

RELIGIOUS CIVILITY, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND CHARITABLE CHOICE: FAITH-BASED POVERTY RELIEF IN THE POST-WELFARE ERA*

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In 1996, the federal government passed the most comprehensive welfare reform bill—the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act—in recent memory (Bane and Ellwood 1996; Mink 1998). One of the most noteworthy aspects of welfare reform law is its enactment of Charitable Choice, Section 104 of welfare reform legislation (*A Guide to Charitable Choice* 1997; Bartkowski and Regis 1999, 2000; Chaves 1999; Cnaan 1999). Charitable Choice mandates that state governments which opt to contract with independent-sector social service providers cannot legally exclude faith-based organizations from consideration simply because these organizations are religious in nature. This dramatic policy change is part of a broader commitment to political devolution. Political devolution, in short, is the philosophy that government deregulation empowers local communities to find grassroots solutions to social problems. From this vantage point, unencumbered locales are empowered communities. Despite the debates Charitable Choice has spawned (see, e.g., DiIulio 1997; Goodstein 1997; Grossman 1995; Klein 1998 for reviews), presidential candidates from both major political parties promised to expand federal support for this provision during the Fall 2000 election campaign (Bartkowski and Regis 2000).

In what follows, we scrutinize the prospects of faith-based welfare reform by examining the dynamics of congregational anti-poverty efforts undertaken by two prominent Mississippi churches—an African American Church of God in Christ (COGIC) congregation and a white Southern Baptist church. Situated in the same Mississippi township, both of these churches actively engage in poverty relief—though each does so with very different intentions and through highly distinctive means. Mississippi has the highest poverty rate in the nation and, at the same time, boasts one of the most highly churched populations in the U.S. (Bartkowski and

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Regis 2000). Our intensive case–study analysis illuminates how the local milieu within which religious congregations are situated influences their views of the poor as well as their preferred strategies for poverty relief. Moreover, a comparative analysis of two churches reveals how the meanings, motivations, and practices associated with faith–based poverty relief can vary greatly across congregational contexts.

Debating Civil Society, Citizenship, and Human Dignity: Libertarian, Communitarian, and Strong Democratic Paradigms

Our study of faith–based poverty relief is informed by ongoing disputes about the ideal structure of American civil society and competing visions of the citizen within this “parallel polis.” Although proponents of civil society generally define civility a respect for the inherent dignity of the human person, scholars often articulate divergent idealized visions of civil society and human dignity. The libertarian and communitarian models of civil society are among the leading contenders in ongoing debates over this issue (Barber 1999). A libertarian vision of civil society places a premium on personal freedoms in the “private” dimensions of social life. The private sphere is defined to include the realm of individual choice, as well as social relations in the market and the home. From the libertarian vantage point, the private sphere should remain untouched and untainted by government regulation. Given the government’s public character, laws are viewed as inherently constraining and coercive.

By contrast, communitarians understand civil society as a “complex welter of ineluctably social relations that tie people together into families, clans, clubs, neighborhoods, communities, and hierarchies” (Barber 1999: 14). Communitarians typically emphasize the pre–contractual nature of social relations while highlighting the mutual obligations and responsibilities that eclipse individual choice. From this standpoint, community ties integrate individuals into the social fabric while provide moral guidance that is impossible to sustain in the libertarian pursuit of individual interest. Following from their divergent visions of civil society, libertarians and communitarians articulate distinctive metaphors of citizenship and human dignity. Whereas

libertarians imagine the citizen as the *private rights-bearing consumer*, communitarians envision citizens as *publicly enmeshed clansmen* who are “tied to [their] community by birth, blood, and bathos” (Barber 1999: 15).

Within recent years, some scholars have argued that neither the libertarian nor the communitarian vision of civil society is adequate. Benjamin Barber argues for a “strong democratic” view of civil society that seeks to balance individual freedom with moral obligation. From this vantage point, “civil society’s ideal citizen . . . is not as steeped in solidarity as the clansmen but is far more free; she is less radically autonomous than the consumer but better able to enjoy the comforts of neighborly associations” (Barber 1999: 23). Interestingly, churches are among the comforting, neighborly associations that Barber names in staking out this middle-range vision of civil society. Yet, of course, such claims raise questions about the appropriate place of religious congregations and faith-based organizations in American civil society. Are churches, as a rule, neighborly associations? What comforts do churches provide, and who are its beneficiaries? More broadly, how do congregations navigate around what Barber charges to be the extremes of an atomizing voluntarism (libertarianism) and a stifling collectivism (communitarianism)?

