continued through the 1920s, and by 1930, approximately one-quarter of thirty to forty-year old southern-born black men resided outside the South.”¹¹² There was a slight decrease in the migration of blacks from rural to urban centers during the Great Depression, but migration patterns regained momentum during World War II.¹¹³ These migration patterns again “stalled in the 1970s, but not before reducing the share of African Americans residing in the South from approximately 90 percent in 1910 to 50 percent in 1970.”¹¹⁴ Blacks moved from the rural communities of the South to the urban centers of the North and the West searching for economic opportunities and a reprieve from the overt hostility that was a part of daily existence in the South.¹¹⁵ In response, the black church provided a social safety net for blacks arriving in these urban centers who were often without the skills needed to transition into this new, competitive, and increasingly hostile, environment.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Collins, William, and Marianne Wanamaker. “Selection and Economic Gains in the Great Migration of African Americans: New Evidence from Linked Census Data.” *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 6, no. 1 (2014): 220-221.

¹¹² *ibid.*

¹¹³ Pruitt, Bernadette. *Other Great Migration: the Movement of Rural African Americans to Houston, 1900-1941*. College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 2017.

¹¹⁴ Collins, “Selection and Economic Gains in the Great Migration of African Americans,” 221.

¹¹⁵ “...the accumulated toll of Jim Crow conditions suffered by the black population of the United States, especially those residing in the South, was profound and debilitating. Because of their subordinate position in a caste system bounded by race, southern African Americans had endured decades of disadvantage, discrimination, and violence.” Tolnay, Stewart E., E.m. Beck, and Victoria Sass. “Migration and Protest in the Jim Crow South.” *Social Science Research* 73 (2018): 13. Not all of the migration was to northern cities. In some cases, it was movement from rural to urban centers in the South and West. Pruitt, *Other Great Migration*.

¹¹⁶ Baldwin, Davarian L. *Chicago’s New Negroes Modernity, the Great Migration, & Black Urban Life*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

The black church, in a manner consistent with the historical norm of resistance, understood itself as the divinely ordained instrument of God ensuring the betterment and well-being of blacks in the face of white resistance.¹¹⁷ However, this normative commitment was challenged by the social and economic realities of the Great Migration. Many blacks, escaping the South in the hope of finding a better life, were met with the familiar and resilient presence of oppression in northern centers. The increasing competition over jobs and the societal changes resulting from the migration of blacks flooding many northern and western cities created incredibly volatile conditions.¹¹⁸ The influx of blacks created significant racial tensions in these cities fueled by white working-class fears of being supplanted by this new and competitive source of cheap labor.¹¹⁹

VII.ii. The Beginnings of Ecclesiological Change

During this period, one witnesses the beginning of ecclesiological change in the black church as it moved away from the earlier Negro folk religion which was “suffused with a yearning for social justice and bearing the burden of protest and relief.”¹²⁰

Wilmore describes this change as

what happen[ed] when [the black church] merged with the accommodating religiosity of black preachers who were poorly educated and convinced that they had to curry favor with whites if blacks were ever to be permitted entrance into the mainstream of American life.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Lincoln and Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 121.

¹¹⁸ “The background of the crisis in race relations included unprecedented mob violence and acts of terrorism against black citizens between 1980 and 1914.” Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 167; Washington, *Black Religion*, 20.

¹¹⁹ Allport, Gordon W. *The Nature of Prejudice*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1958; Raymond, Richard. “Mobility and Economic Progress of Negro Americans during the 1940’s.” *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 28, no. 4 (1969): 340.

¹²⁰ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 173; Washington, *Black Religion*, 37; Frazier and Lincoln, *The Negro Church in America*, 106.

¹²¹ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 173.

The black church, in Wilmore's view, suffered from the growing desire to imitate and embrace white religious and social norms. Leaders of the black church internalized this goal and shifted the focus of their mission to securing societal acceptance of blacks. To do so required the abandonment of the idea of the black church as, "God's judgment on upon racism," which codified the spirit of resistance as an ecclesiological norm of the early black church. Wilmore suggests that,

sometime between the end of Reconstruction and the beginning of the modern civil rights movement the identity of the black church, as an institution with specific vocation of liberation for all facets of black life faded in the face of enervating forces of northern migration and wide racist repression.¹²²

Washington had a similar assessment of the black church, suggesting that a poverty of leadership and theology preceded the church's abandonment of the norm of resistance.¹²³ Whether the shift to an accommodationist posture resulted from leadership, theology, or both, the impotence of the church in the face of new experiences of oppression fueled by the migration of blacks was evident.

VII.iii.Explaining the Change in the Black Church

Counter to the image of the black church as an institution fueled by the instinctual communal response of passive and active resistance as codified in its religious praxes, another picture of the black church, painted by much of current scholarship, emerges of an institution that succumbs, either out of a theological deficiency or the limitations of its leadership, to complacency and accommodation of the oppression of blacks.¹²⁴ How

¹²² *ibid.*, 218.

¹²³ The growing accommodation of oppressive systems by the church resulted from a theology devoid of a proper understanding of the historical theological depths of Protestantism from which it claimed membership. It is likely that Washington would reject that this resistance was ever a norm of the black church. Washington, Joseph. "Are American Negro Churches Christian," 96.

¹²⁴ Clayton, "The Churches and Social Change," 103.

can we reconcile these two drastically different pictures of the black church? Wilmore hints at a possible answer in his discussion of increasingly volatile race relations in the North resulting from the influx of black labor. As blacks sought to transition from serving only as economic inputs in production cycles to exercising increasing autonomy as economic agents, there was a commensurate increase in racial violence.¹²⁵ Wilmore notes that this racial violence resulted from the, “panic of lower-class whites who were terrified and embittered by the new competition for economic and political power.”¹²⁶ This points to the role of economic competition as a catalyst for the racial violence blacks faced. Over the next few decades, this violent resistance to black economic competition would only increase as blacks were introduced to the possibilities and pitfalls for their lives resulting from incrementally increasing participation in the economy.¹²⁷

VII.iv.Economic Conditions as a Causation for Change

The Great Migration and the accompanying population changes in the black communities of the North and the South created an extended period of pronounced

¹²⁵ Shapiro, Herbert. "Afro-American Responses to Race Violence during Reconstruction." *Science & Society* 36, no. 2 (1972): 158-70; Hennessey, Melinda Meek. "Racial Violence during Reconstruction: The 1876 Riots in Charleston and Cainhoy." *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 86, no. 2 (1985): 100-12; Cantrell, G. "Racial Violence and Reconstruction Politics in Texas, 1867-1868." *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 93 no. 3 (1990): 333-355; Rable, George C. *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984.

¹²⁶ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 169. Also see: Meier, August, and Elliott M. Rudwick. *From Plantation to Ghetto*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1993.

¹²⁷ Wilmore notes that in the early twentieth century, “an increasing number of blacks, particularly light-skinned mulattoes, were artisans and skilled laborer - mechanics, seamstresses, teamsters, barbers, expert domestics. Although they were discriminated against in countless ways, they were able to earn a living and raise families with some semblance of dignity. It was from this rising class, which had begun to move northward and westward after the Civil War and arrived in ever growing numbers in the twentieth century, that the churches, lodges, cultural associations, and the new civil rights organizations, received the bulk of their members.” Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 170.

change for the black church.¹²⁸ Men and women left their homes and families in rural communities to venture to urban centers with the hope of realizing a better existence. They visualized their transition as a disruption in their experiences of the overt racial oppression of the South and the pursuit of an improved economic existence.¹²⁹ While neither the reduction in racial oppression nor the increase in economic agency was immediately realized, it was a critical element of the mindset, attitude, and expectations of those who eventually populated the pews of churches in these urban centers.¹³⁰ As blacks entered into new economic relationships seeking, at least superficially, the capacity for greater economic agency, this inevitably produced changes to the black church's vision of itself.

What is often overlooked in discussions of the black church during this period is the impact and influence of the economic changes happening to the black community and the country on the black church. Lincoln acknowledges that changes in religious institutions' understanding of identity often occurs in response to societal changes and conditions.¹³¹ Yet, he does not take the additional step to examine changes in economic

¹²⁸ The population movements were driven by blacks' pursuit of a better life. The economic element of this idea spoke to the possibilities of greater economic agency on the part of blacks most often envisioned as job market participation for the individual. Over time, the economic element increasingly exerted influence on the individual and the institutions supporting and serving them in their pursuit, such as the black church. Tolnay, Stewart E., and E. M. Beck. "Black Flight: Lethal Violence and the Great Migration, 1900-1930." *Social Science History* 14, no. 3 (1990); Lincoln and Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 119-126.

¹²⁹ Tolnay, and Beck. "Black Flight," 347-70; Tolnay, Stewart E., and E. M. Beck. "Racial Violence and Black Migration in the American South, 1910 to 1930." *American Sociological Review* 57, no. 1 (1992): 103-16.

¹³⁰ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 170; Lincoln and Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 123; Harrison, Alferdteen. *Black Exodus: The Great Migration From the American South*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991.

¹³¹ Frazier and Lincoln, *The Negro Church in America*, 104.

conditions as one of the precipitating conditions for changes in the black church. Immense economic changes were altering how blacks viewed themselves and consequently, these economic changes fostered ecclesiological and praxiological changes in the black church. What Lincoln, along with many other interrogators of the black church, failed to consider was the influence and impact of economic agency and identity on blacks, and by extension, on the self-understanding of the black church. While the Great Migration is described as a period of significant numerical growth in the black church, the transition created both new opportunities and new challenges for the community and its churches. As blacks experienced increasing (albeit halting) levels of economic participation, they faced the resilience of white hostility grounded in both racial and sociological encounters resulting from increasing levels of economic competition. Many black theologians fail to recognize that these economic experiences were instrumental in the ecclesiological changes of the black church and point to an increasing embrace of an economic ideology by the congregants of black churches. This embrace was an influencer on the church that must be considered. This new and profoundly transformative economic encounter entered into the precepts and practices of the black church in a manner that, where uninterrogated, would be deformative.

VIII. Case of Economic Causation During the Great Migration

VIII.i. The Growing Influence of Economic Concerns

For different reasons, religious institutions in both southern exit communities and urban entry communities experienced similar outcomes. In urban entry communities, churches increasingly moved to a social gospel that concentrated on providing social safety nets to the impoverished or those experiencing difficulty in the transition to these

new communities.¹³² This was a continuation of the black church's long-standing commitment to assisting in the betterment of its community. However, black churches in these entry communities found it increasingly challenging to live out this norm. They were ill-equipped and under-resourced to respond to the massive influx of new arrivals adequately.¹³³ Wilmore characterized those blacks flooding into the urban centers as "a propertyless, disoriented proletariat."¹³⁴ This meant that while the mission of black churches expanded to meet the needs of the individuals arriving from the south, there was not a corresponding increase in the monetary resources of churches. This dynamic represented a new phase in the black church as economic considerations exerted influence on the praxes of the church.¹³⁵ As churches faced the pressing concerns of meeting the needs of their congregations and community with limited resources, they in turn often allowed these resource concerns to drive the shape and form of their communal engagement.¹³⁶ While a scarcity of resources was not a new problem for these churches, the problem was exacerbated as a result of migration patterns and exerted pressure on these institutions.

¹³² Lincoln and Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 115.

¹³³ *ibid.*, 121.

¹³⁴ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 171.

¹³⁵ This phase is distinguished by the impact of economism on the church. Economism refers to the increasing use of economic and quantitative measures of success to inform the self-understanding and praxes of a Christian community. It is important to note that this economization of ecclesiology represents a manifestation of economic ideology on the church that has often gone unaddressed because of the reluctance of theologians to critically examine economic influences on religious communities.

¹³⁶ Nelsen and Nelsen. *Black Church in the Sixties*, 36-57.

VIII.ii.Growing Ecclesial Competition

The economic concerns of the church were also evident in the growing ecclesial competition between black churches.¹³⁷ The Great Migration represented a time of dramatic increase in the number of churches in urban areas but this also had economic consequences for individual churches. “The extreme proliferation of churches weakened the total impact of black religion in the urban community by reducing the economic and political viability of individual congregations and shattering the institutional solidarity of historic denominations.”¹³⁸ This dynamic increased the tendency of individual churches to adopt the lens of an economic agent and view itself in competition with other churches for the resources increasingly needed to respond to the communal demands placed on churches. Competition, “between denominations and congregations... diverted energies and money from self-help and community welfare concerns to ecclesiastical gamesmanship and institutional housekeeping.”¹³⁹ As churches began to adopt the identity of an economic agent engaged in competition for resources, we witness the beginning of a disassociation of the black church from earlier norms.

VIII.iii.Measuring Church Impact With Economic Criteria

Another consequence of the increasing role of economic considerations within the black church was found in the growing propensity of churches to incorporate the acquisition of land and property as elements of their ecclesial identity. As churches grew in number and managed to gather the precious few resources from their congregations, and as buildings formerly housing white congregations fell empty as a result of shifting

¹³⁷ Drake, St. Clair, and Horace R. Cayton. *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015: 387.

¹³⁸ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 191.

¹³⁹ *ibid.*

residential patterns, black churches began to incrementally acquire property and land.¹⁴⁰ This represented a critical moment of growth for the church but had often unappreciated side effects. In addition to viewing itself as an economic agent in competition with other churches, churches also experienced a growing appreciation of what could be lost if they could not successfully navigate their acceptance by white society.¹⁴¹ With the evolution of ecclesial identity informed by property ownership and material acquisitions, the church became increasingly dependent on agents outside of the church (banks, land-owners, zoning commissions, governmental agencies, and civic leaders) for its continued ecclesiological success as that success became increasingly concretized in the material and quantifiable characteristics of religious institutions. This also hastened black churches increasing adoption and imitation of the praxes of white religious institutions. While this was not a new phenomenon, it took on outsized importance as societal acceptance, considered an economic necessity, drove the praxes of the black church. “By the end of the First World War, independent black churches were becoming respectable institutions...they moved more and more toward what was presented by the white churches as the model of authentic Christian faith and life.”¹⁴² This mimicking of white religious norms and praxes fueled by the desire to succeed economically, meant the adoption of the theology underlying those praxes as codified in white churches. This theology was devoid of the emphasis on social justice

¹⁴⁰ Lincoln and Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 137-140, 259.

¹⁴¹ Mays, Benjamin E. and Joseph William Nicholson. *The Negro's Church*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1969: 215-223.

¹⁴² Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 170.

that was an essential and indispensable part of the ecclesiology of the black church.¹⁴³ Instead, the Protestantism of the white church contained the foundational presuppositions that supported the very economic forces challenging the church's ecclesiological commitment to social justice.¹⁴⁴ "Despite the spirited preaching and emotionalism that [black] churches increasingly discouraged, the prevailing norms were those of white Methodists and Baptists of the North: conservative, revivalistic Protestantism."¹⁴⁵ To this description should also be added "capitalistic".

It is in this regard that Washington misunderstands the theological dynamic at work in the black church.¹⁴⁶ The black church did suffer from a deficiency in its theology but that deficiency resulted from the absorption of the Protestantism of white churches already infected with the foundational presuppositions of capitalism. It was also the result of the increasing encounters of blacks, and their religious institutions, with

¹⁴³ This focus on social justice in the theology of the black church is evident in its commitment to engaging in practices focused on improving the material conditions of blacks. Floyd-Thomas, *Black Church Studies*, 72-76.

¹⁴⁴ The relationship between capitalism and Protestant theology is first presented in Max Weber's seminal work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In this work, Weber posits that Protestantism, and more specifically Calvinism, provided a religious framework in which soteriology led to a justification of the systemic structuring of the lives of individuals within religious communities in a manner efficacious for the emergence of capitalism. It is important to acknowledge that the dynamic between capitalism and religion being posited is one of a plethora of forces now impacting contemporary religious experience. Just as Weber was by no means suggesting that capitalism results solely from Protestantism, it is not suggested here that capitalism has unilaterally re-shaped religious experience in the black church. Instead, what is being proffered is simply that the dynamic so richly described by Weber continues to operate but in ways not fully envisioned by Weber or as interrogated by black religious scholarship. Weber, Max, Peter R. Baehr, and Gordon C. Wells. *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism and Other Writings*. New York: Penguin Books, 2012.

¹⁴⁵ Chapter Two will explore the manner in which the ideology of neoliberalism presents a competing theology to that of the Christian faith. It is these ideological presuppositions which were first codified in the Protestantism being discussed here and that will ultimately invade the theologies of the Christian church without regard to its racial composition. The result will be the deformation of the ecclesiologies of both institutions but the outcome will be far worse for the institutional black church. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 172.

¹⁴⁶ Washington, *Black Religion*, 163-205.

economic agency without the evaluation of how economic agency could be subsumed within Christian identity. It was the absorption of these economic norms that contributed to the theological and ecclesiological deformation witnessed by Wilmore, Washington, Lincoln, and others.

VIII.iv. The Impact of Economic Agency on Black Churches in the South

These economic influences were not limited to the black churches in the urban centers of the North and West. The migration of blacks from the South meant that churches in the South experienced a mass exodus of individuals and a reduction in their already limited resources.¹⁴⁷ Like their urban counterparts, this reduction in resources hastened the growing influence of economic considerations as seen in the development of the competitive mindset of these churches as they grappled with their own economic agency. Concomitantly, these churches sought to facilitate their societal acceptance and that of their congregants. While the opportunities for societal acceptance were far less, and the racial barriers more pronounced, churches in the South still pursued some measure of white acceptance for itself and its members.¹⁴⁸ This led to the similar tendency, as witnessed in churches in northern and western urban centers, to use the white church as an ecclesiological norm. In both the North and the South, as churches sought to, “imitate the theology and lifestyle of the mainline white denominations” one sees the slow corruption of the theology of the black church as the adoption of praxes and norms for the purpose of gaining respectability in the eyes of whites became a

¹⁴⁷ Price-Spratlen, T. “Urban Destination Selection among African Americans during the 1950s Great Migration.” *Social Science History* 32, no. 3 (January 2008): 448; Thomas, Richard Walter. *Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.

¹⁴⁸ Lemann, Nicholas. *The Promise Land: the Great Black Migration and How It Changed America*. New York: Vintage Book, 1993.

significant goal of these churches.¹⁴⁹ This tendency can be traced to a variety of causes, one of which was the desire to advance the economic interests of the black church and its congregants. This began the inexorable deformation that continues even unto this present moment as these tendencies of the black church have only become more ingrained in its self-identity.

IX. Beginning Signs of Class Division

One additional issue related to the influence of the emerging economic agency of blacks on the black church bears consideration. As churches in urban centers absorbed blacks seeking greater economic opportunities and agency, one must not underestimate the influence of these individuals on the black church. As black churches, notably in urban centers, competed for members as a result of the church's own economic needs, they were required to demonstrate an understanding and support of the desires of congregants for greater economic agency in order to draw these individuals and their resources into their respective churches. One of the ways this understanding and support of economic agency was manifested by the black church was witnessed in growing congregational class concentration.¹⁵⁰ As churches begin to mimic their white counterparts, and to demonstrate their support and promotion of economic advancement, there was an increasing desire for congregations to be comprised of individuals perceived as similar in economic aspirations or achievements.¹⁵¹ This similarity was often determined by physical appearance,

¹⁴⁹ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 170.

¹⁵⁰ Price-Spratlen, Townsend. "Between Depression and Prosperity? Changes in the Community Context of Historical African American Migration." *Social Forces* 77, no. 2 (1998): 515.

¹⁵¹ Taeuber, Karl E., and Alma F. Taeuber. *Negroes in Cities; Residential Segregation and Neighborhood Change*. New York: Atheneum, 1972.

behavior, education, or other external attributes that supported the pursuit of greater economic agency as defined by white norms. Churches began to be recognized by congregational homogeneity, measured by employment and education, or by the economic aspirations of congregants.¹⁵²

As black churches began to play a supporting role in the aspirations of its burgeoning congregation for greater societal acceptance and greater economic participation, churches also began to experience greater institutional economic agency and engagement. While scholars have spent significant energy trying to understand and describe the theological, praxiological, and ecclesiological changes in the black church and to understand the black church's role and by some accounts, decreasing engagement in the social protests of institutional structures of oppression, they have often failed to consider the ways in which economic agency and increasing economic autonomy carried with it a set of ideological presuppositions which competed with the theological norms of the black church as manifested in its commitment to and advocacy of liberation as an ecclesiological norm.

X. Question of Relevance: Resistance and Complicity

One may wonder why this phenomenon of increasing influence of economic forces on the black church, beginning during the Great Migration, is of any relevance to an evaluation of the church in the current moment. The questions that emerge from this period regarding the deformation of the black church only become more pointed in the ensuing decades. The critique of the black church of the middle twentieth century is that the increased efforts of blacks to assert their autonomy exposed the limitations of the

¹⁵² Lincoln and Mamiya. *The Black Church and the African American Experience*, 1990:119-126; Drake, and Cayton. *Black Metropolis*, 670.

black church resulting in its diminishment if not its outright death. As the black community found itself struggling to assert a re-constituted self-identity, its religious institutions struggled to understand their role. The black church often opted for self-preservation and self-aggrandizement over political and societal advancement for the community as a whole. This behavior finds its origins, and its explanation, in the period just examined.

The advocacy of resistance by the black church against forces seeking to subjugate the black community continues to serve as an essential litmus test for the church's theological integrity and ecclesiological identity.¹⁵³ The need for the black church's response to oppression has not diminished given that oppression, in varying forms, has been a constant element of black communal and religious life. The history of participation in efforts of resistance and the theological resources of the church provide the black church with an untapped potential to be instrumental in the black community's response to the social, economic, and political challenges facilitated by neoliberalism. The question for the contemporary black church is how does the black church respond to changes in the form oppression takes across historical periods and respond to the black church's continued engagement with economic forces?¹⁵⁴ Each chapter in the history of blacks' encounters with the dominant culture of this country required ever-evolving responses to the reality of oppression.

¹⁵³ This will be a core critique of religious institutions lodged by many liberation theologians particularly when examining the role of the white church in responding to oppression.

¹⁵⁴ For example, as the black community grappled with the opportunity for greater self-determination and agency following emancipation from slavery while also wrestling against increasing violence, the black church offered a variety of strategies designed to assert the humanity of blacks and promote their acceptance by the broader society. Chappell, *Stone of Hope*; Giggie, John Michael. *After Redemption: Jim Crow and the Transformation of African American Religion in the Delta, 1875-1915*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Even though resistance is central to an understanding of the identity of the black church, this does not inoculate the church from also participating in oppression. As a result of oppression's mutating forms, oppression is not always easily identified when the black church and its community focuses only on one form of oppression and not on oppression in whatever form it takes. Even as the black church played a role in responding to the racial oppression it and its community confronted, it is equally true that a review of the history of the black church demonstrates occasions when the church has deviated from its ecclesiological norm, and in some cases, been a co-conspirator with oppression. A full discussion can be had on the ways in which the black church has repeated the patterns of oppression it also has fought against. The very institution within the black community that served so faithfully as a core component of the black community's response to oppression also found itself complicit in the maintenance of oppression. This same complicitness with oppression, witnessed with regards to the issues of gender and sexuality, is also present relative to economic oppression. When the issue is class rather than race, the church has experienced difficulty in identifying and responding to oppression.

From the beginning, there have always been those in the community of blacks in America who have been shaped by their encounters with oppression and who would formulate responses of resistance to the debilitating effects of oppression. Those responses predate the emergence of Christian religious experiences that would eventually be codified within the black church. For this reason, it must be acknowledged that responses of resistance, though eventually formulated with the black church's participation, are grounded in the broader experiences of the black community and not

the church alone. Even after the emergence of the black church, the black community demonstrated the capacity to formulate responses to oppression internal and external to the church. Yet, there concomitantly emerged a symbiotic relationship between the black church and the black community with respect to oppression.

XI. Conclusion

These simple and at times seemingly futile efforts of resistance laid the foundation for a pattern of resistance that, over time, became inculcated within the DNA of the black church. This very human response of resistance became deeply ingrained within the religious traditions and experiences emerging from those enslaved despite the brutal reinforcement of the will of the dominant culture, for their pecuniary benefit, to deny the humanity of blacks. Over the centuries, the instinct toward resistance would be internally and externally challenged. Yet, time and again, it would re-emerge more resilient than before. The complexity of the historical narrative of the black church is matched only by the myriad of voices and perspectives which provide depth and texture to the tapestry that is their multi-vocal story. Many of the elements of these varied narratives have been the subject of intense academic discourse. The narratives continue to evolve with each historical period providing new perspectives and fresh connections to the broader themes of oppression and resistance. They continue to encompass areas of focus once considered outside the boundaries of religious discourse.

Within these multiplicitous intersections of the varied narratives is the need for a new perspective that reexamines oppression and resistance relative to blacks and the role of resistance and protest as one of the *raisons d'être* of their religious institutions. If

a defining element of the identity of the black church is grounded in the church as an institution of resistance, then its identity grows from the theologically grounded call of the church to facilitate a counter-cultural response to the ever-present horrors of oppression. As the black church has grown and evolved, its identity has been shaped by its response to the particularity of oppression. Its encounters with the persistent presence of racism, its pursuit of what some might refer to as the ephemeral illusion of integration into the mythical American melting pot, and its grappling with the complex intersectionalities of class and gender has shaped the evolving institutions collectively referred to as the black church and played an integral part in this community's understanding of self and its pursuit of justice as theologically defined.

The black church has, throughout its history, facilitated responses of resistance to oppression and Wilmore is correct in asserting that this facilitation is a norm of the church. As such, this historical and theological norm forms the basis for a further critique of the black church in the present moment. The question confronting the church is: if resistance is a fundamental element of the identity of the black church, has the black church maintained this element of its identity in this contemporary moment? Against what societal forces has the black church been called to respond and how well has the church reacted to these forces? While the resistance instinct is deeply woven into the identity and fabric of the black church, there has been a discernible alteration in the ways in which that instinct exists and manifests itself. This is the result of the evolution of the threat to communal existence which has complicated both its identification by the black church and the black church's institutional response. It is the failure to give an adequate account of the influence of economic ideology, as experienced and embraced

through the moments of economic participation, that has robbed current analysis of the black church of the comprehensive power to understand the normative deficiencies of the contemporary instantiations of the church and to provide a prescriptive response. With this as the framing of the challenge before us, let us begin with a review of the economic forces at work in the American context generally, and impacting the black community by shaping its theological, ecclesiological, and praxiological content. This will allow for the identification of those economic principles which have fostered the ecclesiological deformation within the black church and will allow for the construction of a theological response leading to the reclamation of black ecclesial identity and the correction of its praxiology as needed for the twenty-first century.

Chapter 2: The Seduction of Neoliberalism

I. Concern of Deradicalization

There remains for black churches, the concern about its deradicalization.¹ This deradicalization is understood as the black church's movement towards accommodation of power structures that oppressed blacks and away from what scholars referred to as the natural militancy of black folk religion.² This deradicalization, while the result of a variety of societal forces impacting black communities and institutions, was also understood to emanate from particular theological paradigms. Initially, a form of Christianity that emphasized an other-worldliness was promulgated by black churches and considered the culprit of the church's deradicalization.³ Other-worldliness refers to the religious perspective that deemphasized temporal existence and oriented the adherent to "a pie in the sky, by and by philosophy."⁴ Other-worldliness encouraged the

¹ Wilmore, in addition to speaking to the deradicalization of the black church, also describes the dechristianization of black radicalism. Black radicalism refers to what Lincoln described as the response of the black community to a growing identity and agency. It was a "revolution in consciousness that encompasses all black institutions, including the black church." (Lincoln, Charles Eric., and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005: 164.) Wilmore understood the deradicalization of the black church as the increasing tendency for radical efforts (understood as resistance to the systemic oppression arising out of black consciousness) to rest outside of the Christian institutions of the black community. Wilmore, Gayraud S. *Black Religion and Black Radicalism an Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*. Orbis Books, 1998: ix, 196-221.

² While Washington spoke of the militancy of black folk religion, he also critiqued black folk religion as deficient relative to the historical (and white) Western religious traditions. Many scholars of black religious traditions lambasted Washington's assertion that black folk religion was a deficient imitation of the authentic religion found among whites. In his subsequent work, *The Politics of God*, Washington appeared to retreat from this characterization of the Christianity practiced by blacks. However, his critique has remained in various forms within characterizations of black religious traditions. Washington, Joseph R. *Black Religion: the Negro and Christianity in the United States*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984: 30-162; Washington, Joseph R. *The Politics of God*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970.

³ Frazier, E. Franklin, and C. Eric Lincoln. *The Negro Church in America. The Black Church since Frazier*. New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1976:18-19.

⁴ Mckinney, Richard I. "The Black Church: Its Development and Present Impact." *Harvard Theological Review* 64, no. 4 (October 1971): 465-66.

pursuit of eschatological reward and emphasized “preparation to enter heaven with minimal attention to liberating African American communities from social injustice.”⁵ This other-worldly-centric theology is believed to be embedded within the Christianity introduced to blacks during slavery and understood to have remained influential on the black church. Other-worldliness is often cited as a cause of the black church’s pietistic focus on individual moral standing.⁶ As the story is told, the advocacy of other-worldliness by the black church suppressed the responses of the church to the challenges of systemic oppression through the marginalization of temporal and material concerns.⁷

Deradicalization was, and continues to be, an issue of concern for the black church. Deradicalization becomes increasingly evident when the praxes of the black church during the twentieth century are contrasted with the ecclesiological norms of the black church that emerged during its pre-history in slavery and its early institutional

⁵ The persistence of this concern with the other-worldliness of black Christian traditions is evident in the presence of this critique even within contemporary evaluations of the black church. Martin, Pamela P., Tuere A. Bowles, Latrese Adkins, and Monica T. Leach. “Black Mega-Churches in the Internet Age: Exploring Theological Teachings and Social Outreach Efforts.” *Journal of African American Studies* 15, no. 2 (2011): 157. Also see: Lincoln, C. Eric. *Race, Religion, and the Continuing American Dilemma*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1984; Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, 12.

⁶ Calhoun-Brown, Allison. “While Marching to Zion: Other-worldliness and Racial Empowerment in the Black Community.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37, no. 3 (September 1998)

⁷ There is significant debate on this reading of the content and impact of other-worldliness. Some religious scholars consider this a reductionist reading of other-worldliness and suggest that, “other-worldly orientations did not preclude this-worldly concerns.” Calhoun-Brown, “While Marching to Zion,” 427.

history following slavery.⁸ Through this lens, deradicalization demonstrates the black church's drifting from the earlier liberative and resistance instincts that empowered and expressed the different theological framework undergirding the church. The deradicalization marked a significant and troubling departure of the black church from its historical purpose.

1.i. Deradicalization as Theological Deformity

However, as has been suggested in the previous chapter, this reading of the deradicalization of the black church is incomplete as it fails to take into consideration other influences on the church that have exacerbated its deradicalization. While I accept that deradicalization has occurred and that it is the result of a theological deficiency within the church, I propose that the cause of the theological deficiency has been misdiagnosed. Instead of other-worldliness being the primary culprit of the black church's deformation, I propose that it results from the influence of neoliberalism on the

⁸ For the purposes of this project, the pre-history of the black church refers to the period beginning with the earliest recorded religious instruction provided to slaves in 1695 through the British Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. (Woodson, Carter Godwin. *A History of the African American Church*. New York: Diasporic Africa Press, 2013:7.) It ends with emergence of the invisible institution which inaugurates the first chapter of the history of the black church. This period includes the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia in 1787 by Rev. Richard Allen. It should be noted that some consider the first black church to be the First African Baptist Church in Savannah, Georgia that while not officially organized until 1788 was founded in 1773. (Brooks, Walter H. "The Evolution of the Negro Baptist Church." *The Journal of Negro History* 7, no. 1 (January 1922): 11–22.) This chapter of the early institutional history of the black church captures the growth of separate black congregations until the period of the Great Migration beginning in roughly in 1910 (or with the beginning of War World I in 1914). The Great Migration signals the second chapter in the history of the black church which continues until the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in 1955 and is marked by the arrest of Rosa Parks and the beginning of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. (Branch, Taylor. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2005.) Liberation and resistance as animating the ecclesiological norms of the early black church is addressed in Chapter 1.

theology of the church.⁹ The deradicalization of the black church, and the church's abandonment of a liberative posture, reflects the growing embrace of the presuppositions inherent in neoliberalism, which is the dominant economic framework of the twentieth and twenty-first century.

I.ii. Question of Foundation

As shared in the introduction, the neoliberal black church refers to those churches within the black religious tradition that have increasingly appropriated neoliberal economic ideology in their self-understanding. The neoliberal church views itself and its community as an institution and

a market made up of a set of current and potential customers and a set of firms seeking to serve that market. The fate of these firms will depend upon (1) aspects of their organizational structure, (2) their sales representatives, (3) their products, and (4) their marketing techniques. Translated into more churchly language, the relative successes of religious bodies (especially when confronted with an unregulated economy) will depend upon their polity and local congregations, their clergy, their religious doctrines, and their evangelization techniques.¹⁰

Implicit in this assertion is the presupposition that neoliberalism offers an ideology that competes with theological commitments. If uninterrogated, these neoliberal presuppositions can influence and mutate theological commitments and leave the church with a religion that simply mirrors neoliberalism rather than offering a counter-narrative. In the neoliberal black church, theological concepts, foundational to the church's self-understanding, have succumbed to their neoliberal counterparts. It is the

⁹ As shall be discussed in further detail, neoliberalism is a general concept referring to an economic ideology that rose to prominence and was instantiated as a governing rationality during the 1970s. Its foundational premise is that of the classical liberal idea of the free market as the best instrument for realizing and sustaining individual freedoms. The neoliberalism that rose to prominence under Ronald Reagan and Margret Thatcher reflected, "minority arguments that had long been in circulation and made the majoritarian." Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, 2005: 2.

¹⁰ Finke, Roger, and Rodney Stark. *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*. 2nd ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005: 9.

influence of capitalistic ideology (and later its instantiation in neoliberalism) that we witness in the history of the black church as the church blossomed in the urban centers of the North and West during the Great Migration. This same neoliberal ideology was at work during subsequent historical periods and is entrenched within the contemporary neoliberal black church. This embrace of neoliberalism within the neoliberal black church will be referred to as economism.¹¹ The concept of economism will be more completely addressed in the next chapter. For now, I offer that economism refers to the use of economic ideas as the primary lens through which an individual or institution views themselves and the world.¹² In relationship to the church, this means the elevation of economic ideas over those within Christian theology. This is not designed to suggest that there exists a necessarily adversarial relationship between economic and theological thought. Theology, when rightly understood, has always included consideration of economic life.¹³ However, when economic ideas supplant theological

¹¹ This term has been used by political scientists to describe what they perceive as violation of the “political sphere’s privileged presumption of autonomy” by economic considerations as those considerations were deemed more important. It also alluded to the undue influence of economic considerations in the “determination of social and political relations.” This term is utilized within this work to reference the same phenomenon of undue influence of economic ideology (in this case that of neoliberalism) on religious institutions and their constituents. Ashley, Richard K. “Three Modes of Economism.” *International Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (1983): 463-96.

¹² Rieger, Joerg. *Liberating the Future: God, Mammon, and Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998: 32.

¹³ Just a few of the many works that have addressed economic concerns as a function of religious or theological study are: Meeks, M. Douglas. “Economics in Christian Scriptures”. in Oslington, Paul. *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014: 3; Almodovar, Antonio and Pedro Teixeira. “The Ascent and Decline of Catholic Economic Thought 1830-1950’s.” in *Keeping Faith, Losing Faith: Religious Belief and Political Economy*. ed. Bateman, Bradley W., and H. Spencer Banzhaf. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008; Novak, Michael. *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Toronto: New York, 1993; Müller, Andreas. *Global Capitalism, Liberation Theology, and the Social Sciences: An Analysis of the Contradictions of Modernity At the Turn of the Millennium*. Huntington, NY: Nova Science Publishers, 2000; Rieger, Joerg. *Remember the Poor: The Challenge to Theology in the Twenty-first Century*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998; Marable, Manning, and Leith Mullings. *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy, and Society*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2015.

thought as the primary lens through which one sees the world, and thus determines praxis, economic thought leads to outcomes which conflict with Christian theological objectives.

1.iii.Choice of the Neoliberal Black Church

Inherent within the idea of the economism of the neoliberal black church is the belief that there exists a proverbial choice of foundations upon which the black church builds, similar to the choice of sand or solid ground. (Matthew 7:24-27) The question of economism is a question of what will serve as the primary lens through which the church examines itself and the world. Will the church use a theological lens to examine economic engagement and to shape its principles and inform its practices within the context of neoliberalism, or will the church use neoliberal economic principles to shape and inform its theology and the practices which guide its operations in this world? It can be rightly argued that the choice is far more complicated than a simple bifurcation of the theological and the economic. The black church rests on the interplay between the social conditions in which the church exists, including economic conditions, and the theological precepts foundational to the black church's self-expression. However, this bifurcation of foundational choices allows for an examination of the impact that arises when economic precepts exert primary influence on the self-understanding and practices of the church.

1.iv.Failure To Account for Economic Influence

The failure to account for the competing and growing influence of economic ideology on the neoliberal black church has resulted in an incomplete narration of the church's history, and a misunderstanding of the change witnessed within the institution. This failure has also limited the ability of theologians to provide a constructive account

of how the neoliberal black church might reclaim its liberative posture and increase its impact. The importance of addressing the economism of the neoliberal black church, and the praxes instantiated by it, increases as one considers the growing need among the church's constituents for a theology that addresses systemic economic oppression, provides guidance regarding economic agency, offers an alternative to the economic ideology of neoliberalism, and guides the church in responding to the economic challenges facing the black community.

Ultimately, our concern rests with how the theology and praxis of the neoliberal black church have been shaped by its immersion in neoliberalism and how that has resulted in a weakening of the church's theological commitment to a liberation that encompasses economic well-being.¹⁴ A constructive response to the challenge presented by neoliberalism must grasp the implications arising from an uncritical appropriation of its ideology and provide a theological response to the most impactful and influential elements of that ideology. With this in mind, let us begin by determining the content of the Christian theology that is of consequence to our evaluation of the ideology of neoliberalism.

II. Protestantism and Capitalism

Within the Christian tradition, there are many strands of theological thought. So, it is important to identify what one means by reference to Christian theology. In this work, I have chosen to use Protestantism as the representative Christian theology to frame the concerns relative to the church's theology and its competition with economic ideology. The choice of Protestantism is driven by two presuppositions. The first is an

¹⁴ A theology of liberation addressing economic agency arises out of a theological critique of neoliberalism that will be addressed in the next chapter.

acknowledgment of Protestantism's deep historical connection to neoliberalism's forerunner, capitalism.¹⁵ This is not meant to minimize the intersections between other non-Protestant or non-Christian theologies and capitalism. There is a fertile field of discussion regarding the interplay between Catholic theology and/or non-Christian theology (e.g. Islam) and capitalism.¹⁶ However, given the presupposition of the influence of economic ideology on the theology of the neoliberal black church, Protestantism provides a lens for examining two concepts fundamental to both economic ideology and theology: the concepts of the individual and of freedom.

It is argued that early Protestantism "paved the way for the mentality characteristic of modern, Western capitalism."¹⁷ Protestantism provided the initial framework in which moral value was ascribed to societal activity, such as labor, allowing behaviors essential to capitalism to flourish.¹⁸ Religion legitimized economic activity and motivated individual behavior in ways that promoted certain forms of economic engagement by providing moral and theological motivation for individuals to structure

¹⁵ In Max Weber's seminal work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, we see the initial argument regarding the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism. Weber, Max, Peter Baehr, and Gordon C. Wells. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Penguin, 2002: ix.

¹⁶ For example, there is a wealth of research regarding Catholicism and capitalism. Significant works in this area include: U.S. Catholic Conference. *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*. Washington, D.C, 1986; Novak, *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*; Paul, John. *Laborem Exercens: Encyclical Letter*. London: Catholic Truth Society, 2003. Interestingly, the history of interpretation of Weber has often focused on the relationship between European religious practices and the emergence of capitalism, but ignored Weber's fragmental but important analysis of Islam and capitalism. Notable exceptions are: Rodinson, Maxime, and Brian Pearce. *Islam and Capitalism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977; Sami Zubaida, *Economic and Political Activism in Islam*, *Economy and Society*, Vol. I (1972), 308.

