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## The Enduring Black Church and its Critics: A Book Review of Omar McRoberts's *Streets of Glory*

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# The Enduring Black Church and its Critics: A book review of Omar McRoberts's Streets of Glory

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**Kenneth D. Johnson**

*Abstract: This review examines several theses and methodologies regarding Black Church activism and contribution to community economic development in an economically depressed inner city neighborhood as presented in Omar McRoberts's Streets of Glory (University of Chicago Press, 2003). It finds the questions of interest, but empirical support for many of the author's theses lacking when considered from a cross-comparative national perspective.*

The historic role and presence of the Black Church among Blacks in the United States is unquestionably part of the most enduring legacy of the arrival of Africans in the North American Colonies and later the United States. Its history began during the pre-Colonial period of Blacks' indentured servitude and in freeborn Black communities, into the slavery period, and onward into Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights era, and now the post-Civil Rights era at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

Praised as an enduring source of cognitive, moral and cultural order with nascent liberationist tendencies, or derided as an economic and political drag upon and cultural opiate of a people ill adapted to the transition to secular modernity, the presence and role of the Black

Church often engenders sharp emotions on all sides. Scholars and the cultural intelligentsia of the Black community are no exception. Sometimes their responses are conditioned not only by their empirical or historical researches, but also by their personal experiences with Black churches, for good or ill, in some cases stemming from childhood, which tend to shape their outlook on the subject. Furthermore, the moral stances of the Black Church

can make secular elite Black intellectuals nervous, especially when they perceive their moral and ethical views as coming

*lack of familiarity, or perhaps discomfort with the Black Protestant tradition that leads Prof. McRoberts to his first interpretive wrong turn*

under judgment by the Church. These factors can create an uneasy engagement with a truly critical and fair evaluation of the potentialities and limitations of the Black Church as it actually functions among Blacks. Sometimes this manifests itself in the form of conceptual blinders among Black scholars in the social sciences.

With this caveat, the work under review is *Streets of Glory*; the first published book written by a young and promising scholar, Omar McRoberts, Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago. I will examine several of his theses, methodologies and conclusions about the Black Church as presented in the book, and close with some observations about the Black Church as a manifestation and guardian of Black Civil Society in the United States.

### History of the Work

The book is a minimally revised monograph of the author's Harvard Sociology Ph.D. thesis of the same title. McRoberts' explanations are clear enough and refreshingly free from the socio-babble and strained attempts at linguistic cleverness so common in sociology theses in the late 1990s. He raises several important questions

worth asking about the Black Church and Black Civil Society, which makes the book worth reading, even though his answers are sometimes hesitant and not entirely satisfying, with minimal value for social policy or a future sociological analysis agenda for the Black Church.

McRoberts' background is important for our review. In the closing chapter of the book, as well as in public lectures<sup>1</sup>, he has described himself as having a Catholic upbringing (McRoberts, 2003a, p. 154), whose primary experience with Protestant Black Churches was during his ethnographic research for this volume. A researcher need not be an adherent to the Protestant Black Church tradition to accurately interpret it. However, it is also a fact that Black Catholicism in many parts of the U.S. differs from its Black Protestant counterpart in liturgy (more formal), metaphysics and philosophical theology (highly indebted to Plato and Aristotle), and social practices. It is this lack of familiarity, or perhaps discomfort with the Black Protestant tradition that leads McRoberts to his first interpretive wrong turn. Specifically, we find that the notion of diverse, fluid, and multiple Black Church views and practices as regarding activism, community involvement, and the shifting poles of militancy and accommodation is *nothing new*. McRoberts himself said so in his January 2001 essay in *Shelterworks Online*, (McRoberts, 2001, p.2) in which he previewed the rollout of his theories of Black storefront churches and economic development in what he calls "the religious district," and where he counseled community organizers not to ". . . assume black churches to be model neighborhood institutions . . ." (McRoberts, 2001, p. 9) Unfortunately, empirical errors creep in to McRoberts' book that vitiates what could have been insightful discoveries.