With these questions in mind, we now examine the distinctive social dynamics underlying poverty relief in two different Mississippi congregations. The first of the churches featured here is Temple Zion Church of God in Christ (COGIC). A predominantly African-American Christian denomination in the Holiness-Pentecostal tradition, COGIC is among the largest black denominational bodies in the U.S., and is the single largest black Pentecostal body in the world (Baer and Singer 1992: 155). COGIC, which traces its origins to the early twentieth-century Holiness movement in Mississippi, currently boasts a total of 5.5 million adherents (Lindner 2000). It enjoys a strong presence among Southern blacks, with its headquarters located near the Mississippi-Tennessee border in Memphis.

We compare Temple Zion-COGIC with Main Street Southern Baptist Church. Main Street is a white, upper-middle class church affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention.

The Southern Baptists are the predominant denomination in the religious landscape of the South in general and Mississippi in particular. In northeast Mississippi, confirmed Southern Baptist churchgoers alone account for as much as almost fifty percent of all church adherents (Bradley et al. 1992). With the Convention founded in 1845, Southern Baptists have a long history in the South and currently claim 15.7 million confirmed members nationwide (Lindner 2000). Approximately one quarter of all Southern Baptists reside in the four southeastern states of Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, and Kentucky (Bradley et al. 1992).

As the following accounts reveal, both Temple Zion–COGIC and Main Street Southern Baptist are favorably disposed toward the forging of church–state partnerships in aid–provision to the local poor. Yet, despite this point of consensus, pastoral narratives of poverty relief in these two congregations are rooted in fundamentally different visions of civil society, citizenship, and human dignity.

Defending Big Government: Tribulation and Transformation at Temple Zion–COGIC

Temple Zion Church of God in Christ (COGIC) is a large, thriving, and politically engaged African American congregation located in a northeastern Mississippi town of approximately twenty–thousand residents. As a congregation with four–hundred members—and similar figures in Sunday service attendance—this church is competing effectively in its local religious economy. The membership of Temple Zion is quite young. Seventy percent of the membership is under thirty–five years old and virtually all are younger than fifty. Elder Cornelius Smith, Temple Zion’s pastor of eighteen years, attributes his predominantly female membership—seventy percent women—to the abundance of black males in the community “who have problems with authority due to their reaction to slavery and Jim Crowism.” Despite its young and predominantly female membership, Temple Zion is a heterogeneous religious congregation in other significant ways. White collar, skilled, and service sector employees, as well as laborers, homemakers, and unemployed persons are well represented at Temple Zion.

Temple Zion's physical facilities are impressive. The church has over fifteen classrooms for Sunday school instruction, a cafeteria that can accommodate nearly three-hundred persons, and a balcony that serves them well on Sunday mornings as they attempt to grow their membership to around five hundred. Temple Zion's annual budget of \$300,000 is modest when compared with its slate of highly active relief programs: rental payment assistance, temporary shelter, clothing, various types of counseling, and financial assistance to those in need of medical services. Perhaps most notably, this church runs a food pantry that, according to Elder Smith, serves over five-hundred families per month and utilizes a grocery voucher system for items not stored in their pantry. In all, Elder Smith says that his church provides relief to nearly six-hundred people in a typical month. Thus, in proportion to its financial and human resources, Temple Zion provides many different types of relief to a sizable number of people.

Debunking the Myths: Blackness, Welfare Reciprocity, and the Question of Fraud

Elder Smith is forty-five years old, has a high-school diploma, and is one of a few pastors in our sample who is not seminary trained. Elder Smith's critical political sensibilities are clearly and unabashedly manifested throughout his discussion of state-sponsored welfare programs. "There is a myth in our country that welfare recipients are mostly black," Elder Smith asserts. This erroneous belief, he contends, has found fertile soil in the minds of both whites and African Americans—even local black pastors: "I think that sometimes black preachers hear that [welfare services may be transferred to local churches], and we think 'My God, the whole welfare burden will be on our shoulders.' That is not true."