¹⁷ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, xii.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, ix.

their lives in ways advantageous to capitalism.¹⁹ The rise of Protestantism brought a malleable religious and moral framework that exercised significant control over the life of its adherents and provided the context for capitalism's ascent. This context for the emergence of capitalism hinted at capitalism's future permeation into "every sphere of domestic and public life to the greatest degree imaginable."²⁰ Over time, there was an almost imperceptible transference of governance of the life of the individual from the religious to the economic.²¹ Eventually, instead of capitalism taking shape from religious practices, capitalism began to shape the perspectives of individuals as their economic activity, rather than religious principles alone, shaped their social relationships.²² Early Protestantism demonstrated the power of religion to gather people into social relationships and to shape how those relationships functioned. It set appropriate goals for the actions of individuals and determined the content and breadth of the individual's understanding of themselves and their community.²³ This was predicated on capitalism

¹⁹ Religion offered capitalism the means to overcome social constraints that impeded capitalism's goals. Early capitalism encountered a social orientation referred to as traditionalism. Traditionalism was the social and religious framework that justified the person who did, "not by nature want to make more and more money, but to simply live - to live in a manner in which he is accustomed to live, to earn as much money as is necessary for this." Early in its history, as capitalism sought to increase, "the productivity of human labor by increasing its intensity, it [ran] up against the infinitely persistent resistance to this leitmotiv of pre-capitalist economic labor." Within this societal construct, there was little incentive for the individual to work harder or to increase productivity in ways that would allow for the accumulation of capital and wealth that has become characteristic of the capitalist system. Instead, traditionalism resisted economic progress even when the opportunity for increased wealth for the individual was present. Weber maintained that the emergence of capitalism was initially impeded by traditionalism which, "identified unconditional obedience to God with unconditional submission to the situation in which one [was] placed." Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 16, 32.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 7.

²¹ *ibid.*, 8.

²² Bell, Daniel. *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. New York: Basic Books, 1996: 146.

²³ In the slow emergence of capitalism, and what is accentuated under neoliberalism, is religion's reduced role in shaping the "shared sentiments and affective ties between [individuals] which have become diffused and weak...as people lost the capacity to maintain sustained relationships with each other in both time and place" as capitalism came to define social ties. *ibid.*, 155.

redefining the idea of the individual and then shaping the individual's relationship to their community. As such, let us examine the differing ideas of the individual provided through theology and capitalism.

III. Protestant Theology and Humanity

In the opening passages of Genesis is the presentation of the Christian tradition's account of creation. This biblical text is understood to provide a description of the once hidden God inaugurating human history as the sound of God's voice echoes across the vast nothingness.²⁴ The narrative describes the stars of the universe being flung against the canopy of a midnight sky as the cosmic lights are separated from the darkness, and the boundaries of the seas and the continents are established. Within just a few verses, this ancient story articulates that the driving force behind creation is the triune God, who stands as the omnipotent source of all of creation.²⁵ It is here that one encounters Protestantism's bold (and controversial) depiction of God's creation of humanity.²⁶ Protestantism uses this text for a foundational assertion that God is the point of origin

²⁴ There is a diverse stream of interpretations of this opening biblical text within Christianity and Judaism. For a sample of patristic interpretations of this text see: Winden, J.c.m. Van. "In the Beginning 1 Some Observations On the Patristic Interpretation of Genesis 1:1." *Vigiliae Christianae* 17, no. 1 (1963): 105–21; Pagels, Elaine. "The Politics of Paradise: Augustines Exegesis of Genesis 1–3 Versus That of John Chrysostom." *Harvard Theological Review* 78, no. 1-2 (1985): 67–99. For contrast between patristic and rabbinic interpretations see: Alexander, Philip. "'In The Beginning': Rabbinic And Patristic Exegesis Of Genesis 1:1." *The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity*, January 2009.

²⁵ Gunton, Colin. "The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study." *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 10, no. 2 (2001): 237–39. The idea of a triune God provides a significant counterpart to the triune god of neoliberalism as described below.

²⁶ There is not a singular understanding within the Christian tradition of the God believed to be revealed within the creation narrative. For the purposes of this discussion, it is only being asserted here that the Protestant tradition proffers the existence of a divine being, refers to that divine being as God, and ascribes a variety of attributes to this divine being.

for all discussions of human existence and purpose.²⁷

III.i. Objects of Human Worship

Some streams of Protestantism believe that all of humanity is created with a knowledge of God written upon their hearts by God.²⁸ Within historical Protestantism, this is referred to as the “seed of religion” or an “awareness of divinity,” and it is this knowledge of God that draws all of humanity to worship something.²⁹ However, what constitutes God, and thus serves as the object of worship, takes on many forms in human experience. Neoliberalism places materiality and the market as the apex of its system and offers the marketplace to the neoliberal black church as the object worthy of adoration and worship. In doing so, it dismisses other claims to the church’s worship or attention. If unaddressed, humanity and their well-being are reduced as a concern of the church. This is problematic for those concerned for the well-being of all of humanity when human dignity is threatened by systemic forces as neoliberalism seeks the

²⁷ The goal here is not to enter into the debate regarding the specifics of humanity’s creation. The only purpose here is to establish that within the Protestant tradition, the creation of humanity and the articulation of humanity’s purpose is attributed to a divine act. As will be subsequently suggested, economics imitates this creation story in its use of the concept of *homo oeconomicus*. “The shape of economics depends on the concept of human nature. Those concepts can be understood as a set of assumptions made about the individual (especially his/her behavior, motives, meaning), his/her social world, and the worldview. Such a concept of human nature builds the basis of thinking about the economics and about its fundamental elements.” (Horodecka, Anna. “The Impact of the Concepts of Human Nature on the Methodology of Humanistic Economics and Religious Motivated Streams of Economics (Buddhist, Islam and Christian).” *Rivista Internazionale Di Scienze Sociali*, vol. 123, no. 4, 2015: 413.) The Genesis passage is far from the only foundation for theological anthropological discussions. Some theologians find passages such as Job 14.1-6 a more appropriate starting point. (Anderson, Ray S. *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2010.) Also, the creation account in Genesis does not fully distinguish humanity from other elements of creation. However, it is the ensuing speech of the divine towards humanity that will begin to sharpen the Christian tradition’s understanding of human existence.

²⁸ Calvin, Jean, John T. McNeill, and Ford Lewis Battles. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006: 1.3.1.

²⁹ When referencing historical Protestantism, I have Calvinism in mind and am primarily reliant on the writings of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. *ibid*.

dismissal of any instincts that might be disruptive to its system.³⁰

III.ii.Role of Rationality

Streams of Protestant thought reject another core presupposition of neoliberalism regarding rationality. Even as reference is made to rationality's role within neoliberalism, it must be acknowledged that its importance is often more theoretical than actual.³¹ As will be discussed later in this chapter, neoliberalism offers a construction of the human agent as driven by rationality.³² Their decisions are cast as objective and uninfluenced by outside forces. However, reality for the human agent is far different. The desires pursued by the individual agent often are far from rational and shaped by external forces such as advertising.³³ However, for the sake of argument, let us accept this postulate of neoliberalism for the moment.

Additionally, it should be noted that Protestantism does not take a uniformed position regarding rationality. Various forms of Protestant thought place varying

³⁰ Johnson, Cedric C. *Race, Religion, and Resilience in the Neoliberal Age*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

³¹ "Modern neoliberal economics is no less dogmatic than its nineteenth-century predecessor in resting on a set of simplistic assertions about the character of the market and the behavior of market actors. The economist critics of neoliberalism have repeatedly exposed how restrictive and unrealistic are the assumptions on which the neoliberal model is based." Clarke, Simon. "The Neoliberal Theory of Society." In *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*, ed. Saad-Filho Alfredo and Johnston Deborah. Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2005: 58.

³² It is argued by some that Christianity contributed to this understanding of the individual through its emphasis on individual will, judgement, and conscience. These are considered by some as precipitating concepts in capitalism's emphasis on rationality and individualism. Abercrombie, Nicholas, Stephen Hill, and Bryan S. Turner. *Sovereign Individuals of Capitalism*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2015: 5-32.

³³ Aaker, David A. "The Social and Economic Effects of Advertising" in *Consumerism: The Search for the Consumer Interest*, 3rd ed., David A. Aaker and George S. Day, eds. New York, The Free Press, 1978; Bauer, Raymond A. and Stephen A. Greyser. *Advertising in America: The Consumer View*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 1968; Berman, Ronald. *Advertising and Social Change*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1981; Capitman, William G. "The Selling of the American Public" in *Advertising's Role in Society*. John S. Wright and John E. Mertes, eds. St. Paul: West Publishing Company, 1974.

emphasis on rationality and its role in the actions of human agents.³⁴ However, it is fair to say that in the earliest forms of Protestant theology, the rationality of humanity was called into question. It was believed that the rational function of the individual had been damaged through what is referred to as ‘the fall.’³⁵ As a result, the ability of the individual to discern good, for themselves or their community, as expressions of their relationship to an ultimate good, was often rejected.

IV. The *Homo Religiosus*

The idea of the human agent as shaped by a set of theological beliefs which are then used to interrogate all other areas of human existence and experience shall be referred to within this project as the idea of the *homo religiosus* or the religious person. This idea of the individual allows for a full diversity in anthropological considerations while setting a theological framework as the primary lens through which all other considerations are encountered.³⁶ The idea of the *homo religiosus* will provide the basis for a contrast to be drawn between the ideas of the individual presented by Protestant theology relative to that of neoliberalism. This will aid us in considering what is at stake when the Christian understanding of the individual is guided by a set of theological commitments and then encounters and interrogates economic existence versus when theological commitments are secondary in consideration to economic ideology.

³⁴ Bruce, Steve. "A Sociological Account of Liberal Protestantism." *Religious Studies* 20, no. 3 (1984): 401, 406; Meland, Bernard Eugene. "The Genius of Protestantism." *The Journal of Religion* 27, no. 4 (1947): 287-288.

³⁵ Finstuen, Andrew S. *Original Sin and Everyday Protestants: The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, Billy Graham, and Paul Tillich in an Age of Anxiety*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

³⁶ Again, I want to note that within this discourse, the theological framework is that of Protestant theology broadly constructed. Gilkey, Langdon. "Social and Intellectual Sources of Contemporary Protestant Theology in America." *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (1967): 69-98.

The term '*homo religiosus*' has assumed several meanings throughout history, with no particular meaning dominating its usage. Initially, it captured a growing appreciation for how religious experience was perceived as a constitutive element of human existence.

"Homo religiosus always believed that there was an absolute reality, the sacred, which transcends this world but manifests in this world, thereby sanctifying it and non-religious man refuses transcendence...[and] accepts no model from humanity outside the human condition."³⁷

The term evolved to refer to a member of a particular religious community or individuals who were particularly attentive to religious practices.³⁸ Later, this term's meaning expanded to denote members of the clergy or the religious leadership within a community. As religious experiences moved beyond the institutional context and became grounded in subjective individual experiences, theologians, such as Schleiermacher, described religious experience as the individual's growing awareness of absolute dependence upon God.³⁹ This, along with the early constructions of the *homo religiosus*, eventually expanded its meaning to speak broadly of a person, "who has God in his heart and God in his actions, who in his own spiritual figure is a transformer of souls and is able in new ways to infuse the word of God into hearts that have softened and yield."⁴⁰ The twentieth century found continued evolution in this term's utilization to acknowledge the connection of the divine to humanity. It is this

³⁷ Eliade, Mircea, and Ana Cartianu. *Mystic Stories: the Sacred and the Profane*. Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1992: 202.

³⁸ Rufus, Sextus, and John William. Eadie. *The Breviarium of Festus: a Critical Edition with Historical Commentary*. London: Athlone Press, 1967: 278-79; Cicero, Marcus Tullius, and Andrew R Dyck. *De Natura Deorum. Liber I*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003: 272.

³⁹ Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *The Christian Faith*. New York: Harper & Row, 1963.

⁴⁰ Scheler, Max. *On the Eternal in Man*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010: 127.

broader construction of the term, suggesting religious experience as something common to all of humanity, that harkens back to earlier concepts within Protestantism of the seed of religion.⁴¹ This evolution in the meaning of the *homo religiosus* allows for its use beyond the confines of religious communities. It can be deployed to embrace all of humanity and not simply persons engaged in religious practices allowing for the presuppositions embodied in this term to provide a place of contrast to neoliberalism. The counter-narration of the individual offered by the *homo religiosus* points to the possibilities offered by Christian theology of a mode of existence which does not ignore economic participation but offers a different set of guiding principles from those intrinsic to neoliberalism.

IV.i. The Homo Religiosus: Connections to the Divine

Within this project, the *homo religiosus* borrows from the idea of an irrevocable connection between human existence and conceptions of the divine. This ties the *homo religiosus* to the broader question of the role of religious experience in understanding human existence.⁴² While not broaching this broader issue, I am accepting the assertion of scholars such as Wilhelm Dupré, who argued that religious experience is essential to understanding what it means to be human.⁴³ This use of *homo religiosus* allows for

⁴¹Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.3.1.

⁴² While this is not the subject of this project, I recognize that this is the focus of a inquiry connected to the psychological study of religion as first initiated by by William James. James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: a Study in Human Nature*. Snova, 2019.

⁴³ It is important to also acknowledge that understandings of a connection between humanity and the divine are as varied as understandings of either the divine or humanity. Even William James (who is cited above) argued against the idea of religious feelings within the individual. He went even further to argue against the idea of religious acts or objects. Dupré Wilhelm. *Religion in Primitive Cultures A Study in Ethnophilosophy*. Berlin: de Gruyter Mouton, 2011; Smith, Christian. "Why Are Humans Religious?" In *Religion: What It Is, How It Works, and Why It Matters*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017: 190-233; Taves, Ann. "Religion: Deeming Things Religious." In *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009; 18.

different definitions of the divine and the divine's connection to humanity. While this project is grounded in a Protestant understanding of the divine and the divine's relationship to humanity, the efficacy of this term is not diminished by the acknowledgment that within Christian theology there exist different constructions of what it means to be human and what constitutes the divine.⁴⁴ *Homo religiosus*, as used here, only requires that any construction of what it means to be human begins with an articulation of the divine's relationship to humanity.

This provides a subtle contrast between Protestant theology and the ideology of neoliberalism but also highlights the glaring similarities between the two. It is the similarities that provide much of the power of neoliberalism to operate unquestioned within the neoliberal black church and the contrast which provide the resources for the neoliberal black church to operate within neoliberalism without being consumed by it. Both Protestant theology and neoliberalism accept the connection of humanity to the divine. However, neoliberalism offers itself, the marketplace, or market forces, as the divine being to whom the individual finds the fulfillment of human existence. As such, it is the marketplace that offers the experience of freedom, the creation of good, and that shapes human action.⁴⁵ Protestant theology offers something or someone not of human

⁴⁴ However, it should be noted that this is only true for those definitions of the divine or of humanity that are not self-contradictory.

⁴⁵ When speaking of freedom within the context of the marketplace, there remains the idea that such freedom involves the will and/or reason which are considered particular mental processes. There are numerous works addressing the issue of freedom whose ideas I have seen referenced in one form or another within economic discussion. They include: Hayek, F. A. *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011; Hayek, Friedrich A, Edwin J. Feulner, and John Blundell. *The Road to Serfdom*. London: IEA Health and Welfare Unit, 1999; Kolm, Serge-Christophe. *Modern Theories of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996; James Tully --, et al. *Isaiah Berlin and the Politics of Freedom: 'Two Concepts of Liberty' 50 Years Later*. New York: Routledge, 2013; Harvey, Mark. *Karl Polanyi: New Perspectives On the Place of the Economy in Society*. Manchester; New York, NY: Palgrave, 2007; Polanyi, Karl. *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001.

origin as the divine and suggests that worship of things created by humanity constitutes idolatry.⁴⁶

IV.ii. The Homo Religiosus: Understanding Human Freedom

Another point central to the comparison between Protestantism and economic ideology centers on varying concepts of human freedom. Any discussion of freedom is fraught with challenges. Both within economics and theology, the phrase is freighted with a wide array of meanings dependent on historical, social, religious, or cultural context. Given the desire to provide a contrast between economic ideology and theology, let me again offer a concept of freedom contingent upon a Protestant theological framework while also acknowledging that this is only one of many possible ways of understanding the concept. Freedom, in its simplest terms, is the ability of the individual “to say a real yes or no to the options of life.”⁴⁷ This idea of freedom, at a rudimentary level, is true within both economics and theology. However, a place of distinction for Protestant theology rests on its understanding of the contingency of freedom. This means that experiences of freedom are contingent on the unfettered exercise of the will and rationality of the individual, which is contingent on an external intervention.

To understand freedom, as offered by Protestantism, one must begin with its

⁴⁶ Johnston, Mark. *Saving God: Religion After Idolatry*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.

⁴⁷ Beach, Waldo. "Freedom and Authority in Protestant Ethics." *The Journal of Religion* 32, no. 2 (1952): 108.

understanding of the limitations of human rationality and human will.⁴⁸ As mentioned above, streams of Protestant thought hold that the rationality and will of humanity have been corrupted as a result of the fall of humanity and the introduction of sin into the human condition.⁴⁹ While there is great variance within Protestant theology regarding the extent to which humanity has been corrupted by the introduction of sin, major tributaries of Protestant theology suggest that any mode of existence reliant on human will and rationality, without the redeeming and restorative intervention of Christ, inevitably fails to experience true freedom. In this regard, Protestant theology borrows from Augustine's assertion that human will is not free but rather unfree.⁵⁰ This conflicts with the assertions of the ideology of neoliberalism that the exercise of free will leads to communal good, is essential to experiences of freedom, and is driven by the rationality

⁴⁸ The discussion of the freedom of the will within Christian thought is as varied as that of discussions of the will in the field of economics. There are a variety of authors and works that have been impactful on theological discussions of the freedom of the will. Two of the classic works within Christianity are: Augustine, of Hippo, Robert P. Russell, and Saint Augustine. *The Teacher: The Free Choice of the Will; Grace and Free Will*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2004; Luther, Martin, Henry P. Cole, Edward Thomas Vaughan, and Henry Atherton. *The Bondage of the Will*. Grand Rapids, Mich., London: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; Sovereign Grace Union, 1931. Beyond these two, discussions of free will veer in a variety of directions beginning with: Kant, Immanuel, Allen Wood, and George di Giovanni. *Kant: Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: And Other Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Depending on the historical period, the theological perspectives (even within Christianity), and whether the discussion is treated as an object of religious or philosophical commitments determine which authors are most influential.

⁴⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.2, 2.1.8.

⁵⁰ There remains significant debate regarding Augustine's view of the moral behavior of the individual and the freedom of the will. While there is relatively wide consensus that Augustine held the individual responsible for their moral acts, there is great debate on what this means for the standing of the individual in relationship to God. In other words, there are some who read Augustine as espousing a model of pre-destination consistent with that of Calvin, while others argue that the will of the individual may have some limited capacity of freedom that does not result in the models of depravity offered by Calvin. Willows, Adam M. "Augustine, the Origin of Evil, and the Mystery of Free Will." *Religious Studies*, vol. 50, no. 2, Apr. 2013: 255–269; Rogers, Katherin A. "Augustines Compatibilism." *Religious Studies*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2004: 415–435; Crawford, Dan D. "Intellect and Will in Augustines Confessions." *Religious Studies*, vol. 24, no. 3, Sept. 1988: 291–302.

of the human agent.⁵¹ Rationality is averred as capable of leading to the outcomes that constitute the freedom and well-being of the human agent as understood by neoliberalism. Again, the concern this raises is that the freedom offered by neoliberalism is counter to that of the Christian faith. The appropriation of a definition of freedom by the church, that is the product of neoliberalism, robs the neoliberal black church of the theological resources that can combat neoliberalism's pernicious counter-narrative of freedom.

IV.iii. The Homo Religiosus: Failures To Achieve Good

This understanding of Protestant theology does not preclude an organizing principle for human communities to govern action and behavior and possibly shape the community in its pursuit of freedom. However, it holds that the weakness of human rationality will always demonstrate itself in the midst of this organizing principle. Neoliberalism offers rationality as an organizing principle of the market and human communities. It further asserts that behavior governed by rationality yields the greatest experiences of individual and communal freedom. If one accepts neoliberalism's ideology as the organizing principle, an assessment of the economic system by theology will assert that within that economic system, humanity will demonstrate its inability and incapacity to experience genuine freedom.⁵² Human will, absent the influence of the divine, is incapable of experiencing or performing the good.⁵³ This is not to suggest that of all the actions of the human agent are evil, but even honorable

⁵¹ Blosser, Joe. "Can God or the Market Set People Free? Libertarian, Egalitarian, and Ethical Freedom." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 41, no. 2 (2013): 233-53.

⁵² Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.13

⁵³ *ibid.*, 2.2.27.

actions are corrupted by evil intent.⁵⁴ Neither human agents nor the market place as a proxy for humanity's cumulative actions stands supreme, but all are in need of the providential intervention of God.⁵⁵ While many of the aspects of Protestant theology mentioned above can be debated, what is essential for this discussion is its understanding of the fullest expression of humanity and experiences of freedom as deeply connected to God.

Protestant theology offers two foundational theological critiques of neoliberalism. First, it argues that no human effort can produce communal good when governed by rationality alone, given the corrupted nature of rationality. Secondly, not only will human communities and their ways of living require more than rationality to govern their proper course, but the intervention needed into such systems is from a divine source. Again, a contrast and similarity between theology and neoliberalism are identified. Protestant theology offers a conception of the divine as something utterly not-human and the proper source of intervention.⁵⁶ Neoliberalism does not disagree that an intervention is needed for human agents and communities to experience good, but it sets the source of that intervention at the foot of the marketplace.⁵⁷ The idea of intervention and the commitment to the divine are held by both belief systems. However, the assertions by Christian theology of the divine as something other than the marketplace is anathema to neoliberalism. The definition of the divine in the two systems is central to the divergence of these systems and consequential to how religious institutions immersed within

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 2.3.8.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 2.3.7.

⁵⁶ Barth, Karl. *The Humanity of God*. Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960.

⁵⁷ Cox, Harvey. *The Market As God*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016: 10.

neoliberalism will contend with the system while holding true to theological principals.

V. The Competing Ideology: Homo Oeconomicus

The implications of the *homo religiosus* gain clarity when contrasted with the alternative construction of humanity and the divine offered by neoliberalism. As stated above, neoliberalism's acknowledgment of the divine as a constitutive element of human identity rests in its understanding of the divine as the marketplace. Neoliberalism offers the elevation of human rationality and desire as essential elements of its ideology. The market serves as the communal place where desires are satisfied, with the only constraints on the human agent being their rationality and resources. Neoliberalism proceeds to reshape humanity's self-understanding through its provision of the *homo oeconomicus* or economic person.⁵⁸ The *homo oeconomicus* proffers humanity as "unswervingly rational, [and] completely selfish," pursuing the satisfaction of personal desires (which are shaped by the market) with cold objectivity. "This rational paradigm has served economics well, providing a coherent framework for modeling human behavior."⁵⁹ However, similar to Protestant theology, there is disagreement with this normative claim. Some suggest that the idea of the human agent as completely and utterly rational does not align with human experience.⁶⁰ These insurgents, commonly referred to as behavioral economists, argue that actual human behavior deviates from

⁵⁸ Donald McCloskey rightly suggests that this phrase is best translated economic person as opposed to economic man, "since a male adult would usually be designated by *vir* in Latin, while *homo* had a broader meaning." Persky, Joseph. "Retrospectives: The Ethology Of Homo Oeconomicus." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 9, no. 2 (April 1995): 221.

⁵⁹ Levitt, Steven D, and John A List. "Homo Oeconomicus Evolves." *Science* 319, no. 5865 (February 15, 2008): 909

⁶⁰ This theory is addressed by both behavioral economists and by the idea of 'bounded rationality' within economics which accepts the limitations of rationality that classic constructions of the economic agent seem to disregard. Arthur, W. Brian. "Designing Economic Agents That Act like Human Agents: A Behavioral Approach to Bounded Rationality." *The American Economic Review* 81, no. 2 (1991): 353-59.

the rational model in predictable ways.⁶¹ In this insurgency, we witness not only the evolution of economics but the theological concern of the impaired rationality of humanity emerge from within economics itself. This offers some hope for the neoliberal black church that not only can its liberative posture be reclaimed, but in doing so, it might accelerate the emergence of an understanding of economic agency by its constituents aligned with its theological commitments.

Vi. Origins of the Homo Oeconomicus

The *homo oeconomicus*, once considered by economists to be bereft of explanatory value, has taken on renewed influence as neoliberalism places the *homo oeconomicus* at the center of its ideology. Neoliberalism offers an account of humanity, devoid of any notion of the divine, as something other than the collective desires and rationality of humanity as expressed in the marketplace.⁶² The idea of the *homo oeconomicus* can be traced back to John Stuart Mills, who uses the image to provide an abstraction of the human agent for its explanatory power regarding basic, and quite limited, economic decisions and specifically for its efficacy in explaining the production and distribution of wealth.⁶³ Later in economic history, one witnesses the conflation of the *homo oeconomicus* with that of the rational person, where the concern is less about what the individual produces and is more focused on the rational process of making

⁶¹ “Incorporating these features into economic models, proponents argue, should improve our ability to explain observed behavior.” Levitt, “Homo Oeconomicus Evolves,” 909.

⁶² In fact, neoliberalism posits its own trinitarian God constituted by the rational individual, human desire, and the marketplace.

⁶³ Mill, John Stuart. *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*. London: Routledge, 1996; Persky, “Retrospectives: The Ethology Of Homo Economicus,” 223.

choices in pursuit of individual desires.⁶⁴

The *homo oeconomicus* came to be understood as the “rational, God-like decision-maker, exercising control over creation.”⁶⁵ The individual’s rational pursuit of self-interest, and the freedom required for such a pursuit, is of utmost importance under neoliberalism.⁶⁶ If one traces the emergence of the *homo oeconomicus* from classic liberals to its recent incarnations in political economy, one witnesses the construction of the idea of the rational pursuit of the satisfaction of self-interest as the lens for understanding the *homo oeconomicus*’ thoughts and actions. The application of this frame is by no means limited to economic decisions and actions alone. Neoliberalism extends the reach, influence, and impact of this myth of the individual and their actions to non-economic spheres of life.⁶⁷ The unrestrained pursuit of self-interest frames the context in which ideas of liberty and freedom are understood, and communal institutions are judged in light of their protection of this liberty. However, it is important to keep in mind what already has been asserted. The idea of the utterly rational individual falters under the weight of human experience. Consequently, the notions of freedom and liberty based on these false understandings of human action are also called into question along with the religious institution that embraces this thinking in shaping its theological praxes.

⁶⁴ For a fuller explanation of the evolution of the rational person within economic history see: Kirzner, Israel M. *The Economic Point of View: an Essay in the History of Economic Thought*. Kansas City, KS: Sheed and Ward, 1976.

⁶⁵ Nixon, Mark G. “Satisfaction for Whom? Freedom for What? Theology and the Economic Theory of the Consumer.” *Journal of Business Ethics* 70, no. 1 (2006): 49.

⁶⁶ Novak, *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

⁶⁷ Eagleton-Pierce, Matthew. *Neoliberalism: the Key Concepts*. New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016: 84.

Vii. The Place of Distinction for the Homo Oeconomicus

The conflicting conceptions of humanity offered by the *homo religiosus* and the *homo oeconomicus*, along with the presuppositions of each, frame the ideological and theological concern for the neoliberal black church. The difference between these two systems is driven by their respective views of human nature and their belief in the divine power needed for the intervention required to orient humanity to its proper place and purpose. At the center of the distinction between the two systems is not merely their respective understandings of humanity but also their understandings of the divine. Both systems allow for the human agent to be subordinated to an external power to experience true freedom. The question is: What power will the individual be subordinated? The source of external intervention, and constructions of the human agent, represent significant points of divergence for the *homo religiosus* and the *homo oeconomicus*. To better understand these distinctions requires a further examination of neoliberalism and the context from which both the *homo oeconomicus* and the idea of freedom emerges and within which they currently operate.

VI. The Ideology of Neoliberalism

Despite the ubiquity of the use of the term in academic, political, or communal discourse, neoliberalism resists a singular definition. Neoliberalism's multivalence, a product of its complex history of describing a wide array of economic policies and praxes, complicates efforts to link it to a singular economic phenomenon. Its ambiguous meaning is partially responsible for the many debates surrounding this economic concept and its application.⁶⁸ It is critical to understand that neoliberalism is not a new

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, xiii.

economic phenomenon as much as it is a resurgence of classical economic theory.⁶⁹ Many of the economic policies ascribed to neoliberalism are also referred to as neoclassical economics. Neoclassical economics owes an enormous debt to the work of Milton Friedman and his response to Keynesianism.⁷⁰ Neoliberalism represents a re-embrace of neoclassical economics and a recommitment to several of its underlying presuppositions.⁷¹ However, what is critical to remember is that neoliberalism addresses more than simply market relationships. It seeks to reconstruct economic, political, and social relations in the image of the free market.⁷²

VI.i. The Sovereignty of the Marketplace

Since roughly 1979, a period during which economic policies within the United States and abroad set the stage for the emergence of neoliberal economic policy, neoliberalism has been understood as a response to, if not an outright overthrow of, the economic principles attributed to and espoused by John Maynard Keynes (also known as Keynesianism) that dominated the economic thinking of the time.⁷³ This rejection of Keynesianism is important to our discussion because it highlights one of the distinctive

⁶⁹ Springer, Simon, Kean Birch, and Julie MacLeavy. *The Handbook of Neoliberalism*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016: 2-3.

⁷⁰ Hunt, E. K., and Mark Lautzenheiser. *History of Economic Thought: a Critical Perspective*. New York, NY: Taylor and Francis: Routledge, 2011: 398-433.

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² The term 'free market' is considered by some to be a misnomer. In spite of neoliberalism's valorization of the market, neoliberalism has exhibited a suppressive tendency particularly as it leveraged political and governmental power to protect its operation. Additionally, even within economics, neoliberalism has been less interested in providing space for markets to freely arise and operate and more interested in particular market formations that met neoliberalism's ideological pre-commitments. Finally, discussion of the free market fails to take into consideration systemic disparities in the power of the actors engaged in economic transactions. Bruff, Ian. "Neoliberalism and Authoritarianism" in Springer, Simon, Kean Birch, and Julie MacLeavy. *The Handbook of Neoliberalism*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016, 107.

⁷³ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 10.

features of neoliberalism of interest to theology. Keynesianism represented an acceptance of the *homo oeconomicus* as the rational economic agent consistent with earlier economic models.⁷⁴ However, Keynesianism differed from earlier economic models in its acceptance of intervention by external forces (in this case, the government) in the market (understood as the cumulative actions of the *homo oeconomicus*).⁷⁵ Keynesianism rejected the idea of the market as omnipotent and self-governing and asserted that government intervention was needed to mitigate the negative consequences of individual economic actions.⁷⁶ In doing so, Keynesianism also accepted limitations on the actions of the *homo oeconomicus*. For reasons far different than that of Protestant theology, Keynesianism recognized the limitations of an economic system governed solely by the pursuit of individual satisfaction.⁷⁷ However, neoliberalism obliterated the modest restraints of Keynesianism on the *homo oeconomicus*, believing that the freedom of the individual from external restraint as its great gift to society, while simultaneously setting the market as the force to which the individual would be ultimately subject.⁷⁸

Neoliberalism sought to assert the market's unconstrained operation as best for

⁷⁴ Hunt, *History of Economic Thought*, 618-625.

⁷⁵ Hunt, *History of Economic Thought*, 634-639.

⁷⁶ For a fuller discussion of Keynesianism see: Weintraub, Sidney. *Classical Keynesianism, Monetary Theory and the Price Level*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Pr., 1976; Colander, David C., and Harry Landreth. *The Coming of Keynesianism to America: Conversations with the Founders of Keynesian Economics*. Cheltenham (UK): Elgar, 1996; Hall, Peter A. *The Political Power of Economic Ideas: Keynesianism across Nations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Pr., 1989.

⁷⁷ Alfredo Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston --, et al. *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*. London; Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2005: 10-15.

⁷⁸ Springer, Simon, Kean Birch, and Julie MacLeavy. *The Handbook of Neoliberalism*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016: 33.

the facilitation of experiences of the individual's freedom.⁷⁹ The idea of the market as self-governing and self-correcting provided it, and by extension, the *homo oeconomicus*, with a sense of infallibility and disclosed its positing of the marketplace as sovereign.⁸⁰ The sovereignty of the market undergirded neoliberalism's assertion that external constraints on its operation, from sources other than the market itself, would be ineffective and detrimental to the experiences of freedom for the *homo oeconomicus* who was the beneficiary of the market's benevolence.⁸¹ This position challenges suggestions that individual freedom could be obtained without neoliberalism or better fostered by other economic or religious systems. This bracketed off the market from theological inquiry and placed the market's operation beyond interference and interrogation by theological bodies. Accordingly, the market's status was held as an omnipotent force for good in the pursuit of individual freedom while concomitantly driving the expansion and protection of the wealth and power of the privileged few.⁸²

Neoliberalism's construction of the sovereignty of the marketplace, and its

⁷⁹ Eagleton-Pierce, *Neoliberalism*, 81-86.

⁸⁰ Shaikh, Anwar. "The Economic Mythology of Neoliberalism." In Alfredo Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston --, et al. *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*. London; Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2005: 41.

⁸¹ This is not to suggest that there are no differences of opinion of the market's ability to self-govern even among economists. "Markets are an efficient way of producing and distributing a very large number of mundane items. Market incentives are a dependable way of getting our bread baked. Markets allow us to make the best use of the information dispersed throughout a society. Markets give their participants a certain kind of freedom - expanding the range of choices and giving each person a variety of partners with whom to deal." Miller, David and Saul Estrin. "A Case for Market Socialism: What Does It Mean? Why Should We Favor It?" In *Why Market Socialism? Voices from Dissent*, ed. by Frank Roosevelt and David Belkin. Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe, 1994: 23. The contrarian view suggests that, "when we examine markets we find institutions that generate increasingly inefficient allocations of resources, unleash socially destructive incentives unnecessarily, bias and obstruct the flow of essential information for economic self-management, substitute trivial for meaningful freedoms, and lead to irremediable inequities in the distribution of goods and power." Hahnel, Robin and Michael Albert. *Quiet Revolution in Welfare Economics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990: 46.

⁸² Mitchell Dean, *Sociology After Society, Sociology after Postmodernism*. London: Sage, 1997.

proposed influence on individual freedom, represents an ideological commitment that, while operative, often goes unacknowledged. This presupposition is entrenched within both cultural and religious institutions because it appeals to ideas of freedom deeply woven into the American culture.⁸³ The rhetoric of freedom and autonomy is such an intrinsic part of American discourse that neoliberalism's presuppositions are taken for granted and rarely questioned even though the rhetoric of these concepts differs greatly from their substance.⁸⁴ The ideology operates invisibly in both policy prescriptions, and more critically, within the neoliberal black church. Once reified, the ideology was granted the power, persuasiveness, and perseverance to surreptitiously invade even religious institutions.⁸⁵

VI.ii. The Freedom and the Individual

In promoting the *homo oeconomicus* in its ideology, neoliberalism averred a particular construction of both the human agent and the idea of freedom, and it affirmed

⁸³ There are a wide range of historical treatments of the intellectual underpinnings of neoliberalism which include: Peck, Jamie. *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2014; Jones, Daniel Stedman. *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics*. Princeton University Press, 2014; Dardot, Pierre, and Christian Laval. *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*. Verso Books, 2014; Mirowski, Philip. *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*. Verso Books, 2013; Burgin, Angus. *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets Since the Depression*. Harvard University Press, 2012; Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*; Boas, Taylor C., and Jordan Gans-Morse. "Neoliberalism: From New Liberal Philosophy to Anti-Liberal Slogan." *Studies in Comparative International Development* 44, no. 2 (2009): 137–61; Hartwich, Oliver Marc. *Neoliberalism: the Genesis of a Political Swearword*. St Leonards, N.S.W.: The Centre for Independent Studies, 2009.

⁸⁴ "The power of ideology is not constrained to only those who benefit from the ideology. Whether talking about elites or the masses, each operates under the influence of an ideology." Brown, Steven R. "Consistency and the Persistence of Ideology: Some Experimental Results." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (1970): 60-68; Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 5.

⁸⁵ "Only when "reified, does neoliberalism takes on the denotation of a concrete abstraction, an accomplished object, a totalizing ideological formation; even, in its temporal dimension, an epoch." Comaroff, John. "The End of Neoliberalism?" *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 637, no. 1 (2011): 141, 142.

the idea of human autonomy as grounded in rationality.⁸⁶ The *homo oeconomicus* was the rational decision-maker consistently optimizing their choices and resources in a utilitarian pursuit of satisfaction, which challenged both human experience and Protestant theological constructions of the individual. Neoliberalism sought to maximize and facilitate experiences of individual freedom and viewed the marketplace as the best economic expression of that freedom as it provided the organization of economic activity of individuals and entities operating voluntarily.⁸⁷

Neoliberalism's freedom was the unfettered ability of the individual to pursue their self-determined ends constrained only by their resources.⁸⁸ This freedom represented the autonomy of the individual to determine, free of constraint, what goods to purchase or buy, or where to trade one's skills and labor for financial reward.⁸⁹ Neoliberalism sought to resist the growing tide of collectivism represented by socialism. It presumed the individual knew what ultimately would satisfy their desires and that the individual had the autonomy, power, and resources to obtain satiation of those desires. The *homo oeconomicus* and the corresponding ideas of individual freedom, choice/satisfaction, and sovereignty all represent theological categories that neoliberalism redefined. This redefinition is of ultimate theological concern to the black church.

⁸⁶ Eagleton-Pierce, *Neoliberalism*, 81-86; Olsen, Niklas. *The Sovereign Consumer: A New Intellectual History of Neoliberalism*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

⁸⁷ In order to facilitate the individual's economic pursuit of freedom, the economic encounter must always have the appearance of volitional engagement. "Co-operation is strictly individual and voluntary provided: (a) that enterprises are private so that the ultimate contracting parties are individual and (b) that individuals are effectively free to enter or not enter into any particular exchange, so that every transaction is strictly voluntary." By voluntary, neoliberalism means simply the "absence of coercion of a man by his fellow man." Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 14-16.

⁸⁸ Eagleton-Pierce, *Neoliberalism*.

⁸⁹ Neoliberalism sought to resist the growing tide of collectivism represented by socialism. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*.

VI.iii. Neoliberalism Cooption of Freedom

Proponents of neoliberalism's construction freedom defend it as the "Almighty's gift to every man and woman in this world...and as the greatest power on earth [America has] an obligation to help spread the freedom."⁹⁰ This freedom is rooted in a liberalism developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and was an "intellectual movement that...emphasized freedom as the ultimate goal and the individual as the ultimate entity in the society."⁹¹ Neoliberalism holds the freedom of the individual as the supreme measure of any set of social relationships and not exclusively economic ones. Thus, it brings the economic, social, and political spheres of life into communion in the marketplace under the guise of facilitating the maximum freedom in all spheres.⁹² It should not surprise us that it also sought, and in the case of the neoliberal black church succeeded, to breach even the religious sphere. This was accomplished through neoliberalism's claim that its system was a constitutive element of freedom broadly defined. Economic freedom, and by extension a free society, was an end unto itself and an "indispensable means towards the achievement of political

⁹⁰ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 6.

⁹¹ This, Milton Friedman asserts, changed in the 1930's when the term liberalism took on a very different meaning. "It came to be associated with a readiness to rely primarily on the state rather than on private voluntary arrangements to achieve objectives regarded as desirable. The catchwords became welfare and equality rather than freedom. The nineteenth-century liberal regarded an extension of freedom as the most effective way to promote welfare and equality; the twentieth century liberal regards welfare and equality as either pre-requisites of or alternatives to freedom." Friedman, Milton, and Rose D Friedman. *Capitalism and Freedom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012: 5.

⁹² For example, often economics and politics are bifurcated as "individual freedom is considered a political problem and material welfare an economic problem." Such a construction of the relationship between the two can lead to the conclusion that a political structure can be combined with any economic framework. However, Milton Friedman notes that the idea of democratic socialism is one such pairing of the economic with the political that he considers delusional. For Friedman, the economic and political frameworks are inexorably tied to one another and that "a society which is socialist cannot also be democratic, in the sense of guaranteeing individual freedom." *ibid.*, 10.

freedom.”⁹³ This elevation of economic freedom and the role that it served in maintaining individual political freedom suggested that capitalism was a necessary condition for individual/political freedom.⁹⁴ Neoliberalism’s ideological commitment to a particular understanding of freedom is evident in the founding statement of the Mont Pelerin Society.⁹⁵

The central values of civilization are in danger. Over large stretches of the earth's surface the essential conditions of human dignity and freedom have already disappeared. In others they are under constant menace from the development of current tendencies or policy. The position of the individual and the voluntary group are progressively undermined by extensions of arbitrary power. Even that most precious possession of Western Man, freedom of thought and expression, is threatened by the spread of creeds which, claiming the privilege of tolerance when in the position of a minority, seek only to establish a position of power in which they can suppress and obliterate all views but their own. The group holds that these developments have been fostered by the growth of a view of history which denies all absolute moral standards and by the growth of theories which question the desirability of the rule of law. It holds further that they have been fostered by a decline of belief in private property and the competitive market; for without the diffused power and initiative associated with these institutions it is difficult to imagine a society in which freedom maybe effectively preserved.⁹⁶

From its very origins, neoliberalism considered itself not only a necessary condition for

⁹³ *ibid.*, 12.