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<sup>1</sup> McRoberts gave a public lecture to the Four Corners community on his book at the Ella J. Baker House, in the sanctuary of the Azusa Christian Community, on July 9, 2003. See Lovett (2003) for news reportage of that event.

## What Is Four Corners?

The “religious district,” a term that McRoberts helpfully introduces to describe thickly settled numbers of churches in a neighborhood, is his identifier for the Four Corners neighborhood of Dorchester in Boston. At the time of McRoberts's data collection, it was and still is, a largely Black and poor community, with over 40% of its residents under the age of eighteen (what some in the City government describe as a “youth-intensive” neighborhood).

Four Corners residents are African-Americans (defined here as persons whose grandparents were born in the U.S.) and Afro-Caribbeans (both West Indian and Spanish-speaking, i.e., families from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico). Residents include a smattering of recent (1970-1980's) Cape Verde immigrants, Afro-Hondurans, Somalis, and Vietnamese Americans (including a significant number of Afro-Vietnamese refugees, progeny of Vietnamese mothers and Black fathers, U.S. military personnel during the Vietnam War). Within this swirl of Black ethnic diversity, which is markedly non-normative when compared to other Black communities, and rarely matched by any other similarly situated neighborhood in the U.S. except for certain boroughs of New York City, McRoberts identifies the Four Corners neighborhood as being .6 miles square, containing twenty-five churches. However, this is not correct. McRoberts' Four Corners is *three sizes too big*. In fact, Four Corners is merely a political designation, not considered a full fledged neighborhood like those less than 0.25 miles from it, such as Grove Hall, Fields Corner, Uphams Corner, or Codman Square. The City of Boston has declined to install the customary blue welcome signs [to mark Four Corners] that announce the demarcation between neighborhoods. Even back street industrial areas of the city are considered “official” and get their signs. But not Four Corners. The city's Elections Department describes the Four Corners election precincts that are part of Ward 17 as being part of Codman Square; an “official” neighborhood located about 0.10 miles from Four Corners.

This is not a trivial detail. McRoberts informs us that many of his clergy informants displayed no knowledge or befuddlement when asked if they knew their churches were located in the Four Corners neighborhood. This befuddlement reemerged again during McRoberts' July 2003 visit to The Ella J. Baker House in Four Corners to give a community lecture on his book. Many pastors in the audience could not recognize themselves or their churches in the narrative. However, details do matter. A recent physical resurvey of churches in a correctly sized Four Corners (including one that had closed down since his interviews, and a Jehovah's Witness church building, discussed below) only found eleven churches in a 0.25 square mile radius, less than half as many as the twenty-five asserted by McRoberts<sup>2</sup>.

## How Many Churches?

Another inaccuracy concerns the Jehovah's Witnesses Kingdom Hall church building shared by five congregations. Four of the congregations correspond to local streets in Dorchester, and the fifth is a Spanish-speaking congregation. As each of the congregations share resources, members and doctrine, it seems improper to split these out as separate churches as McRoberts does, which along with the earlier miscount due to incorrect boundaries, *inflates the total number of churches in the neighborhood*. This has significance for his arguments on the proportion of activist/less-than-activist churches, the "overchurched" thesis, as well as for his theories around church presence and economic vitality or decay of the local neighborhood. When one asks local

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<sup>2</sup> The center of the Four Corners neighborhood is the intersection of Washington and Harvard Streets. The shape of the area is a rough triangle whose boundaries are the following streets: Eldon Street, and Norwell Street where these intersect with Washington Street to the north, Bowdoin Avenue and Greenbrier Street to the east, Park Street to the south, and Norwell Street to the west. It should be noted, however, that the Four Corners Main Streets economic development group has larger boundaries, in part to garner more City resources for underserved residents.

residents on streets that McRoberts assigns to an inflated Four Corners, these respondents state they are located in other neighborhoods, such as Franklin Park, Blue Hill Avenue, Grove Hall, Bowdoin/Geneva, Fields' Corner, or Franklin Field. I am inclined to believe these local respondents instead of McRoberts and accept their self-definition of neighborhood boundaries.