⁹⁴ Friedman acknowledges that capitalism is not a sufficient condition and provides several examples, including fascist Spain, Italy, and Germany as communities with private enterprise as the dominant form of economic activity but are far from politically free societies. *ibid.*, 10, 12.

⁹⁵ “After World War II, in 1947, when many of the values of Western civilization were imperiled, 36 scholars, mostly economists, with some historians and philosophers, were invited by Professor Friedrich Hayek to meet at Mont Pelerin, near Montreux, Switzerland, to discuss the state and the possible fate of liberalism (in its classical sense) in thinking and practice. The group described itself as the Mont Pelerin Society, after the place of the first meeting. It emphasized that it did not intend to create an orthodoxy, to form or align itself with any political party or parties, or to conduct propaganda. Its sole objective was to facilitate an exchange of ideas between like-minded scholars in the hope of strengthening the principles and practice of a free society and to study the workings, virtues, and defects of market-oriented economic systems.” See <https://www.montpelerin.org/about-mps/>

⁹⁶ See <https://www.montpelerin.org/about-mps/>

economic freedom but also for individual and political freedom.⁹⁷ The government was understood as the entity which operated to safeguard that freedom, which meant that the government would allow the market to organize its economic activity without interference. This facilitation of mutual individual benefit through a voluntary engagement within a community presented neoliberalism as enhancing individual freedom (the ideological north star of neoliberalism) through the provision of increased choice and protecting that freedom within social and economic encounters.⁹⁸

The arguments of Friedrich Hayek illustrate early contrasts between the constrictive concept of serfdom (not free) versus the liberating utilization of one's income-producing capacity in the workforce (free).⁹⁹ Subsequent neoliberal advocates would deploy the idea of freedom to frame the tension they perceived between the experience of individual freedom found in the workplace versus that found in the home or to contrast urban versus rural opportunities for experiences of individual freedom in the exercise of one's labor.¹⁰⁰ Appeals to freedom were also utilized within neoliberal economic thought to identify the organizational or theoretical constructs which best facilitated economic results that were understood as manifestations of the freedom envisioned by neoliberal proponents.¹⁰¹ Even neoliberalism's use of rhetoric such as the

⁹⁷ Ironically, Friedman's emphasis on individualism also requires that individual freedom be understood in light of communal existence. Friedman argues that it is only within a communal context that individual freedom has currency. Friedman uses the example of Robinson Crusoe to illustrate that individual freedom is not relevant if the individual is unencumbered by any constraint to his individual actions. Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 4,12-13.

⁹⁸ Both of these are questions asserted by neoliberalism.

⁹⁹ Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*.

¹⁰⁰ Eagleton-Pierce, *Neoliberalism*, 83.

¹⁰¹ For example, free trade, often a centerpiece of neoliberal thinking, is contrasted with Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.

'free market' demonstrates the ubiquity of the concept of freedom as an ideological foundation for this economic perspective. Yet, one must ask, what is particularly free in neoliberalism? In most instantiations of neoliberal economic policy, the idea of freedom must contend with economic and human suffering, and experiences of freedom or suffering are determined by far more than the effort or talent of the individual. More often than not, within neoliberalism, whether one experiences some measure of liberation or degradation is contingent on exogenous factors such as class, race, education, or even geography.¹⁰²

VI.iv. Problems With Neoliberalism's Freedom

Within politics and philosophy, "freedom is often used to descriptively or normatively define the problem spaces of socio-political life, with an emphasis on questions of power, responsibility, and the distribution of resources."¹⁰³ Freedom is the ideological backbone of neoliberalism and relentlessly appealed to in its defense.¹⁰⁴ However, the concentrations of wealth and power, the self-preservationist tendencies of those who hold power, and the implications of power on the existence of the poor are realities to which neoliberalism's idea of freedom gives insufficient attention. The black church that chooses to understand the work of God as a call to the liberation of the poor and oppressed (spiritually, economically, and politically) will also realize it is called to

¹⁰² Carter, Locke. *Market Matters: Applied Rhetoric Studies and Free Market Competition*. Hampton Press, 2005; Carrier, James G. *Meanings of the Market: The Free Market in Western Culture*. Berg Oxford, 1997; Aune, James Arnt. *Selling the Free Market: The Rhetoric of Economic Correctness*. Guilford Press, 2002.

¹⁰³ Eagleton-Pierce, *Neoliberalism*, 81. Also see: Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty and Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008; Connolly, William E. *The Terms of Political Discourse*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993.

¹⁰⁴ Katz, Wallace, Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, and Gregory Elliott. "Democracy And The New Capitalism: The New Spirit Of Capitalism." *New Labor Forum* 16, no. 2 (2007): 126–30.

critique the purported voluntary nature of economic transactions in light of the significant disparities in power between parties.¹⁰⁵ This is a reality that neither conservative nor liberal economic thought gives adequate attention, so the church must do so.

VII. Choice and Satisfaction

While the idea of freedom plays an essential role in the ideology of neoliberalism, it is hardly the only concept trapped in neoliberalism's embrace. A concept considered demonstrative of freedom is that of choice. Choice is no stranger to theology having been at the center of debates regarding free will and mechanistic causality which was attendant to the scientific revolution at the beginning of the Enlightenment period.¹⁰⁶ Within neoliberalism, choice is best illustrated through an examination of consumer theory. Consumer theory provides the intellectual construct for understanding the capacities of the individual to determine the worth of various options and to choose which among those options presented satisfy his or her needs. Consumer choice shapes the encounters and perceptions of every economic agent.¹⁰⁷ The basic idea is captured in Gossen's Law, which states that "a person maximizes utility when he distributes his available money among various goods so that he obtains the same amount of satisfaction from the last unit of money spent upon each commodity."¹⁰⁸ This law equates satisfaction with consumption and requires the individual to pursue

¹⁰⁵ Ironically, it is the very collusion of economic and political power that both economic streams of thought claim to despise that is produced by neoliberalism through the inequitable distribution of capital as an instrument of power. Eagleton-Pierce, *Neoliberalism*, 21; Nitzan, Jonathan, and Shimshon Bichler. *Capital As Power: A Study of Order and Creorder*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2009.

¹⁰⁶ Eagleton-Pierce, *Neoliberalism*, 20.

¹⁰⁷ Gilboa, Itzhak, and David Schmeidler. "Cumulative Utility Consumer Theory." *International Economic Review* 38, no. 4 (June 1997): 737.

¹⁰⁸ Blaug, Mark. *Economic Theory in Retrospect*. Whitefish, MT: Literary Licensing, 2013.

maximization of their satisfaction. Without satisfaction maximization as the telos, equilibrium (otherwise understood as systemic happiness) cannot be achieved.

This theory also presumes that individuals are endowed with the knowledge of what basket of goods consumed produces satisfaction. This allows an economic agent to arrive at their consumption decisions and thus create market demand.¹⁰⁹ Consumer knowledge, often referred to as ‘consumer sovereignty’, provides no room for communal or moral constraints on the consumption decisions of the *homo oeconomicus*.¹¹⁰ The idea that the *homo oeconomicus* is not subject to anything other than their desires and satiation is a cornerstone of communal satisfaction and economic theory.¹¹¹ Through the pursuit of individual desire, society marshals its resources to meet collective needs in a manner constrained only by what is perceived as the efficient utilization of available resources. The only evil defined by neoliberalism is material scarcity (or privation) or inefficient utilization of resources.¹¹² The anthropology inherent in consumer theory requires an asocial and amoral *homo oeconomicus*. The agent is individualistic in the determination of their needs and unimpeded by ideological or communal concerns in the pursuit of satisfaction.¹¹³ While a theological rebuttal will be offered, a critique of these provisions in neoliberalism can be offered without an appeal to theology.

¹⁰⁹ As has been stated earlier, this ignores the influence of outside forces, such as advertising and marketing, on creating demand.

¹¹⁰ Nixon, “Satisfaction for Whom?,” 42-44.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

¹¹² Lebergott, Stanley. “Consumer Choice: Advertising.” In *Pursuing Happiness: American Consumers in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993: 16-20.

¹¹³ Nixon, “Satisfaction for Whom?,” 39-60.

VIII. Critiques of Neoliberalism from within Economics

Neoliberalism offers a new mode of operation that has resulted within the United States of “higher and worsening income inequality...higher poverty rates, lower productivity growth, longer working hours, and wage stagnation for those in the bottom half of the wage distribution.”¹¹⁴ Yet, these realities of neoliberalism generate differing perspectives on their causes and remedies and also result in drastically different economic policies being advanced by liberal and conservative economic theorists. Any of these perceived negative implications of neoliberalism are often treated as the acceptable cost of pursuing greater experiences of freedom and satisfaction. However, not all experiences of freedom (or the lack thereof) are treated equally. The interest in experiences of freedom, while espoused for all of society, appears to be most responsive to those experiences accrued by individual agents also possessing substantial resources and wealth. Experiences of freedom, or systemic impediments to experiences of freedom, encountered by the poor do not garner similar responses or objections from the marketplace. For those members of the human community for whom the systemic constraint of resources prohibits the unfettered pursuit of the satisfaction of individual need, neoliberalism appears to attribute these conditions to deficiencies in the individuals themselves. It is at this point that one of the primary critiques of neoliberalism arises from within neoliberalism itself, although this critique is also a concern of theology.

VIII.i. Question of Resource Disparity

Neoliberalism affirms the importance of the individual pursuit of the satisfaction of

¹¹⁴ Saad-Filho, Alfredo and Deborah Johnston --, et al. *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*. London; Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2005

self-interests while assuming that the individual possesses the resources needed for the required economic transactions in the marketplace. Accordingly, the individual should be unconstrained in the utilization of these resources. However, neoliberalism offers no account for how capital is formed, how the distribution of resources within a community has been achieved, or of the magnitude of resource disparity that may exist. In this regard, neoliberalism is ahistorical and simply assumes that individuals have whatever resources they possess and have enough resources to execute the transactions needed to bring about their satisfaction. Neoliberalism treats the current distribution of resources as a given, accepts the existing distribution resources, and is perfectly content to continue systemic resource disparities even if they are further exacerbated by the market's operation. This reality provides one of the objective bases for the evaluation of whether neoliberalism lives up to its expressed *telos* of the provision of greater experiences of freedom and satisfaction for all individuals.

Neoliberalism's facilitation of the unfettered pursuit of self-determined ends by the *homo oeconomicus* also fails to recognize that this facilitation requires restrictions on the pursuit of self-determined ends in conflict with neoliberalism's self-purported goals. If the *homo oeconomicus* is unconstrained in their pursuit of any self-determined goals, this is only possible if the *homo oeconomicus* is endowed with the resources sufficient for such pursuit. However, access to this level of resources requires a redistribution of resources or limitations placed on self-determined ends. Either condition results in a diminishment of the very freedom neoliberalism suggests only it can provide.

VIII.ii. Just How Free Is a Free Market?

As has been alluded to earlier, the juxtaposition of the free market relative to government interference ignores the reality that the market is far from free in either its construction or its operation. Specifically, the market gives no account for the forces that enable and empower its existence or for its resistance to other forms of market engagement that threaten the unconstrained accumulation of resources or consumption by a few. Additionally, neoliberalism seems to ignore that the market is itself the result of governmental action. Whether through advantageous tax policy or subsidization of particular industries, Karl Polanyi accurately points out that, “the road to a free market was opened and kept open by an enormous increase in continuous centrally organized and controlled intervention.”¹¹⁵ The idea of freedom works within neoliberalism to link the concepts of political and economic freedom to one another.¹¹⁶ It implies that the freedom of the market guarantees political freedom when the market is not disrupted by governmental interference. However, Wendy Brown rightly suggests that,

...neoliberalism transposes democratic political principles of justice into an economic idiom, transforms the state itself into a manager of the nation on the model of the firm and hollows out the substance of democratic citizenship and even popular sovereignty. Thus, one important effect of neoliberalization is the vanishing of liberal democracy’s already anemic *homo politicus*, a vanquishing with enormous consequences for democratic institutions, culture, and imaginaries.¹¹⁷

VIII.iii. Neoliberalism: a Governing Rationality

Neoliberal economic policies demonstrate that, whether conservative or liberal, they

¹¹⁵ Polanyi, Karl. *The Great Transformation: the Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2007: 146.

¹¹⁶ Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 8.

¹¹⁷ Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalisms Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books, 2017: 35.

share ideological foundations that anchor and shape all policy manifestations. Neoliberal ideology exhibits a credendum so deeply ingrained within the American consciousness that it provides the rationality of neoliberalism with a near Kantian law-like quality. This allows the ideology of neoliberalism to exist just outside the scope of critical critique, even as the policies of neoliberalism are hotly debated, allowing the ideology to exist (and promulgate itself) as though it were an innate, unquestionable, universal truth. Utilizing ideas such as freedom, neoliberalism advances the suggestion that only under its economic oversight, itself the product of particular ideological commitments, can these ideas be fully experienced and vigorously protected. This creates a self-reinforcing rational loop within individuals and institutions that are subsumed in the grasp of neoliberalism. This equates the policies of neoliberalism with the ideological concepts undergirding them and requires that opponents lodge their objections concurrently against neoliberal economic policy and its ideological foundation, which is deeply connected to credendum woven into the self-identity of America. The rationality of this ideology obfuscates neoliberalism's deformation of these ideas and vacates these ideological commitments of meaning outside of neoliberalism's use. The ideology of neoliberalism empties ideas such as individualism or freedom of any meaning unrelated to economic agency. The idea of freedom is reduced to economic choice undeterred by externalities, and this meaning usurps other constructions of freedom, including constructions of freedom theologically understood. This constraint of meaning often goes unacknowledged, allowing for the rhetoric of freedom to be deployed in justifications of neoliberalism and placing any critiques in the disadvantageous position of appearing to be objections to the experience of individual

freedom and not simply freedom as defined by neoliberalism. Over time, the very concept of freedom is deformed in a way that renders it vacuous. This ideological deformation is of significant consequence when these ideological concepts are uncritically extended to and deployed within theology.

The concern here is in neoliberalism's establishment as a governing rationality in competition with Protestant theology.¹¹⁸ Neoliberalism reshapes the rational apparatus, initially utilized to make economic decisions, and extends it well beyond the sphere of the economic into non-economic realms. This has allowed for the ideology of neoliberalism to infiltrate theological thinking, creating a particular challenge for the neoliberal black church, given that its constituents have been particularly impacted by neoliberalism.¹¹⁹ More tragically, the rationality of neoliberalism represents a reordering of human reason that "configures all aspects of existence in economic terms."¹²⁰ It does this through a distortion of the ubiquitous concepts captured by its ideology that exert influence on the hermeneutics of the individual.¹²¹ This rationality gets promulgated through economic precepts, praxis, and performance like a serpiginous cancer on society. It is for this reason that the examination of neoliberalism's economism is pertinent. Economism is the means through which the governing rationality of

¹¹⁸ Of particular help in unpacking the capacity of neoliberalism to operate as a governing rationality are the following: Zamora, Daniel, and Michael C Behrent. *Foucault and Neoliberalism*. John Wiley & Sons, 2016; Brown, *Undoing the Demos*; Hamann, Trent H. "Neoliberalism, Governmentality, and Ethics." *Foucault Studies* (2009): 37-59.

¹¹⁹ The particular impact of neoliberalism on the black community will be discussed in chapter 5.

¹²⁰ Through its deformation of the concepts appropriated through its ideology, neoliberalism extends the application of both the concepts and the ways in which those concepts are deployed within economic transactions to all areas of human existence. Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 17, 47-48.

¹²¹ This includes both the hermeneutics through which the beingness of the individual is encountered and understood and the hermeneutics that the individual then utilizes to encounter and understand the world and others.

neoliberalism instantiates itself and extends its influence beyond the realm of the economic into every aspect of human existence.¹²² Economism gives shape and form to the practices of neoliberalism and concretizes the fundamental conflict with Christian theology. Christian theology has both a right and a reason for providing a theological response to neoliberalism. The concrete conditions in which economism is experienced within the neoliberal black church and to which the theological response will be directed will consume our attention next.

¹²² Jackson Jr, John L, David Kyuman Kim, and John Comaroff. "The End of Neoliberalism? What Is Left of the Left." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 637, no. 1 (2011): 141-14; Brown, Steven R. "Consistency and the Persistence of Ideology: Some Experimental Results." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (1970): 60-68.

Chapter 3: The Case for a Theological Rebuttal

I. What Is at Stake?

This project's concern lies in providing a constructive theological response to the influence of the ideology of neoliberalism on black churches. This concern presupposes that a consequential relationship exists between black churches and the black community and that this relationship has been deleteriously impacted by the churches' embrace of the ideological underpinnings of neoliberalism. The ideology of neoliberalism operates as a governing rationality within North America, and both individuals and institutions (religious and secular) have been deeply influenced by it. I am asserting that segments of the black church have been drawn into a conspiratorial relationship with neoliberalism to the detriment of the black community and the black church. The language of conspiratorial, as it relates to these segments of the black church, may convey a level of intentionality on the part of those black churches. While this is not outside of the realm of interpretive possibilities, the focus here is to respond to both the intentional and unintentional actions of churches under neoliberalism's ideology which has caused these black churches to fail to address "the ways in which the existing system of production and social structures relates to black oppression and exploitation."¹

In the previous chapter, I shared some of the contrasts between the ideas animating neoliberalism and those ideas within early Protestant theology. Specifically, I examined the ideas of who or what is divine, conceptions of human freedom, and

¹ This will be addressed more fully in Chapter 5. Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. --, et al. *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003: 878.

anthropology. The *homo oeconomicus*, representing neoliberalism's idea of the individual agent, is presented as the one experiencing human freedom through the unconstrained operation of the marketplace.² However, the reality for the human agent is far different. The individual, left in the hands of the marketplace, experiences a commodification of their life as the ever-expanding reach of neoliberalism's tenets consume all aspects of human existence.³ This is harmful to humanity *writ larg* and specifically to members of an oppressed group such as blacks. Within the black community, the black church historically has been one of the mechanisms through which the corruption of human dignity and potentiality has been resisted. The church fostered, sustained, and reinforced a counter-narrative to neoliberalism's most deformative ideas.⁴ The black church also served as a facilitator of resistance to oppression, and the praxes of the black church sustained blacks' declaration of individual value and purpose, challenging economic determinations by the marketplace.⁵ Under ideal conditions, the black church confronted the commodification of human existence by neoliberalism, and its theology drew attention to systemic obstructions to experiences of equality. So, there was no greater tragedy than when the theology of the black church was distorted through neoliberalism's

² Eagleton-Pierce, M. *Neoliberalism: The Key Concepts*. New York, NY: Routledge: 81-86.

³ This is evident in neoliberalism's turn to the consumer as the model for the human agent and the extension of the consumer, and their attendant consumptions, as the model through which other sectors of human existence are understood and engaged. Finke, Roger, and Rodney Stark. *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*. 2nd ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005: 9.

⁴ Eagleton-Pierce, *Neoliberalism: The Key Concepts*, 104.

⁵ Fitzgerald, Scott T., and Ryan E. Spohn. "Pulpits and Platforms: The Role of the Church in Determining Protest among Black Americans." *Social Forces* 84, no. 2 (2005): 1016.

ideology, as that ideology even resists economic incentives for the amelioration of its most harmful effects.⁶

II. Birth of the Neoliberal Black Church

This theological distortion occurred when the principles of neoliberalism had primacy in the thinking and actions of the black church. Neoliberalism's ideology works to "configure all aspects of existence in economic terms."⁷ This reordering affects not only the reason of the individual, but also institutional reason. This reordering is manifested as black churches are drawn from the historical and theological norm of resistance found within the black church tradition.⁸ This renders these black churches complicit in the expanse of this mindset beyond the economic sphere and the exploitation of the poor under neoliberalism.⁹ Participation in and promulgation of this economic reconfiguration of life is also referred to as economism, which denotes when "economic values are viewed as primary and therefore as properly determinative" serving as the principle hermeneutic of institutions and individuals.¹⁰ Economic values

⁶ Economism's commodification of human life is particularly troubling when encountered within the black community whose inherent value has been historically challenged by the dominant society. Walker, Corey D. B. Walker, "Social Theory and African American Theology" in Cannon, Katie G. *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology*. Vol. 1 [edition]. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014: 377. For an economic treatment of discrimination in the labor market see: Gary Stanley Becker. *The Economics of Discrimination*. Chicago; London: The University Of Chicago Press, 1971; Swinton, David H. "A Labor Force Competition Theory of Discrimination in the Labor Market." *The American Economic Review* 67, no. 1 (1977): 400-04.

⁷ Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. MIT Press, 2015, 17, 47-48.

⁸ Wilmore, Gayraud S. *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Introduction of the Religious History of African Americans*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998. ix.

⁹ The posture of resistance by the black church (as discussed in Chapter 1) sets the criteria against which the praxis of the neoliberal black church will be measured in the succeeding chapter. The idea of neoliberalism operating as a governing rationality is discussed in: Brown, *Undoing the Demos*.

¹⁰ Quote by Cobb as found in: Rieger, Joerg. *Liberating the Future: God, Mammon, and Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998: 32.

supplant alternative value systems under economism including theological values resident within religious institutions. This has given birth to what will be referred to as the ‘neoliberal black church.’ Neoliberal black churches exist as a subset of the black church community and utilize the ideology of neoliberalism as a primary lens through which to understand themselves, their mission, and their community.¹¹ The neoliberal black church does not always explicitly choose to embrace economism. More often than not, this embrace has been uncritical and unintentional resulting in the theological and praxiological deformation.¹² Under economism there is a theological distortion within the neoliberal black church of concepts ubiquitous within religious discourse such as individuality or freedom. These concepts take on meanings inherent within an economic context even as they remain operative theologically. This advances the deformation of these values and exerts influence on how these concepts are deployed by individuals, communal institutions, and those churches falling under the spell of economism. Through economism, neoliberalism’s ideology is extended beyond economic life to every aspect of human existence.

¹¹ The neoliberal black church will be contrasted with what will be referred to as the liberative black church. The liberative black church, which embodies this project’s constructive response to the problem encountered under neoliberalism, does not ignore economic agency but understands economic participation through the lens its theology. One of the concrete differences between these two instantiations of the black church is that the neoliberal black church interprets its theology through the lens of the individual. As such, the individual serves as the object of theological practice without regard to the individual’s connection to the broader community. The neoliberal black church mirrors neoliberalism’s emphasis on the individual. The liberative black church understands that all individuals are the object of its theological concern, and while concerned about the well-being of and the needs of individuals, it has an expressed concern for those individuals most vulnerable to systemic disparities.

¹² Both this theological and praxiological deformation and its consequences will be engaged in greater detail in the next chapter.

III. The Danger of Economism's Embrace

Economism's promulgation of neoliberalism's presuppositions, without critical theological examination, performs a form of conceptual violence to marginalized communities that is often the prelude to physical violence and renders normative economic violence already performed.¹³ Economism renders normative ideas that erode the human dignity essential to the quest for liberation and pursuit of equality implicit in the black church tradition. More tragically, economism allows oppressive communal powers to remain insensitive to the lived experiences of the poor and marginalized that contradict neoliberalism's ideological presuppositions. This enforces limitations on the ability of the poor to exist beyond the prescribed confines of the market.¹⁴ The marginalized are forced to conform to prescribed notions of their (non)existence, as those notions themselves are taken, not as projections, but as realities of their existence.¹⁵ Economism, expressed within the *homo oeconomicus*, posits a prescribed notion of the individual and their agency that is of particular concern for communities of the oppressed and demands a theological response to its presuppositions. The need for a theological response is all the more acute when the implications of economism, and the *homo oeconomicus*, encounter the lens of race and class. The intersectionality of race and class, as operative within neoliberalism,

¹³ Hector, Kevin. *Theology without Metaphysics: God, Language, and the Spirit of Recognition*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

¹⁴ Soss, Joe, Richard C. Fording, and Sanford Schram. *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2011.

¹⁵ Kevin Hector points out that, "as metaphysics identifies an object's essence with one's ideas about it, it may force the object to fit into one's preconceptions, and this conceptual violence may give way to other sorts of violence." What Hector says of this metaphysical reality holds true for economism. Hector, *Theology without Metaphysics*, 11-12.

begs for a theological examination of the oppression it fosters.¹⁶ Provision of an alternative to economism is desperately needed, and the black church, when faithful to its theological heritage, is particularly suited for this task. The failure of the neoliberal black church to play the role of ideological resistance to the encroachments upon human dignity and flourishing innate to economism is deeply problematic.

Given the history of discriminatory practices impairing the ability of blacks (and the poor among them) to participate freely and fully in the marketplace, questions of poverty or labor force participation as drivers to experiences of poverty are of great importance to marginalized groups.¹⁷ However, many economists reject the notion that neoliberalism is a source of oppression or that any concern for the poor justifies intervention in the market's operation. Many classic economists argue that the best

¹⁶ Roberts, David J. "Race and Neoliberalism" in Springer, Simon, Kean Birch, and Julie MacLeavy. *The Handbook of Neoliberalism*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016: 209-215; Davis, Dana-Ain. "Narrating the Mute: Racializing and Racism in a Neoliberal Moment." *Souls* 9, no. 4 (October 2007): 346-60; Inwood, Joshua F.J. "Neoliberal Racism: The 'Southern Strategy' and the Expanding Geographies of White Supremacy." *Social & Cultural Geography* 16, no. 4 (June 2015): 407-23; Hill Collins, Patricia, and Sirma Bilge. *Intersectionality*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016.

¹⁷ Yet, these are issues that are insufficiently addressed by the neoliberal black church. This is not to say that they do not speak on issues such as poverty or systemic obstacles to the participation of people of color in the labor market, but they do so through the lens of neoliberalism. "In these churches, theological teachings avoid critiques of societal inequalities in education, health care, the judicial system, etc. resulting in a conservative embrace of God's power that applies spiritual prowess to helping believers overcome more personal challenges (e.g., poverty and sickness) and structural barriers such as discrimination." Martin, Pamela P., Tuere A. Bowles, Latrese Adkins, and Monica T. Leach. "Black Mega-Churches in the Internet Age: Exploring Theological Teachings and Social Outreach Efforts." *Journal of African American Studies* 15, no. 2 (2011): 158-159.

remedy for eradicating poverty or discriminatory labor practices lies with the market.¹⁸

For example, Milton Friedman boldly asserts,

It is an historical fact that the development of capitalism has been accompanied by a major reduction in the extent to which particular religious, racial, or social groups have operated under special handicaps with respect to their economic activities; have, as the saying goes, been discriminated against.¹⁹

The view is that the market has been instrumental in promoting individual liberty, particularly for disadvantaged classes.²⁰ In the labor market, when arbitrary restrictions on labor are exercised (restrictions based on race, gender, sexuality, or age), labor flows to the next available entity. Ultimately, those who discriminate either pay higher costs for labor or experience lower production levels as a result of having less than the necessary units of labor, thus putting the business unit at a competitive disadvantage.²¹ This argument posits that there is little need for governmental

¹⁸ In addition to the failure of capitalism to address the issue of systemic discrimination of people of color in the work force, its very method for thinking of the individual's participation in the workforce is problematic. Neoliberalism requires a fragmentation of the individual into agent and source of labor with each separated from the other. The individual is expected to engage in the market, deploying their labor for their benefit, in an objective and rational fashion. However, such division is neither practical nor possible. The fragmentation of the individual that neoliberalism requires only accelerates their commodification. It is this same fragmentation that assumes that discriminatory practices in the marketplace can be overcome through economic forces as the individual engaged in such practices divorces themselves from their bias and engages objectively in market activities. However, history tells a far different story. Styhre, Alexander. *Management and Neoliberalism: Connecting Policies and Practices*. Routledge Studies in Management, Organizations and Society. New York: Routledge, 2014: 130.

¹⁹ Friedman, Milton, and Rose D Friedman. *Capitalism and Freedom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002: 109. For other takes on the market and discrimination, see: Arrow, Kenneth. "Some Models of Racial Discrimination in Labor Markets." In Pascal, Anthony H. and Rand Corporation. *Racial Discrimination in Economic Life*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1972; Baran, Paul A. and Paul M. Sweezy. *Monopoly Capital: An Essay On the American Economic and Social Order*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1968; Becker, Gary S. *The Economics of Discrimination*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971; Lang, Kevin. *Poverty and Discrimination*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007; Thurow, Lester C. *Poverty and Discrimination*. Washington: Brookings Institution, 1969.

²⁰ Roberts, David J., "Race and Neoliberalism."

²¹ Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 109.

intervention on discrimination (which would inevitably reduce choice and waste resources) because market forces respond more effectively to this problem.²² Implicit in this perspective is the idea that economic self-interests are sufficiently strong to deter individuals' potential moral failings as evident in discrimination. The suggestion is that, rather than critiquing the marketplace and how it obfuscates the reality of discrimination or its deleterious effect on blacks, it should be understood as a mitigating presence for certain social concerns.²³ This conclusion is grounded in a form of utilitarianism which acknowledges that some harm may be done but that the overall benefit to human society outweighs any perceived harm. Proponents of neoliberalism believe it to be the solution to the disparities witnessed between individuals or communities. In making this claim, they do not disregard the presence of problems, such as systemic and structural poverty or income inequality. Instead, they argue that these problems arise from a communal or political resistance to a complete surrender to market forces.²⁴ Even economists willing to acknowledge the market's culpability for societal inequality often advocate for the necessity, infallibility, and objectivity of the

²² Swinton, David H. "A Labor Force Competition Theory of Discrimination in the Labor Market." *The American Economic Review* 67, no. 1 (1977): 400-04. Competing narratives regarding economics and discrimination include: Arrow, Kenneth J. "What Has Economics to Say about Racial Discrimination?" *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 12, no. 2 (1998): 91-100; Charles, Kerwin Kofi, and Jonathan Guryan. "Studying Discrimination: Fundamental Challenges and Recent Progress." *Annual Review of Economics* 3 (2011): 479-511; D'Amico, Thomas F. "The Conceit of Labor Market Discrimination." *The American Economic Review* 77, no. 2 (1987): 310-15.

²³ Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 109.

²⁴ Blank, Rebecca M. and William McGurn. *Is the Market Moral?: a Dialogue on Religion, Economics and Justice*. Brookings Institution Press, 2004: 39-40.

market as defenses to any theological encroachment.²⁵ These are the very systemic issues the black church is called to address.

Some might challenge this role of the black church, and many scholars in religion and economics argue over the relationship between economic systems and religion, along with the respective roles of the economist and theologian in each other's fields. Compassionate conservatism²⁶ and the growth of faith-based initiatives and the engagement of religious institutions in advancing the work of the public sector, has given rise to the emergence of what is referred to as religious neoliberalism.²⁷ This phenomenon of religious engagement with neoliberalism is one reason for the need for a critical assessment of the black church and neoliberalism. A theological critique of economism is born of the black church's role as a facilitator of resistance. This critique is essential to our desire to articulate the economic challenges confronting the black church and its community. The first step in this theological engagement with economism is to establish the basis for the theological interrogation and articulate the particular issues and response offered by theology.

²⁵ "There is no viable alternative to the market as an organizing principle for an economic system in a complex society. The key question is not "Should there be a market?" But "What are the limits to the markets as an organizing structure for economic life?" *ibid.*, 12-13.

²⁶ For an examination of compassionate conservatism and the implications of these policies on the black community, see: Wallace, Sherri L., and Angela K. Lewis. "Compassionate Conservatism and African Americans: Politics Puts Faith to Work and Gains New Allies?" *Journal of African American Studies* 10, no. 4 (2007): 75–93; Pilbeam, Bruce. "The Tragedy of Compassionate Conservatism." *Journal of American Studies* 44, no. 2 (September 2009): 251–68; Bean, Lydia. "Compassionate Conservatives? Evangelicals, Economic Conservatism, and National Identity." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53, no. 1 (2014): 164–86.

²⁷ For a synopsis of the concerns raised within the idea of religious neoliberalism see: Hackworth, Jason R. *Faith Based: Religious Neoliberalism and the Politics of Welfare in the United States*. Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2012; Docka-Filipek, Danielle, and Andria Timmer. "Religious Neoliberalism 'On the Ground': Nonprofit Authorities' Views on Religiosity, Devolution, and Remoralization in Poverty Relief." *Administrative Theory & Praxis (M.E. Sharpe)* 41, no. 4 (December 2019): 331–49; Hennigan, Brian, and Gretchen Purser. "Jobless and Godless: Religious Neoliberalism and the Project of Evangelizing Employability in the US." *Ethnography* 19, no. 1: 84–104.

IV. The Basis for a Theological Critique

On what basis might the black church and its theologians offer a response to economism? To answer this question requires that two issues be addressed. First, a response must be given to the concern raised by some economists and theologians regarding the appropriateness of a theological interrogation of a field considered by some to be agnostic and scientifically objective.²⁸ Secondly, we must identify the evidence of the deformation believed to be experienced by the black church as a result of economism and the consequences of this deformation for the black community. The former question will consume our attention within the remainder of this chapter, and the later will be the focus of the following chapter.

IV.i. Historical Connection of Theology and Economics

The basis for any theological interrogation of economism begins with an acknowledgment of the consequential relationship that has existed between economics and theology since economics was first separated from scholastic theology in the 17th century.²⁹ The roots of this relationship are illustrated in the Greek word *οἰκονομία* (translated economics) which initially was understood to refer to the management or organization of the household.³⁰ As originally used within religious discourse, *οἰκονομία* focused on the divine or ecclesiastical economy and referred to either the divine presence and operation in the world or touched upon the operation

²⁸ Nelson, Robert H. *Economics As Religion: From Samuelson to Chicago and Beyond*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001: xiii-xxvi.

²⁹ Schumpeter, Joseph Alois, Elizabeth Boody Schumpeter, and Mark Perlman. *History of Economic Analysis*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2009: 54.

³⁰ A more complete explication of *οἰκονομία* and the emergence of the field of economics, along with the relationship between the two, see: Leshem, Dotan. *The Origins of Neoliberalism Modeling the Economy from Jesus to Foucault*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017. Of particular interest is chapter two of this work entitled: From Ecclesiastical to Market Economy.

and organization of the church.³¹ Over time, the relationship between theology and economics would be further explicated through Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.³² In spite of this historical relationship between these two fields, some economists object to a theological critique of neoliberalism, or any economic system, given the perception that economic systems operate without relationship to the foundational warrants animating theology.³³

For many economists, the theologian is unable to offer a compelling critique of any economic system given theology's appeal to truths that are neither universal nor applicable to economics' agnosticism.³⁴ Economists think of themselves as scientists and the focus of their research as a quantitative field of knowledge regarding the production of widgets, satisfaction theories, conceptions of the consumer, and descriptions of price movements, all of which seem well beyond the purview of the theologian. Many economists object to theologians casting their gaze upon the complexities of the labor market, the relationship between unemployment and inflation, examining monetary or fiscal policy, or evaluating the implications of debt in

³¹ Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis*.

³² As stated in the previous chapter, Weber posits that religion, and more specifically Protestantism, provided a religious framework in which its soteriology led to a justification of the systemic restructuring of the lives of individuals within communities in a manner efficacious for the emergence of capitalism. It is this moral framework that has persisted since the time of Weber's analysis and which gives a foundation to the theologian's critique of economics. Weber, Max, Peter R. Baehr, and Gordon C. Wells. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism and Other Writings*. New York: Penguin Books, 2012.

³³ Emmett, Ross B. "Economics and Theology After the Separation" in Oslington, Paul. *The Oxford Handbook Of Christianity And Economics*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014: 135.

³⁴ Theologians must acknowledge the particular theological or religious context in which their critique operates and accept that the critique may only be valid for those who share a commitment to the theological, moral, or intellectual context in which the theologian operates. These theological commitments define and constrain the applicability of any theological critique. Economists must acknowledge that they are far from agnostic and that neoliberalism makes claims similar to those of religion. Nelson, *Economics As Religion*.

maintaining the subjugation of portions of the American community.³⁵ While the economist's concerns carry some legitimacy, they do not tell the whole story. Economists may enjoy wrapping themselves in the garment of scientific objectivity, but they hold far more in common with theologians than they may care to admit.³⁶

Yet, one must consider if the theologian can offer a theological critique of neoliberalism that can withstand examination by those who reject the foundational assertions essential to the theologian's critique. Additionally, where an acceptance of the underlying warrants fueling a theological critique exists, there may also exist various prescriptions emerging out of the critique. For example, a primary concern of theologians is how neoliberalism concretizes power disparities that are essential to the maintenance of oppressive communities.³⁷ This concern arises from the deep commitment of Christian theology³⁸ to the vulnerable, including those experiencing economic vulnerability.³⁹

IV.ii. Alienation in Marxism

As Robert Nelson rightly posits, economics is not dependent on,

...the existence of any god in the hereafter [and their] belief systems results not in a Judeo-Christian heresy, but an entirely new and secular

³⁵ Emmett, "Economics and Theology After the Separation," 135-150.

³⁶ Rieger, Joerg. *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009: 15.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ I wish to remind the reader that when the language of 'Christian theology' is used in this work, I have a Protestant theological construction in mind. The rationale for this is found in Chapter 2, Section II: Protestantism and Capitalism.

³⁹ While it is appropriate to see the way this idea is expressed within classic black liberation theology, with Janes Cones as an important primary source of first generation liberation theology, or to reference the works of Latin American theologians such as Gutiérrez, the idea of God's preference for the poor is a deeply woven element of streams of the Christian tradition. Cone, James H. *Black Theology and Black Power*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1969; Gutiérrez, G., Eagleson, J. and Inda, C., 1990. *A Theology Of Liberation*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.

religion—although one that draws many of its themes from the biblical tradition, and now typically reworking them in a less direct and mostly implicit fashion.⁴⁰

It is this deep connection to religious thought inherent within economics that provides the theologian with the grounds for engagement with economics and the basis for economism's competition with theology. This dual concern regarding the interplay and relationship between theology and economics is not simply the idealistic invention of the theologian. Many great economic thinkers allude to the deep connection between economics and religious thought.⁴¹ This is true even when the economic thinker was oppositional to religion. Nowhere is this more evident than in the works of Karl Marx.⁴² Marx offers a descriptive analysis of capitalism that understands capitalism as dependent on a form of eschatology.⁴³ The alienation described within Marxism is a product of the class struggle Marx so eloquently describes.⁴⁴ This class struggle is seen as one of the many "evils" of capitalism.⁴⁵ The alienation created by class struggle bears a striking similarity to the concept of original sin evident in the Christian

⁴⁰ Nelson, *Economics as Religion*, 23.

⁴¹ Oslington, Paul. *The Oxford Handbook Of Christianity And Economics*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014.

⁴² Marx, K., Paul, C. and Paul, E. *Capital*. London: Dent, 1974.

⁴³ While Marx would not use the language of eschatology to describe his work, it is nonetheless an apt point of comparison between his work and Christian theology. Nelson, *Economics As Religion*, 24.

⁴⁴ Ollman, Bertell. "Marx's Use of "Class"." *American Journal of Sociology* 73, no. 5 (1968): 573-80; Marcus, Anthony, and Charles Menzies. "Towards a Class-Struggle Anthropology." *Anthropologica* 47, no. 1 (2005): 13-33.

⁴⁵ Schmidt, Ingo. "Capital and the History of Class Struggle." In *Reading 'Capital' Today: Marx after 150 Years*, ed. by Schmidt Ingo and Fanelli Carlo, by Noonan Jeff, Thompson Paul, Smith Chris, Patnaik Prabhat, Holleman Hannah, Federici Silvia, Gose Peter, Paulson Justin, Pelz William, Korsika Anej, and Hudis Peter. London: Pluto Press, 2017: 18-35. Some argue that the class struggle envisioned by Marx has yet to materialize under capitalism. However, a response to this concern is offered by John Holloway. Holloway, John. "Where Is Class Struggle?" in Saad-Filho, Alfredo. *Anti-capitalism: A Marxist Introduction*. London; Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2003: 224-34.

tradition.⁴⁶ Whereas the Christian tradition speaks of the alienation of the individual from the divine resulting in a state of “darkness, depravity, and corruption,” Marx posits class struggle as the god-like force producing a similar alienation.⁴⁷ The Christian tradition offers a remedy to this condition through the work of the divine God, who seeks a restoration of the creative order to its original purpose, overcoming the alienation of sin and the separation of the individual from their divine *telos*.⁴⁸ For Marx, the Christian God is replaced by the “laws of economic history,” which seeks to overcome the alienation of class and succeeds only after a great and deliberate struggle.⁴⁹ The antagonists in this struggle are the capitalists, and the protagonists are the proletariat class, each representing evil and good respectively.⁵⁰ In the Christian tradition, a similar struggle occurs between good and evil that culminates in the vanquishing of evil, the coming of God, and the establishment of peace on earth.⁵¹ Within both Christianity and Marxism, this vanquishing of alienation or overcoming of evil is understood as the arrival of paradise or utopia.