## Do Churches Inhibit Economic Development?

McRoberts presents another critical thesis that there was a rush to the Four Corners neighborhood by churches seeking cheap rents in the form of storefronts. His corollary argument is that the presence of so many churches seeking cheap rents, sitting on what otherwise might be prime real estate formerly occupied by businesses, (and that could be reoccupied by new businesses to spark economic revitalization) hinders economic development and pits the self-interest of the churches against development interests of the community at-large. While this could be a sophisticated argument if true, it is undercut by the facts on the ground. Most of these churches *own, not rent*, the properties they occupy. Some of the storefronts had not been occupied in decades, and were often sites for loitering and drug activity. No one wanted these properties, certainly not conventional businesses. It could be better argued that the churches provide a community service in occupying these properties that might otherwise become drug dens, liquor stores, or remain empty to await the arsonist's match.<sup>3</sup> Also, of those churches that occupy *rented* storefronts,

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<sup>3</sup> The six storefront churches in the corrected Four Corners area still open are: Grace Church of All Nations, Bibleway Christian Center, Iglesia de Dios Pentecostal, Eglise De Dieu Bethel De Boston (which occupies a former bank), Friendship Apostolic Church, and Revival Deliverance Temple Church (For All People). The four other open churches are New Testament Church of God House of Deliverance, Azusa Christian Community, Greenwood Memorial United Methodist Church, and Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses. The only closed church in the corrected Four Corners that could be found was the First Star Holiness Church, Inc. (a storefront next to a barbershop). Ten other churches outside Four Corners' corrected boundaries are: New Testament Pentecostal Church of God in Christ (GOGIC), Chief Cornerstone Church –

there is nothing to stop the property owners from charging higher rents, or simply refusing to renew rental agreements when their terms expire in order to make the properties available to wealthier businesses to contribute to community economic development.<sup>4</sup>

As it is, the majority of businesses in Four Corners are bodegas, hair salons, Laundromats, and auto repair shops. It is unclear

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that the churches are to blame for any lack of economic vitality. As McRoberts indicates, other factors such as redlining<sup>5</sup>, lack of insurance, lack of capital, and the presence of crime contribute strongly to this state of affairs.<sup>6</sup>

### **Commuter Congregants?**

McRoberts also devotes much space to what he perceives as the phenomenon of church members driving from other places in order to attend churches in the Four Corners neighborhood. He believes this leads to a disconnection of these churches from the needs of the local

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Apostolic, Joy & Gladness Pentecostal Church, Greater Friendship Missionary Baptist Church, Mt. Pleasant Holiness Church; and the former Church of Christ on Glenway Street that sold its church edifice to the Church of God of Prophecy, Inc., Zion Assembly Apostolic Church, a newer storefront on Glenway Street, Victory Fellowship Ministries; and two closed churches, St. Leo's Catholic Church and Pentecostal House of Prayer for All People.

<sup>4</sup> This actually happened to one now-closed church, First Star Holiness Church, Inc., when it was evicted because it could no longer afford the rent charged by the owner of the nearby barbershop whose storefront the church was occupying. According to the owner, the church still owes over \$5,000.00 in back rent.

<sup>5</sup> The practice of refusing to serve particular geographical areas because of the race or income of the area's residents.

<sup>6</sup> If these churches engaged in more evangelization, or grew through attracting other already churching people either from the local neighborhood or other places, this could create physical growth needs that might motivate these Four Corners churches to seek other locations. Certainly the increased membership would yield more money to the churches in the form of tithes and offerings that could be used to purchase alternate properties.



neighborhood. McRoberts does not consider the possibility that some of these churches might have bi-vocational pastors who might not be paid for fulltime ministry in the neighborhood, or that some churches might lack the wherewithal to have staffing available to run community programs during the week in between services.

However, the casual reader unaware of the geography of Boston or Greater Boston might be misled into thinking that parishioners are traveling long distances from suburbs to worship in low-rent inner city storefront churches. In fact, this is not so. Boston and Greater Boston geography is very compact. It is not distance, but time and traffic flow that are the key issues in commuting to church, unlike some cities like Philadelphia, Dallas, Houston, and Atlanta, where suburbs might be a forty-five minute or more drive, one-way, into the city. Car travel from Greater Boston towns to neighborhoods within Boston takes as little as twenty minutes. In some cases, it takes longer to travel between Boston neighborhoods than travel from outside the city's neighborhoods, due to the small streets and dense traffic congestion during certain hours.

The issue of Black "commuter churches" is real. Many gentrifying Black communities like South Central Los Angeles or the Fillmore District of San Francisco, or certain up-and-coming inner city neighborhoods of Atlanta and Philadelphia, either have or will soon have Black parishioners who relocate from the inner city to the suburbs. They must decide if they will continue to commute into the city (like some of their white suburban colleagues) or relocate their churches to new buildings in the Black suburbs for a fresh start. McRoberts validly raises the question of whether commuter churches can be relied upon to look out for a Black neighborhood's interests if few of its parishioners live there.

However, powerful counter-examples to McRoberts' assertions of normatively non-contributing Black churches exist in congregations such as West Angeles Church of God in Christ in South Central Los Angeles, Glide Memorial United Methodist Church in San Francisco, Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland, or Bethel AME Church in

Baltimore. These are large mega churches, or churches just shy of megachurch size with many commuter congregants. However, these churches have decided to stay in their neighborhoods and contribute to economic development and other forms of social service uplift there. McRoberts does not mention the large empirical study done by Ram Cnann and Stephanie Boddie of the University of Pennsylvania that was a congregational census of social service delivery by a variety of different-sized congregations in Philadelphia. The study revealed that of 2,095 congregations, 88% had at least one social service program and that, on average, they had 2.41 programs that served 102 people per month, with most beneficiaries being non-church members in local neighborhoods. The value of these services was conservatively estimated to be 246 million dollars annually (Cnann & Boddie, 2001b). This level of involvement seems more normative for many Black urban churches of sufficient size to implement programs. A more useful question that McRoberts could have asked is whether the entire issue of Black Church neighborhood engagement is rapidly becoming moot in many cities due to the influx of white residents and other non-black groups into what were formerly segregated, largely Black inner city areas.<sup>7</sup> Another question worth exploring is: now that over 20% of urban Black churches have memberships of over six hundred people (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990, p. 143), what are the implications for social service engagement and economic development contributions from such churches, since these would have greater financial means to support such activity?<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This is precisely what is happening in Four Corners today. More whites are moving into the area, including recent college graduates seeking cheaper rents or lower mortgages on their first homes. However, the high presence of Section 8 housing and triple-deckers and multiunit apartments with many poorer black and Afro-Latino residents serve as a potent barrier to wholesale “black flight” and white gentrification at this time.

<sup>8</sup> This point is also raised in Trulear, H. D. (2000) Faith-Based Institutions and High-Risk Youth: First report to the Field, especially p. 10, where he discusses the need for “focused leadership” in meeting the challenges that accompany social services by churches on behalf of high-risk youth. The Azusa Christian Community in Four Corners is noted as an exemplar of how small congregations can perform this effectively.