⁴⁶ Toews, John E. *The Story of Original Sin*. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2013.

⁴⁷ Nelson, *Economics as Religion*, 24.

⁴⁸ Calvin, Jean, John T. McNeill, and Ford Lewis. Battles. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006: 2.3.7; Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *The Christian Faith*. New York: Harper & Row, 1963; Bromiley, Geoffrey William. *An Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979: 175.

⁴⁹ Nelson, *Economics as Religion*, 24.

⁵⁰ *ibid.* Marx offered a more sustained and developed discussion of class struggle which goes beyond the scope of this project. The intent here is to identify the manner in which theological categories, such as good and evil, are utilized within the Marxian system. This is done to establish fundamental points of connection between economic and Protestant Christian theological systems.

⁵¹ There are a great variety of eschatological depictions of the end of time. What is described here is only one of the depictions offered by some streams of the Protestant Christian tradition. The goal here is not to privilege this particular depiction but rather to use it as an example of the similarity of the narratives of both Marxism and the Christian tradition.

IV.iii. Marxism as Religion?

Paul Tillich suggests that religion must posit a vision or version of an “ultimate reality.”⁵² In this regard, Marx’s vision of the world, as depicted through his economic analysis, can be considered, utilizing Tillich, as more than an economic system. It can be considered a religion. In fact, Tillich considered Marx, “the most successful of all theologians since the Reformation.”⁵³ While Marx would undoubtedly object to the characterization of his work as religious or himself as a theologian, Marxism nonetheless shares similarity with religion. Marx’s analysis, “nourishes itself on scientific reasons...but at its bottom it is not scientific, nor even rational, it is religious.”⁵⁴ The comparison of Marxism and the Christian tradition is not limited to its understanding of the eschaton. Other concepts within Marx are analogous to ideas found within Christianity.

In place of Yahweh stands historical necessity; the proletariat is, of course, the chosen people; the Christian parousia becomes the post-revolutionary Communist society. The final fight between Christ and Anti-Christ seems as obvious an analogue to the last antagonism between bourgeoisie and proletariat.⁵⁵

The goal here is not to argue that Marxism is a religious system but rather to advance the argument that economic systems, even those viewed as wholly oppositional to religion, share a great kinship with Christianity. It is the ideological kinship, and the utilization of religious concepts, that provides the theologian with ample space to offer

⁵² Tillich, Paul. *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964.

⁵³ Tillich, Paul, and Carl E. Braaten. *A History of Christian Thought, from Its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1972: 476.

⁵⁴ Romaine, Jules. *Problèmes Européens*: Paris: E. Flammarion, 1933.

⁵⁵ Stromberg, Roland N. “Marxism and Religion.” *Studies in Soviet Thought* 19, no. 3 (April 1979): 210.

a critique of neoliberalism and creates the conditions under which the competition between economism and the theology of the neoliberal black church can be explicated. This deep connection between the intellectual underpinning of economics and Christian religious thought is further illustrated by a brief examination of another foundational economic thinker on the opposite end of the ideological spectrum from Marx.

IV.iv. Religion According to Keynesianism

John Maynard Keynes' economic prescriptions for utopia are certainly at odds with Marx and with aspects of neoliberalism that succeeded Keynesianism.⁵⁶ However, like Marx (and later neoliberalism), Keynes proffers a salvific prescription for the world's eventual arrival at utopia or paradise. Keynes asserts that the power of economic forces will drive society towards the *telos* of human existence.⁵⁷ Keynes' eschaton is defined by the rapidly growing productivity resulting from increasing economic efficiency.⁵⁸ This is not to suggest that Keynes was not keenly aware of the economic and social challenges of his time or the inter-relatedness of the communal and economic spheres. The events of the Great Depression were certainly prominent in

⁵⁶ Keynes, John Maynard. *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1964; Fontaine, Philippe, and Albert Jolink. *Historical Perspectives on Macroeconomics : Sixty Years After the General Theory*. London; New York: Routledge, 1998; Costas Lapavitsas. *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*. University of Chicago Press, 2005, 31-32

⁵⁷ Hutt, William Harold, and John Maynard Keynes. *Keynesianism-retrospect and Prospect: A Critical Restatement of Basic Economic Principles*. Chicago, 1963.

⁵⁸ Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*.

Keynes' mind as he articulated a better future through the use of many of the macroeconomic tools his work inaugurated.⁵⁹

Like Marx, and consistent with other religious systems, Keynes' economic prescriptions contained the concept of salvation and evil. In Keynesianism, evil was understood as scarcity, and the economic system was viewed as the best means of saving society from this evil (salvation). Keynes asserted the triumph of the salvific forces of economics over the prevailing evil of his time.⁶⁰ He acknowledged that the rapidity of change created great societal pain and difficult problems but believed that "this [was] only a temporary phase of maladjustment" and that the substance of these challenges was not new.⁶¹ His faith in economic forces prompted his predicting that they would guide society through turbulent times, and the societal problems would be overcome just as they had been overcome in prior periods, notwithstanding their complexity and magnitude. Paradise would be realized through the market's production of increasing standards of living.⁶²

IV.v.Different View of Self-Interest

Keynes, consistent with other religious systems, offered a vision of the omnipotence of the market and the role of self-interest. However, he took a position neoliberalism would later reject. Keynes suggested that an economic system driven by

⁵⁹ Keynes, John M., "The Consequences to the Banks of the Collapse of Money Values," in *Essays in Persuasion*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1963. Calomiris, Charles W. "Financial Factors in the Great Depression." *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 7, no. 2 (1993): 61-85; Kirshner, Jonathan. "Keynes, Legacies, and Inquiry." *Theory and Society* 38, no. 5 (2009): 537.

⁶⁰ Keynes, John Maynard. "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren" in *Essays in Persuasion*. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, 1932: 358-373.

⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁶² *ibid.*

self-interest, while critical to a functioning marketplace, also presented an obstacle to fully capturing human potential. He envisioned a future where,

...the accumulation of wealth is no longer of high social importance, there will be great changes in the codes of morals. We shall be able to rid ourselves of many of the pseudo-moral principles which have long ridden us for two hundred years, by which we have exalted some of the most distasteful of human qualities into the position of the highest of virtues. We shall be able to afford to dare to assess the money motive at its true value. The love of money as a possession-as distinguished from the love of money as a means to the enjoyments and realities of life- will be recognized for what it is, a somewhat disgusting morbidity, one of those semi-criminal, semi-pathological propensities which one hands over with a shudder to the specialist in mental disease. I see us free, to return to some of the most sure and certain principles of religion and traditional virtues - that avarice is a vice, that exaction of usury is a misdemeanor, and the love of money is detestable...⁶³

For Keynes, the sin which produced a separation of the individual from their true purpose was the constant struggle for survival in a world of material scarcity. This evil was only exacerbated through a relentless pursuit of self-interest.⁶⁴ In this regard, Keynes agreed with Marx that the “economic workings of capitalism (and feudalism along with the other previous economic systems) had alienated human beings from their true nature just as the Fall in the Garden had previously been thought to be the true cause of the separation.”⁶⁵ Keynes, like Marx, sought to make a god of economic forces and the marketplace while using the productive power of capitalism to pave the path for the salvation of humanity.⁶⁶ Capitalism would produce an end to the evil of material scarcity and human nature (with some constraint) and would lead to the

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ Nelson, *Economics as Religion*, 30.

⁶⁶ Marx offers economic categories as the lens through which to view the conflict between the capitalist and the proletariat classes. Marx envisions both class conflict and its resolution through the lens of economic forces. As such, it can be argued that the god (or animating force) of his critique is economics.

eschaton. This end would be bought about by continued economic growth resulting in the “euthanasia of the cumulative oppressive power of the capitalist class to exploit the scarcity value of capital” as envisioned by Marx.⁶⁷

While Keynes saw his work more in fellowship with Newton and other great scientific thinkers, his work bears more kinship with theologians than he might imagine. Like the theologian, and consistent with Marx, Keynes offers a description of the world in alienation from its true purpose. Keynes proposes a solution which he envisions as the attainment of a world freed from the sinful human condition of self-interest.⁶⁸ The difference between Keynes and Christian theologians lies in the remedies proffered in response to this alienation. Christian theologians reject the idea that economic forces would serve as the key to the salvation of humanity because they conceive of the alienation of humanity and its salvation differently. However, both Christian theologians and Keynesianism aspired to address the fundamental problem of how humanity could be freed from an existence filled with material privation.⁶⁹ Keynes suggested this evil would be remedied through economic forces. The theologian posits that economic forces, left to their own devices, can be one of the sources of the problem but also can be an element of the solution. Christian theology thinks of salvation in broader terms than Keynes.⁷⁰ However, Keynes offers a needed reminder to the theologian that a salvation which leaves material deprivation unaddressed leaves evil in place. While the

⁶⁷ Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment*, 374.

⁶⁸ Keynes, “Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren,” 371-372.

⁶⁹ Mann, Geoff. “Poverty in the Midst of Plenty: Unemployment, Liquidity, and Keynes’s Scarcity Theory of Capital.” *Critical Historical Studies* 2, no. 1 (2015): 77.

⁷⁰ One broader vision of salvation in the Christian tradition is found in: Tracy, David. “The Christian Understanding of Salvation-Liberation.” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 7 (1987): 129-38.

idea of salvation addresses spiritual needs, it cannot exclude material concerns.⁷¹ Once again, we witness, with this classic economist, that the discussions of the presence and implications of evil provide the theologian with the grounds for an examination of and response to the economism evident in Keynes' earliest economic proclamations.

IV.vi.Religion According to Capitalism

While Keynesianism introduced the framework of capitalism into American culture, neoliberalism was concretized by later economists such as Milton Friedman.⁷² Friedman's work provides the essential starting point for what will eventually blossom into neoliberalism. From its beginnings, Friedman's capitalism exhibited the religious tendencies found in the previous systems we have examined. Friedman's economic approach was guided by his interpretation of the United States Constitution, which he held as an element of his sacred canon.⁷³ His hermeneutics led him to the

⁷¹ This bifurcation of spiritual and material, which is present within certain theological constructions (chief among them the other-worldliness mentioned in the previous chapter) represents for this author a false choice. I hold that a properly constructed Christian theology recognizes the deep connections between the spiritual and the material and, consistent with my reading of Cone's work, these connections are essential to a proper understanding of the life and ministry of Christ.

⁷² First, it is understood that capitalism pre-dates Keynesianism. However, the conditions to which Keynesianism responds are among the early causes for capitalism entering the public discourse. Additionally, since neoliberalism is seen as a reclamation of classic economic theory, it seemed fitting to use a conservative economist who represents the foundational presuppositions animating neoliberalism. However, it should be noted that conservative is not the label Friedman would have used to describe either his economic policies or the moral framework in which his policies operate. Later, conservative economic thinkers will operate under the nomenclature of supply-side economists during the Reagan administration and the proposed efficacy of these policies were celebrated by researchers. (Roberts, P. C. "Supply-side Economics: An Assessment of the American Experience." *National Westminster Bank Quarterly Review* (February 1989), pp. 60-75.) Yet, a vigorous rebuttal is offered by competing researchers. Blanchard, O. J. "Reaganomics." *Economic Policy* 5 (1987); Modigliani, F. "Reagan's Economic Policies: A Critique." *Oxford Economic Papers* 40 (1988): 397-426; Arestis, P. and Marshall, M. G. "The New Right and the U.S. Economy in the 1980s: An Assessment of the Economic Record of the Reagan Administration." *International Review of Applied Economics* 4, 1 (1990), pp. 45-71; Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 5.

⁷³ Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 2020.

understanding that the freedom of the individual was of paramount importance. Like those before him, Friedman understood economic forces as the best economic expression and protector of that freedom. Friedman's economics was driven by the *homo oeconomicus* and focused on the conditions under which the *homo oeconomicus* could overcome the evil of scarcity and any infringement on experiences of freedom.⁷⁴ Under Friedman, we witness the religious instincts of capitalism as expressed in the *homo oeconomicus* and its pursuit of freedom. This religious orientation remained throughout later iterations of capitalism and took on undue influence and importance within neoliberalism. Freedom was seen as manifested in the market's facilitation of voluntary transactions within a community constrained only by the limits to which technology might restrain the sphere of economic activity.⁷⁵ Friedman saw the market as enhancing individual freedom (the religious north star of

⁷⁴ Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 89.

⁷⁵ Freeman is not alone in arguing for the strength of conservative economic policy to address societal issues and against government intervention. However, such arguments ignore the role of capitalism in sustaining persistent racial economic disparities (Bayer, Patrick and Charles, Kerwin Kofi. *Divergent Paths: Structural Change, Economic Rank, and the Evolution of Black-White Earnings Differences, 1940-2014*. Washington, DC:National Bureau of Economic Research, 2016; Button, James W. *Blacks and the Quest for Economic Equality: The Political Economy of Employment in Southern Communities in the United States*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006; Whatley, Warren and Wright, Gavin. "Race, Human Capital, and Labour Markets in American History." in George Grantham and Mary MacKinnon (eds.), *Labour Market Evolution*. New York: Routledge, 1994) or the intersection between race and neoliberalism as represented in: Dawson, Michael C. and Francis, Megan M. "Black Politics and the Neoliberal Racial Order." *Public Culture*, 28 (1), 2016, 23-62; Reed, Adolph. "Marx, Race, and Neoliberalism" *New Labor Forum*. Sage Publications, 22 (1), 2013, 49-57.

the economic system) through increased choices while also protecting freedom within social and economic encounters.⁷⁶

Friedman expands the idea of evil beyond scarcity to include any concentration of power that interferes with the exercise of individual freedom.⁷⁷ As such, he lays the groundwork for neoliberalism's resolute resistance to any forms of coercion or external control, even if that control is offered as a method for the vulnerable to experience greater levels of personal freedom.⁷⁸ This is one of the many moments where economism manifests its religious commitment to individual freedom and the pursuit of self-interest. The economism of capitalism will advocate for individual freedom while ignoring the self-preservationist tendencies of those who hold power and the implications of power on the poor. This will represent for theologians a recurring concern and present a consistent target for their critique.

Friedman also exhibits a religious-like faith in the power of the market in ways that mirror the faith of the Christian tradition where faith is described as the "substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." (Heb. 11.1) While this verse can be interpreted in various ways, one understanding of faith represented in this text is

⁷⁶ Economic freedom, and a free society, is an end unto itself and an, "indispensable means towards the achievement of political freedom." This elevation of economic freedom and the role that it serves in maintaining individual political freedom suggests that capitalism is a necessary condition for individual/political freedom. Friedman acknowledges that capitalism is not a sufficient condition and provides several examples, including fascist Spain, Italy and Germany as communities with private enterprise as the dominant form of economic activity but far from politically free societies. Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 10, 12.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, 15-16.

⁷⁸ "Consequently, if economic power is joined to political power, concentration seems almost inevitable. On the other hand, if economic power is kept in separate hands from political power, it can serve as a check and a counter to political power." The use of liberation theology to critique the economic system will call into question the voluntary nature of transactions when there is a significant disparity in power between the parties. This is a fact to which Friedman does not give adequate attention. Ironically, it is the very collusion of economic and political power that economists claim to despise that is in fact produced by their economic systems through the inequitable distribution of capital. *ibid.*

that faith has evidentiary power.⁷⁹ In this regard, Friedman has faith in the power of the market, in the absence of significant intervention, to produce an end to scarcity and the fullest experiences of freedom central to the *homo oeconomicus* despite the overwhelming absence of evidence (or rather the overwhelming evidence to the contrary).⁸⁰ For Friedman, the only intervention the market requires is that which is designed to facilitate its continued function.⁸¹ While acknowledging several problematic social issues, from discrimination to poverty, Friedman faithfully suggests the god-like power of the market, when left alone, can heal the disease of inequality in human communities.⁸² The best method for responding to societal inequity and increasing the economic vitality of the citizens of a community is to allow the unfettered marketplace to provide economic opportunity for all.⁸³ Friedman grounds his arguments in more than qualitative and quantitative considerations of the cost benefit of his many policy prescriptions. He justifies these prescriptions through their achievement of the eschatological objective, which remains, like those economists before him, the eradication of the evil of scarcity and the sin of external interference in

⁷⁹ Cockerill, G. *The Epistle To The Hebrews*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012.

⁸⁰ Marshall, M G, and Philip Arestis. "The Myths and Realities of Conservative Economic Policy-making in the US." *Review of Social Economy* 49, no. 2 (1991).

⁸¹ The idea of individual freedom shares Friedman's understanding of market intervention by an entity such as the government. "The basic roles of government in a free society [are]: to provide a means whereby we can modify the rules, to mediate differences among us on the meaning of rules, and to enforce compliance with the rules on the part of those few who would otherwise not play the game...He advocated that government's, major function must be to protect our freedom both from the enemies outside our gates and from our fellow-citizens: to preserve law and order, to enforce private contracts, to foster competitive markets. Beyond this major function, government may enable us at times to accomplish jointly what we would find it more difficult or more expensive to accomplish severally." Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 15-16. 25, 39.

⁸² *ibid.*, 109.

⁸³ *ibid.*

the pursuit and promulgation of individual freedom. What Friedman's economic system desperately calls for is the theologian's interrogation of its underlying economism, and a theological evaluation of whether this economic system actually achieves its proposed utopia, and if so, at what cost.

IV.vii. Religion According to Neoliberalism

Much more could be said about Marxism, Keynesian, Friedman, and the emergence of capitalism, along with the religious instincts evident within each of these economic systems. While this analysis also could be expanded to consider other economists, it is important to directly examine the economism evident within neoliberalism and how it provides the theologian with room for critique. As with all of the economic systems preceding it, there exists a connection between Christian theology and the malleable moral foundation of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism presents itself as standing independent of religion for its justification while embracing the religious instincts animating its origins. A careful review of the construction of neoliberalism reveals it to be driven by religious presuppositions.⁸⁴ Neoliberalism, as an "economic way of thinking...rests on certain assumptions about the human condition. Those assumptions are neither innocent nor uncontroversial, for they stir up baffling moral and theological questions."⁸⁵ These theological questions serve as the foundation for the theologian's inquiry and examination of neoliberalism.

⁸⁴ Here it again appears important to remind ourselves that this observation's currency is contingent on the audience to which this paper speaks. If one accepts that there is a moral underpinning to the market, then consideration of the validity of that moral underpinning relative to a moral system grounded in a Christian theological framework may only be meaningful to those who also accept the validity of the Christian framework and may be less persuasive to those who operate outside of the Christian construct.

⁸⁵ Waterman, A. M. C. "Economics as Theology: Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations." *Southern Economic Journal* 68, no. 4 (May 2002): 907; Clarke, Simon. "The Neoliberal Theory of Society." in *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*, ed. Saad-Filho Alfredo and Johnston Deborah, 57-58.

Neoliberalism, like the preceding stage of capitalism, advances certain moral, ethical, and theological propositions.⁸⁶ In doing so, neoliberalism acts as a "modernist faith with its own Ten Commandments and Golden Rule, its nuns, bishops and cathedrals, and its trinity of fact, definition, and holy value"⁸⁷ The goal of the Christian theologian is to expose the incompleteness and insufficiency of the religious ideas promulgated by neoliberalism.⁸⁸ However, to do so requires one expose the latent theology underlying neoliberalism's economism.⁸⁹ The black church is called to engage neoliberalism at a time when the fundamentalist mindset embodied in neoliberalism's economism has moved from the margins of intellectual discourse to become the dominant intellectual perspective across the globe.⁹⁰ Neoliberalism has reached a, "religious-like certitude of those who believe in the moral superiority of organizing all dimensions of social life according to market principles."⁹¹

From its origins, the economism of neoliberalism asserted itself as the essential framework for human advancement.⁹² In making this claim, it sought to inoculate itself

⁸⁶ McCloskey, Deirdre. *The Rhetoric of Economics*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998; Stettler, Michael. "The Rhetoric of McCloskey's Rhetoric of Economics." *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 19, no. 3 (August 1995): 391–403.

⁸⁷ McCloskey, *The Rhetoric of Economics*, 1998: 4-9.

⁸⁸ Sung, Jung Mo. *Desire, Market and Religion*. SCM Press, 2007: 12.

⁸⁹ "It is a short step to recognizing the theology latent or implicit in much economic literature...Policy debates sometimes look like wars of religion between two faith communities." Waterman, "Economics as Theology: Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations," 906.

⁹⁰ Bourdieu, Pierre, and Richard Nice. *Acts of Resistance: against the Tyranny of the Market*. New York: The New Press, 2006; Campbell, John L., and Ove Kaj. Pedersen. *The Rise of Neoliberalism and Institutional Analysis*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001; Stiglitz, Joseph E. *Globalization and Its Discontents*. London: Penguin Books, 2002..

⁹¹ Somers, Margaret R., and Fred Block. "From Poverty to Perversity: Ideas, Markets, and Institutions over 200 Years of Welfare Debate." *American Sociological Review* 70, no. 2 (April 2005): 260.

⁹² Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

against criticism by averring the market's infallibility.⁹³ Neoliberalism suggested that the only weakness of the market, or danger to its ceaseless pursuit of paradise, was attempts by external forces to thwart its operation.⁹⁴ Neoliberal advocates refused to relinquish this claim when interventions occurred in pursuit of a perceived greater societal good or in response to the negative societal consequences arising out of unconstrained market activity. This response has deep roots in capitalist thought, as evident by Hayek's suggestion that

the pretense of knowing the market and directing [the market] towards the solution of social problems is at the origin of all economic and social evils. In other words, the greatest sin is to fall into the temptation of doing good.⁹⁵

Under the market fundamentalism of neoliberalism, sin is not only material scarcity but also any desire to re-direct the actions of the marketplace even for the amelioration of social ills. "With this interpretation of original sin, we have a complete inversion of the love commandment. To love is not to be in solidarity any more with those who suffer, but to defend one's self-interest in the market (competition in the market) and to avoid the temptation to do good."⁹⁶

V. Endogenous Theology of Neoliberalism

The common ground for the Christian theologian and neoliberalism rests on two observations. First, the economic systems averred by economists contain moral presuppositions similar to those found in theology. Both are guided by conceptions of

⁹³ Cox, Harvey. *The Market As God*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016: 33-46.

⁹⁴ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 6.

⁹⁵ Hayek, Friedrich A. von, and Friedrich A. von Hayek. *A Free-Market Monetary System*. Auburn, AL: Ludwig Von Mises Institute, 2008.

⁹⁶ Sung, *Desire, Market and Religion*, 16.

the good and evil that are morally constructed. Secondly, both utilize a faithful allegiance and adherence to a set of core beliefs. “In other words, like those who are used to accepting religion on the basis of a kind of blind faith, economists tend to take economic theory on blind faith as well.”⁹⁷ Neoliberalism requires an implicit faith in “the moral benevolence of the free market system and private property, combined with a common acceptance among liberal, neoliberal, and neoclassical theorists that this is the only system that works.”⁹⁸ The deep connections between theology and the history and operation of economics offer the theologian ample opportunity to engage the economist on ground common to both fields.

Economism operates like theology, seeking to influence its adherents (understood as institutions or individuals) understanding of all of human existence through the presuppositions of neoliberalism. Economism advances the belief system of neoliberalism and can be said to expand the ‘endogenous theology’ of neoliberalism. Theology, in its broadest form, can be said to provide an explication of the idea of the divine, humanity, and the nature of the relationship between the two.⁹⁹ Neoliberalism also offers a theology in that it provides an understanding of the divine, which it views as the marketplace.¹⁰⁰ It then explicates its understanding of the human agent (the *homo oeconomicus*) and the relationship between the two.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Nelson, *Economics as Religion*, 16.

⁹⁸ Rieger, Joerg. *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009: 15; Nelson, *Economics as Religion*, xv.

⁹⁹ Day, Keri. “Doctrine of God in African American Theology.” in Cannon, Katie G. *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology*. Vol. 1 [edition]. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014:139.

¹⁰⁰ Cox, *The Market As God*, 33-46.

¹⁰¹ Sung, *Desire, Market and Religion*.

Neoliberalism's theology is considered endogenous because it emerges from within the ideological paradigm of neoliberalism and is not imposed on it by an external source. The endogenous theology of neoliberalism has additional shared characteristics with Christian theology. Neoliberalism possesses an eschatology, a concept of original sin and theodicy, and an ideal of sacrifice, all of which are central concepts within Christianity.¹⁰² "Obviously, these themes are not treated with traditional religious language by the defenders of the capitalist system, but terminological change does not necessarily mean that these questions are not being addressed in a mythical-religious way."¹⁰³ Let us now examine these ideas as presented within neoliberalism.

Vi. Neoliberalism's Eschaton

The eschaton of neoliberalism is the achievement of the good society.¹⁰⁴ The good society for neoliberalism does not differ significantly from the utopia found in earlier forms of capitalism. Utopia is understood as the state of being where scarcity has been overcome through the technologically driven production capacities of the marketplace.¹⁰⁵ The eschatology of the endogenous theology of neoliberalism is grounded in a construction of human liberty and freedom, which nurtures the strong

¹⁰² These ideas are presented by Jung Mo Sung although not applied to the Christian tradition specifically but rather to religion broadly. *ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ The idea of the good society within the scope of economics is often associated with the work of John Kenneth Galbraith. However, it has been used in a diverse set of economic paradigms from capitalism to marxism. Its use here alludes to the goal of neoliberalism of creating conditions in which the societal evil imagined is ultimately remedied. This is what is evident in works as early as that of the Mont Pèlerin Society that will be discussed below. This good society is a feature of neoliberalism that is shared with Christianity although Christianity's understanding of the good society, how it is arrived at, or the impediments to its realization, differ greatly from neoliberalism's account. Galbraith, J. *Good Society*. Boston: Mariner Books, 1997; John P. Burke, Lawrence Crocker, and Lyman Howard Legters. *Marxism and the Good Society*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1981; Mirowski, Philip, and Dieter Plehwe. *The Road From Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective, With a New Preface*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.

¹⁰⁵ Sung, *Desire, Market and Religion*, 13.

sense of individualism evident in the *homo oeconomicus*.¹⁰⁶ This eschatology presents neoliberalism as the apex of human civilization as a result of the collapse of neoliberalism's primary alternative, socialism.¹⁰⁷ However, neoliberalism's eschaton represents what Jung Mo Sung refers to as the myth of progress, which has deleterious implications. "With this myth disappears the notion of limits for human action, to be replaced by the rise of the idea that will is power."¹⁰⁸ The individual's freedom knows no bounds (except to the degree that it infringes on the freedom of the other), and experiences of freedom only grow through the market.¹⁰⁹ Scarcity and limitations of individual freedom remain the basis of all evil in neoliberalism. The pursuit of neoliberalism's eschaton establishes the boundaries of the market, provides the criteria by which neoliberalism evaluates its effectiveness, and determines the ends towards which neoliberalism aims.¹¹⁰ Neoliberalism is shaped by its eschatology, without which it would be an irrational and arbitrary construct. Whether conservative or liberal, economists pursuing widely varied applications of neoliberalism's endogenous theology in their policy prescriptions, all share this eschatology. While the goals of the market are not described within neoliberalism with theological terms such as eschatology, these concepts are nonetheless operative, and they provide theologians with a place for a critique of neoliberalism.

¹⁰⁶ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 2005.

¹⁰⁷ Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. London: Penguin books, 2012: xii, xv.

¹⁰⁸ Sung, *Desire, Market and Religion*, 13.

¹⁰⁹ Eagleton-Pierce, *Neoliberalism: the Key Concepts*, 81.

¹¹⁰ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 27.

The construction of human needs and the pursuit of their satisfaction through neoliberalism drives its eschatology. The technological progress envisioned as a result of the unconstrained operation of the market provides for neoliberalism's proposed realization of the end of scarcity and offers the possibility of the limitless accumulation of goods by individuals so that their desires might be satiated.¹¹¹ With this eschatology, neoliberalism presents itself as "the implementer of the promises of Christianity" and in doing so, understand the marketplace as god.¹¹² Neoliberalism's claim as the divine opens the space for theological rebuttal as it challenges the Christian theology underlying the black church.

Vii. The Danger of an Endogenous Theology

Through economism, neoliberalism's endogenous theology surreptitiously seeks to usurp theology's place in the thinking of the church and its constituency. Neoliberalism's endogenous theology mirrors that of Christianity, and it seeks to replace all ideological competitors. The endogenous theology of neoliberalism presents a danger to the alternative theological constructions of Christianity operative within the church through its seduction of individuals and institutions to pursue its goals and to offer supporting practices that are shaped by this endogenous theology and fueled by religious fervor.¹¹³ It corrupts the practices of black churches by mutating those

¹¹¹ For an examination of consumption produced by neoliberalism and states of being see: Offer, Avner. "Consumption and Well-Being." in Trentmann, Frank. *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012: 653.

¹¹² Sung, *Desire, Market and Religion*, 14.

¹¹³ This is not meant to ignore the the times in which Christianity has operated in concert with capitalism. Such concurrence between the two can lead to the reasonable assertion that Christianity does not actually offer a differing eschatology. However, it is this author's belief that the construction of Christian theology envisioned provides an eschatology which, because of its rejection of neoliberalism's construction of the individual and the proper ends or pursuits of humanity, is distinct and different from that of neoliberalism.

practices through its hermeneutical lens.¹¹⁴ For example, neoliberalism offers the pursuit of self-interest as the method for the realization of its eschaton. While this would be considered evil in the eyes of Christian theology, neoliberalism presents this pursuit as good. In doing so, neoliberalism robs the conscience of its adherents of moral or theological resistance to its goals.¹¹⁵ Neoliberalism seeks to convince the world that there is no need for alternative moral systems governed by competing theologies, philosophies, or moralities.¹¹⁶ However, neoliberalism inadvertently creates the conditions for its undoing because neoliberalism is itself premised on a “respect of certain moral norms to a far greater extent than its official ideology avows.”¹¹⁷

VI. Framework for Evaluating Neoliberal Deformity of the Black Church

VI.i. Eschatology

The eschaton offered by neoliberalism’s endogenous theology cannot be realized through the pursuit of self-interest alone.¹¹⁸ A proper eschatology requires the intervention of the divine (where the divine is understood as something other than the marketplace), which will provide the capacity for the rational processes of the human agent to be directed towards goals fitting for the human subject. The economist argues

¹¹⁴ Wendy Brown articulates the capacity of neoliberalism and applies it to an understanding of its influence in the political domain but her analysis has great applicability to examinations of the influence of neoliberalism within and upon religious institutions. Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. MIT Press, 2010, 10.

¹¹⁵ “He who practices evil in the name of some perverse god (an idol) or guided by a religious kind of devotion, has a peaceful conscience (see Psalms 73.12). This is so because the evil that one practices against the little ones is not seen as evil but as saving work.” Sung, *Desire, Market and Religion*, 12.

¹¹⁶ Saad-Filho, Alfredo, and Deborah Johnston. *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*. University of Chicago Press, 2005.

¹¹⁷ Carvalho, Luís Francisco, and João Rodrigues. “On Markets and Morality: Revisiting Fred Hirsch.” *Review of Social Economy* 64, no. 3 (September 2006): 331.

¹¹⁸ Nixon, Mark G. “Satisfaction for Whom? Freedom for What? Theology and the Economic Theory of the Consumer.” *Journal of Business Ethics* 70, no. 1 (2007): 42.

that the definition of the eschatology found within theology represents a different *telos* than that of economics.¹¹⁹ However, the ends of economics mirror that of Christian theology in the sense that both systems pursue an end which presumes the vanquishing of evil.¹²⁰ These two competing eschatologies differ less in their ends and more in their means.¹²¹ Christian theology rejects the proposition that neoliberalism (and it alone) offers the best vehicle for maximizing experiences of freedom as represented by its eschatology.

VI.ii. The Individual and Sin

Neoliberalism also opens itself to theological critique with its construction of sin which is understood as scarcity or as external limitations on the individual's experiences of freedom and satisfaction of desire. In making this claim, neoliberalism returns our attention to *homo oeconomicus* who is presented as the relentlessly rational pursuer of self-interest constrained only by their resources.¹²² Neoliberalism suggests that this image of the individual is external to the human agent.¹²³ This is to say that neoliberalism believes that "individuals are [un]changed in nature by the economic process...and the nature of individuality is endogenous to the economic

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*, 47.

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, 54. The evil of Christian theology includes the sin of material privation.

¹²¹ Again, I wish to remind the reader that the theology envisioned is distinct from the endogenous theology of neoliberalism.

¹²² The *homo oeconomicus* represents neoliberalism's theory of the individual. This theory is taken as a given and assumes that this particular construction of the individual successfully and completely explains individuality. Before the eighteenth century, the idea of the individual as, "a person with a unique set of properties" such as rationality or discrete self-interests was uncommon. This theory of the individual is further explicated through the theory of individual choice which explains that freedom is experienced as the relatively unconstrained series of individual consumption decisions driving neoliberalism. Davis, John Bryan. *The Theory of the Individual in Economics: Identity and Value*. New York: Routledge, 2003: 1, 11. Eagleton-Pierce, *Neoliberalism: the Key Concepts*, 102.

¹²³ Davis, *The Theory of the Individual in Economics*, 11.

process.”¹²⁴ The suggestion is that the evil of its system is external to the individual and that there is something unchanging about the individual even as the individual experiences countless changes throughout time as produced through their economic encounters. This same assertion is made regarding the nature of institutions. In spite of their many economic experiences, institutions are perceived as unchanged except in ways that improve their ability to pursue their satisfaction. Some economists concede the potentiality of change through economic encounters without accepting that these experiences have any lasting impact on the construction of the individual or the institution.¹²⁵

Christian theology asserts that neoliberalism offers an inadequate theory of the individual and that the economist’s stirring defense of individualism is particularly problematic. The inadequate attention paid within the *homo oeconomicus* to social or communal relationships as constitutive elements of individuality reduces the *homo oeconomicus* to being shaped singularly by subjective preferences in a manner that theology suggests is detrimental to the full understanding of individuality.¹²⁶ Instead, Christian theology understands the individual as situated within their relationships with

¹²⁴ For more detailed examinations of endogeneity as an economic theory see: Fine, B. “Critical Survey. Endogenous Growth Theory: a Critical Assessment.” *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1 (Mar. 2000): 245–265; Grossman, Gene M., and Elhanan Helpman. *Innovation and Growth in the Global Economy*. MIT, 2001. Like most theoretical treatments of endogeneity, these authors fail to consider the economic individual as an endogenous variable of the economic equation beyond the role of the economic agent as the source of economic transactions. Davis, *The Theory of the Individual in Economics*, 2.

¹²⁵ Neoliberalism posits this and suggests that not only are individuals unchanged through economic transactions but that the preferences of individual and the choices they make, which constitute the freedom which the economic system seeks to protect, are untouched by the decisions of others. Yet this disregards the roles of advertising in shaping the desire or preferences of the individual that inherently reduce the experiences of freedom for which the system advocates. Blank and McGurn, *Is the Market Moral?*.

¹²⁶ Nixon, “Satisfaction for Whom? Freedom for What?,” 48.

both God and community. It posits that the individual can only be fully understood in light of these external relationships.¹²⁷ It is here that the contrasting constructions of sin within Christian theology and neoliberalism come into play. In a manner consequential to its critique of neoliberalism, Christianity offers an idea of sin that is deeply attached to the idea of the pursuit of individual interest to the exclusion of all other considerations and relationships.¹²⁸ This understanding of sin is grounded in the individual's relationship with the divine. By contrast, neoliberalism continues to assert that sin is that which frustrates or interferes with the market's facilitation of the *homo oeconomicus*' experiences of freedom. Neoliberalism promulgates this theory of the individual and freedom through repeated economic transactions that provide power to its economism. These theories serve to expand the reach and influence of neoliberalism's endogenous theology, allowing it to operate without question to influence the axiological girds of institutions and individuals.

The *homo religiosus* theory of the individual is intrinsically linked to the relationship between the individual and the divine.¹²⁹ The relationship to the divine provides the individual with the opportunity for experiences of freedom. For the theologian, freedom is never possible through the rational pursuit of self-interest alone. The unwillingness of the *homo religiosus* to embrace rationality as the driver behind experiences of freedom is one of the many points of contrast between the *homo religiosus* and the *homo oeconomicus*. This resistance is grounded in a belief by

¹²⁷ *ibid.*, 48-49.

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, 54.

¹²⁹ I wish to remind the reader that this is a reading of the *homo religiosus* informed by the Protestant theological construct being utilized within this project. This construction of the *homo religiosus* offers an understanding of human purpose less concentrated on consumption and ownership and more so on stewardship and communal good. *ibid.*

Christian theology of the impotence of human rationality to lead to experiences of freedom because of the damage to rationality by the effects arising out of the fall of humanity as described in the creation story of the Protestant tradition.¹³⁰ As a result of sin, human rationality cannot lead to freedom and happiness without divine (external) intervention. While the manner in which this intervention takes place is debated within Protestant communities, the *homo religiosus* holds that experiences of human freedom are unachievable by the human agents alone.

Christian theology asserts that the endogenous theology of neoliberalism, as expressed in the *homo oeconomicus* and its claims to facilitate experiences of freedom are the emperor's garments of Andersonian proportions. The *homo religiosus* posits that the rational processes of the individual, so essential to the *homo oeconomicus*, cannot lead to authentic experiences of freedom because the choices made by rationality are never free of coercion.¹³¹ The coercion exists in the form of self-interest that has been corrupted by evil. The presence of this coercive force, while viewed as essential to the *homo oeconomicus*, robs the choices made of the very freedom they are thought to achieve. Additionally, any economic system founded on the satisfaction of self-interest or the destructive consumption it births in its never-ending pursuit of satiation, promotes the worse of human character and places that system on an

¹³⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.5.14; Luther, Martin, and John Nicholas Lenker. *Commentary On Genesis*. Minneapolis, MN: Luther Press, 1910; Calvin, Jean, John King, and Calvin Translation Society. *Commentaries On the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*. Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847; Wiley, Tatha. *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meaning*. New York: Paulist Press, 2002.

¹³¹ Eagleton-Pierce, *Neoliberalism: The Key Concepts*, 20-24.

unstable foundation.¹³² The desires whose satiation neoliberalism seeks are “not only unstable [and] changeable [but] the chief thing which the common-sense individual actually wants is not satisfaction for the wants which he has, but more, and better wants.”¹³³ It is the never-satiated desire of the individual that assures that the reality of scarcity, the sin of neoliberalism, will always be present. The idea that simply through technological advancement, as offered through neoliberalism’s perception of continuous progress, it will be able to respond to the continually changing and never-ending desires of the individual such that utopia can be achieved and sin eradicated, is hopeless.

VI.iii. The Problem of Satisfaction and Choice

More troubling, neoliberalism makes the crude determination that the satisfaction of human desire results in a qualitatively better existence for the individual. In this framework, better is measured simply by increase.¹³⁴ This quantification of what is considered better underlies neoliberalism’s understanding of evil as scarcity. If more is always better, then less is understandably worse. However, this crude calculus fails to take into account that this idea of scarcity is grounded in the *homo oeconomicus*’ desire, which always eclipses available resources.¹³⁵ Christianity offers an alternative

¹³² “By now it is well established that contemporary economic modeling portrays human behavior as self-interested...The assumption of self-interest is fundamental not only to economists’ modeling of market-based behavior but also to broader questions the economic approach to human behavior is applied to various spheres of life.” However, Christian theologians have rightly rejected this construction of the human agent as far too simplistic and incomplete. Hicks, Douglas A. “Self-Interest, Deprivation, and Agency.” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2005: 147-148.

¹³³ Knight, Frank Hyneman. “Ethics and the Economic Interpretation.” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 36, no. 3 (May 1922): 458.

¹³⁴ Blank and McGurn, *Is the Market Moral?*.

¹³⁵ “Many theologians note that capitalism presumes scarcity...and that human wants and desires are always greater than available resources, we can never have everything we want.” *ibid.*, 13.

understanding, making the counterclaim that “calls into question scarcity as the fundamental assumption of modern economics.”¹³⁶ Building upon an Augustinian concept, Christianity offers God as the only object worthy of human desire and capable of satiating that desire. All other objects of desire ultimately collapse on themselves and fail to satisfy the carnivorous appetite of desire or self-interest.¹³⁷

Additionally, Christianity differs from the endogenous theology of neoliberalism’s understanding of the idea of choice as a constitutive element of the experiences of freedom. Whereas neoliberalism suggests a neutrality to the choices the individual might make, Christianity posits that choices are not morally neutral.¹³⁸ Choices have varying capacities to further the *telos* of Christianity, and the individual is called to make individual decisions in light of the eschatology of Christianity.¹³⁹ Given that the only constraints on choices within the endogenous theology of neoliberalism are the resources available to the individual, resources, as concretized in money, provides the means by which freedom is experienced. As an instrument of the endogenous theology of neoliberalism, money becomes the place where the disparities in experiences of freedom or power are instantiated.¹⁴⁰ Money also serves as the instrument where

¹³⁶ “Christian perspective on needs and consumption is that God the Holy Spirit is providing enough of what it takes for all to live and live abundantly.” *ibid.*

¹³⁷ Wetzel provides a powerful discussion of Augustine’s use of *homo curvatus in se* or humanity as curved on themselves as a part of his broader discussion of Augustine’s *City of God*. While his discussion of this idea expands beyond its application in this work, it provides the idea of human desire as a cannibalistic element of human existence. Augustinus, Aurelius, and James Wetzel. *Augustines City of God: a Critical Guide*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014.

¹³⁸ Blank and McGurn, *Is the Market Moral?*, 28.

¹³⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Rieger, Joerg. “Capitalism and Christian Theology.” *Religion Compass*, 2020.

power disparities, as expressed in the commodification of labor, are manifested and invites the theologian into critical review and discourse.¹⁴¹

VI.iv. The Challenge of Community

Finally, the *homo oeconomicus* is envisioned as a solitary figure. Decisions are made in light of self-interest and are free from the influence of external social or moral concerns. The *homo religiosus* is posited as a social creature but not to the extent that self-interest is ignored. Rather, self-interest is understood as “embodying both self and other interest.”¹⁴² The individual’s acknowledgment of self-interest does not singularly govern the *homo religiosus*. Instead, the *homo religiosus* recognizes that self-interest alone is insufficient for experiences of the fullness of human potential. Only when one recognizes that self-interest is linked to the other (understood as both relationship to the divine other and the human other) can human flourishing occur.¹⁴³ This understanding of the relation of the individual to the other is first inculcated within the individual as they understand their identity in the context of a relationship with the divine and with fellow persons.¹⁴⁴ Both of these external entities exert appropriate

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*

¹⁴² Blank and McGurn, *Is the Market Moral?*, 27.

¹⁴³ Nixon, “Satisfaction for Whom? Freedom for What?” 48-50.

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*

influence on the decisions and actions of the *homo religiosus*. The *homo religiosus* can only be fully understood, or fully experience freedom, in light of these relationships.¹⁴⁵

VI.v.Problem of Disparity

VII. The Theological Concern for the Church

The preceding highlights just a few of the places where neoliberalism's endogenous theology, promulgated by economism, seeks to offer an alternative to Christian theology. Neoliberalism's success in persuading culture to embrace its underlying presuppositions is evident in the economism that is operative throughout society, impacting both economic and non-economic encounters. The influence of the endogenous theology of neoliberalism is particularly problematic for the black church, which has a long history of engagement with and exploitation by neoliberalism. Christianity has been particularly focused on addressing the implications of neoliberalism on the conditions of the poor. This is of particular concern to the black church given the enormous disparities between the black community and the dominant culture despite neoliberalism's claim to be the force for eradicating these inequalities.¹⁴⁶

The black church is called to reject any system that advocates that the acquisition of wealth, the accumulation of material items, or the satisfaction of desire are the only or highest pursuit for humanity. Christianity posits that

¹⁴⁵ "If existing social arrangements negate and frustrate the concern for persons produced in the Christian fellowship, a force to change the social order is released. This concern is not focused merely on individual need or remedial measures...there is no limit to their efforts to seek social causes and social remedies for the personal problems of their fellows. There is a common fallacy that the religious approach to human need is individualistic and restricted to relieving the distress of individuals...In so far as the social basis of personal problems is apprehended, social causes and social action will be sought. This the Christian is compelled to become economist and to seek an economic strategy for making his concern for persons effective." Knight, *The Economic Order and Religion*, 132-33.

¹⁴⁶ Leiman, Melvin M. *Political Economy of Racism*. London; Boulder, CO: Pluto Press, 2010: 88-145.

...any social and economic order that treats being or becoming rich as highly desirable [harms] those who, must not only accept its goals, but succeeds in achieving them...Capitalism is bad for those who succeed by its standard as well as for those who fail by them.¹⁴⁷

This crucial understanding is often lost by proclaimers of the gospel but is essential to any rebuttal to neoliberalism. The *homo oeconomicus* undermines what it means to be human which includes membership in the human community for reasons other than self-interest. It does so because of its reductionist view of humanity and questionable setting of satisfaction maximization as its telos.¹⁴⁸ Additionally, the *homo oeconomicus* carries the asocial ethic of consumption that is antithetical to the communal nature of humanity as averred by Christian theology.¹⁴⁹ This asocial ethic ultimately erodes the divine calling of the individual to be an agent of liberation in their community.¹⁵⁰ This stands in direct conflict with the Christian tradition in which choice is constrained by moral or theological precepts and executed with communal good in sight.

Having examined the space in which the theologian might make a credible examination of neoliberalism, our attention turns to the specific concerns the

¹⁴⁷ MacIntyre, Alasdair C. *Marxism and Christianity*. Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984: 85.

¹⁴⁸ I have been particularly helped in this formulation of the problem by the following: Hodgson, Bernard, *Economic Science and Ethical Neutrality: The Problem of Teleology*, (*Journal of Business Ethics* 2, no. 4 1983), 237-253; Nelson, Robert H., *Reaching for Heaven on Earth: The Theological Meaning of Economics*. Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1991; Nelson, *Economics As Religion*; Nixon, "Satisfaction for Whom? Freedom for What?" 39-60; and Waterman, "Economics As Theology: Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations."

¹⁴⁹ Nixon, "Satisfaction for Whom? Freedom for What?"

¹⁵⁰ Evidence of this deleterious outcome is observed in research focusing on the ethical considerations of Black consumers or examination of consumption within the community or by its churches. Swaidan, Ziad, Scott J Vitell, and Mohammed YA Rawwas, "Consumer Ethics: Determinants of Ethical Beliefs of African Americans." *Journal of Business Ethics* 46, no. 2 2003: 175-186; Lamont, Michèle, and Viràg Molnár, "How Blacks Use Consumption to Shape Their Collective Identity Evidence From Marketing Specialists." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 1, no. 1 2001: 31-45; Persons, Georgia A. "National Politics and Charitable Choice As Urban Policy for Community Development." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 594, no. 1 2004: 65-78.

endogenous theology of neoliberalism and the effects of its economism have for the black community and the black church.

Chapter 4: Crisis of Complicity

I. Restatement of the Concern

In the previous chapter, I spoke of an economism born of the endogenous theology of neoliberalism. Reference to the endogenous theology of neoliberalism is designed to rob neoliberalism of its facade as an objective science free of any moral commitments or consequences.¹ Neoliberalism's ardent disciples posit themselves as purely rational actors and maintain this claim in spite of neoliberalism's failure to produce many of the outcomes its adherents depend on for their justification and advocacy of its continued use.² Instead, neoliberalism's devotees demonstrate a faith in the system that rests less on objectivity and more on a fervor often reserved for religious practices.³ I reject the assertion that neoliberalism represents a set of morally-neutral propositions, and posit that neoliberalism contains moral commitments which are consequential to how individuals understand themselves and their agency, how they live in community with others, and how their desires are shaped.⁴ Ultimately, neoliberalism offers its version of what human flourishing looks like for individuals and their fellow members of the human community.

¹ Nelson, Robert H. and Max Stackhouse. *Economics As Religion: From Samuelson to Chicago and Beyond*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001:xiii-xxvi.

² A brief synopsis of neoliberalism's actual track record is provided in: Palley, Thomas I. "From Keynesianism to Neoliberalism: Shifting Paradigms in Economics." in Saad-Filho, Alfredo, and Deborah Johnston. *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*. University of Chicago Press, 2005: 24-27.

³ Stiglitz, Joseph E. *Globalization and Its Discontents*. London: Penguin Books, 2002: 20, 23.

⁴ Berger, Peter L. *The Capitalist Revolution: Fifty Propositions About Prosperity, Equality, and Liberty*. New York: Basic Books, 1986.

The endogenous theology of neoliberalism influences individuals and institutions in spheres of life beyond economic practices. This is what is meant by the reference to the economism of neoliberalism within this project. Economism refers to the extension of the presuppositions of neoliberalism to serve as the criteria by which individuals and institutions understand, evaluate, and determine appropriate and acceptable goals, aspirations, and actions in economic and non-economic spheres of life.⁵ Economism is the mechanism through which the endogenous theology of neoliberalism seeks “to bring all human actions into the domain of the market” in its pursuit of the neoliberally defined good of society.⁶

Economism does not constrain its influence to only those individuals and institutions who knowingly and willingly embrace neoliberalism.⁷ Economism influences individuals and institutions in ways that are neither self-evident nor the result of explicit decisions.⁸ Instead, economism’s impact is witnessed even when there is no explicit

⁵ Neoliberalism represents a “normative order of reason” that corrodes every aspect of human existence in which it comes into contact ultimately resulting in a transmogrification of human existence itself. It is this effect on human rationality, human existence, and all human institutions, inclusive of the church, that must be theologically addressed. Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. MIT Press, 2010.

⁶ Economism raises two issues of concern. The first concern is that of understanding the scope of individuals and institutions affected by it. The second concern is that of understanding the scope of the spheres of life affected. Both of these concerns have consequences for this project. Johnson, Cedric C. *Race, Religion, and Resilience in the Neoliberal Age*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016: 2.

⁷ If only these groups were impacted, an evaluation of neoliberalism could be reserved to questions regarding the decision to willingly participate in an economic structure deleterious to the lives of fellow members of the human community, particularly the poor among us, and the deformation of those individuals.

⁸ Wendy Brown talks about neoliberalism as a governing rationality within the context of its application to the law and democratic structures. However, this analysis is applicable to the influence of economism to other realms of human existence, inclusive of the religious realm and its institutions. Brown, Wendy. “Neoliberalism and the Economization of Rights.” in *Critical Theory in Critical Times: Transforming the Global Political and Economic Order*, ed. Deutscher, Penelope and Lafont Cristina. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017: 91-116.

decision made but rather the failure to reject the most deformative aspects of neoliberalism's ideology. In other words, neoliberalism is influential wherever there is no explicit decision by the individual or the institution to resist it, including institutions within religious communities.⁹ This is of particular concern to those institutions perceiving themselves as concerned with the plight of the poor and powerless as it introduces the possibility that they are, in fact, influenced by economism whether they have explicitly embraced its precepts or not.¹⁰ It is this unknowing and implicit presence of economism that represents the greatest danger of neoliberalism. When this occurs, individuals and institutions, perceiving themselves as actively engaged in the fight for an equitable distribution of power and resources in society may, in fact, be unwitting co-conspirators in the continuation of practices that leave the poor bereft of societal support while objectifying and exploiting them.¹¹ The economism of neoliberalism, through which its endogenous theology is instantiated in individual and organizational practices, can be present in a manner to which parties have become blinded. The concern of this work is that critical segments of the black church are

⁴⁸¹ The ideology of neoliberalism offers reconstructions of ideas fundamental to human existence such as that of the individual, freedom, and satisfaction. Individuals or institutions need not explicitly embrace neoliberalism to be influenced by its constructions of these ideas. An example of this, as related to the church, is found within 'prosperity preaching'. A central animating idea of this homiletical approach is a construction of God as myopically focused on the satisfaction of individual needs. This theological construction of God borrows heavily from neoliberalism but proponents of this homiletical and theological approach are not always aware of the source of the ideology animating their proclamation.

¹⁰ "The point for neoliberalism is not to make a model that is more adequate to the real world, but to make the real world more adequate to the model. This is not mere intellectual fantasy, it is a very real political project. Neoliberalism has conquered the commanding heights of global intellectual, political, and economic power, all of which are mobilized to realize the neoliberal project of subjecting the whole world's population to the judgement and morally of capital." This goal is sought by neoliberalism without regard to the consent of the people and simply results from the will of the wealthy. Clarke, Simon. "The Neoliberal Theory of society." in Alfredo Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston. *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*. London; Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2005: 58.

¹¹ Kotsko, Adam. *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capital*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2018: 70-71.

unwittingly complicit in the spread and support of the worse elements of the endogenous theology of neoliberalism. These churches have been labeled as ‘neoliberal black churches.’ Through their proclamation and praxis, the neoliberal black church has imported neoliberalism’s theology, compromised their Christian identity, and participated in the continued exploitation of the poor. These churches have become unwittingly promulgators of a theology deformed by the inherent economism of the institution.

Within the neoliberal black church, neoliberalism invited theological engagement through the lens of the individual as disconnected from any commitment to community.¹² The extension of the presuppositions of neoliberalism to aspects of human existence beyond economic transactions, through its unrelenting focus on the individual, deforms any Christian theological framework.¹³ The basic theological presuppositions of Christianity can be maintained but are re-contextualized in ways that obscure the concern for and connection to the wellbeing of any community of the poor and vulnerable.¹⁴ The theology of the neoliberal black church mirrors the propositions of neoliberalism. It understands the divine as the source of satisfaction of individual desires and one’s relationship to the divine is witnessed in one’s material

¹² This is a result of the asocial nature of neoliberalism. There are many examples of the asocial presuppositions of neoliberalism that vary based on the field of inquiry. Some examples are: Jo, Tae-Hee. “Neoliberalism as an Asocial Ideology and Strategy in Education.” *Forum for Social Economics* 35, no. 1 (January 2005): 37–58; Mark G. Nixon. “Satisfaction for Whom? Freedom for What? Theology and the Economic Theory of the Consumer.” *Journal of Business Ethics* 70, no. 1 (2007); Urbinati, Nadi and Martin Thom. “Economic Individualism.” in *The Tyranny of the Moderns*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2015: 88-108. It must also be noted that ideas of individualism, while emphasizing the connection of the individual to a social system, have been used by neoliberalism “as a form of social cement, unifying a society under the hegemony of a dominant class.” Abercrombie, Nicholas, Stephen Hill, and Bryan S. Turner. *Sovereign Individuals of Capitalism*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1986: 32.

¹³ Blank, Rebecca M, and William McGurn. *Is the Market Moral? A Dialogue on Religion, Economics, and Justice*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004: 23.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

acquisition. The individual's pursuit of satisfaction is understood as the result of one's faithful dependance on God. While one is called to good works, those works are understood in light of their facilitation of the maturation of the individual's relationship to the divine which is expressed in God's provision of wealth and well-being. The theology of the neoliberal black church is affirmed even as it embraces the well-being of the individual and the sustaining of the religious institution as its *telos*. The result is a theology operative within the neoliberal black church, which is similar to the basic tenets of Christian theology, but owes its allegiance to a different god than that of the Christian faith.¹⁵ God as the marketplace provides the lens through which the God of the Christian faith and the praxes of the black neoliberal church communities are reimagined. This compromised theology leads these churches to decisions that are innocuous on the surface but whose underlying presuppositions are in tension with their theology.

This is not to suggest that the only concern is with the applicability of the endogenous theology of neoliberalism within the realm of the church.¹⁶ However, the primary concern here is with the consequences of the application of the endogenous theology of neoliberalism for marginalized communities. The poor of these communities are already under assault by the dominant culture. The extension of neoliberalism's precepts by the neoliberal black church, as compromised by economism, is all the more troubling. For religious communities, such as the neoliberal

¹⁵ Joerg Rieger. *Jesus vs. Caesar: For People Tired of Serving the Wrong God*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018.

¹⁶ As has been discussed, there are ample reasons to challenge the belief that neoliberalism actually achieves the objectives it sets for itself. It is equally clear that Christianity has something to say regarding economic existence.

black church, the embrace of economism implies that the practices of these institutions reflect theological presuppositions that have been redefined within neoliberalism rather than grounded in an understanding of the presence of God in human existence regardless of the economic status of the community or individual. Christian theology is concerned with all aspects of human existence, for all individuals, including their economic existence. However, when a religious community interprets economic existence through neoliberalism, it focuses on the individual in competition with others instead of cooperating with others.¹⁷ This loosens the connection between the individual and the rest of the human community.¹⁸ Neoliberalism's mutation of the Christian concern for others, through its commodification of human life, harms the construction of individual and institutional identity, the practices which instantiate that identity, and the contextual lens used to evaluate their decisions and practices of the individual and communal institutions. It degrades and harms the congregant, the church, and those who exist external to the institutional walls.¹⁹

¹⁷ This posture manifests itself when a religious institution privileges actions which minimize personal inconvenience or deprivation. This is a presupposition often undergirding approaches to charitable activity within a ministry where there is an avoidance of actions costly to the institution or individual even when those actions aligned with the proclaimed mission of the ministry.

¹⁸ Blank, *Is the Market Moral?*, 21-22.

¹⁹ Stated this way assumes a bifurcation between theological and economic influences can be clearly delineated. There is no clean separation of the theological and the economic. Rather, the economic is a subset of the theological and when rightly engaged, the theological includes consideration of economic existence. What is challenged here is that instead of the theological driving economic interactions, the theological has ceded its influence over the economic and non-economic spheres of life to the endogenous theology of neoliberalism. This phenomenon has particularly deformative impact on the neoliberal black church and exacerbates the already deleterious repercussions of neoliberalism on the black community. Leiman, Melvin M. *Political Economy of Racism*. London; Boulder, CO: Pluto Press, 2010: 88-145.

II. A Question of Proof

II.i. Examining Preaching

However, if the concern regarding the effects of economism on the neoliberal black church is true, what proof substantiates this claim? What evidence validates the concern that the neoliberal black church has been unduly influenced by neoliberalism's theology? A variety of practices and experiences within neoliberal black churches lend themselves to interrogation for possible validation of the concerns of this project. An immediately obvious place of interrogation of the particularly pernicious effect of economism is found in the preaching of the black church.²⁰ A cursory review of the homiletics of leading contemporary neoliberal black churches yields considerable evidence of economism at work.²¹ The intertwining of material and theological concerns within preaching has a rich and important history within the black religious tradition. However, a recent strain of this homiletical approach is that of Prosperity Gospel preaching.²² Prosperity Gospel is defined by one scholar as "a movement derived from the mind-cure theories of the nineteenth century, with the modern

²⁰ Any examination of the preaching of the black church understands and accepts that its preaching is as varied as the institutions themselves. The homiletical practices described are found in large and small churches and within denomination and non-denominational structures. They are found in churches with highly educated pastoral leadership and those led by individuals with limited educational or theological training.

²¹ Mumford, Debra J. "Prosperity Gospel and African American Prophetic Preaching." *Review & Expositor* 109, no. 3 (2012): 365–85; LaRue, Cleophus J. *The Heart of Black Preaching*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox, 2006; Mumford, Debra J. *Exploring Prosperity Preaching: Biblical Health, Wealth & Wisdom*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2012; Harrison, Milmon F. *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005; Hamilton, Charles V. *The Black Preacher in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.

²² "Prosperity Gospel also is accredited to Kenneth Hagin Senior, Neo-Pentecostal faith movement, which is also known as Word of Faith...Prosperity Gospel provides congregants with an energizing, exuberant other-worldly worship plus a this-worldliness message of wealth and consumerism." Martin, Pamela P., Tuere A. Bowles, Latrese Adkins, and Monica T. Leach. "Black Mega-Churches in the Internet Age: Exploring Theological Teachings and Social Outreach Efforts." *Journal of African American Studies* 15, no. 2 (2011): 158-159.

doctrine teaching that ‘verbal confessions’ of faith possess the metaphysical power to compel God’s blessings.”²³ Within this preaching, material concerns constitute the places where God is encountered, and God’s favor is experienced through material abundance. While the focus on God as a participant in materiality and a concern for the material existence of humanity is as old as the creation story itself, it is the assertion that God’s primary concern is with the material abundance of the individual that separates this form of preaching from others.²⁴ This is not a new homiletical approach as a historical review of black preachers identifies “several well-known, twentieth-century, Black preachers emphasizing the pursuit of material wealth in the here and now rather than waiting for riches in Heaven in their theological teachings.”²⁵ The historical record is filled with the names of ecclesial leaders such as “Bishop Daddy Grace, Father Devine, and Reverend Ike [who] were leaders of ministries that highlighted the message of earthly gratification in contrast to traditional teachings of the historic Black denominations.”²⁶ Additionally, this phenomenon is not relegated to

²³ Archer, John, and Charity Carney. “Sanctifying the SUV: Megachurches, the Prosperity Gospel, and the Suburban Christian.” in *Making Suburbia: New Histories of Everyday America*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015; 250; Rue, Loyal D. *Religion Is Not About God: How Spiritual Traditions Nurture Our Biological Nature and What to Expect When They Fail*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005.

²⁴ Houtman, Dick, and Birgit Meyer. *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012; Cannell, Fenella. *The Anthropology of Christianity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

²⁵ Martin, “Black Mega-Churches in the Internet Age,” 158-159. Also see: Dallam, M W. *Daddy Grace A Celebrity Preacher and His House of Prayer*. New York, NY: New York Univ Pr, 2009; Johnson, S. The Black Church in Goff, Philip. *The Blackwell Companion to Religion in America*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010: 446-467.

²⁶ Martin, “Black Mega-Churches in the Internet Age,” 159.

the preaching of the black church tradition alone but also is present throughout Christian communities of all racial and ethnic identities and nationalities.²⁷

II.ii.Commodification of Christian Education and Worship

While homiletics is often an initial place of inquiry for examining the presence of economism within religious communities, it is far from the only place lending itself to interrogation. Expanding the scope of evaluation to include the Christian education practices within religious communities is also fruitful. It provides a place to consider the commodification of worship and education practices in a manner highly influenced by economism.²⁸ This economism is evident in the monetizing of Christian education practices as their economic value is considered equal to, if not greater than, their role as constitutive elements of the catechistic and discipleship functions of the church. The rise of religious conferences commoditizes Christian education and worship and follows the economic model of demand and supply.²⁹ As a result, the offerings of the neoliberal black church are developed to mirror those desires reflected in the broader religious community with theological considerations secondary.³⁰ The marketing of sermon content was once the domain of ministries and religious personalities with

²⁷ Bowler, Kate. *Blessed: a History of the American Prosperity Gospel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

²⁸ Kitiarsa, Pattana. "Toward a Sociology of Religious Commodification." *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*, May 1, 2010: 563–83.

²⁹ This means that the content, structure, and frequencies of Christian conferences are driven in response to either the market or to the manipulation of the market's demand through the ecclesial institution itself. Steven, Robert E. *Concise Encyclopedia of Church and Religious Organization Marketing*. Routledge, New York, NY. 2012: 77.

³⁰ Iyer, Sriya. "The New Economics of Religion." *Journal of Economic Literature* 54, no. 2 (June 2016): 395–441; Becker, Gary S. "Religions Thrive in a Free Market, Too." *BusinessWeek*, no. 3458 (January 15, 1996): 20; Moberg, Marcus, and Tuomas Martikainen. "Religious Change in Market and Consumer Society: The Current State of the Field and New Ways Forward." *Religion* 48, no. 3 (July 2018): 418–35.

the economic resources necessary to utilize the radio waves and later television.³¹ However, with the growing accessibility of technology platforms, the ability to market religious content has proliferated in a manner consistent with the claims of neoliberalism to usher in what it considers progress through technological advancement.³² However, also consistent with neoliberalism is the idea that the increase and growing presence of religious content represents a good regardless of the substance or content of that material.³³ This allows for the growth in availability to be considered good even if that good is defined economically and not theologically. The proliferation of worship and Christian education content represents a place to interrogate the economism at work in the marketing of sermonic and worship products and the use of technological platforms as elements of a branding strategy for ministries.³⁴

II.iii. Another Possibility: Suburbanization

While each of the above areas in the life of the neoliberal black church provides occasions to witness the impact of economism, there exists another trend that has not

³¹ Gaddy, Gary D. "The Power of the Religious Media: Religious Broadcast Use and the Role of Religious Organizations in Public Affairs." *Review of Religious Research* 25, no. 4 (April 1984): 289; Hangen, Tona J. *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion & Popular Culture in America*. United States: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003; Ward, Mark. "Consolidating the Gospel: The Impact of the 1996 Telecommunications Act on Religious Radio Ownership." *Journal of Media and Religion* 11, no. 1 (2012): 11–30; Erickson, Hal. *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921-1991: the Programs and Personalities*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001; Abelman, Robert, and Stewart M. Hoover. *Religious Television: Controversies and Conclusions*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publication Corp, 1990.

³² Reynolds, Laurence and Bronislaw Szerszynski. "Neoliberalism and Technology: Perpetual Innovation or Perpetual Crisis." in Pellizzoni, Luigi, and Marja Ylönen. *Neoliberalism and Technoscience: Critical Assessments*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012.

³³ Blank, *Is the Market Moral?*. What this allows for is the promulgation of a theological construction which mirrors neoliberalism instead of a theology which might challenge neoliberalism's worse instincts.

³⁴ Einstein, Mara. "The Evolution of Religious Branding." *Social Compass* 58, no. 3 (September 2011): 331–38; Sargeant, Adrian, and Walter W. Wymer. *The Routledge Companion to Nonprofit Marketing*. London: Routledge, 2018.

undergone significant consideration but might be fruitful for this discussion. An infrequently evaluated aspect of the history of the neoliberal black church that provides evidence of the detrimental effects of economism on both the institutions and individuals of the black community is the suburbanization of the neoliberal black church. By suburbanization of the neoliberal black church, I am referencing the trend of many neoliberal black churches to escape the confines of inner-cities through relocation to outer-ring communities beginning with the out-migration of blacks in the 1970s. This time also coincides with the emergence of neoliberalism.³⁵ Over the ensuing decades, this trend in church expansion followed a similar residential trend for black communities and masked the theological concerns for these individuals and institutions. The lack of significant academic consideration of the suburbanization of the neoliberal black church reflects two realities.³⁶ First, the drivers behind the decisions by churches to relocate or plant new campuses in suburban communities resulted from a dizzying array of forces operating on these institutions.³⁷ Secondly, it

³⁵ In addition to relocation, suburbanization also captures the trend of neoliberal black churches in shifting expansion or new campus plants to suburban communities. Winsberg, Morton D. "Flight from the Ghetto: The Migration of Middle Class and Highly Educated Blacks into White Urban Neighborhoods." *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 44, no. 4 (October 1985): 411.

³⁶ The movement of white religious organizations to the suburbs beginning before, but picking up momentum after, WW II has been well documented. However, there has been scant academic attention to this phenomenon for black churches. Douglass, Harlan Paul. 1925. *The Suburban Trend*. New York: Century, 1925; Gordon, Albert I. *Jews in Suburbia*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1959; Greeley, Andrew M. *The Church and the Suburbs*. Glen Rock, NJ: Deus Books, 1959; Hudnut-Beumler, James. *Looking for God in the Suburbs: the Religion of the American Dream and its Critics, 1945–1965*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994; Shippey, Frederick A. *Protestantism in Suburban Life*. New York: Abingdon Press, 1964; Winter, Gibson. *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches: an Analysis of Protestant Responsibility in the Expanding Metropolis*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961.

³⁷ While the focus of the following cited article is on the experience of white churches in relocating to the suburbs, it does provide a glimpse of the forces at work that would have also impacted black churches' decisions regarding relocation. Miller, Brian J. "Growing Suburbs, Relocating Churches: The Suburbanization of Protestant Churches in the Chicago Region, 1925-1990." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56, no. 2 (June 2017): 342–64.

reflects economism's capacity to hide its influence on religious institutions and their decisions. The permeation of the ideology of neoliberalism throughout the culture means that its presuppositions go uninterrogated and accepted even when operative within the church.³⁸ Economism's entrenchment of the neoliberal ethic into the life of the church has avoided serious critique and the actions prompted by it. For this reason, consideration of the suburbanization of the neoliberal black church is efficacious for this discussion.

The remainder of this chapter will proceed as follows. I begin with a brief discussion of the drivers to the suburbanization of the black community to provide a mirror into the ways in which the residential movement was, in part, an embodiment of economism operative at the individual level.³⁹ After describing the drivers to the suburbanization of individuals, I will examine how this movement was mirrored in the life of the neoliberal black church. Suburbanization reflected an embrace of economic criteria by the church, at the expense of the theological, in the institution's decision making. This drove the suburbanization of churches beginning in the late seventies and continuing to this day. Examination of suburbanization of the neoliberal black church offers the space in which to speak of the deformative embrace of economism in the life of the church and the consequences of that embrace for the church, its congregants,

³⁸ Neoliberalism is understood as more than a mode of the market but also as a tool for governance or control of the conduct of people. It represents a particular framework for understanding the operation of society and the institutions within it. As such, neoliberalism is made up of presuppositions about human and institutional actions that are perceived to have a form of logic that is often uninterrogated. This is not only true of the individuals under its influence but also the institutions. Rose, Nikolas S. *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999: 19, 27.

³⁹ The suburbanization of the black community represents a dangerous bifurcation of the poor from the middle and upper classes of the black community through changing residential patterns in a manner of which Christian theology demands careful consideration.

and communities of the poor. Finally, I will close this chapter with an introduction of how this journey of the neoliberal black church to find greener pastures (economically) has come full circle with the expansion of poverty and the poor to suburban communities. This reality provides a continuing critique of neoliberalism's promises. It offers the neoliberal black church (internal and external to suburban communities) the opportunity to reassess and re-engage its theological and praxiological commitments to the poor.

III. Case of Suburbanization

The story of the historical growth of suburban communities in America is a rich and complex narrative arising from a confluence of factors.⁴⁰ The return of veterans after World War II, the continued industrial growth of the manufacturing base post-war, the rapid expansion of highway systems rendering rural geographic areas accessible, rising household income, continued public works projects bringing needed utilities and services to formerly remote areas, and increasing access to credit which ushered in growing homeownership were just a few of the many forces spurring the residential growth of suburban communities.⁴¹ Initially, the growth of suburban communities was a predominantly white phenomenon.⁴² However, race and class were instrumental in the

⁴⁰ Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

⁴¹ Bradford, David F., and Harry H. Kelejian. "An Econometric Model of the Flight to the Suburbs." *Journal of Political Economy* 81, no. 3 (May 1973): 566–89.

⁴² The discussion of the white suburbanization of America does not ignore that there have always existed a black presence in suburban communities. Or more accurately, there have always existed blacks residing or owning property in areas once considered outside of the boundaries of cities that eventually evolved into suburban communities as a result of population growth. In many cases, blacks were simply bought out of the land at unreasonably low prices. In other cases, blacks remained residents, albeit segregated, in these areas. Clark, Thomas A. *Blacks in Suburbs, a National Perspective*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, Center for Urban Policy Research, 1979.

growth of suburban communities from the very beginning. For example, race was a significant catalyst for the initial white flight that gave birth to suburban communities.⁴³ By the early 1970s, the in-migration of blacks into northern urban centers had quadrupled their presence. In response, growing numbers of whites sought to increase their social distance from these black migrants.⁴⁴ Some argued that white flight from urban centers was not driven by racial animus. They posited that the influx of black residents into urban centers impacted the house/rental supply putting upward pressure on residential housing prices and rental rates and consequently incentivized white families to pursue lower housing costs outside of the city limits.⁴⁵

However, racial animus was a reality in the flight of whites from the city, spurring the techniques used by banks, real estate agents, and homeowners (utilizing housing covenants) to maintain racial segregation in housing.⁴⁶ The irrationality of this racial animus is seen in the fact that,

...despite large numbers of new black arrivals [to urban centers], white exposure to black neighbors did not increase at all in the North."⁴⁷ This allowed overwhelming numbers of whites, who already had little residential interactions with blacks, to remain isolated in spite of the

⁴³ "White suburbanization was motivated by economic forces...but white departures from the city were also, in part, a reaction to black in-migration." Boustan, "Black Migration, White Flight," 94.

⁴⁴ "The black population share quadrupled to 16 percent by 1970 and then increased again to 23 percent by 2000." *ibid.*, 94-95.

⁴⁵Boustan, "Was Postwar Suburbanization White Flight?" 417-43.

⁴⁶ Mahoney, Martha R. "Residential Segregation and White Privilege." in *Critical White Studies*, ed. Delgado Richard and Stefancic Jean. Temple University Press, 1997: 273-75; Taylor, Dorceta E. "Contemporary Housing Discrimination: Does It Still Happen?" in *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility*. NYU Press, 2014: 262-78; Adelman, Robert M. "The Roles of Race, Class, and Residential Preferences in the Neighborhood Racial Composition of Middle-Class Blacks and Whites." *Social Science Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (2005): 209-28; Jones-Correa, Michael. "The Origins and Diffusion of Racial Restrictive Covenants." *Political Science Quarterly* 115, no. 4 (2000): 541-68.

⁴⁷Boustan, "Was Postwar Suburbanization White Flight?" 95.

increasing in-migration of blacks into the urban centers of the North and West.⁴⁸

After years of in-migration by blacks into urban centers, the percentage of predominantly white urban communities fell from sixty-seven percent to forty percent between 1940 and 1970, and this continued steadily in subsequent decades.⁴⁹ A corresponding increase in the percentage of predominantly black neighborhoods occurred during the same period (rising from five to twenty-four percent).⁵⁰ As whites continued to flee urban centers in response to black in-migration, segments of the black community also began an exodus to suburban communities as blacks experienced a modest increase in household income.⁵¹ This did not significantly change the complexion of suburban communities, as these blacks often settled into communities that, over time, grew to be racially and economically homogenous as urban centers grew increasingly black and poor.⁵² However, the out-migration of blacks

⁴⁸ “Yet, the typical white household lived quite far from a black neighborhood in sections of the city that were at little risk of racial turnover. What is more remarkable is that black in-migration had no effect on white contact with blacks in northern metropolitan areas. White isolation at the metropolitan level remained stable during this period [of 1904-1970], falling only from 96 to 95 percent.” *ibid.*, 94-95, 98.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 95.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ Studies examining the migration patterns of blacks out of urban centers into suburban communities are: Blumberg, Leonard, and Michael Lalli. “Little Ghettos: A Study of Negroes in the Suburbs.” *Phylon* (1960-) 27, no. 2 (June 1966): 117-31; Farley, Reynolds. “The Changing Distribution of Negroes Within Metropolitan Areas: The Emergence of Black Suburbs.” *American Journal of Sociology* 75, no. 4, Part 1 (March 1970): 512-29; Downs, Anthony. *Opening up the Suburbs: an Urban Strategy for America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977; Rabinovitz, Francine F., and William J. Siembieda. *Minorities in Suburbs: the Los Angeles Experience*. Lexington, Mass: Lexington Books, 1977; Bean, Frank D., and William Parker. Frisbie. *The Demography of Racial and Ethnic Groups*. New York: Academic Press, 1978; Clark, Thomas A. *Blacks in Suburbs, a National Perspective*. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University, Center for Urban Policy Research, 1979; Connolly, Harold X. “Black Movement Into the Suburbs.” *Urban Affairs Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (1973): 91-111; Marshall, Harvey H., and John M. Stahura. “Determinants of Black Suburbanization: Regional and Suburban Size Category Patterns.” *The Sociological Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1979): 237-53; Lake, Robert W. “The New Suburbanites: The Recent Buyers Survey.” *The New Suburbanites*, 2017, 107-37.

⁵² Boustan, “Black Migration, White Flight,” 102.

to suburban communities was slowed by several factors. “High-income black households were initially no more likely than their low-income counterparts to live in a suburban area.”⁵³ This was the product of both institutional and individual obstacles.⁵⁴ Many black families depended on house purchasing strategies that increased the overall cost of homes at often disadvantageous interest rates.⁵⁵ Concomitantly, white suburban residents utilized many tactics to exclude blacks home buyers from suburban communities such as

racially restrictive covenants on property, coordinated efforts by local real estate agents to limit black entry to suburban towns, and zoning regulations favoring large lots and single-family homes in suburban towns, which often priced out poorer black households.⁵⁶

Perversely, these obstacles increased the perceived value of attaining residence in suburban communities as a sign of success and attainment for some blacks.

Blacks increasingly migrated to suburban communities as white suburban residents continued their flight from integrated communities.⁵⁷ This growth in black migration was also impacted by the growth of the working and middle classes in the

⁵³ “In 1960, for example, a 10 percent increase in income for metropolitan whites (around \$4,000 in 2010 dollars) was associated with a 1.2 percentage point increase in the likelihood of living in the suburbs. In contrast, a 10 percent increase in income for metropolitan blacks raised the likelihood of living in the suburbs by less than 0.1 percentage points.” *ibid.*

⁵⁴ “Limited access to mortgage financing created another institutional impediment that limited black entry into the suburbs. The vast majority of the suburban housing stock was owner-occupied, requiring a source of mortgage credit for purchase. Until the mid-1960s, black households had difficulty securing mortgages underwritten by the FHA.” *ibid.*, 105.

⁵⁵ Satter, Beryl. *Family Properties: Race, Real Estate, and the Exploitation of Black Urban America*. Metropolitan Books. New York, NY: 2009.

⁵⁶ Boustan, “Black Migration, White Flight,” 103.

⁵⁷ This continued outflow of blacks was aided by the increasing number of blacks who, through greater economic engagement through the work-force, saw household incomes increase though they continued to lag behind that of whites. As a result, with the growth of the middle class was a corresponding growth in the presence of blacks in suburban communities. Winsberg, “Flight from the Ghetto: The Migration of Middle Class and Highly Educated Blacks into White Urban Neighborhoods,” 411.

black community.⁵⁸ The segments of the black community moving to the suburbs consisted of upper, middle, and working-class families. Their residential destinations in the suburbs were varied. Some settled in spaces contiguous to the cities filled with other working-class blacks. Others lived in middle-class suburban communities, though often predominantly black. Still others represented “a significant number of Black suburban residents living in predominantly White middle-class suburban communities.”⁵⁹ These blacks sought a better quality of life as defined by the dominant culture, which meant pursuit of the consumerism and materialism with which they were inundated.

Additionally, given the background of deprivation that had been such an intrinsic part of the narratives of black existence in this country, some blacks were enticed to the seduction of material aggrandizement that was reflected and reinforced by their cultural context.⁶⁰ Black and white suburbanization was driven by a conception of a better life often defined in opposition to the growing poverty (which was often deeply connected to increasing minority presence) within inner cities. While there was nothing wrong with the desire to improve one’s condition in life, the decision by families to exit inner cities often gave little consideration to the impact of this move on those that remained trapped in impoverished communities. Economism encouraged a myopic

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹Banks, James A. “Black Youths in Predominantly White Suburbs: An Exploratory Study of Their Attitudes and Self-Concepts.” *The Journal of Negro Education* 53, no. 1 (April 1984): 3.

⁶⁰ Charles, Kerwin Kofi, Erik Hurst, and Nikolai Roussanov. “Conspicuous Consumption and Race.” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 124, no. 2 (2009): 425-67; Alexis, Marcus. “Patterns of Black Consumption 1935-1960.” *Journal of Black Studies* 1, no. 1 (1970): 55-74; Mazzocco, Philip J., Derek D. Rucker, Adam D. Galinsky, and Eric T. Anderson. “Direct and Vicarious Conspicuous Consumption: Identification with Low-status Groups Increases the Desire for High-status Goods.” *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 22, no. 4 (2012): 520-28.

view of this decision by the individual, disconnected from potential communal outcomes.⁶¹ While the communal impact of black out-migration was not completely ignored by blacks, the impact was often evaluated in terms of its potentiality for negative consequences for the individual through diminished access to culturally important elements of life. These concerns reflected a prioritization of individual desires and aspirations to the exclusion of communal impact, which is evidence of an embrace of economism. More troubling, the intellectual framework rationalizing suburbanization would soon be adopted by the neoliberal black church. The slow migration of this economism, from the individual to the institution, would result in a reconsideration of the historical theological norms of the black church and a rationalization of the resulting harm to the men and women who did not possess the resources to escape the confines of what became an increasingly destructive environment.⁶²

⁶¹ Blank, *Is the Market Moral?*, 21-22.

⁶² Stoll, Michael A. "Race, Place, and Poverty Revisited." in Harris, David R., and Ann Chih Lin. *The Colors of Poverty: Why Racial and Ethnic Disparities Persist*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008: 202. The flight of whites did not always result in the deterioration of an urban community. Atlanta, while sufferings from some of the ills related to concentrating the poor in particular geographic areas, also is a testament to the power of those within these communities to produce an opposite outcome. However, even Atlanta serves as both an example of the power of a community to overcome the flight of whites and the lingering problem of class. The city participated in a neoliberal approach to the city's growth which left thousands of men and women trapped in poverty as it enriched a few. Kruse, Kevin M. "City Limits: Urban Separatism and Suburban Secession." in *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005: 234-58.

IV. Suburbanization of the Neoliberal Black Church

As mentioned earlier, black churches historically have been instrumental to the political, economic, and civic advancement of the black community.⁶³ In the presence of oppressive forces, black churches emerged and provided leadership through the assumption of practices and services well beyond what might ordinarily be defined as religious. They served as centers of social existence, incubators of political leadership, and reservoirs of social and communal resources and support.⁶⁴ As urban communities wrestled with escalating social ills, driven by inadequate economic activity and growing economic isolation, black churches in these communities continued to be tremendous assets in combating these ills.⁶⁵ However, neoliberal black churches experienced geographic shifts similar to the patterns emerging within the broader black community. As middle and working-class blacks began leaving the confines of inner-cities,

⁶³ There exists a rich history of the church as a centerpiece of efforts to overcome the entrenched forces that sought the continued subjugation and degradation of black and poor communities. This is not to suggest that the black church alone was instrumental. There were a number of non-religious organizations that also played a role in the advances experienced by the black community during the Civil Rights movement. Labor groups and unions, political and grassroots entities, educational support efforts, historically black colleges and universities, and black fraternities and sororities are just a few examples. Additionally, the advance of the black community was not fostered by black organizations alone. Individuals and groups with memberships representing many ethnicities and nationalities played a significant role in the victories won through this period. However, none of these facts diminish the important role that black churches played. Floyd-Thomas, Juan Marcial, and Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas. *Liberating Black Church History: Making It Plain*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014: 69.