## Is Four Corners Normative For Black Churches?

Another defect of this study is its unrepresentative nature. McRoberts remained evasive and vulnerable on this point during his July 2003 public lecture when questioned. New England is *very non-normative* regarding Black Church formation and practices as compared to cities such as Tulsa, Memphis, Atlanta, Philadelphia, and St. Louis, for example. A nationally prominent bishop of the Church of God in Christ recently referred to New England as a "remote area" in terms of church planting - so far it is from the norm of Black Church practice. The white mainline denominations are not doing much better, as some church growth theorists describe Greater Boston as a church "graveyard." Some churches have shut down entirely. Even one of McRoberts' informants, Rev. Winspeare, acknowledged the unrepresentative nature of Boston Black Church practice: "I'm not from Boston, I'm from Tennessee. And it's quite different from Memphis . . . The church setting, to me, in Memphis is more of an embedded place just for church, for worship, just for churches themselves. . . (p)eople look forward to coming to church. Not just Sunday but whatever the case may be . . . I'm saying there is a sense of worship [yet] to be in this area, a sense of God [yet] to really be in this area," (McRoberts, 2003a, p. 72).

Except for some large Black churches like the mega church New Covenant Christian Church (with over 5,000 members, the largest church of any racial group in Massachusetts), and Charles Street AME and Bethel AME churches (around 1,500 members each), most Black churches in New England do not exceed 200 members. This is below the U.S. average Black urban church membership of 240, or even the average rural Black church membership of eighty-five people as reported by C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Any theories of Black Church practices based on observations in Boston must be given great scrutiny, as these are unlikely to hold up in places where there are significant Black populations and churches, such as

Philadelphia, New York City, Atlanta, Dallas, Memphis, or Tulsa. At least a cursory inter-city comparative examination of McRoberts' theories in his original doctoral thesis should have been required, in order to see if these held up in other, more normative Black Church cities. I assert that most of these theories will not withstand empirical scrutiny when cross-comparatively tested against the Black Church conditions in other Black-intensive cities in the United States. McRoberts has not effectively refuted other studies documenting extensive Black Church community involvement, such as chapter 6 of Lincoln and Mamiya's *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (1990), or the more recent study *Black Church Outreach* (Cnann and Boddie, 2001a) that supplemented their earlier Philadelphia-wide congregational study by doing a comparison between Black and non-Black congregations in social service provision.

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### **Three Churches: Four Opinions?**

As I noted, the diversity of views among Black Churches as to social involvement is not news to anyone even casually informed about the history political theory of the Black Church's role in events such as the Civil Rights Movement. A review of Taylor Branch's works, or David Garrow's study of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life, or Clayborne Carson's discussion of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) reveal heterogeneous ideological tendencies in church-based movements.<sup>9</sup> McRoberts' book, in the way it uses

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<sup>9</sup> See Branch, T. (1988) *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years: 1954-63*, and (1998) *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years: 1963-65*; Garrow, D. J. (1986) *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*; and Carson, C. (1981) *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, for further discussion of ideological diversity in church-based movements.

sociology, is ahistorical: he has great difficulty situating his assertions in the historical narrative of the Black Church (or Black churches, as he might prefer). McRoberts decries what he feels is a mistaken nomenclature describing a "Black Church" when he would prefer us to accept the notion of "Black Churches." The idea that scholars in the field of sociology (according to McRoberts) appear to be unaware of the diversity of political and social thought in the Black Church says something about what could be the intellectual insularity of some academic sociologists. Political scientists, historians, theologians, Black Studies scholars and cultural critics seem to understand and accept the idea of ideological diversity among churches in the Black community. This does not seem to be an original or particularly edifying insight on McRoberts' part.

Indeed, I should be very concerned if there were no ideological diversity within the Black Church, including those churches in Four Corners. Blacks continue to partake of American modernity, manifesting more diversity in terms of black ethnicity, occupational roles and status, and income levels and class distinctions. (William Julius Wilson noted this regarding class in his *The Declining Significance of Race*.) We can expect increased diversity of views and social and political action across Black institutions, including the Black Church. The current legates of the Civil Rights Movement, both community organizers and public policy advocates, face the challenge of knitting together this eclectic quilt of opinions and objectively different and potentially conflicting subgroup interests into a new political force. It should be noted that such diversity has always been present in the Black community generally. The divisions between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, or Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. are two examples. Also consider that Blacks as late as 1972 gave over 30% of their presidential votes to Richard Nixon, a Republican, over his Democrat opponent. This reveals that Blacks differ in their opinions on a variety of subjects. This is not news, nor should it be viewed as abnormal. The attempt to fragment and ahistorically atomize the Black Church into "Black churches" serves little

constructive analytical purpose, and actually dilutes the symbolic strength of the Black Church as an institution in service to the interests of Black people.