⁶⁴ Chaves, Mark, and Lynn M. Higgins. "Comparing the Community Involvement of Black and White Congregations." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 31, no. 4 (1992): 425. See also: B., Du Bois W. E., and Alton B. Pollard. "The Negro Church: Report of a Social Study Made under the Direction of Atlanta University." *Proceedings of the Eighth Conference for the Study of the Negro Problems, Held at Atlanta University, May 26th, 1903*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011; Lincoln, C. Eric. *The Black Church since Frazier*. New York: Schocken Books, 1974; Morris, Aldon D. *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement Black Communities Organizing for Change*. New York: The Free Press, 1986.

⁶⁵ "Faith communities in general, and African-American churches in particular, are a largely untapped, but potent, resource to reduce the toll of substance abuse and other health issues." Watson, Donnie W, Lorrie Besesi, Susan Tanamly, Tiffanie Sim, Cheryl A Branch, and Eugene Williams, III. "The Role of Small and Medium-Sized African-American Churches in Promoting Healthy Life Styles." *Journal of Religion and Health* 42, no. 3 (2003): 191.

neoliberal black churches began leaving as well.⁶⁶ While this phenomenon began as early as the 1960s, it accelerated in the subsequent decades and exacerbated the declining conditions in the urban centers.⁶⁷

However, even before the departure trends for these neoliberal black churches escalated, the seeds of disconnection between the neoliberal black church and its community were already present. This disconnection was fostered by the influence of economism in turning the institution's attention inward.⁶⁸ This inward focus of the neoliberal church "conceived of community [in] intra-church ways" and increasingly understood its community as defined by its congregants and less by the individuals living within the shadows of its facilities.⁶⁹ Eventually, this focused the efforts of the neoliberal black church on sustaining and growing its institutional presence, a goal consistent with suburbanization. This inward institutional focus weakened communal connections, particularly as congregants (often those with significant resources

⁶⁶ "Oddly, this has been a centuries old practice among whites but it has rarely uttered an objection. What we find, in fact, is not that the black church is simply moving out of low income areas but the second large wave of black middle-class folks are now moving to the suburbs--a trend that began in the 1960s when blacks were given more freedom to let the market inform our living preferences." Bradley, Anthony. "Black (Middle Class) Church Flight." *St. Louis Post Dispatch*. October 16, 2008.

⁶⁷ These same forces were evident decades later. "In a time of unprecedented black geographic mobility, the church faced the same social and economic forces -- including people moving to the suburbs and the high cost of maintaining older buildings -- that caused many predominantly white Protestant churches and synagogues to flee downtown decades ago." *ibid*.

⁶⁸ This inward turn of the institution or the individual is a natural by-product of the rampant individualism that is a constitutive element of neoliberalism.

⁶⁹ Smith, R. Drew. "Churches and the Urban Poor: Interaction and Social Distance." *Sociology of Religion* 62, no. 3 (2001): 310.

relatively to their poorer brothers and sisters) began out-migration to the suburbs.⁷⁰ The growing internal focus of neoliberal black churches and the out-migration of more economically impactful congregants, collided with the rising maintenance costs of aging buildings and other ancillary costs of maintaining a presence within inner-cities, creating significant financial stress on churches. In later periods, the financial pressures on churches mutated, while remaining just as impactful, as the residential trends of white Americans reversed, bringing many of them back to the once minority-dominant communities of the inner cities.⁷¹ These reverse residential trends escalated property values in formerly poor communities. Those churches financially struggling found the rising value of their land and property providing an even greater temptation to sell their property and move to suburban communities where property values were less.

These financial incentives, combined with another powerful stimulus as the growing presence of middle-class blacks in suburban communities, presented the possibility of institutional success (understood through the lens of economism) that proved irresistible. Institutional success under economism meant that the church's success could be quantified and measured by revenue (tithes, offerings, conference revenue, and other streams of income) and membership. Growing income or membership became the primary evidence of the church's missional success as both provided the church with the human and financial capital necessary to engage in other

⁷⁰ It was not uncommon for out-migrating congregants to attempt to maintain a connection with their inner-city church and community resulting in two phenomenon. The first was the growth of the commuter black church, where a significant portion of the congregation no longer lived in the inner community while the institution remained located there. This led to the second phenomenon which, as a result of the weakening connection of the church to its often poor community, the church would begin to question if it would not be better served in following its congregants, and potential new members, to the suburbs to which so many were relocating.

⁷¹ Hwang, Jackelyn, and Jeffrey Lin. "What Have We Learned About the Causes of Recent Gentrification?" *Cityscape* 18, no. 3 (2016): 9-10.

ministry work.⁷² Under this model, the neoliberal black church was driven to consider strategies that grew the base of congregants and to evaluate the efficacy of those efforts financially. This model of growth not only quantified the metrics ministries would use to measure success but also accelerated a commodification of the congregation consistent with the aims of neoliberalism. The neoliberal black church realized that the value of congregants could be determined by their financial impact.⁷³ While everyone might be equal before God, economism, when applied to the church, understood that some congregant lives were worth more (at least economically) to the church and were more desirable. Under this logic, suburban communities looked increasingly attractive. Given that blacks transitioning to suburban communities often represented households with higher or more stable levels of income relative to those households remaining within the boundaries of the city, suburbanization of the church was both a defensive strategic tactic (lowering the possibility that those high-income households would become members of other churches closer to their new place of residence given the relatively low barriers to exit for congregants) and a marketing opportunity providing the church with a chance to tap into a pool of potential congregants who met a similar financial profile as the congregants that the church was seeking to retain.⁷⁴ This

⁷² Notice that the determinant of the activity of the church now privileges financial impact as a criteria. It becomes easier to understand how these considerations opened the door to the type of transactional thinking common to the neoliberal black church but at odds with many forms of Christian thought.

⁷³ Robert Mochrie examines models of churches that include economic considerations such as revenue and church membership. He applies his analysis over several historical periods but offers both a Price Theory and Club Model of church organizing which gets at some of the implications of examining congregants in light of their revenue potential and economic impact. Mochrie, Robert. "Economic Models of Churches" in Oslington, Paul. *The Oxford Handbook Of Christianity And Economics*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014. 427-431.

⁷⁴ This assertion suggests that the neoliberal church both understands itself and operates in ways similar to that of the firm as discussed in: Porter, Michael E. *Competitive Advantage: Creating and Sustaining Superior Performance*. New York: London: Free Press; Collier Macmillan, 1985: 1-26.

commodification of congregant life could be disguised in the theological wardrobe of the neoliberal black church as simply seeking to address the spiritual needs of suburban blacks as an explanation for its relocation. However, the reasoning masked the economism at work in the church's decision process and self-understanding.

In a time of unprecedented black geographic mobility, the church faced the same social and economic forces -- including people moving to the suburbs and the high cost of maintaining older buildings -- that caused many predominantly white Protestant churches and synagogues to flee downtown decades ago...old mission that expects men and women who have moved up the economic ladder not to abandon those left behind.⁷⁵

V. Theological Challenge of Suburbanization

There are two questions to consider when examining the suburbanization of the neoliberal black church. The first question to consider is: What connections exist between the economism of neoliberalism and the suburbanization of the church? The second is: What are the theological consequences for the neoliberal church and its community (along with communities of the poor) resulting from the economism undergirding suburbanization? It can be rightly asked if the suburbanization decision alone (the choice of whether to relocate a church to the suburbs from an inner-city, a decision many inner-city churches faced over the last fifty years) can be understood as reflecting an underlying economism within the neoliberal black church.⁷⁶ As indicated

⁷⁵ Bradley, Anthony. "Black (Middle Class) Church Flight." *St. Louis Post Dispatch*. October 16, 2008.

⁷⁶ The drivers behind these decisions vary in substance and across time-frames. Recent reversals in the residential migration of whites have presented the same problem within a new context. Now, inner-cities are being gentrified, which is the recent manifestation of neoliberalism at work. In this case, as will be discussed below, the poor are being exported to suburban communities, as the wealthy return and revitalize inner-cities. As a result, many churches have been forced to consider this proposition regardless of size and resources. Most recently, gentrification efforts have forced ministries to reconsider their geographic location. As shared by one pastor in the Nashville area, a city that has undergone tremendous gentrification over the last decade, "Most of the black churches in this community are leaving. They are selling their churches to land developers who are turning them into restaurants and bars and condos and apartments and any number of things." Meyer, Holly. "Convert to Condos or Stay Put: How Churches Are Responding to Their Changing Neighborhood." *The Tennessean*, July 23, 2017.

above, I believe that an examination of the suburbanization decision provides one reflection of the pervasive manner in which the economism of both individual members and the neoliberal black church was at work. While this does not ignore or diminish suburban neoliberal black churches' theological reflection before exiting communities of the poor, it also does not ignore that the pull on these churches to suburban communities was often grounded in economism.

Economism worked to affirm the desire to separate from what was perceived as the negative attributes and escalating challenges of inner-city life that problematized the pursuit for a better quality of life.⁷⁷ This pursuit was often defined by metrics that accentuated the desire and perception of the individual as disconnected from the needs of a community and that remains at the heart of economism. Many whites took full advantage of the mechanisms at their disposal to separate from urban communities in pursuit of a better quality of life.⁷⁸ Many blacks followed as middle-class blacks sought to increase the social distance between themselves and the working- and lower classes. This idea of separation drove, in part, the attraction of suburban communities by churches and these churches took advantage of these separatist tendencies and built churches that catered to congregant desires.⁷⁹ Just as their congregants were in pursuit of a mythical American dream where they could improve their quality of life with little regard for their connections to or impact of their economic decisions on the less

⁷⁷ Lake, "The New Suburbanites: The Recent Buyers Survey," 107–37.

⁷⁸ Archer and Carney, "Sanctifying the SUV: Megachurches, the Prosperity Gospel, and the Suburban Christian," 246.

⁷⁹ Thumma, Scott and Warren Bird. *Changes in American Megachurches: Tracing Eight Years of Growth and Innovation in the Nation's Largest-Attendance Congregations*. Hartford Institute for Religion Research. Hartford, CN: September 2008, http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megastoday2008_summaryreport.html.

fortunate, churches made a similar calculation. Leaders sought to erect ministries in places that supported the “suburban myth of middle-class prosperity and romanticized self-sufficiency, even if these characteristics [were] not truly representative of the suburbs in which the churches [were] planted.”⁸⁰ This pursuit of prosperity and separation from those whose existence challenged the neoliberal narrative found its expression in the buildings erected in these suburban communities, which distanced the church and its congregants from any visual reminders of the rampant inequity produced by neoliberalism.⁸¹ It was seen in the “decidedly bourgeois language their leaders used via the prosperity gospel, the conservative ideology they affirmed, and the architectural grandeur of the structures themselves.”⁸² The economism infused in the decision to relocate to suburban communities permeated every aspect of the neoliberal black church and the actions and rhetoric of the church “encouraged believers to accept wealth or gifts of talent and beauty as being from the Lord, relieving perceived suburban guilt in a society constructed on the foundations of attainment and appearances.”⁸³ These neoliberal black churches created self-sustaining communities that acted as surrogates for the forgotten communities of the inner-city.

Economism drove the church to be seeker or consumer-oriented.⁸⁴ In doing so, these churches sought to attract “thousands of congregants by constructing spaces

⁸⁰ Archer and Carney, “Sanctifying the SUV: Megachurches, the Prosperity Gospel, and the Suburban Christian,” 242.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, 246; Carol H. Demong, *The Bleating of the Sheep, and Other Essays: A Voice for People Tired of Mind-Numbing Churchianity*. Longwood, Fla.: Xulon Press, 2008: 32–35.

⁸² Archer and Carney, “Sanctifying the SUV: Megachurches, the Prosperity Gospel, and the Suburban Christian,” 242-243.

⁸³ *ibid.*, 250.

⁸⁴ Watson, J. B. And Walter Scalen. “Dining with the Devil: The Unique Secularization of American Evangelical Churches.” *International Social Science Review* 83, no. 3/4 (2008): 171-80.

that reappropriated and repurposed common and identifiable objects, products, and places” which provided a feeling of familiarity and dampened the sense of separation from the communities from which these ministries arose without a connectedness or sense of responsibility or obligation to those communities.⁸⁵ These neoliberal black churches were built on the commercialism of neoliberalism which also drove the growth of suburban communities.⁸⁶ Neither the potential loss of middle-class congregants if the churches remained in the inner-cities nor the potential acquisition of “consumer-oriented” individuals seeking places of worship were lost on churches and ecclesial leaders facing the suburbanization problem.⁸⁷

It may appear as though the argument regarding the theological harm of economism has already been addressed. The decisions of neoliberal black churches to exit communities of the poor in search of what they perceived as more attractive places of service demonstrated the subtle ways in which the criteria governing the praxis and decisions of these churches could be rationalized through the neoliberal rubric even when that logic was at odds with the Christian commitment to the poor. Little to no examination of the decisions of churches who followed in the footsteps of financially better off congregants and fled to the greener pastures of the suburbs has

⁸⁵ Archer and Carney, “Sanctifying the SUV: Megachurches, the Prosperity Gospel, and the Suburban Christian,” 242-243.

⁸⁶ The focus on revenue and growth appealed to many of their members who were deeply grounded in the corporate life of America. In fact, the decision to relocate to the suburbs was often grounded, at least in part, in a financial benefit. Many of these church leaders found “suburbia an attractive location because it offers lower land prices and fewer zoning restrictions than do urban centers.” This financial concern extended to the attractiveness of the potential pool of membership. Archer and Carney, “Sanctifying the SUV: Megachurches, the Prosperity Gospel, and the Suburban Christian,” 243.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 244-245.

been performed, nor has there been any attempt to explicate the potential theological harm of these decisions.⁸⁸

VI. The Endogenous Theology Neoliberalism at Work

It must be remembered that the endogenous theology of neoliberalism utilizes a variety of strategies and instruments to achieve four distinct objectives.⁸⁹ The first is to maintain the operation of the market free from external interference. The second is to render invisible those portions of society whose visibility serves as a condemnation of the supposed efficacy of the market through their manifestation of the market's inequities. The third is to exert control over those portions of the population that represent potential harm to the market and its operations. The fourth objective is to secure the continued participation of those segments of society who do not necessarily benefit from the market's operation but are nonetheless essential to its continuance.⁹⁰ To accomplish these ends, the market disrupts efforts to resist its influence, incentivizes preferred behaviors, and coopts communal institutions to "teach prevailing norms...to transform [individuals] into cooperative subjects of the market."⁹¹ It is with these goals of neoliberalism in mind that we can further examine the ways in which the

⁸⁸ One of the ways to chart the possible dissonance of suburbanization with the theology of the church is to examine the toll on communities of the poor resulting from suburbanization. This becomes even more consequential when we recognize that not all neoliberal churches made the transition to the suburbs but only those that had the financial resources necessary to secure property and to maintain the type of praxis and services that were consistent with the audience of middle class and aspiring working class blacks that these ministries sought to attract and retain. This in turn meant that those black neoliberal churches making the transition from the inner cities to suburban communities often represented those ministries best positioned to be of help to their exit communities. This in turn exacerbated the conditions of cities as they grappled with the continue migration of blacks from the south, the diminishing taxes base which limited their investments into schools and other communal institutions essential to maintaining adequate standards of living within cities.

⁸⁹ Johnson, *Race, Religion, and Resilience in the Neoliberal Age*, 25.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

⁹¹ *ibid.*, 25-26.

market's cooption of the neoliberal black church, as seen in its suburbanization, has been theologically deformative.

VI.i. Bearers of Tradition

Neoliberalism accomplishes its objectives by minimizing the possibility of market disruption by those poor communities essential to the market's operation. One of the ways this was accomplished was through economism's cooption of the traditions of the neoliberal black church. The church, in light of its historical presence and theological mandate, was designed to offer hope to communities of the poor and vulnerable. Religious practices instantiated within the rituals of the church provided one of the many basis from which social, political, and economic emancipatory practices emerged.⁹² As such, the importance of these religious practices cannot be overstated. These practices were also tradition-bearing in that they "united a religious community with the communities of the past and with a wider religious community in the present."⁹³ As the neoliberal black church embraced economism, the ahistorical nature of neoliberalism influenced the disconnection of the church and its rituals from their past. For the suburban black neoliberal church, this resulted in the reformulating of traditions and rituals in a manner that, while addressing the perceived needs of its suburban congregation, robbed the institution and its rituals of their deep connection to the historical legacy of the black church or its historical legacy within the community which gave the church its birth.⁹⁴ Instead, the institution and its rituals sought to

⁹² *ibid.*

⁹³ *ibid.*, 17.

⁹⁴ This is not only a problem for the suburban neoliberal black church. For those churches which, for any number of reasons, did not relocate or expand to a suburban community, economism still could be operative. For the inner-city neoliberal church, a similar transformation of rituals can occur robbing the church of the very emancipatory tools its congregants and community most need.

appease the needs of its congregation with little regard for the ritual's connection to a historical past grounded in a theologically liberative posture. Leaders of such churches served as bricoleurs engaged in the construction of new traditions from the ashes of historical traditions and rituals that connected the church with its past.⁹⁵ These constructions of a new faith mirrored the endogenous theology of neoliberalism.⁹⁶ The suburban neoliberal black church became the,

...site of this process of bricolage—a process of cultural construction through which the church combined older faith traditions, newer versions of prosperity gospel theology, repurposed and grandiose architecture, and contemporary musical and pop culture references to feed the desires of its congregants with low regard for the historical or theological content of the black church or its traditions.⁹⁷

This recontextualization of rituals and traditions eroded the church's engagement in practices which were emancipatory for both its congregants and for communities of the poor who were most in need. It created and sustained a sense of community that existed outside of the boundaries of the poor. The ahistorical nature of economism also safeguarded the neoliberal black church, its rituals, and traditions from comparisons to

⁹⁵ Ellingson, Stephen. *The Megachurch and the Mainline: Remaking Religious Tradition in the Twenty-first Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007: 14, 24.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

⁹⁷ Archer and Carney, "Sanctifying the SUV: Megachurches, the Prosperity Gospel, and the Suburban Christian," 242-243. For more on suburban bricolage, see: Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962; Fishman, Robert. *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*. New York: Basic Books, 1987. For religious scholars' take on bricolage, see David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2000: 18; Ellingson, *The Megachurch and the Mainline: Remaking Religious Tradition in the Twenty-first Century*, 14, 27, 67

the historical norms of the black church against which the neoliberal black church and its congregants might be held to account.⁹⁸

VI.ii. Shaping Identity and Character

The identity of both the individual and the institution were concretized in the religious practices of the church. The decision to relocate out of communities of the poor cannot be viewed in isolation from what it said about the nature of the institution. The movement of blacks to suburban communities reflected the ways in which individuals, to varying degrees, embraced an economic understanding of their existence and followed the dictates of neoliberalism to pursue individual good and well-being with little regard to that of the community.⁹⁹ While this instinct was not inherently wrong, the church was the institution purposed to remind congregants that their identity was never forged in independence of the other.¹⁰⁰ Rather the church was called to strengthen and reinforce the connections between individuals and community. However, in suburbanization, we witnessed the individualism of neoliberalism influence the decisions of the church. Instead of the church serving as a place of resistance to economism, it participated in economism. “Through their joint participation in socially shared activities, the adherents of a religious community learned to play certain roles and make use of certain cognitive scripts that were held in common and created a

⁹⁸ This concept of religious practices finding depth through the connection they establish between communities across generations is first examined by Alasdair MacIntyre. Richard Osmer picks up on this line of thinking and applies it more specifically to Christian communities. Osmer, Richard Robert. *The Teaching Ministry of Congregations*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005; MacIntyre, Alasdair C. *After Virtue: A Study of Moral Theory*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.

⁹⁹ Remember this does not have to be an explicit decision to nonetheless be a decision even if passively made.

¹⁰⁰ Blank, *Is the Market Moral?*, 23.

collective sense of identity.”¹⁰¹ The dialectical role of the church in identity formation was critical to understanding the impact and loss opportunity of the church relative to its community. The identity of the institution and that of the individuals within it were shaped by the economism at work within both. The identity formation capacity of economism, when empowered by the praxis of the church, extended to even those individuals who stood as objects of its care and subjects of its liberative efforts. Under economism, the identities of all parties were altered and changed into the image of the god of the marketplace.

The development of character is instantiated in the practices and habits of the Christian community.¹⁰² The neoliberal black church was to serve as an instrument in the development of character, and that character was shaped by the church’s praxis as informed by the church’s theology. If the history of the black church was grounded in its preference for the poor, the church was the institution in which those habits embodying this preference were established, transmitted, and ingrained in the life of its community. The black church represented the opportunity for a congregation to impact the conditions of economic deprivation that engulfed so much of the broader black community. However, through suburbanization, the black church inculcated and exacerbated the distance between the classes within a black community and provided tacit approval to habits which sought to distance congregants from the very communities it’s theology averred should be the focus of the church’s attention.

¹⁰¹ Osmer, *The Teaching Ministry of Congregations*, 63.

¹⁰² Johnson, *Race, Religion, and Resilience in the Neoliberal Age*.

VI.iii.Contextual Interpretation

Most importantly, black religious communities, through their religious practices, provided the lens through which congregants interpreted their context.¹⁰³ The church served many within the black community by providing individuals with the capacity to see the ways in which particular modes of economic existence worked in concert with or in opposition to divinely ordained human dignity. The historical traditions of the church sought to reaffirm this dignity and the sacredness of all human life, particularly for those under conditions of economic deprivation. The church was called to suggest, particularly to those who somehow escaped the most devastating aspects of neoliberalism, that they could not interpret context in light of individual achievement alone. The practices of the church were designed to inform the shared connection of individuals that cut across economic and racial barriers. However, neoliberalism sought to undermine this sense of a shared experience, which informed an understanding of context. Economism understood that such a shared reading of context could lead to a unification of forces that might ultimately work to disrupt market functions. As such, the market sought, as it always does, to bifurcate classes of individuals from one another and to suppress unity among those whom the market sought to exploit. The market's purpose was served by the neoliberal black church's increasing class concentration (as exacerbated by suburbanization) and its practices and decisions to be inwardly focused.¹⁰⁴ As this occurred, the internal community of the church lacked the variance of disparate economic classes, and contextual interpretation was

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, 17-18.

¹⁰⁴ It does not matter which class constitutes the neoliberal church, just that there is increasing homogeneity of class concentration. This serves to minimize the connections that can be drawn between classes and the ways classes might unite to disrupt oppressive power structures.

increasingly performed through the singular lens of economic empowerment.¹⁰⁵ As the neoliberal black church was shaped by economism, it served as a promulgator of the very framework that commodified human life and sought neither the flourishing of the individual nor the alleviation of the conditions of poverty that were so devastating in their impact on the lives of the poor and black.

This economism, as operative within the neoliberal church, warped the perspective of the individuals within the church's embrace and shaped its institutional contextual perspective. For example, the preference for the poor, an intrinsic element of Christian theology, suggested that as long as there was poverty, the neoliberal black church should be engaged in a struggle for its eradication. However, under the influence of economism, efforts captured under the rubric of compassionate conservatism were understood through the lens of institutional advancement rather than as efforts to hold the nation accountable for ending systemic poverty.¹⁰⁶

VII. Possibilities for the Church

If ever there were a time for a change in the neoliberal black church, it is now. As stated in the previous chapter, the endogenous theology of neoliberalism operates with an eschatology that suggests that the free market, free of external intervention, ultimately results in the end of scarcity for humanity, which is the self-described *telos* of its system.¹⁰⁷ However, neoliberalism's greatest accomplishment appears to be its

¹⁰⁵ Kimberly Karnes, Wayne McIntosh, Irwin L. Morris, and Shanna Pearson-Merkowitz. "Mighty Fortresses: Explaining the Spatial Distribution of American Megachurches." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46, no. 2 (2007): 266.

¹⁰⁶ Johnson, *Race, Religion, and Resilience in the Neoliberal Age*, 23-24.

¹⁰⁷ Long, D. Stephen. *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market*. London; New York: Routledge, 2000: 143-146.

ability to maintain the fidelity of its adherents without delivering on this *telos* or its other oft-quoted goals and aspirations. The benefits of neoliberalism have been far

less than its advocates claim, the price has been greater, as the environment has been destroyed, [and] as political processes have been corrupted...and brought in their wake massive unemployment have, which in turn, have been followed by longer term problems of social dissolution.¹⁰⁸

Nowhere have the consequences of neoliberalism been more acutely felt than in communities of the poor. This is the result of a confluence of virulent racist ideals deeply woven into the American psyche and an “alliance of political and ideological forces that coalesced to form a hegemony characterized by both racially driven neoliberalism and neoliberally fueled racism.”¹⁰⁹ As a result,

...the neoliberal system that emerged in the United States is highly racialized and reflects the legacies of North America’s racial history. The emergence of the neoliberal age in the United States is thus interpreted within the context of a historic transition from a system of racial domination to a hegemonic racially driven neoliberalism.¹¹⁰

While America perceives itself as embracing an equality for all individuals, the reality is far different.

This is the unfortunate *telos* of neoliberalism that neoliberal black churches succumb to when they allow the economism of neoliberalism and its commodification of human life to permeate the thinking of the church. The suburbanization of these churches is just one manifestation of an internal economism that is also reflected in the church’s internal focus. For many of these churches, suburbanization required that “questions of equality be rationalized by the prevailing [economic] ideology and

¹⁰⁸ Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents*, 20, 3.

¹⁰⁹ Goldberg, David Theo. *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism*. Vancouver: Crane Library at the University of British Columbia, 2011: 111.

¹¹⁰ Johnson, *Race, Religion, and Resilience in the Neoliberal Age*, 24.

conditioned by specific social practices and the social relations derived from them.”¹¹¹ This allowed for a distancing from the poor, the pursuit of higher income potential congregants, the repackaging of services, rituals, and practices in a manner that reassured consumption-driven congregants. The rhetoric of equality and concern for all humanity, still vibrant elements of neoliberal religious expression and proclamation, was contradicted by the internal focus, growth-centric programs, and sustainability expenditures of the neoliberal black church. The church’s separation of itself from communities of the poor further disenfranchised the marginalized within those communities by removing the church as a social and political asset in resistance to oppression and liberation for those who remain trapped. All of this occurred even as the marketplace continued to rely upon the essential but exploited services of the poor. The very people from whom the neoliberal black church distanced itself continued to “struggle to make ends meet, yet the burdens they shouldered were indispensable for the operation of societal institutions and quality of life that people in developed areas take for granted.”¹¹² Meanwhile, the church preached and proclaimed prosperity for congregants offering a reflection of that prosperity in their ever-sprawling campuses.

After decades of out-migration by both the middle and working-classes and neoliberal black churches, communities of the poor continue to struggle.¹¹³ These communities suffer from a concentration of under- or unemployed families and a reliance on governmental assistance even as that assistance becomes increasingly

¹¹¹ Smith, Archie. *The Relational Self: Ethics and Therapy from a Black Church Perspective*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1982: 163.

¹¹² Johnson, *Race, Religion, and Resilience in the Neoliberal Age*, 25.

¹¹³ Wilson, William J. *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987: 26, 38.

focused on disciplining rather than aiding the poor.¹¹⁴ The ability of the poor to improve their economic conditions is often limited. “Poor people and the places where they live are often wanting in the social and economic assets necessary for upward mobility and community development.”¹¹⁵ Institutions, such as the church, can provide invaluable assistance, in partnership with other committed communal organizations, to the poor in improving their lives and reforming the conditions of their communities.¹¹⁶ It is into this ever-worsening environment that the neoliberal black church has been called to serve, and the possibilities for its impact are well documented.¹¹⁷

It is absolutely true that a church is not prohibited by its geography in assisting the poor. Given that congregational income and size have been shown to be impactful to the level of social engagement of a church, large suburban neoliberal black churches

¹¹⁴ Soss, Joe, Richard C. Fording, and Sanford Schram. *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011; Smith, “Churches and the Urban Poor: Interaction and Social Distance,” 302.

¹¹⁵ Owens, Michael Leo, and R. Drew Smith. “Congregations in Low-Income Neighborhoods and the Implications for Social Welfare Policy Research.” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (March 2003): 316–39. Also see: Anderson, Elijah. *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York: Norton, 2000; Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*; Wilson, William Julius. *When Work Disappears: the World of the New Urban Poor*. New York: Knopf, 1997.

¹¹⁶ Owens and Smith. “Congregations in Low-Income Neighborhoods and the Implications for Social Welfare Policy Research,” 317. This is not to suggest that there has not been significant scholarly discussion of the efficacy of religious institutions in improving the lives of those individuals trapped in poverty. Bane, Mary Jo, Brent Coffin, and Ronald F. Thieman. *Who Will Provide?: the Changing Role of Religion in American Social Welfare*. Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 2000; Bane, Mary Jo, and Lawrence M. Mead. *Lifting up the Poor: a Dialogue on Religion, Poverty, and Welfare Reform*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003; Unruh, H. R. “Sacred Places, Civic Purposes: Should Government Help Faith-Based Charity?” *Journal of Church and State* 44, no. 3 (October 1, 2002): 592–93.

¹¹⁷ What is clear from the research is that churches, particularly those focused on communities of the poor, can play a significant role in providing much needed assistance. Whether independently or in cooperation with other public or private organizations, churches within these communities can provide valuable assistance well beyond the confines of their congregations. The assistance covers a wide range of needs within poor communities - from meals and shelter to engagement with youth and the provision of critical services. Wuthnow, Robert. *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism*. Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2003.

cannot be written off. They can, and many do, have some impact on the wellbeing of the inner-city poor.¹¹⁸

Of the five independent variables, annual congregation income, college-educated pastor, and length of congregation presence in the neighborhood are statistically significant. That is, controlling for other variables related to dimensions of congregation size, congregation social class, and congregation residency, congregations with higher incomes, college-educated clergy, and longer tenures in their neighborhoods provide services in more program areas than congregations with lower incomes, clergy with only elementary and secondary educations, and shorter neighborhood tenures.¹¹⁹

However, even where the suburban neoliberal black church has been engaged in programs designed to impact the poor, they have also been found likely to “engage the poor more as social service clients than as integral to the church's community.”¹²⁰ Given the influence of economism on these churches, one is not surprised at the ease at which these churches might objectify the recipients of its aid, particularly given that these recipients are unlikely to present any revenue value to the church.¹²¹ The poor loses the full potential of the black church to further incite the human instinct of resistance to oppression or to partner with them for the restoration of forsaken communities. The black neoliberal church is also impoverished by economism as they

¹¹⁸ “Congregations with large memberships are more likely to provide social services than congregations with small memberships...The number of members may influence social service activity because congregations with large memberships possess latent resources (e.g., volunteers, money, and space) for social welfare programming and delivery...Beyond congregation memberships and income, leadership influences social service activity. Congregations often align their community interests and actions with those of their pastors.” Owens and Smith. “Congregations in Low-Income Neighborhoods and the Implications for Social Welfare Policy Research,” 320-321.

¹¹⁹ Owens and Smith. “Congregations in Low-Income Neighborhoods and the Implications for Social Welfare Policy Research,” 327.

¹²⁰ Smith, “Churches and the Urban Poor: Interaction and Social Distance,” 311.

¹²¹ This tendency is not just present in the suburban neoliberal church but also in the inner-city neoliberal black church where the church can “appear to be involved with their low-income neighbors when, in fact, there is very little direct involvement at all between these low-income residents and the internal life of the church.” *ibid.*

are robbed of the power of the poor to incite within them the thirst for liberation measured by more than individual material attainment. The poor present the church with a fuller understanding of its own story when the church engages “disaffected populations to the point of being challenged to abandon exclusive conceptions of community prevailing among many of these congregations.”¹²²

However, where a church and its congregation resides is determinative. There is something to be noted in those black churches that have remained within troubled communities. Many of those that have remained have done so after extended periods of public and corporate disinvestment largely because of their understanding of their institutional and theological identity as tied to the presence of the poor and their embrace of active resistance.¹²³ Being resident in communities of the poor can be theologically, strategically, and practically efficacious to the church’s commitment to the poor. These churches are often better able to respond to the needs of its community and better positioned to address needed communal reforms.¹²⁴ In ways very different from their neoliberal suburban counterparts, these churches may possess far greater clarity “of the solutions to removing the obstacles to self-sufficiency that the poor confront. Moreover, congregations located in impoverished communities may better discern the problems of the poor as well as how to resolve them.”¹²⁵ Black churches located in communities of the poor possess a “unique potential to redeem

¹²² *ibid.*, 312.

¹²³ Owens and Smith. “Congregations in Low-Income Neighborhoods and the Implications for Social Welfare Policy Research,” 319.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*

¹²⁵ “Local congregations, in contrast to commuter congregations, may also have a lucid understanding of the neighborhood assets that could be leveraged to promote self-sufficiency among residents.” *ibid.*, 321.

poor places as stable, decent, and safe residential areas” in a manner that cannot be easily replicated from the distance of the nearest suburb.¹²⁶

Church residency within these communities aids the church in understanding the most vulnerable residents of a community, and more often than not, these churches offer some form of support to the residents.¹²⁷ However, it must also be acknowledged that residence within a poor community does not automatically result in a connection of the congregation to the needs of the community or an understanding by that congregation of the challenges the community’s residents face.¹²⁸ In addition to location, it requires an intentionality of the church born of its practices. Churches, whether suburban or urban, must make a decision to resist a compromised theology, which could lead to less engagement with or advocacy of the needs and concerns of the poor.¹²⁹

VIII. The Opportunity for the Neoliberal Church

Economism was evident in the decision by black neoliberal churches to move from poor inner-city communities to suburban communities. Yet, having made this decision, there exists an opportunity for the suburban neoliberal black church just as

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, 319-320.

¹²⁷ What this suggests is that poor communities benefit when stronger and larger neoliberal churches remain in their community. This support is not limited to those community members who are also members of the church. “The number of congregation-provided social services available to those who need them increases as congregation revenue increases. Increased income also expands the range of program areas in which congregations provide services, offering the needy a diversity of social services. Nevertheless, the congregations in low-income neighborhoods, including the majority of their commuter congregations, have meager incomes.” *ibid.*, 328-329.

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, 321.

¹²⁹ Thuesen, Peter J. *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism*. Berkeley: University of Calif. Press, 2002; Tsitsos, William. “Race Differences in Congregational Social Service Activity.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 2 (June 2003): 205–15; Wuthnow, *Saving America? Faith-Based Services and the Future of Civil Society*.

an opportunity exists for the inner-city neoliberal black church. Unlike any other period over the last seventy-five years, the poor are more easily accessible to both sets of churches. This is because neoliberalism has continued to erode the economic foundation of families. Where many families thought they were escaping the impoverishment of the inner-cities by their transition to the suburbs, they now find that the poor have migrated to suburban communities. More critically, those who perceived themselves as having escaped poverty have, in fact, joined the ranks of the poor as neoliberal practices continue to generate increasing poverty while enriching the already wealthy.¹³⁰ Today, it is not simply inner-city churches who have the blessing of being able to provide systemic aid and assistance to the poor; it is also suburban black churches.

Deep poverty, and high-poverty neighborhoods reach both urban and suburban areas, and there are now more poor people in the suburbs of our largest metro areas than in the central cities. Nearly every suburban community has seen a notable increase in the number of poor people and in its poverty rate since 1990.¹³¹

Yet, while poverty levels have risen precipitously in suburban communities, they have not declined in inner cities. “Poverty rates in cities are significantly higher than in 1990 and remain much higher than in suburban communities.”¹³²

This is the environment that the black church, neoliberal or progressive, suburban or urban now faces. This is the environment to which neoliberalism has led

¹³⁰ Allard, Scott WA. *Places in Need: the Changing Geography of Poverty*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2017: 177-178.

¹³¹ “The growing number of poor communities has escalated in the last two decades and several million more suburban residents are living in deep poverty today than just a decade ago.” *ibid.*, 177

¹³² “Concentrated poverty persists in central cities, and poverty problems in the cities and suburbs of America’s largest metropolitan areas became worse in the five years following the formal end to the Great Recession.” *ibid.*

us. Now, regardless of location, the challenge is the same. How might the black church reclaim its voice and role in resisting the very forces that threaten to swallow communities whole? This is the theological question that drives this final chapter: How do we reclaim a theology for the black church in this historical moment that responds to the endogenous and destructive theology of neoliberalism? Without such a theology, churches in both communities may find it “difficult to generate community solutions to rising poverty or give voice to low-income populations in deliberations over how to address rising need.”¹³³ We now turn our attention to the theological framework that will aid the neoliberal black church in reclaiming the power of the historical and theological norm of liberation.

¹³³ *ibid.*, 179.

Chapter 5: A Lazarian Liberative Theology

I. The Neoliberal Black Church's Need for a New Theological Framework

The neoliberal black church, understood as that segment of the black church community that has been influenced by economism, faces a renewed challenge.¹ Growing financial instability is a persistent reality under neoliberalism as we see in growing numbers of the poor while the wealth generated under neoliberalism continues to concentrate within the ranks of the one-percent.² This dynamic has been particularly destructive for communities of color where the poor of these communities have been structurally and systemically excluded from participation in the wealth creation of neoliberalism while concomitantly trapped in its grasp as exploited elements of neoliberalism's sustainability.³

This presents an opportunity for the neoliberal black church, assuming that it can overcome the effects of economism on its underlying theology. The historical tradition

¹ As a reminder, the term 'economism' has been used by political scientists to describe the violation of the "political sphere's privileged presumption of autonomy by economic considerations" and to the undue influence of economic considerations in the "determination of social and political relations." This term has been utilized within this work to reference the same phenomenon of undue influence of economic ideology (in this case that of neoliberalism) in religious institutions and their constituents. Ashley, Richard K. "Three Modes of Economism." *International Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (1983): 463-96.

² What is striking is the allegiance of neoliberalism's adherents in the face of persistent poverty, high levels of unemployment, and concentrations of wealth and income. Evidence persistently points to neoliberalism as the cause and not the solution of many of these societal ills. Shaikh, Anwar. "The Economic Mythology of Neoliberalism." in *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*, ed. Saad-Filho Alfredo and Johnston Deborah, 41-49. Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2005: 43.

³ During the 1980s and 1990s, many countries experienced growing income inequity. This has been primarily driven by the growth of income accruing to capital at a rate significantly higher than that of income derived from labor. The net effect of this was a significant growth in income for the wealthy that far exceeded that of the working class. This meant a growing pool of families falling below the poverty line in many countries inclusive of the United States. (Johnson, Deborah. "Poverty and Distribution: Back on the Neoliberal Agenda?" in *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*, ed. Saad-Filho Alfredo and Johnston Deborah, 41-49. Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2005: 135-139.) For another insightful work on the capital-labor income inequity, which is seen as one of the outcomes of neoliberalism that impacts the growing levels of poverty, see: Piketty, Thomas. *The Economics of Inequality*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015.

of the black church, from which the neoliberal black church emerges, exhibits a norm of resistance to oppression, no matter how oppression was manifested within a particular historical period.⁴ However, beginning with the Great Migration, segments of the black church, particularly those within urban centers of the West and North, increasingly saw this instinct of resistance transformed by economic forces influencing both religious institutions and their congregants.⁵ This encounter with capitalism only intensified under the economism of neoliberalism. I have argued that this is one of the reasons for the transformation of the self-identity of the black church (giving birth to the neoliberal black church) that was identified by scholars as the church's deradicalization.

Over the last fifty years, while perceiving itself as actively engaged in resistance to the degradation of human life by neoliberalism, neoliberal black churches promulgated an economic ideology as the lens through which to interrogate and understand the world. These churches exhibited a diminished focus on resisting the impact of neoliberalism as they and their community negotiated its place in society and grappled with changing levels of economic agency.⁶ This decreased focus on responding to oppression was not the result of a lessening of oppression as poverty,

⁴ Cone, James H., and Gayraud S. Wilmore. *Black Theology: a Documentary History*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004: 218; Johnson, Cedric C. *Race, Religion, and Resilience in the Neoliberal Age*. Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2016; Wilmore, Gayraud S. *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Introduction of the Religious History of African Americans*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998. ix.

⁵ One particular helpful treatment of the evolution of the black church beginning during the Great Migration is found in Chapter 3 of Nelsen, Hart M., and Anne K. Nelsen. *Black Church in the Sixties*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1975.