## **This World Or The Next?**

What of the seeming tension between church activism and “other-worldism” that emerges among the Black Churches? McRoberts’ book in one sense sharply delineates these positions, relating them to some churches’ fears of the street life right outside their doors. McRoberts introduces the well-worn sacred-versus-profane dichotomy (McRoberts, 2003a, p. 81-99). However, there is a more accurate metaphor that he could have used. The better description for this phenomenon is that offered by the British anthropologist Mary Douglas, in her path-breaking book *Purity and Danger* (Douglas, 2002 [1966]). It is that concept, of (sacred) purity versus danger (whether metaphysical or real), which serves as a better interpretive fit for the reticence of some neighborhood churches to confront the real physical dangers of crime and its consequences. One might be tempted to criticize these churches for failing to fully implement their sacrificial, kenotic, agape-oriented, Holy Ghost-filled Christian doctrines, but in comparison, not many in the academic community eagerly seek opportunities to demonstrate such physical courage during fieldwork excursions in the toughest neighborhoods in the U.S. The notion of real danger, and the use of concepts of purity and piety, are coping tools that some churches use to deal with the cognitive dissonance that arises from their inability to fully implement street outreach according to the model of Jesus as depicted in the Bible. More research from a social psychology perspective might be useful in discerning the actual dynamics of this coping phenomenon.

However, what of the oft-noted distinction between “otherworldly” and “activist” behaviors of churches in the Black community? In his book, McRoberts continues this sharply defined analytical distinction, but then notes tentatively that he found that all

churches in his sample viewed themselves as “activist,” with the only distinction being whether the activism was internally or externally directed (McRoberts, 2003a, p. 121). This was somewhat dependent on the theological anthropology used by the church involved, some emphasizing the salvation of the soul or spirit with de-emphasis on the embodied existence of people, others emphasizing the well being of “the whole man/woman” without splitting body and soul. Again, this does not appear to be a new insight, but McRoberts does soften the distinctions by using a helpful typology grid developed by Davidson and Koch (1998) that illustrates the various social stances in what McRoberts calls the “activist space.” By introducing this analytical tool, he seeks to overcome a false binary choice between “worldly” and “otherworldly” stances of churches. This approach is among the most useful contributions of his book, in that he inserts and maps the Four Corners churches with regard to the different types of activism they exemplify, and whether such changes were by intentional design, or simply unplanned drift by the churches. Of particular benefit here is his explanation of the “priestly,” or member-focused roles of churches, which were not merely insular, but rather serving to equip the members for increased levels of external service (McRoberts, 2003a, p. 100-102). While he seeks to overcome the dichotomy, McRoberts’ discussion seems hesitant and tentative. Instead, he redeems himself in terms of this theoretical innovation with a crisply written and concise essay (so different from his book, that it seems written by a different person entirely) in the edited volume, *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (Dillon, 2003, p. 412-422). This essay encapsulates one of his core objectives – the overcoming of what McRoberts views as a false dichotomy of “otherworldly” and “activist” roles of Black churches. McRoberts fuses these categories together, asserting that all the church activity is “activist” in its practice. By getting beyond sociology’s forced dichotomy, he seeks to give sharper focus to the functional actions of Black churches and their effects upon the Black community. Before this, Lincoln and Mamiya (1990, p. 10-16) provided the best available

explanatory category, that of dynamic, dialectical tensions between passivity and activism, worldly and otherworldly, etc. The dialectic as they describe it is not in the Hegelian sense with a thesis-antithesis-synthesis progression; "There is no Hegelian synthesis or ultimate resolution of the dialectic."(p.11), but rather more akin to a classical Hellenistic dialectic wherein the tensions remain: "This dialectic holds polar opposites in tension, constantly shifting between the polarities in historical time."(p.11). McRoberts' attempt to sweep clean this analytical distinction in order to get down to the descriptive level of what Black churches actually do in their own neighborhoods might be his most valuable contribution to the entire discussion.<sup>10</sup>