⁶ Landry, Bart and Kris Marsh. "The Evolution of the New Black Middle Class" *The Annual Review of Sociology* 37 (August 2011): 373-394.

one of the many symbols of neoliberalism's deleterious impact, makes readily evident.⁷ The decreasing focus on problems such as poverty reflects, at least in part, a theological deformation of the neoliberal black church. This theological deformation is all the more evident when the neoliberal black church is examined against the backdrop of the historical black church as the church emerged from slavery and during the virulent and violent period of Jim Crow. While the challenges facing the black community have become more varied than simply responding to the threat of violence (although the death of George Floyd, the most recent of far too many deaths of blacks, reminds us that violence remains a concern for this community), the need for a communal institution, such as the black church, to respond to oppression remains critical. However, the instinct of resistance requires that the neoliberal black church overcome the influence of neoliberalism and break with the incessant individualism rampant in the theology of too many churches. To do so is made all the more difficult by neoliberalism's instantiation in the very modes of thinking that governs and guides these churches. Responses to oppression continue to arise from institutions other than the church and are referred to as the dechristianization of radicalism.⁸ This, however, does not lessen the need for the church to play its role in also responding to communal oppression. The unfortunate and growing perversity of poverty provides the occasion for the neoliberal black church to re-engage in its historical and theological mission. However, that re-engagement requires a theological framework that can operate within

⁷ Reeves, Richard, Edward Rodrigue, Elizabeth Kneebone, and Center on Children and Families at Brookings. "Five Evils: Multidimensional Poverty and Race in America." *Center on Children and Families at Brookings*. Center on Children and Families at Brookings, April 1, 2016; Mallach, Alan. *The Divided City: Poverty and Prosperity in Urban America*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2018.

⁸ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, ix.

the context of neoliberalism without succumbing to its worse influences.⁹ I offer in this chapter such a theological framework called the lazarian liberative theology.

I.i. Framework of a Lazarian Liberative Theology

What is needed is a return by the neoliberal black church to the liberative posture of black religious tradition. I use the language of lazarian liberative theology for this framework to express its kinship with the rich history of the many generations of black liberation theology.¹⁰ I define black liberation theology in two essential ways. First, I am referring to black liberation theology as embodied in the work beginning with the July 31, 1966 article written by the National Committee of Negro Churchmen¹¹ through the creation of the Society for the Study of Black Religion in 1970, which marks the transition of black theology into the academy.¹² I confine my description of black liberation theology to this period in the belief that the challenges facing the neoliberal black church in confronting economism find its best resources in this period where black and white clergy wrestled with the universalizing tendencies present in

⁹ This acknowledges that the black church is called to operate within the current context of neoliberalism while simultaneously re-imagining life (inclusive of economic existence) in a manner that conflicts with neoliberalism and may even call for a revolutionary stance relative to neoliberalism.

¹⁰ Again, I remind the reader that it should be acknowledged when one speaks of black liberation theology, one is not speaking about a monolithic set of theological suppositions. Instead, one is speaking of the body of knowledge that has emerged after multiple generations of preachers and theologians have interrogated its pre-suppositions. Later generations of black liberation theologians would expand the field of questions to which liberation theology sought to respond beyond that of race to include issues such as gender and sexuality which were not the primary objectives of the first generation of liberation theologians. For example, one might consider the following as examples of the evolution of black liberation theology: Griffin, Horace L., *Their Own Receive Them Not: African-American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches*, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010; Hopkins, Dwight N., *Walk Together Children: Black and Womanist Theologies, Church and Theological Education*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010; Anderson, Victor, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African-American Religious and Cultural Criticism*, Continuum New York, 1995.

¹¹ Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, 19.

¹² Hopkins, Dwight N., *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999.

theological discussions. These same tendencies have re-emerged through the neoliberal black church's immersion in neoliberalism.¹³ Finally, even within the first generation of black liberation theology, there was significant variance in the formulation of this theological framework.¹⁴ In recognition of this variance, I am intentionally most reliant upon the model of liberation developed by James Cone.¹⁵ Cone's christologically grounded formulation of black liberation theology is an efficacious foundation for articulating a theological framework grounding itself in the lived experiences of the oppressed.¹⁶ I have chosen the language of 'liberative' instead of liberation to emphasize how this framework, once embraced by the neoliberal black church, is understood as an ongoing dialectical process. This formulation perceives

¹³ Again, I remind the reader that I am concerned that more contemporary scholars grappling with the implications and application of black liberation theology have, at times, muddled the theological waters by not adhering to the essential elements of this theological construct. While black liberation theology is open to critique, scholars such as Anthony Bradley and Alistair Kee, in spite of their best intentions, appear to fundamentally misunderstand (or redefine in ways that I consider problematic) the fundamental objective and efficacy of the theological project black liberation theology attempts to perform. Bradley, Anthony B., *The Political Economy of Liberation: Thomas Sowell and James Cone on the Black Experience*, New York: Peter Lang, 2012; Kee, Alistair, *The Rise and Demise of Black Theology*, London: SCM Press, 2008.

¹⁴ Again, I remind the reader that this is not to ignore the blind spots in the first generation's writing. Many of this generation were silent on issues that would emerge in later iterations of black liberation theology. However, the first generation addresses the invisibility of the church's complicity in oppression that is of value to this discussion. Some of those writings constituting the first generation of black liberation theology include: Cone, James H. *Black Theology and Black Power*. New York: Seabury Press, 1969; Cone, James H. *God of the Oppressed*. Rev. ed. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997; Roberts, J. Deotis. *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*. Rev. ed. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994; Cone, Cecil Wayne. *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology*. Rev. ed. Nashville, Tenn.: AMEC, 2003; Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*.

¹⁵ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*; Cone, *God of the Oppressed*.

¹⁶ I am not insensitive to the tremendous contributions that Latin liberation theologians have made to the discourse on liberation, particularly when dealing with issues of class. However, because of the ways in which both race and class continue to exert its influence on the experiences and understanding of oppression within the American context, I have chosen to rely on James Cone as the starting point for my theological formulation. This is also a function of my being deeply concerned about the issue of liberation for blacks as understood through the lens of economics. One of the many treatments of the deteriorating economic conditions of blacks over the last few years is found in: Leiman, Melvin M. "Chapter 2: The Economic Facts of Life" in *The Political Economy of Racism*. Chicago, Ill.: Haymarket Books, 2010: 88-145.

that the agents of liberation (the neoliberal black church) experience liberation from economism through its engagement with the poor. In this way, the community and the church serve as both objects and agents of experiences of liberation.

I.ii. Biblical Framework

I use the language of 'lazarian' to highlight the distinctive biblical foundation of this framework. While this choice of biblical text holds no greater authority than other theological or biblical foundations associated with liberation theology, it represents a different lens through which to articulate the process and expectations of this liberative theology. Many liberation theologians have particular passages of scripture that powerfully inform their understanding and approach.¹⁷ For others, depending on their theological perspective, a liberative theology may not require a biblical foundation. However, it is important to remember that within the black church tradition, the Bible remains uniquely authoritative.¹⁸ I am reminded of the words of noted homiletician, Cleophus LaRue, who, speaking of preaching within the black church says "Black preaching is inextricably tied to scripture. In the eyes of the black church, a preacher

¹⁷ Siker, J.S. "Uses of the Bible in the Theology of Gustavo Gutierrez: Liberating Scriptures of the Poor." *Biblical Interpretation* 4, no. 1: 40–71; Comber, Justin A. J. "Framing Oppression: A Dialogue between Gustavo Gutiérrez and Mark the Evangelist on the Kingdom, Oppressors, and the Oppressed." *McMaster Journal of Theology & Ministry* 17 (January 2015): 47–71; Rowland, Christopher, and Mark Corner. *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990; Roelofs, H. Mark. "Liberation Theology: The Recovery of Biblical Radicalism." *The American Political Science Review* 82, no. 2 (1988): 549-66; Kim, Wonil. "Liberation Theology and the Bible: A Methodological Consideration." in *Reading the Hebrew Bible*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2000: 292–320.

¹⁸ "Thus scriptural usage, in general, and via sermons, in particular, could placate the masses; evoke liberation; manifest as particularistic rituals that undermine community involvement; emphasize preeminence of the Deity and personal religious hygiene; and encourage political action and other forms of community engagement." Sandra L. Barnes. "Black Church Culture and Community Action." *Social Forces* 84, no. 2 (2005): 970. The influence of the Bible is also evident in many aspects of black church traditions from its songs and prayers to its sermons. Calhoun-Brown, Allison. 1998. "While Marching to Zion: Otherworldliness and Racial Empowerment in the Black Community." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37(3): 427-39; Costen, Melva Wilson. *African American Christian Worship*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. 1993.

without scripture is like a doctor without a black bag, which is to say, what one needs to get the job done comes with some encounter with Scripture.”¹⁹ This is true of both the act of preaching and of any theological paradigm that is to be influential within the black church. The lazarian liberative theology espoused here utilizes the gospel of John’s depiction of the resurrection of Lazarus to shape its vision of the black church as engaged in the proclamation of a Christ-centered liberty to those held captive by oppression.

This biblical narrative may appear an odd choice given the rich history of liberation theologians’ reliance on passages such as the fourth chapter of Luke.²⁰ In the Luke passage, Jesus’ identity is concretized in his liberative mission. Luke does not present Jesus as an abstract set of moral principles existing at a distance from the lives of the oppressed. The Jesus presented in Luke is “an event of liberation, a happening in the lives of the oppressed people struggling for political freedom. Therefore, to know him is to encounter him in the history of the weak and the helpless.”²¹ Jesus’ particularity: his Jewishness; his poverty; his ministry to the poor and dispossessed; provides a true glimpse into who Jesus was and who Jesus is for

¹⁹ LaRue, Cleophus James, *I Believe I’ll Testify: The Art of African-American Preaching*, Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, 57.

²⁰ Prior, Michael. *Jesus the Liberator: Nazareth Liberation Theology (Luke 4. 16-30)*. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995; Schottroff, Luise, and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza. *Let the Oppressed Go Free: Feminist Perspectives On the New Testament*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993; Hanks, Thomas D. *The Subversive Gospel: A New Testament Commentary On Liberation*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2000; Cone, *God of the Oppressed*.

²¹ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 32.

the Christian community.²² However, John's depiction of Jesus' encounter at Lazarus' tomb provides a more efficacious context within which to respond to the opportunity for liberation and the economism plaguing the neoliberal black church. John's narrative viscerally reminds us that a liberative theology lives within the particular experiences of human beings who are the objects of God's liberating grace. The Johannine text encourages the theologian to consider the liberative possibilities arising from the implications of the institution's engagement.

I.iii.Lazarian Liberative Theology's Goal

The goal of lazarian liberative theology is to offer a theological framework that calls the neoliberal black church, operating under the influence of neoliberalism, to reclaim the historical norm of the black church as a facilitator of liberation. In doing so, neoliberal black churches can shed the nomenclature of neoliberal and resume their role as liberative black churches. Liberative black churches are understood as churches that ground their identity in a theology that consistently calls the church and its congregants away from the grip of neoliberalism and anchors the identity and praxis of the institution and individuals in a mode of existence that identifies the places where economism is operative while withstanding its gravitational pull. This requires a

²² However, a theological approach which only spiritualizes Luke's text renders it devoid of the power to speak to oppressive communal conditions. Such an interpretive lens constrains the language of the poor to spiritual poverty and restricts concepts such as poverty of the spirit. [Matt 5.3] An example of such a reduction of the concept is seen in Johannes Baptist Metz's *Poverty of Spirit*. This reading ignores that Jesus is speaking to the reality of material poverty and allows the church to appropriate Jesus' message while ignoring the social justice issues attendant to poverty. Similarly, the powerful language of liberty to the captives, when overly spiritualized, only speaks hope to those who are captive to sin while ignoring those captive to systemic societal oppression. Such interpretations fail to fully explicate the power or relevance of Jesus' message to the Christian community. My reading of a liberative theology in Luke's gospel is influenced by: Prior, *Jesus the Liberator: Nazareth Liberation Theology, Luke 4:16-30*; Bailey, James L. "Preaching the Lukan Gospel" *Currents in Theology And Mission* 12, no. 6 (December 1, 1985): 325-337; Clifford, Richard J., and Khaled Anatolios. "Christian Salvation: Biblical And Theological Perspectives" *Theological Studies* 66, no. 4; Matthey, Jacques, "Luke 4:16-30--The Spirit's Mission Manifesto--Jesus' Hermeneutics" *SEDOS Bulletin* 32, no. 6 (June 1, 2000): 187-191.

theological framework that establishes the boundaries, rules, and expectations of the church and its praxes. A lazarian liberative theology seeks to render visible those who have been made invisible through neoliberalism and acknowledge their voices as meaningful in understanding and executing the church's mission. While activists, community leaders, and politicians of the black community have turned their attention to interrogating the political and societal institutions that served the interests of power, the lazarian liberative theology examines the church for possible complicity in the maintenance of oppression to redirect the indispensable resources of the black church towards the eradication of oppression. The theological reflections immanent in the lazarian liberative theology interrupt systems of oppression and make explicit patterns of non-recognition that have become normalized in American culture, propagated by the neoliberal black church, and even internalized by segments of the black community and its religious institutions.

Within the framework of the lazarian liberative theology, liberative practices speak practically and aspirationally to the church, its congregation, and the communities of the poor. The practicality of the lazarian liberative theological framework gains its influence through its ability to speak to the lived experiences of the poor and oppressed.²³ Neoliberal black churches worship and serve in communities who are unimpressed by the frequency or formality of their rituals or worship. Each week, these churches gather while surrounded by the poor who live within the

²³ This statement is in tension with Richard Lischer's assessment of Bonhoeffer's approach to the gospel when he declares that neither the theology of the church nor its proclamation "originates from a truth from personal experience." I respectfully assert that it is the particularity of lived experiences within which the truth of the gospel becomes most visible. It is therefore in the lives of the poor that we most clearly witness Jesus. Lischer, Richard. *The Company of Preachers: Wisdom on Preaching, Augustine to the Present*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2002: 35.

shadows of the church's ornate cathedrals or humble storefronts. These men and women look upon the practices of the church with concern and consternation, if not outright contempt. Why? Because they wonder,

...If the God boldly professed by the church is so present when these Christians lift up their voices; if the God they declare is listening so attentively to their petitions; if the God they blindly follow is so good and abundant in blessing those God loves, why is this God and God's blessings so absent from our community? Every Sunday, churches gather in the midst of the residual fragments of broken communities. Every Sunday, they worship in the midst of barren fields of oppression and struggle to produce harvests from ground saturated with the blood of their children. Children whose lives have been callously cut short by one another or, far too often, tragically taken by those sworn to protect and serve. In the midst of these tragic contradictions, communities of the black, brown, and poor cry out, "Where is this God when another young life is taken, or when a child and their family goes to bed with hungry bellies, or when men and women, through no fault of their own, fall to sleep with no more than heaven itself as shelter?" As these ornate and overflowing churches stand in worship and celebration, communities of the poor continue to lift their voices in lament and dismay. And the church fiddles while the city burns.²⁴

The lazarian liberative theology responds to these concerns by directing the church to identify and struggle with the oppressed, recognizing that Christ, and thus the authentic church, is found in the midst of the oppressed. "Christians are, or should be...those in solidarity with the interests and aspirations of the oppressed and the repressed of the world today."²⁵ This stands in opposition to neoliberalism's intent to deny the persistence presence of the poor or its role in sustaining poverty.²⁶ When the

²⁴ Except from a sermon offered at a community worship service. Latimore, David. *Worship at the Cross*. Joliet, IL, Mt. Zion Baptist Church, September 7, 2014.

²⁵ Gutiérrez, Gustavo, and Robert R. Barr. *The Power of the Poor in History*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992: 21.

²⁶ Neoliberalism continues to assert that, if left to its own devices, it can eradicate persistent poverty. It uses its influence to assert that those who remain poor do so because of personal deficiencies rather than as a result of systemic failures of the market. Johnson, Deborah. "Poverty and Distribution: Back on the Neoliberal Agenda?", 135.

principles of neoliberalism become ingrained in the thinking of the neoliberal black church, the church exhibits an individualistic view of poverty, which locates “the causes of poverty in poor persons themselves (e.g., lack of ability, lack of effort).”²⁷ When poverty is understood through this lens, efforts to respond to the presence of the poor focus on modification of the behavior of the poor. The neoliberal black church, using this approach, then understands poverty as a problem of people and their practices and emphasizes methods for improving the behavior of poor people so that those individuals might, in turn, improve their lot in life.²⁸ Focus on the personal behavior of the poor reflects and reinforces the dominant ideology of individualism that is an element of the economism at the root of the very problem to which the neoliberal black church believes itself to be responding. Instead, the lazarian liberative theology is distinguished by its embrace of a structuralist perspective of poverty and understands the root causes of poverty as systemic to the economic and societal conditions in which the poor are trapped.²⁹ As such, this theology responds to these systemic issues by directing the church to work towards change in the systems responsible for the perversity of poverty.

²⁷ Hunt, Matthew O. “Religion, Race/Ethnicity, and Beliefs about Poverty.” *Social Science Quarterly*, 83, no. 3, 2002: 812.

²⁸ Martin, Pamela P., Tuere A. Bowles, Latrese Adkins, and Monica T. Leach. “Black Mega-Churches in the Internet Age: Exploring Theological Teachings and Social Outreach Efforts.” *Journal of African American Studies* 15, no. 2 (2011): 158-159.

²⁹ Hunt, “Religion, Race/Ethnicity, and Beliefs about Poverty,” 812; Bobo, Lawrence. “Social Responsibility, Individualism, and Redistributive Policies.” *Sociological Forum* no 6, 1991: 71–92.

II. The Condition of the Neoliberal Black Church

II.i. Suburbanization

In the previous chapter, we addressed the economism gripping the neoliberal black church and shaping its identity, and that of its congregants, in ways that often go unquestioned. Evidence of economism's impact on neoliberal black churches is witnessed in practices ranging from preaching to the commodification of Christian education and worship.³⁰ Another unquestioned reflection of economism within some neoliberal black churches was found in their suburbanization.³¹ Suburbanization resulted from a variety of factors including the desire of middle-class blacks to distant themselves from communities of the poor whose presence directly contradicted the

³⁰ As you may recall from the previous chapter, this commodification is witnessed in several of the practices of the church. Examination of the marketing and distribution of sermonic, worship, and christian education content, the growing prevalence of conferences as a distribution platform for church content, or the evolution in the homiletical content of the neoliberal church, all show signs of the commodification of the underlying praxis. Hinton, Mary. *The Commercial Church: Black Churches and the New Religious Marketplace in America*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011; Martin, Lerone A. "Selling to the Souls of Black Folk: The Commodification of African American Sermons." in Martin, Lerone A. *Preaching On Wax: The Phonograph and the Shaping of Modern African American Religion*. New York: New York University Press, 2014: 62-90; Marti, Gerardo. "Conclusion: Religion in the Era of Identity Commodification." in *Hollywood Faith: Holiness, Prosperity, and Ambition in a Los Angeles Church*, 177-92. New Brunswick, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 2008.

³¹ Suburbanization refers to the decision by these churches to relocate or expand their presence to suburban communities from inner-city communities. These decisions often were a response to the flight of whites and blacks of economic means from inner-city communities. There has been some modest discussion of the trend of both individuals and churches relocating to suburban communities and some of the drivers behind those decisions. A sample of relevant readings are: Carney, Charity, "Sanctifying the SUV: Megachurches, the Prosperity Gospel, and the Suburban Christian," in *Making Suburbia: New Histories of Everyday America*, ed. John Archer, Paul J. P. Sandul, and Katherine Solomonson. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015; Miller, Brian J., "Growing Suburbs, Relocating Churches: The Suburbanization of Protestant Churches in the Chicago Region, 1925-1990," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56, no. 2 (June 2017): 342-64; Wiese, Andrew, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century. Historical Studies of Urban America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

myth of the American Dream which the middle class pursued.³² Churches that followed their congregants in the race to the suburbs lent tacit support to the economism undergirding these decisions and, in doing so, diminished consideration of the consequences of these transitions for the communities they were departing and its remaining residents. The failure to consider the communal impact, or for such impact to not carry significant weight in the deliberative process, was a classic feature of the economism at work.³³ These ecclesial decisions were often theologically rationalized, but nonetheless reflected the commodification of black lives fundamental to economism.³⁴ These churches benefitted from the growing gap between classes within the black community.³⁵ The pursuit of middle-class congregants represented an economic opportunity for the neoliberal black church as these churches sought to retain and grow potential members whose economic resources were greater than that

³² “As conceived by sociologist William J. Wilson, the theory posits that new opportunities generated by civil rights legislation created a “class-selective” migration, allowing middle-class blacks (followed by working-class blacks) to flee heavily black, predominantly poor neighborhoods, presumably settling into the majority-white suburbs of the nation’s largest cities.” Lacy, Karyn R. *Blue-Chip Black: Race, Class, and Status in the New Black Middle Class*, Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2007: 43; Lake, Robert W. “The New Suburbanites: The Recent Buyers Survey.” in *The New Suburbanites*. New York: Routledge, 2017: 107–137.

³³ Nixon, Mark G. “Satisfaction for Whom? Freedom for What? Theology and the Economic Theory of the Consumer.” *Journal of Business Ethics* 70, no. 1 (2006): 39-60.

³⁴ This commodification is reflected in the financialization of decisions by the neoliberal black church which is another symptom of the influence of economism. This eventually lead to the reduction of congregants to their income potential in the decision processes of churches in a manner similar to firms in the marketplace. Again, while not addressed as fully as needed in this project, there remains ample space to analyze the similarities in the operation of neoliberal black churches to that of for-profit firms under neoliberalism. The model that would be the basis of comparison is found in Micheal Porter’s classic text. Porter, Michael E. *Competitive Advantage: Creating and Sustaining Superior Performance*. New York: London: Free Press; Collier Macmillan, 1985.

³⁵ “In the United States it is common knowledge that there are stark, un-relenting divisions between the black underclass and the black middle class. Indeed, class polarization between the two groups is so pervasive that we often assume the central fault line in the black world is that between the black poor and the black middle class.” Lacy, *Blue-Chip Black: Race, Class, and Status in the New Black Middle Class*, 21.

of the inner-city poor.³⁶ As an element of this pursuit, neoliberal black churches adopted the perspective of congregants as customers and directed their energies to providing a competitive array of services to draw or retain their customer base.³⁷ Like many decisions affected by economism, the choice to leave the inner-city for the suburbs was not inherently bad.³⁸ However, it masked a devaluing of the lives of those who remained trapped within the increasingly desperate confines of deteriorating urban settings and robbed the poor of one of the valuable communal resources needed for the remediation of the systemic conditions of poverty that continued to trap men and women in its grasp.³⁹

Suburbanization is one of many examples of the challenge to the church inherent in economism's inculcation and concretely demonstrates the stakes in the church's blind embrace of neoliberalism's endogenous theology.⁴⁰ The resulting concentration of the poor birthed a variety of detrimental consequences for their well-being.

³⁶ Beginning in the early 1970s, and following in the footsteps of working- and middle-class families, churches established themselves in growing communities filled with blacks of increasing economic participation and potential. Yet, these men and women's income continued to significantly lag behind whites, reflecting the vulnerability of their growing economic agency. Landry and Marsh. "The Evolution of the New Black Middle Class," 373-394.

³⁷ This consumerization of congregants reflects the basic analysis that firms undergo as a part of any competitive strategic process. For another classic work on understanding the competitive strategy of for-profit firms (that begs for a comparable application to the neoliberal church), see: Porter, Michael E. *Cases in Competitive Strategy*. New York: London: Free Press; Collier Macmillan, 1983.

³⁸ There is nothing inherently evil in the geographic choice for a church. The possibility of evil emerges when the geographic choice fails to consider the repercussions of the choice on the communities of the poor.

³⁹ Smith, R. Drew. "Churches and the Urban Poor: Interaction and Social Distance." *Sociology of Religion* 62, no. 3 (2001): 301.

⁴⁰ Suburbanization is a symptom of the influence of neoliberalism. While a response to suburbanization can be crafted, if that response fails to consider the underlying cause (neoliberalism) then we will see other manifestations of the evils of neoliberalism in the practices and decisions of these black churches.

The ability of the poor to improve their socioeconomic status and the conditions of their neighborhoods is limited. Poor people and the places where they live are often wanting in the social and economic assets necessary for upward mobility and community development. In particular, they tend to lack access to well-paying, low-skill employment as well as connections to middle-class families and their social resources and political influence.⁴¹

Suburbanization reflects one of the many ways economism robbed these communities of churches through the relocation of these institutions to suburban communities and by refocusing neoliberal churches that remained in these communities on sustaining their institutional existence over impacting the lives of the vulnerable in their communities. The embrace of economism by the church, and the detrimental implications of this complicity with neoliberalism, are made visible through the increasing value placed by the church on material acquisitions and the valorizing of excess consumption as measures of divine favor.⁴² Economism encouraged the debilitating isolation of the poor and the dissemination of values, under the authority of the church, that accrued to the benefit of a few.⁴³

II.ii.Suburbanization as Weltanschauung

Decisions to move to the suburbs were not, in isolation, determinative of the grip of economism on the church. Churches were neither infected with economism because they chose to relocate from inner-cities nor was economism contingent upon geographic location. Instead, economism was made visible through this decision.

⁴¹ Owens, Michael Leo, and R. Drew Smith. "Congregations in Low-Income Neighborhoods and the Implications for Social Welfare Policy Research." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (March 2003): 317.

⁴² Miguez, N. O., Joerg Rieger and Jung Mo Sung. *Beyond the Spirit of Empire: Theology and Politics in a New Key*. London, UK: SCM Press, 2009: 13.

⁴³ Snarr, C. Melissa. *All You That Labor: Religion and Ethics in the Living Wage Movement*. New York: New York University Press, 2011: 95.

However, this visibility should not lead any of us to assume that economism was not also present within churches remaining within inner-cities.⁴⁴ Just as there were reasons why a church might relocate, there were an equal number of reasons why a church, though influenced by economism, might lack the capability or resources to act on those economistic influences. While suburbanization provides a window through which the influence of economism might be seen, suburbanization alone does not define the sphere of neoliberal black churches grappling with the effects of economism. What is of concern is the impact of economism on those churches which unwittingly and inadvertently allowed themselves to come under its influence regardless of their geographic location. Economism coopts those churches through its advancement of a “way of thinking and doing, a *Weltanschauung*, and even a certain theology that demonstrates the imperial Spirit which is innate to the form of social organization that we visualize as Empire.”⁴⁵ This mode of existence, offered by economism, diminishes the capacities of individuals and institutions to disrupt the market’s operation.⁴⁶ The neoliberal black church’s cooption by economism lessens its capacity to respond to the deformation of the human dignity of the poor that has been the focus of the

⁴⁴ Mark Owens demonstrates the affects of economism on church in both suburban and urban settings on the provision of social services such as child care. This is one of many examples of the ways in which competitive factors of micro-economics filtered into decision making of the neoliberal church. Rennhoff, Adam D., and Mark F. Owens. "Competition and the Strategic Choices of Churches." *American Economic Journal: Microeconomics* 4, no. 3 (2012): 152-70. Another example on economism across geographic boundaries is found in: Stoll, Laurie Cooper, and Larry R. Petersen. "Church Growth and Decline: A Test of the Market-Based Approach." *Review of Religious Research* 49, no. 3 (2008): 251-68.

⁴⁵ Miguez, *Beyond the Spirit of Empire: Theology and Politics in a New Key*, 1-2.

⁴⁶ Johnson, *Race, Religion, and Resilience in the Neoliberal Age*, 25.

historical black church and redirects the neoliberal black church's efforts to the implicit support of the growing dominance of the powerful over the poor.⁴⁷

II.iii. The Invitation for the Neoliberal Church

The initial aim of suburbanization was for those with the necessary resources to escape from communities of the poor and all of its attendant problems.⁴⁸ However, as neoliberalism continued to siphon off resources from the poor to the wealthy, it left in its wake a growing pool of families whose economic existence was jeopardized.⁴⁹ Instead of a growing number of families benefiting from the economic rising tide, there was a dramatic increase in the number of poor and a disproportionate concentration of poverty within the ranks of black and brown families.⁵⁰ This growing poverty did not remain sequestered behind inner-city walls but breached even the boundaries of suburbia.

⁴⁷ "Empire is the convergence of economic, political, cultural and military interests that constitutes a system of domination in which benefits flow primarily to the powerful. Centered in that last remaining superpower, yet spread all over the world, empire crosses all boundaries, reconstructs identities, subverts culture, overcome nation states and challenges religious communities." Miguez, *Beyond the Spirit of Empire: Theology and Politics in a New Key*, 1-2: 5.

⁴⁸ With this trend, inner-city communities increasingly lacked the economic and political power or communal resources and institutions to object to the community's economic exploitation and subjugation.

⁴⁹ Bush, Ray. "Resisting Poverty and Neoliberalism." in *Poverty and Neoliberalism: Persistence and Reproduction in the Global South*, London; Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2007: 178-200; Shaikh, Anwar. "The Economic Mythology of Neoliberalism," 41-49.

⁵⁰ "Poverty in the United States is painted disproportionately in hues of brown and black. 'Poor' and 'black' are certainly not synonymous, although they are too often assumed to be so. A cursory reading of government statistics on poverty and income distribution reveals how income disparities are racialized in the United States. While Whites are certainly affected by income inequality (9.2% falling below the poverty threshold in 2008) and dominate the face of poverty by sheer numbers, African Americans and Latinos are overrepresented in low-wage labor sectors and poverty statistics." Snarr, *All You That Labor: Religion and Ethics in the Living Wage Movement*, 68-69.

The suburbs were no longer an escape from the difficulties produced by poverty in the inner cities.⁵¹ While residential enclaves for the wealthiest of blacks remained, it was (and is) increasingly clear that the future of upper-, middle-, and working classes were tethered to the well-being of the poor.⁵² This means that neoliberal black churches are re-invited to refocus on the plight of the poor. The neoliberal black church, driven by its dream of participating in the mythical pursuit of prosperity in America, now finds this ethereal success dissipating as it is called to grapple with the residual casualties of economism: the growing presence and perversity of poverty. This is also an invitation to re-engage with the black church's historical and theological mission to participate in the fight for the equality and well-being of all humanity.⁵³ Most importantly, the neoliberal black church is called to shed its neoliberal hermeneutic and engage in a fight with the systemic injustice produced by economism on behalf of the poor. Economism, if unaddressed within the neoliberal black church, will continue to erode the responses of the church to the perversity of poverty and continue the deformation of its theology. The result will be the continued deafening of the church to its historical call to fight on the side of the black and poor. The lazarian liberative theology is an antidote and constructive theological framework within which to respond to this theological deformation of the neoliberal black church.

⁵¹ "Problems of income poverty, deep poverty, and high-poverty neighborhoods reach both urban and suburban areas, and there are now more poor people in the suburbs of our largest metro areas than in the central cities. Nearly every suburban community has seen a notable increase in the number of poor people and in its poverty rate since 1990." Allard, Scott WA. *Places in Need: the Changing Geography of Poverty*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2017, 177.

⁵² Parisi, D., D. T. Lichter, and M. C. Taquino. "Multi-Scale Residential Segregation: Black Exceptionalism and America's Changing Color Line." *Social Forces* 89, no. 3 (March 1, 2011): 829.

⁵³ This is one of the assertions regarding the very nature of the church that Cone declares in his many works. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 34.

III. The Antidote: Lazarian Liberative Theology

III.i. The Necessity of Liberation

The lazarian liberative theology makes a distinct claim regarding the necessity of liberation, given the conditions of those in need and the historical and theological traditions of the black church.⁵⁴ The call of liberation is grounded in the deep-well of the black religious tradition, as varied as it might be, and it understands the black church's identity as concretized in the pursuit of life for the most vulnerable.⁵⁵ In this regard, the lazarian liberative theology refuses to submit to the enticement of the endogenous theology of neoliberalism to prioritize institutional existence as the criteria for its success. Rather, the lazarian liberative theology neither surrenders its attention to the conditions of the poor nor relinquishes its understanding of institutional and individual identity as expressed through the community. It possesses an understanding of the community that anchors individual and institutional identity in solidarity with those who have been rendered invisible and mute.⁵⁶ In this regard, the lazarian liberative theology can help the neoliberal black church which, through economism, accepts the conditions of invisibility and muteness of the poor as givens or unchanging truths of human existence. The neoliberal black church justifies this position using the

⁵⁴ Antonio, Edward. "Black Theology and Liberation Theologies." in Hopkins, Dwight N., and Edward P. Antonio. *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012: 185-197: 33-43; Warnock, Raphael G. *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety, and Public Witness*. New York: NYU Press, 2014: 59-74.

⁵⁵ Wright, Jeremiah A. "Protestant Ecclesiology." in Hopkins, Dwight N., and Edward P. Antonio. *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012: 185-197.

⁵⁶ Collins, Chuck, Juliet B. Schor, Felice Yeskel, United for a Fair Economy, and Class Action (Organization). *Economic Apartheid in America: A Primer On Economic Inequality & Insecurity*. Rev. and updated. New York: New Press : Distributed by W.W. Norton, 2005: 6, 38-59.

words of Jesus (Matthew 26:11) to suggest the intransigence of poverty as the church lifts its hands not in protest but in surrender to the unrelenting and ever-expanding presence of economic disparity.⁵⁷ Additionally, the lazarian liberative theology refuses to render the poor as simply objects of the church's charitable activity and challenges the very systems working to ensure the permanence of the poor and their continued exploitation by market forces dependent on their submission.⁵⁸

The lazarian liberative theology represents a conscious choice by the liberative black church to respond to the systemic and entrenched disease of oppression, in all of its social, political, and economic manifestations, as present within the community in which the church serves. This choice acknowledges that the call to the work of liberation for an institution already in the grasp of economism most often results in the failure of that institution to engage in a genuine and authentic pursuit of liberation on behalf of those most in need. Instead, an economic liberation (which is a liberation formed in the image of the economic principles at the root of economism) serves to re-enforce the very conditions which oppress and to rob those who might otherwise disrupt systems of oppression of the impetus to engage in such activities. This leaves these institutions with the belief that they are on the side of the poor while they remain passive toward or unengaged in actions that might ultimately overturn or threaten the

⁵⁷ Van Aarde, Andries G. "The Love for the Poor Neighbor: In Memory of Her (Matthew 26:6-13)." *Acta Theologica* 23 (2016): 150–75; Wafawanaka, Robert. "Is the Biblical Perspective on Poverty That 'There Shall Be No Poor among You' or 'You Will Always Have the Poor with You'?" *Review & Expositor* 111, no. 2 (May 2014): 107–20.

⁵⁸ The financialization of the marketplace (the privileging of capital over labor) has resulted in the increasing downward pressure on wage rates which in turn has stymied efforts by the working poor to improve their living conditions. This has not happened mysteriously but rather by deliberate decisions in how our economy and society are governed under neoliberalism. Collins, *Economic Apartheid in America: A Primer On Economic Inequality & Insecurity*, 65-99; Míguez, Néstor Oscar, Joerg Rieger, and Jung Mo Sung. *Beyond the Spirit of Empire: Theology and Politics in a New Key*. London: SCM Press, 2009: 13.

market's continued operation and exploitation.⁵⁹ A lazarian liberative theology is birthed from a conscious decision by the church that its response to oppression should be the pursuit of liberation.⁶⁰ The theological impetus for the pursuit of liberation lies in a particular reading of the narratives of the Gospels of the New Testament, where the liberation of the poor and oppressed is posited as the central message and mission of Jesus, and by extension, of the church.⁶¹ Additionally, that liberation understands that the pursuit of liberation will continue until its consummation at Christ's return.⁶² This suggests that the eschatological nature of liberation sweeps the contemporary Christian community into its grasp, making the pursuit of liberation an appropriate posture of the church.⁶³

III.ii. The Response to Hopelessness

A lazarian liberative theology provides the theological rationalization for the church's self-understanding as an instrument of liberation for itself, its congregants, and its community. This theological framework does not ignore the aspirations of the individual to experience freedom and autonomy. Nor does this theology ignore the

⁵⁹ Míguez, Néstor Oscar, Joerg Rieger, and Jung Mo Sung. *Beyond the Spirit of Empire: Theology and Politics in a New Key*, 64.

⁶⁰ This decision acknowledges that the response of the church to oppression is not limited to the pursuit of liberation. There are many possible responses, including capitulation and assimilation. For more on these options for communal response to oppression see: Sonn, Christopher C, and Adrian T Fisher. "Sense of Community: Community Resilient Responses to Oppression and Change." *Journal of Community Psychology* 26, no. 5 (1998): 457-47 or Sonn, Christopher C, and Adrian T Fisher. "Identity and Oppression: Differential Responses to An In-between Status." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 31, no. 1-2 (2003): 117-28.

⁶¹ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 35.

⁶² Cone, James H. *A Black Theology of Liberation*. [1st ed.]. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970: 21.

⁶³ Roberts, J. Deotis. "Dignity and Destiny: Black Reflections on Eschatology." in Hopkins, Dwight N., and Edward P. Antonio. *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012: 211-220.

connection between the individual's need for liberation and communal need for liberation. Instead, a lazarian liberative theology suggests a dialectical relationship exists between the individual and communal experiences of liberation. In contrast to neoliberalism, which filters experiences and understandings of freedom through the singular lens of the individual, offering an understanding of liberation disconnected from the human community's experience, a lazarian liberative theology suggests that individual and group experiences are deeply and intrinsically linked. However, if the lazarian liberative theology offers a mode of self- and institutional-identity understanding linked to the pursuit and realization of liberation, how can such a theological framework remain a rational option in light of the intransigence of oppression?⁶⁴ The obstinacy of oppression can, over time, render a liberative theology seemingly futile if its efficacy is measured by its temporal outcome alone.⁶⁵ So, on what grounds does this theological framework sustain its invitation to the liberative black church to wage a seemingly nonsensical struggle to eradicate oppression?

If a liberative theology is to be habituated into the life of the neoliberal black church and its congregants, it must possess a resilience that enables its framework to

⁶⁴ One might argue that a theology that is measured by its rationality has already relinquished its claim to be a theology of something other than rationality. Theology, as used here, acknowledges that it is governed by and judged by something other than simply rationality. This is not to suggest that measures of rationality do not have a role in these sorts of theological discussions but rather that there may be and often are elements of theological frameworks that might not be responsive to a rationalist argument.

⁶⁵ The connection between liberation and material concerns first emerges in: National Committee of Negro Churchmen. "Black Power." in Cone, and Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, 19.

overcome the historical strength of oppression.⁶⁶ Such resilience can be found in the eschatology of a lazarian liberative theology which points to

a future event [that] is not simply other-worldly, but is the divine future that breaks into our social existence, bestowing wholeness in the present situation of pain and suffering enabling people to know that the existing state of oppression contradicts their real humanity as defined by God's future.⁶⁷

While some might read this eschatological move as playing into the hands of an other-worldly perspective, its currency within the temporal framework is found in its empowering of resistance to societal forces seeking to rob the poor and oppressed of their dignity and humanity. It does so by allowing the oppressed to visualize their future beyond the confines of their current historical context and empowering those who choose to fight on behalf of the oppressed to continue that fight for a God-ordained future that refuses to surrender to the seeming lack of evidence of that future in the current moment.⁶⁸

At the time of this writing, America again finds itself embroiled in the chaos erupting in many communities in response to the needless death of George Floyd at the hands of the police. Millions gather under clouds of smoke and tear gas on city streets in defiance of restrictions designed to quell discontent that has been fermented by years of neglect, and many are struck by the tragic familiarity of this moment. George Floyd's name has been added to a seemingly endless list of the poor whose lives have been cut short by needless violence at the hands of those who protect the

⁶⁶ Understandings of oppression (as a function of exercises of power) have contextual particularity and experiences of oppression emerge in different periods and under different social or communal constructs. Haslanger, Sally. "Oppressions: Racial and Other." in *Racism in Mind*. Levine, Michael P., and Tamas Pataki. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004: 99.

⁶⁷ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 159.

⁶⁸ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 101.

interests of the dominant class (even though those individuals often do not participate in those privileges).⁶⁹ After one-hundred and fifty years, people continue to wait for this country to respond to the malignancy of racial discrimination and exploitation.⁷⁰ In light of the overwhelming historical intransigence of this manifestation of oppression, and what some describe as a lack of progress, even if one recognizes the incremental progress and moments that have given glimpses of a hope for a better tomorrow, one could rightly wonder if progress will ever be achieved. Given the great cost of the struggle for equality, men and women of good conscience might reasonably wonder if they would not be better off simply surrendering to economism's call to individualism at the expense of communal liberation. It is in response to these understandable questions of surrender that the eschatological element of a lazarian liberative theology is most impactful. A liberative theology fuels the institution's and individual's faithful and continuous identification with the oppressed and fortifies the persistency of the struggle against oppression.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Johnson, L. A. "A Decade Of Watching Black People Die." NPR.org, May 21, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/29/865261916/a-decade-of-watching-black-people-die>.

⁷⁰ It was one hundred and fifty years ago that news of the Emancipation Proclamation arrived to the enslaved in Texas. This country has continued since that time to grapple with the repercussions of the sin of slavery. Barr, Alwyn. "Juneteenth." in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 16: Sports and Recreation*, ed. Jackson H. Harvey and Charles Wilson Reagen, (University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 311-312.

⁷¹ Roberts, "Dignity and Destiny: Black Reflections on Eschatology," 213-219.

However, the theological framework is only as strong as its supporting practices.⁷² Unfortunately, many of the necessary practices have largely faded from use within neoliberal black churches. In the process, their absence has weakened the ability of the church to uphold a definition of humanity independent of economism. There is a growing discontinuance of hymns, stories, folk narratives, and testimonies within worship, driven by their perceived simplicity and irrelevance to the contemporary moment.⁷³ This reflects an ahistorical perspective, encouraged by neoliberalism, that disconnects the neoliberal black church from its rich history and diminishes the power of its increasingly infrequently used traditional rituals.⁷⁴ This leaves the neoliberal black church homiletically, ritually, and theologically impoverished and susceptible to emulation rather than eradication of the deformative aspects of neoliberalism. Robbed of sustaining praxes that emphasize liberation as something present but not fully realized, the neoliberal black church loses one of the central tools in its struggle against oppression. Gone is the sustaining power of faith that declares that present conditions

⁷² Rausch, Thomas P. *Eschatology, Liturgy, and Christology: Toward Recovering an Eschatological Imagination*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012; Thomas Linda. "The Social Sciences and Rituals of Resilience in African and African American Communities." in Hopkins, Dwight N., and Edward P. Antonio. *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012: 53-55; Raboteau, Albert J. *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001: 48-49; Best, Wallace D. *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915-1952*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005: 94-117.

⁷³ Many neoliberal black churches "rely on contemporary worship practices, including music that uses a variety of rock instruments, peppy tempos, and repetitious refrains. Songs are intended to uplift rather than condemn and focus on the value of the individual rather than the collective." Archer, John, and Charity Carney. "Sanctifying the SUV: Megachurches, the Prosperity Gospel, and the Suburban Christian." in *Making Suburbia: New Histories of Everyday America*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015: 245.

⁷⁴ Wisman, Jon D. "Legitimation, Ideology-Critique, and Economics." *Social Research* 46, no. 2 (1979): 307; Baiman, Ron P. *Morality of Radical Economics: Ghost Curve Ideology and the Value Neutral Aspect of Neoclassical Economics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016: 107; Marshall, M., & Arestis, P. "The Myths and Realities of Conservative Economic Policy-making in the US." *Review of Social Economy*, 49(2), (1991): 233.

are not determinative of one's humanity. In the absence of these tools, neoliberalism's definition of individualistic liberty becomes the adopted *telos* of the neoliberal black church's efforts. This acceptance of the oppressor's language and value system means a growing deafness to the truth of the divine preference for the poor.⁷⁵ This weakened condition of the neoliberal black church allows for the encroachment of economism on both the church and the poor as the church surrenders its role to challenge the prevailing cultural systems and render their hypocrisies transparent.⁷⁶ The lazarian liberative theology is not divorced from those practices within the black church which reinforce its eschatology and strengthen its role as a facilitator of communal resistance to the dominant ideology of neoliberalism.

III.iii.Resources for a Response to these Challenges

As mentioned earlier, the lazarian liberative theology anchors itself in the particularity of John's Lazarus narrative as the frame for understanding the conditions it confronts and the role and work of the church. Lazarus' entombment can be understood as symbolic of the oppressive conditions in which the poor and exploited exist. These conditions, like Lazarus' death and burial, appear inescapable, and because of his condition, Lazarus has been rendered invisible and removed from the community.⁷⁷ He has been left unseen and unheard in the grip of the tomb. This is one

⁷⁵ The rhetoric of neoliberalism seeks to deprive people "of their power and instead benefits the interests of a small dominant class." When this rhetoric is adopted by the neoliberal church, the church become a participant in neoliberalism's effort without the corresponding benefit. Seitz, David W. And Amanda Berardi Tennant. "Constitutive Phetoric in the Age of Neoliberalism." in Nguyen, Kim Hong (Kim Hong Thanh). *Rhetoric in Neoliberalism*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017: 109-110.

⁷⁶ Miguez, *Beyond the Spirit of Empire: Theology and Politics in a New Key*, 6.

⁷⁷ Jeffers, James S. *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999: 20.

of the objects of Jesus' concern - to speak to and for the one who is now voiceless.⁷⁸ This scene speaks powerfully to the neoliberal black church at a moment when the poor have been hidden behind the proverbial walls of inner-city communities or made invisible by the church's departure to what it may have perceived as greener pastures.⁷⁹ These are the people who have been left voiceless except at times when their frustration boils over in riot and protest. Even in those moments, their voices may be heard but dismissed as the irrational outbursts of those who are simply in need of the care of a paternalistic system that knows what is best for them.⁸⁰ Or, more tragically, they are left in the hands of the religious and pious who revive the error of other-worldliness and insist that their condition has no immediate or temporal resolution. Yet, understanding the ministry of Jesus, and by extension, the identity of the church, within the framework of the Lazarus text reminds us that it is indeed the voiceless and unseen for whom Jesus (and the church) are called to labor. Upon Jesus'

⁷⁸ Porter, Stanley E. *John, His Gospel, and Jesus: In Pursuit of the Johannine Voice*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015; Brown, Raymond E. *The Gospel and Epistles of John: A Concise Commentary*. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1988.

⁷⁹ An invisibility that remains even as the poor breach the walls of exclusion to be led into the once segregated domain of suburbia. Western, Bruce. "Invisible Inequality." in *Punishment and Inequality in America*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006: 85-107; Lawson, Victoria and Sarah Elwood. "Conclusion: Politicizing Poverty." in *Relational Poverty Politics: Forms, Struggles, and Possibilities*, ed. Lawson, Victoria and Sarah Elwood. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018: 235.

⁸⁰ Soss, Joe, Richard C. Fording, and Sanford Schram. *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011: 41. The paternalism is even evident within religious institutions dealing with the poor. Hackworth, Jason. "Compassionate Neoliberalism?" in *Faith Based: Religious Neoliberalism and the Politics of Welfare in the United States*, 48-62. University of Georgia Press, 2012: 58.

arrival, Lazarus' spiritual and material liberation is proclaimed.⁸¹ This, along with the many other glimpses into the ministry of Jesus, serves to conjoin Jesus' with the plight of the oppressed.⁸² This picture renders visible the neoliberal black church's complicity in the maintenance of systems of oppression and the reality that this complicity carries social, economic, and political repercussions for the formulation of genuine Christian theology and practice. Jesus' radical confrontation with the conditions of the oppressed in this text expresses the essence of divine identity and divine activity.⁸³

The challenge for the lazarian liberative theology is to operate within the all too familiar reality of oppression and pain within which the poor live. In confronting this challenge, the Lazarus text is prescient. As mentioned above, Lazarus has been separated from the community, and his condition is understood as beyond temporal remediation. While Jewish understandings of death and life after death were varied, the condition of death was often understood as representing a pathway that could not, without divine intervention, be regressed.⁸⁴ As such, John presents Jesus' arrival at

⁸¹ I believe that this is inadvertently pointed to in many exegetical analysis of this passage. For example, Stephen Kim points to the temporal reality of the idea of a new life in Jesus when he says, "Jesus was reiterating the truth He had been teaching all along, namely, that eternal life begins here and now, and those who believe in Him already have that life." I understand that this may not have been his intent, nonetheless the allusion to the consequences of eternal life before death open up the possibilities of understanding the material consequences of that eternal life. Kim, Stephen S. "The Significance of Jesus' Raising Lazarus from the Dead in John 11." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168, no. 669 (January 2011): 59.

⁸² Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 32.

⁸³ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 69; Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation*, 57; Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church*, 113-114.

⁸⁴ Gillman, Neil. *The Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought*. Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights, 1997; Raphael, Simcha Paull. *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*. Second edition. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009; Halkin, Hillel. *After One-hundred-and-twenty: Reflecting On Death, Mourning, and the Afterlife in the Jewish Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016; Schneiders, Sandra Marie. "The Resurrection (of the Body) in the Fourth Gospel: A Key to Johannine Spirituality." in *Life in Abundance: Studies of John's Gospel in Tribute to Raymond E Brown, SS*. Colledgeville, 2005: 168-98.

Lazarus' tomb as confronting a temporally hopeless circumstance.⁸⁵ The hopelessness of this moment speaks to the analogous circumstance that the neoliberal black church confronts. The sheer magnitude of repeated acts of ideological and physical violence experienced by the poor and communities of color, relentless in their sheer frequency, create a hopelessness similar to that of Lazarus' condition. Nevertheless, this is the very circumstance into which Jesus has stepped where this hopeless circumstance and the finality of Lazarus' invisibility results from the ritualistic practices of the community. Yet, their rational practice of surrender to Lazarus' condition has inadvertently also made them complicit in Lazarus' separation from the community. Just as the audience pictured in this text might object to the accusation of their complicity, one can hear the objections of the neoliberal black church to similar accusations. The economism operative within the neoliberal black church leaves its actions seemingly as rational as that of the community burying Lazarus, but a liberative theology has arrived to confront the rationality of neoliberalism that smothers the decaying smells of the church's abdication to poverty. Before there is any action recorded by the writer of this gospel, one hears from the text liberative theology's declaration to the neoliberal black church in Jesus' call to Lazarus. In this moment, the lazarian liberative theology extends an invitation to the church to believe that, even in the presence of seeming hopelessness, liberation remains possible.⁸⁶ It calls the

⁸⁵ It is understood that the Johannine presentation of the miracle stories operates within the meta-narrative of signs within the earthly ministry of Jesus. As such, even the miracle at Lazarus' tomb can be interpreted within John's larger apologetic effort. Moloney, Francis J. *Signs and Shadows: Reading John 5-12*. Minneapolis: Fortress Pr, 1996; Kim, "The Significance of Jesus' Raising Lazarus from the Dead in John 11," 53-62; Schneiders, "The Resurrection (of the Body) in the Fourth Gospel: A Key to Johannine Spirituality."

⁸⁶ North, Wendy Elizabeth Sproston. *The Lazarus Story Within the Johannine Tradition*. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001.

church to confront the communal oppression and death present within communities of the poor, not to accommodate it, but to respond and overturn its presence. The church is called to speak, fight, and work towards overturning neoliberalism's illusion of infallibility and to speak life into the particularity of the impoverished.

The call of the lazarian liberative theology to the neoliberal black church to combat poverty and other forms of oppression evident within communities of the poor must be rescued from the seduction of neoliberalism to rid this theological call of its power. Overly-spiritualized interpretations of this biblical text adopt a meta-narrative that the ministry of Jesus only represents an overturning of the spiritual forces impacting the life of Lazarus, and by extension, all of those in need of Jesus' salvific action, robbing this narrative of any material consequence.⁸⁷ An earlier exchange in this text between Jesus and Lazarus' sister, Martha, represents an understanding of the claim of Jesus on the life of Lazarus to be within the context of a future resurrection.⁸⁸ [John 11.27] However, Jesus' actions within this passage provides for a reading of this text that focuses on Jesus as offering a direct rebuke of both spiritual and physical forces that rain death upon the most vulnerable. Most importantly, this text serves as a call to "creative non-violence [which] confronts the powers of death itself and calls

⁸⁷ Van der Merwe, Dirk G. "Old Testament Spirituality in the Gospel of John." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 35, no. 1 (2014): 1–9; Schneiders, Sandra Marie. "Death in the Community of Eternal Life: History, Theology, and Spirituality in John 11." *Interpretation* 41, no. 1 (January 1987): 44–56; Hamm, Dennis. "Dwelling in the Household of God: Johannine Ecclesiology and Spirituality." *Theological Studies* 69, no. 1 (March 1, 2008): 225; Lee, D. A. *Hallowed in Truth and Love: Spirituality in the Johannine Literature*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012.

⁸⁸ J. Ramsey Michaels. *The Gospel of John*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015; Burkett, Delbert. "Two Accounts of Lazarus' Resurrection in John 11." *Novum Testamentum* 36, no. 3 (1994): 219.

humanity to live in the new life of resurrection, here and now.”⁸⁹ Both the call to confront death as understood in this encounter with oppression, which is also the call of a liberative theology to the church to engage in the confrontation with death, and the hope of victory against these powers, speaks against a spiritualizing of this encounter and the possibilities it presents for the church.

What is at stake in this encounter at the tomb is an understanding of Jesus’ ministry, and those who would follow this example, as concerned with the physical or material existence of those the community has written off as beyond their help. The Jesus presented in this text is interested in the particularity of Lazarus’ condition, and this does not exclude, but embraces, Lazarus’ materiality. This narrative posits the possibility that a liberative theology cannot pursue liberation theoretically or abstractly. It must be concerned with the particular and material needs of the vulnerable. Borrowing from Gustavo Gutierrez, a liberative theology must offer,

the meaning of the word of God for its contemporaries, at a certain moment of history. Any attempt to answer this question will be made in the function of our culture, in function of the problems faced by men and women of our time.⁹⁰

It is this emphasis on understanding God’s presence in the material context in which one is situated that is the catalyst for liberative theology.

III.iv. Response to Irrationality

The lazarian liberative theology makes a distinction between the experience and/or pursuit of liberation and the invitation to a community of faith to join in that

⁸⁹ Dear, John. *Lazarus, Come Forth!: How Jesus Confronts the Culture of Death and Invites Us into the New Life of Peace*. New York: Orbis Books, 2011: 2-3.

⁹⁰ Gutiérrez, Gustavo, *The Power of the Poor in History : Selected Writings*, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004, 56.

pursuit. This claim accepts that neither the goal of liberation nor the methods of its pursuit are self-evident. This distinction between the liberative message and the realization of its need by congregants exists because the congregants of the neoliberal black church are themselves immersed in economism's meta-narrative that conflicts with the narrative of the lazarian liberative theology. This gives rise to the concern expressed by Walter Brueggemann when he describes the phenomenon of congregations that have embraced the dominant (and oppressive) narrative (economism) and have little desire to receive the counter-narrative embodied in a lazarian liberative theology. In these environments, the church must,

keep deciding in pastoral ways about the means and pace for advocating this [liberative] narrative in such a contested environment where the listeners have no zeal about the contestation and do not desire the dominant narrative to be placed in question. The preacher must be continually aware of the many deep ways in which the dominant narrative is defining for her life, so that none are immune to the contradiction that is to be faced. The preacher must remember that when the congregation (or some part of it) is deeply embedded in the dominant narrative, prophetic preaching advocating a counter narrative sounds like unbearable nonsense...From the perspective of the dominant narrative, advocacy of this alternative narrative sounds as best like foolishness.⁹¹

It is this truth that made the work of first-generation black liberation theologians so important. The primary thrust of their arguments was grounded in their perception of the church's complicity in the maintenance of the dominant narrative of oppression and was a call to the church to renew its identity by aligning itself with the poor and the oppressed. A lazarian liberative theology seeks to extend this invitation to the

⁹¹ Brueggemann, Walter, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching An Emancipatory Word*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012, 6.

neoliberal black church to pursue an individual and communal liberation that is theologically constructed and communally experienced.⁹²

The theology framed by this encounter at Lazarus' tomb is efficacious in responding to the seeming irrationality of this theology. As mentioned above, economism's strength is found in how it inculcates a mode of thinking into individuals and institutions that governs aspects of human existence and action well beyond the economic. Economism reshapes human existence in neoliberalism's image and reframes, "every register of the social order, to the depths of the social world and to such a point that it seeks to rule over human nature itself" redefining even rationality.⁹³ Economism offers the endogenous theology of neoliberalism as the presupposition underlying the decisions and actions of those in its grasp. This renders economism both powerful and difficult to overcome. In the case of the neoliberal black church, this mode of thinking, reflecting the presuppositions of neoliberalism, remains hidden, influencing the actions of the church while the church continues to perceive itself as operating on behalf of the poor and in a manner consistent with its claims of a commitment to social justice.

When confronted with the possibilities of a different way of thinking or operating, ways that lie in stark contrast to the intent of economism, the alternatives can be seen

⁹² The idea of the communal experience of liberation borrows from the communitarian aspects of Catholic social teaching which asserts the dignity and sacredness of every person which is only fully realized within community. [§13, 14, 32] Within community, the presence of injustice (as defined by oppression of the poor and vulnerable [§38, 40] diminishes the dignity of all. *Tenth Anniversary Edition of Economic Justice for All : Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy; A Catholic Framework for Economic Life: A Statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops; A Decade After "Economic Justice for All": Continuing Principles, Changing Context, New Challenges : A Pastoral Message of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops on the Tenth Anniversary of the Economic Pastoral.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1997.

⁹³ Miguez, *Beyond the Spirit of Empire: Theology and Politics in a New Key*, 64.

as irrational. For example, with suburbanization, one anticipates questions regarding the rationality of alternatives to suburbanization. Is a liberative theology suggesting that churches, faced with the dilemma of retaining members of increasing economic agency as they move to communities of affluence and away from the poor of the inner-cities, should simply remain in communities of the poor? Should those churches, even though they may have the resources or capital necessary to join their more affluent members, remain situated in the deteriorating conditions of the poor to simply work on or mitigate the impact of concentrating the poor within a geographic space? These possibilities can appear as nonsensical to ask of the neoliberal black church as it is to ask individuals who have experienced the sweet nectar of increasing economic agency to consider sacrificing their economic well-being, and that of their family, to remain in struggling communities as a way of living out some theological commitment. While the answers to these concerns are far from black and white, and individuals sharing a commitment to living out their faith in difficult places might come to different responses to these questions, what a lazarian liberative theology rejects is the assumption that the very questions asked are themselves as nonsensical as economism would assert.

Instead, the lazarian liberative theology posits that the ministry of Jesus calls the follower to a mode of thinking that can appear, on the surface and in contrast to the thinking promulgated by neoliberalism, irrational. This irrationality is most visible in the exchange captured in the Johannine text between Jesus and Lazarus' sister, Martha.

Jesus said, Take ye away the stone. Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days. John 11:39

Having arrived at the tomb where Lazarus lies imprisoned, Jesus makes the simple request of Martha to have the stone removed.⁹⁴ These stones are not for the benefit of Lazarus but for protecting the community from enduring the disease, smells, and unpleasantness of Lazarus' entombment and deterring grave robbers.⁹⁵ In like manner, neoliberalism has erected barriers that protect its operation from the reality of the poor, and challenges to the removal of these barriers can appear as senseless as Martha's response to Jesus suggests. Given Lazarus' condition and the length of time he has been declared dead, it seems foolish for any action to be taken that ignores his condition or envisions a different possibility for Lazarus.⁹⁶ Martha's response in the text is quite understandable and rational in light of the facts presented. Yet, Jesus' response to Martha's declaration offers insight for the neoliberal black church engulfed in the rationality of economism. Jesus' action suggests that the response of the liberative black church to the presence of poverty will not align with economism's rationality. The fight on behalf of the poor or solidarity with the impoverished, that a lazarian liberative theology advocates, will be seen as irrational in a world governed by the rationality of the market. Any call upon the individual or the church to forgo self-interest and the pursuit of personal aggrandizement will be at odds with a theology that

⁹⁴ McCane, Byron. *Roll Back the Stone: Death and Burial in the World of Jesus*. Harrisburg: Trinity, 2003.

⁹⁵ The burial practices of first-century Jewish communities, while well known, have not always been utilized for their hermeneutic value. It is not my intent to replicate this error. However, it is equally true that this passage provides a wide range of interpretive possibilities such as that of the liberative theological framework that is not in conflict with other understandings of communal burial practices. An example of the influence of first-century Jewish burial practices on biblical interpretation is found in: *ibid.*, 31–43.

⁹⁶ North, *The Lazarus Story Within the Johannine Tradition*.

is captive to economism.⁹⁷ Nonetheless, this is the possibility the lazarian liberative theology asks the church to consider. This encounter between Jesus and Martha offers the church a glimpse into the reality of a liberative theology that offers the possibility of envisioning life for the poor that defies conventional thinking. It invites the church into a pursuit of a standard of living for all men and women that is not determined by their economic usefulness and rejects economism's declaration that such thinking is irrational. A liberative theology suggests that redistribution of wealth and diminishing the disparity between the wealthy and the poor is not irrational.⁹⁸ A liberative theology suggests that the church and its congregants considering the rejection of the rampant individualism driving consumption are not irrational.⁹⁹ The pursuit of equality for the poor and vulnerable, in spite of the continued persistence of oppression, is not irrational. This acceptance of the alternative possibilities for human existence made visible through the lazarian liberative theology is unfathomable within neoliberalism but is what the example of the ministry of Jesus invites the neoliberal church to consider.

The lazarian liberative theology seems foolish given the magnitude of what confronts so many black churches and communities. However, this is precisely what is

⁹⁷ Alfredo Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston --, et al. *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*. London; Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2005: 10-15.

⁹⁸ The redistribution of wealth to the wealthy under neoliberalism is well documented, particularly as it pertains to global redistributions. The same can be said of proposals for the redistribution of wealth from the wealthy to those who shoulder the burdens of disparities in the distribution of wealth and income. Benshalom, Ilan. "How to redistribute wealth? A critical Examination of Mechanisms to promote global wealth distribution." *The University of Toronto Law Journal* 64, no. 3 (2014): 317-58; Geisler, Charles C. "Land and Poverty in the United States: Insights and Oversights." *Land Economics* 71, no. 1 (1995): 16-34; Harvey, David. "Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (2007): 31; Felício, João Antônio. "Alternatives to Neoliberalism: Towards a New Progressive Consensus." in *Struggle in a Time of Crisis*, ed. Pons-Vignon Nicolas and Nkosi Mbuso. London: Pluto Press, 2015: 83.

⁹⁹ Blank, Rebecca M., and William McGurn. *Is the Market Moral?: a Dialogue on Religion, Economics and Justice*. Brookings Institution Press, 2004.

so visibly posited as Jesus stands before Lazarus' tomb. Envision standing there as one of the grieving spectators, and immediately you see the apparent foolishness of Jesus' crying out for a dead man to come forth.¹⁰⁰ In like manner, the neoliberal black church is challenged to stand with the poor and foolishly trumpet life in the midst of those who are forgotten as if dead. The lazarian liberative theology invites the neoliberal black church to stand,

..in the midst of a world shaped by almost overwhelming powers of domination and violence and death...[and] preach with nothing but a word in the midst of a world shaped by armies and weapons of mass destruction, by global technology and economy, by principalities and powers that overwhelm both by their seductiveness and their threat.¹⁰¹

In these moments, the neoliberal black church is called to do more than simply retire to the security of suburban sanctuaries, or rest in religious rhetoric, or retreat to the safety of non-threatening rituals that refuse to challenge the powers of the status quo. Instead, the neoliberal black church is called to stand before the sepulchers of poor communities and to cry out (in word, and more importantly, in deeds) in pursuit of an eschatologically defined but materially experienced liberation that gives life and hope to the vulnerable. Like the Johanne Jesus, the black church musters, through a lazarian liberative theology, the strength to stand, even through tears and with broken hearts, to lift their heads to heaven and lay their hands to the work of earth, and to proclaim and pursue life and victory for those in need.

¹⁰⁰ Ramsey Michaels. *The Gospel of John*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015; Burkett, "Two Accounts of Lazarus' Resurrection in John 11."

¹⁰¹ Campbell, Charles L., and Cilliers, Johan, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel As a Rhetoric of Folly*, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012, 18.

IV. The Dialectic of a Lazarian Liberative Theology

Before connections between the liberative theology and the community can be effectively made, connections between the liberative effect of the gospel and the individual must be made.¹⁰² Doing so recognizes the force of economism on the congregant and church held in its grasp. The lazarian liberative theology does not require that one be free of economism before the theological framework can begin to be effective. The liberative theology speaks to the individual and institution, facilitating its break with economism.¹⁰³ The lazarian liberative theology provides the individual with an encounter with the liberative power of the gospel that can precede (and at times is a proxy for) broader communal issues. This is not to say that personal liberation alone is sufficient when one is crafting a liberative theology within a congregation. One must be able to move beyond individual needs to communal needs. Failure to do so reduces a liberative theology to nothing more than a reflection of

¹⁰² Given Henry Mitchell's work, this observation now seems self-evident. If, as Mitchell declares, the church encounters the truth of the gospel through the lens of experience. Mitchell emphasizes the degree to which all of one's humanity is impacted by the encounter with the truth of the gospel and so the church must speak from and to the totality of human existence. We are constituted by many different experiential elements that provide the places of connection between ourselves and others. The black church is at its best when it finds or creates these connections between ourselves, others, and God through the lens of shared moments of human existence with the purpose of moving individuals to points of change and action in their lives. Mitchell's assertion implicitly affirms the experiential hermeneutic for the church. Mitchell, Henry H., *Celebration and Experience in Preaching*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008.

¹⁰³ For example, discussions of institutional oppression in a community's experiences with the criminal justice system are often conflated with the moments where individuals are seeking relief from personal encounters with the criminal justice system. The mother whose child is imprisoned will hear the pleas of a liberative theology for a response to the systemic injustices within the criminal justice system through the pain of the more immediate experience in their child's life.

neoliberalism's endogenous theology. A liberative theology is grounded in an understanding of the concrete needs of the congregants and then the community.¹⁰⁴

This is consistent with the Lazarus narrative's framing of this theological effort as the text invites consideration of both communal and individual needs. Lazarus' need for freedom from the tomb is paramount. Nevertheless, the needs of his sisters (and the community as reflected in Jesus' prayer) are also evident.¹⁰⁵ The needs of Lazarus are not subsumed by communal needs and communal needs are not sacrificed for the sake of Lazarus. The liberative actions of Jesus meet both needs. Borrowing from the Lazarus imagery, the neoliberal black church is invited to stand before the tomb of poverty and oppression in which the poor have been trapped and to call for the liberty of those held captive. However, concurrent with speaking to communal oppression, the church must also speak to the individual need for liberation.¹⁰⁶ A liberative theology can impact the institutions and individuals trapped within economism by appealing to the individual's need for liberation. Only then will they be willing to make the broader connections to the need for liberation within the community.

A lazarian liberative theology must navigate the tenuous space between individual and communal liberation. Individuals trapped within economism often require

¹⁰⁴ It would seem evident to assert that congregants gather in churches throughout the United States with expectations that are profoundly personal and deeply anchored in their experiences. The ubiquitous affirmation of this assertion is evident in the wide-array of ecclesial models positing that institutional effectiveness is grounded in the ability of the institution to make connections to the lived experiences of the congregants. Such assertions would be intellectually bankrupt if not for the pre-supposition that congregants first present themselves with expectations concretized in their lived experiences. This common element of many ecclesial models suggests that not only should there exist points of intentional commonality highlighted in the life of the church but that congregants come with an interpretive lens grounded in the particularity of their lives.

¹⁰⁵ North, Wendy Elizabeth Sproston. *The Lazarus Story Within the Johannine Tradition*. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001.

¹⁰⁶ For the neoliberal church this is a call to break the chains of economism for congregants.

liberation as well as those suffering under neoliberalism in communities of the poor. As one experiences the mediation of individual liberation within the congregation and church, one grows more open to the invitation to join in making liberation a reality for the community. Concomitantly, it remains the liberative black church's task to ensure that the congregant does not become so myopically focused on personal experiences of liberation that they lose sight of the systemic oppression that exists around them. It must not be left to the congregant to make the connection between their experience of liberation and the need to participate in the fight for communal liberation. The church must speak explicitly of the link between the congregation and the community's experience of oppression and opportunity for liberation.¹⁰⁷

IV.i. Material Consequences

Having spoken separately to the liberative needs of the community and congregants, and having made explicit the connection between the two, the Lazarian liberative theology remains incomplete. Evidence of this is found in a return to the Lazarus text with particular attention to the troubling conclusion of the narrative. In the narrative, Jesus first mentions the crowd in his prayer, indicating to the reader that Jesus has not lost sight of the crowd in this miraculous moment. Jesus speaks to Lazarus, calling him by name from the tomb but then speaks directly to the crowd. This forms an *inclusio* consisting of the first mention of the crowd, then Lazarus, and then

¹⁰⁷ The emphasis on communal liberation is not without its challenges. Yet, these challenges are unavoidable if one takes the call to a liberative theology seriously. Kenyatta Gilbert, in his work, *The Journey and Promise of African-American Preaching*, advocates for a trivocal proclamation. This is defined as libertive proclamation that occupies the space of priest, prophet, and sage. He pulls from the many practical streams of African-American preaching, leveraging theologians such as Henry Mitchell and Cleophus LaRue. This work is a useful tool in understanding, within the larger historical framework of homiletics within the black tradition, how one navigates both the challenges and opportunities presented by the context in which many black churches exist. Gilbert, Kenyatta R., *The Journey and Promise of African-American Preaching*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011.

the crowd again.¹⁰⁸ The individual and the communal are joined as Lazarus emerges from the tomb.¹⁰⁹ However, the connection made is somewhat unexpected.

And he [Lazarus] who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Loose him, and let him go." [verse 44]

Lazarus has been, within the framework of this text, liberated from the tomb by Jesus' action, but Lazarus is not yet fully free. He has been restored, but that which renders Lazarus genuinely human, his identity as symbolized by his face, remains covered.¹¹⁰ Emphasizing the importance of Lazarus' complete liberation, and the critical nature of the community, Jesus invites the community surrounding Lazarus to participate in his liberation. This presents an important aspect of the call of the lazarian liberative theology on the neoliberal black church. The call resists an over-spiritualization of liberation and the other-worldly aspects so often present in eschatologically dependent liberative frameworks. It is true that Lazarus' resurrection serves John's explication of the spiritual dimension of Jesus' ministry.¹¹¹ However, it is equally true that there are material and tangible elements to this miraculous moment. In like manner, while the church may hold to the spiritual implications of its service, it is equally true that the church has been called to pursue the material liberation of those entrapped as well. Notice that the narrative offers an understanding of Lazarus' death which suggests that there are multiple problems from which Lazarus needs liberation. The narrative provides a picture of Lazarus that, once free from death (and its spiritual ramifications),

¹⁰⁸ Ramsey, *The Gospel of John*, 201.

¹⁰⁹ Haenchen, Ernst, Robert Walter Funk, and Ulrich Busse. *John: A Commentary On the Gospel of John*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.

¹¹⁰ Moody, Rick. "Notes on Lazarus." *Conjunctions*, no. 69 (2016): 94.

¹¹¹ Burkett, "Two Accounts of Lazarus' Resurrection in John 11," 219.

Lazarus continues to need liberation from the residuals of that death.¹¹² In this regard, the text allows the liberative framework to speak powerfully to the neoliberal black church. It acknowledges that even if one understands the forces of neoliberalism on the church's mission within a spiritualized framework, the church must also account for its material consequences. This realization offers the neoliberal black church an avenue for attending to the material and spiritual consequences of the evils neoliberalism may present to the church and its community.

IV.ii. Communal Role

Equally important is the community's participation in freeing Lazarus and restoring his identity. The efficacy of this biblical narrative as a liberative framework is rooted in the idea that the community is directly called to liberate. The liberative theology links the congregants' experience of liberation to the community's need for liberation and calls the congregation into an active pursuit of the realization of the liberation of the community. Jesus, as described in this text, surrenders the completion of this miraculous moment to the hands of the very community that participated in the ritual of declaring the finality of the conditions of Lazarus' life. In like manner, the neoliberal church, complicit in having thrown its hands up in surrender to the conditions which trapped the vulnerable, has been called to serve as agents of liberation. Why does this text present a Jesus who seems to leave the work of liberation incomplete, if not to affirm that the liberation that the ministry of Jesus so boldly proclaims is a liberation to which the church is instrumental? Without the action of the crowd, Lazarus would be alive but remain trapped. Without the involvement of

¹¹² *ibid.*

the church, the vulnerable remain trapped even though the power of the gospel declares them free. This is what is at stake in the failure of the neoliberal black church to overcome economism's grip.

Without the involvement of the church, the most vulnerable never fully experience the freedom that is theirs as the creation of a loving God. This is the God that Jon Sobrino, along with countless other theologians, speaks of when he writes,

the absolute yes that Jesus gives to love for human beings, and the maintenance of that yes throughout history, even in the presence of the negation of love, is the mediation of the understanding of God as love-a God who becomes manifest as lesser in hiddenness among the lowly and the poor, and who becomes manifest as greater and transcendent in the condemnation of poverty.¹¹³

The Lazarus text introduces the community as the final agent of liberation and introduces a dialectic between the neoliberal black church and the community. The conclusion of the Lazarus narrative suggests that both the community and the church are simultaneously both subject and object of God's liberative desires. The church is never fully liberated outside of their participation in the liberation of others. While their liberation from economism provided the church's entry point into the experience of liberation, this liberation is incompletely experienced. As the church seeks the liberation of its community, the church more fully experiences its liberation. This is the *telos* the lazarian liberative theology seeks and represents the dialectic this liberative theology. While liberative theology can be understood as encouraging the congregation to bring about liberation for its community, the church's involvement in the realization of this reality is as much about the church's liberation as that of the community. The ones who are seen as objects of the church's mission are, in fact, the ones that allow the

¹¹³ Sobrino, Jon. *Jesus in Latin America*. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis, 1987: 124.

church to experience their liberation more completely through its identification with and participation in their struggle. This community, for all of its ills and problems, is a part of the theological plan to allow all of creation to walk in liberation.¹¹⁴ This means that the church must continue to help congregants understand that while the neoliberal black church might be important to the well-being of the poor, the poor are as important to the church living in liberation.

V. Summary

There is great power in the lazarian liberative theology's provision of a theological framework for the mission of the neoliberal black church and the practices that support that mission. It rightly suggests that Jesus discloses that God has chosen the poor and the oppressed to be recipients of God's gracious liberation. First, a lazarian liberative theology declares the liberation of the individual from the economism that grips them. Secondly, the lazarian liberative theology declares that the liberation of the poor, as symbolized by Lazarus, is the proper pursuit and mission of the neoliberal black church. The Lazarus text encourages avoiding the temptation of allowing the liberative theology to be myopically warped by the lens of individualism. The church must continue to proclaim the importance of a congregation remaining engaged with the community's needs. In an age dominated by the prosperity gospel, this realization has been lost. The church is called upon to make explicit the connection between personal liberation and communal liberation. Finally, a lazarian liberative theology avoids the temptation of believing that the congregation serves only as agents of liberation and that the community exists solely as objects of those liberative efforts. Such a posture fosters a religious arrogance leading the church to believe that the poor

¹¹⁴ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 100.

exist solely as the recipients of the church's gracious activity. Again, the Lazarus text is instructive. While it is true that the church is an agent of change for its community, the church is also a beneficiary of its activity in its community. It is the community, and the church's service to that community, that provides the church with the deeper experience of its liberation. While the congregation is constituted by those who have been freed from the death and bondage of neoliberalism, the congregation only fully experiences its liberation when it is actively engaged in the liberation of its community. In this regard, it is the community that is an agent of liberation and the congregation that is an object of that liberation. This sense of mutual dependence ensures that the church and the community are viewed as partners in one another's liberation

VI. Next Steps

VI.i. Effects of Economism on the Identity of the Neoliberal Black Church

This project takes the embryonic steps of laying out questions I am confident will guide my research and writings for the remainder of my career in the academy. This project was born of my concern for black churches which I believe are struggling under the relentless pressure of neoliberalism as neoliberalism invades every aspect of the black church's identity and existence and that of the people who constitute them. I remain deeply concerned that this ideological infiltration has reduced the black church's impact and efficacy at a time when the church is most needed. There is an opportunity to further research and describe, in more discrete ways, how economic ideology persistently shapes the self-understanding of the black church and its congregants and how that reshaping occurs imperceptibly. This would aid the further development of the lazarian liberative theological model to respond to the worse effects of neoliberalism for the black church and the black community. I hope to empower the black church to once again reclaim the historical and theological norm of resistance to the oppression experienced under neoliberalism.

VI.ii. The Neoliberal Black Church as Firm

I have labeled those churches caught in the grip of economism as the neoliberal black church. Upon reflection, there is a greater opportunity to better define and examine this subset of the black church. I have alluded to how these churches mimic the thinking and operation of firms in the marketplace. As a next step, using the model of the firm as found in Michael Porter's *Competitive Advantage*, I will examine how the private sector firm understands itself within the market relative to other entities and lay

that model on top of the universe of the black church to better identify and illuminate the existence and operation of the neoliberal black church. If the neoliberal black church is understood as those churches in the gripe of neoliberalism, there is no better tool for identifying and discussing them than that of neoliberalism itself. Additionally, I anticipate I will find that there also are churches, considered liberative, that have in fact, been compromised by economism.

VI.iii.Commodification

Porter's model also provides an interesting intellectual framework for understanding how the firm understands its products, how it prices its services, how it understands its consumers, and how it successfully negotiates changes in the marketplace. I hypothesize that this model has tremendous explanatory value when examining the behavior of the neoliberal black church. This model offers the opportunity to better describe the commodification which occurs within the neoliberal black church. Using Porter's intellectual framework, commodification deals with both the consumers (congregants) and the products (worship, sermons, conferences, etc.) of the firm (neoliberal black church). It will provide a better lens for examining the ways strategic and tactical actions within the neoliberal church have been influenced by economism and wrapped in theological rhetoric and the tensions that arise from within the church when ideological frameworks of economism override the theological considerations of the church.

VI.iv.Development of the Lazarian Liberative Model

The lazarian liberative theological framework will be further developed to address the specific manner in which it affects the liberation of either the institution or

the individual in the grip of economism. In what ways can the neoliberal church be freed from economism, and how does that freedom occur through the engagement of activities of communal liberation suggested by this theological model? Additionally, there exists the opportunity to examine how this liberative model plays out when dealing with specific challenges facing a community. If the church is called to engage in the freeing of the community from an issue such as poverty, does the liberative model commend specific approaches? Does the model work when the nature of oppression changes and can it detect the ever-mutating reality of oppression? These, and many other, questions remain to be examined.

VI.v.Economistic Liberation Theology

This work referenced how neoliberalism's ideology seeks to supplant Christian theology within the neoliberal black church. It does so while leading the church to believe it is still faithfully engaged in its historical mission of liberation. One of the ways this occurs is through neoliberalism's offering of an economistic liberative theology. This is a theology of liberation that is driven by the individualism of neoliberalism. It defines liberation as experiences of greater levels of self-aggrandizement and consumption. These experiences of liberation allow for the rhetoric of liberation to remain in use within the neoliberal black church while emptying it of its theological content. The next step involves laying out the framework of an economistic liberation theology and examining how it animates practices within the neoliberal church.

VI.vi.Economism and Church Leadership

If one takes the problem of economism seriously, one cannot help but be drawn to the issue of how economism plays itself out on three levels:

1. How does it shape and affect the church's perception of itself?
2. How does it shape and affect the perception of its community?
3. How does it shape and affect the perception of church leadership of itself?

While all three of these questions merit further consideration, it is the last of these three questions that represents a pressing concern for me as a pastor of a black church. It does not take a significant amount of research to identify the multitude of approaches to church leadership that utilize the corporate CEO example as the framework for understanding church leadership. This is in keeping with the recognition that economism seeks to shape the church, and itself leadership, in the image of the market. What is now needed, and I would hope to make a contribution to, is a theological response to the deficiencies in this model of church leadership.

VI.vii.Re-narrating Black Church History

As mentioned earlier in this work, there has been a persistent failure by scholars of the black church to give an adequate account of the influence of economic forces in understanding and describing the history of the black church. I have made oblique references to this phenomenon when examining the deradicalization of the black church emerging from the period of the Great Migration. Several important works examine the economic effect of the Great Migration, but there remains an excellent opportunity to give a comprehensive account of how economic forces during this period shaped the black church.

This analysis also will bear fruit when applied to other periods in the history of the black church. A few historical periods come immediately to mind. One is the period immediately preceding and during the Civil Rights Movement. While social, cultural, and political examinations have occurred, and while some consideration has been

given to the economic consequences of the Civil Rights Movement for the black community, I am not aware of works that deal specifically with the way economic forces shaped the responses and expectations of the black church during this period. Another period to examine is that immediately following the Civil Right Movement. As blacks increasingly entered into the American economy, gaining some level of economic and political power, little consideration has been given to how those changes impacted the development of the church. This period coincides with the period of suburbanization alluded to in this work. However, there remains significant work to be performed in understanding how the emergence of neoliberalism, the changes in the economic participation of blacks, and the growing concentration of poverty impacted the black church's identity.

These are just a few of the research questions prompted by this initial work. While not shy about the economic considerations they prompt, all of these questions seek to give a theological response to guide the church in living out its historic call to the liberation of the poor.

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