## Policy Implications

McRoberts concludes the main segment of his book with a brief excursus on whether the Black Church(es) are a suitable instrument for social service provision along the lines proposed by the Federal Government's Faith-Based and Community Initiative. As noted in the White House 's report *Unlevel Playing Field* (2001), at the time of its writing there were *no* systematic and rigorous outcome measures or quality evaluations for *secular social service vendors* funded by Federal dollars, thereby creating uncertainty as to their presumed superior efficacy compare to those smaller, non-Federally funded programs operated by Black churches. The objective of the Faith-Based Initiative was to remove discriminatory barriers against churches and other small to medium-sized faith-based, community serving institutions, and to find ways to help build financial and operational program capacity among these groups.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See also Murphy, L. G. (2000), *Down by the Riverside: readings in African-American Religion* for an interdisciplinary and historically grounded collection of essays on the Black Church and its role today.

<sup>11</sup> By way of disclosure, this reviewer directs The Ella J. Baker House, a faith-based 501(c) (3) youth services agency that received Federal funds long before there was a Faith-based Initiative under President William Clinton's



*Certainly secularism or non-religious spiritualities are present in the Black community, and we now have at least two generations of youth and young adults who have never darkened a church door...*

In the Black context, the Black Church is an institution that is closest in terms of physical and often social proximity to the needs of

residents in the inner city. Its historic presence has given it staying power and credibility among residents. Some may view this as an historical accident; perhaps the Black community could have had a substantial presence of secular, non-religious social groups or other civic organizations like bowling leagues or card clubs that would be involved in providing social uplift in the community. But while these other institutions may exist in the Black community today, they do not command the significant level of assent among Black people that the Black Church does. Certainly secularism or non-religious spiritualities are present in the Black community, and we now have at least two generations of youth and young adults who have never darkened a church door, much less exemplified a faith commitment. But an instrumental and pragmatic argument can be made that, absent the emergence and thriving of secular religions or values in the Black community, the Black Church is one of the few pro-social institutions left standing after the demise of Black Power, Black Consciousness, revolutionary Marxism, and a host of other ideological movements over the past thirty years that sought preeminence in the hearts and minds of Blacks.

Informed scholars such as John J. DiIulio, Jr., former head of the faith-based office, and now at the University of Pennsylvania, acknowledged at the outset of the faith-based initiatives that churches could not be used as a substitute for the role of government in providing help to the inner city (DiIulio, 2001), but rather should be used as

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administration, and also has received Federal monies under the current Administration.

partners in order to get the most resources closest to those in need without enduring the resource shrinkage that occurs with excessive government bureaucracy or socially distant social service vendors whose leadership are sometimes totally removed from the social world of their clients. Provided we recognize the ideological diversity that motivates some churches to get involved with Charitable Choice and faith-based initiatives, while others prefer to fund their social works themselves; or due to financial, staffing and other operational constraints elect to leave this to the state, there is no reason why both approaches cannot be accommodated in the Black community. This reviewer agrees that anyone seeking to have churches provide social services in conjunction with government should exercise due diligence. But there seems no compelling reason to avoid the obvious, normative, daily presence of the Black Church in Black urban communities in the United States.

Nothing in McRoberts' ethnography or theoretical offerings in his book provides anything beyond an ordinary, common sense caveat that churches need to be dealt with on their own terms and that they are diverse institutions that occupy their particular place in the social ecology of the Black inner city. Perhaps this fresh engagement between the Black Church as the leading Civil Society institution among Blacks, and the State, could be the Church's finest hour as it seeks to help local residents bring peace and healing to our inner cities through the provision of moral instruction, pro-social role modeling, and social services to "the least of these."

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