Elder Smith also critiques what he views as other "welfare myths" as the opportunity arises. He has little patience for those who assume that the allegedly all-black recipients of public assistance commonly "abuse" the system through "welfare fraud." Like several other black pastors in the local area, Elder Smith cites concrete instances in which welfare fraud—when understood in a broad, though very practical sense—has been perpetrated by privileged whites who extract benefits indirectly from welfare recipients. Among the most common

examples cited are white landlords who artificially inflate rental prices in public housing for local blacks, and small-scale merchants who keep retail prices high in order to absorb the monies of welfare recipients in nearby neighborhoods. Elder Smith, who has personally seen such abuse, adroitly redefines the notion of “welfare reciprocity” when he says: “White people will be crying [about welfare reform]. It will be the mom and pop grocery stores who have been taking the food stamps and taking the welfare checks the first of every month [that will be adversely affected by welfare reform]. They will be going broke.”

Interestingly, this critical appraisal of such welfare myths has not spawned jaundiced resignation or political apathy for Elder Smith. To the contrary, Elder Smith’s vibrant religious convictions create for him an unyielding sense of confidence in his congregation’s ability to minister effectively to many different disadvantaged populations. Material relief is provided at Temple Zion in many different forms—to the hungry at the church’s food pantry, to the infirm who struggle with medical and prescription bills, to parents of limited means in need of dependable child care, and to those whose rental bills sometimes arrive before the tenants themselves are capable of paying them. Other types of sustenance—non-material in character—are provided to the likes of struggling couples in need of marriage counseling, depressed persons with flagging self-esteem, or addicts requiring drug rehabilitation counseling.

If they are not already attending Temple Zion, clients of the congregation’s food pantry and other relief programs are viewed unambiguously as future church members. In this sense, Temple Zion melds accountability standards—namely, the expectation of church membership—with compassionate relief. While some critics would characterize such expectations as aid provision with “strings attached,” Elder Smith does not. He proclaims unflinchingly: “We hope that somehow, if we show enough love, [aid recipients] will come back to our services and be a part of our church.” He continues: “In our sessions, we offer Christ many times and there are those who don’t really want Christ.” The church’s “solution” to those who reject such efforts at proselytization is pragmatic but uncompromising—ministers “give them counseling of a secular nature also. But we let them know that we believe [in Jesus Christ], and we teach that Jesus

Christ is the answer to all of our problems.”

Religious Civility and Kinship with the Poor

Elder Smith adamantly states that their distinctive approach to relief provision moves public assistance recipients from welfare dependency into more economically productive endeavors. To discourage dependency on public assistance programs, Elder Smith critically invokes the notion of the welfare “handout” from the libertarian ideology of *self sufficiency*. However, he changes the meaning of terms such as “handout” and “dependency” by giving them a spiritual, otherworldly cast. By invoking the notion of *spiritual dependency*, Elder Smith argues that all believers “depend” on the grace of God for their “welfare”—broadly understood:

All I can tell you is two-thirds of our people when they came to us were on welfare. It is my Sunday morning sermon at some points [that is] on that [topic]. [I tell my congregants:] “If you are on welfare, get off as soon as you can because welfare is limiting your future. Welfare is hampering your success.” That’s how I teach it. I tell them this. “It is not God’s will for you to be on welfare. And it insults God for Him to be our Father, [for] us to trust in Him, and we have to have a handout every day of our lives.” So, therefore, I teach it is essential to us growing, to being proper witnesses, that we don’t find ourselves on welfare. And I would dare to say [that] out of the numbers we called to you earlier [i.e., two-thirds of those who came to the church on welfare], I would dare to say that less than ten percent are on welfare.

Elder Smith therefore critiques public assistance—rather than its recipients per se—because such programs are set up to undermine the believer’s dependency on God. From this perspective, all believers—rather than just welfare recipients—must recognize their common state of dependency.

Through such sermons, Elder Smith charismatically champions achieving “success” and fully exploring one’s “future” through means other than welfare. Regardless of how terms such as “success” and “future” are interpreted by his diverse congregants, Elder Smith claims to be achieving results by preaching against public assistance programs. In a similar fashion, Elder Smith boasts a ninety–five percent success rate for marriage counseling with church members and estimates a one–in–two long–term success rate through the church’s drug rehabilitation program.

If these dramatic success rates are taken at face value, how are we to make sense of them? Perhaps these outcomes result from the unique combination of compassion and judgment that characterize Temple Zion’s relief efforts. At Temple, the moral logics of compassion and judgment are seamlessly interwoven with another. Moreover, these twin moral imperatives are *practiced as personalized convictions* rather than merely *preached as abstract principles*. Elder Smith claims kinship—literally and figuratively—with those on welfare: “My sister was a welfare recipient. Now she has a school of ministry.” Redemption–from–public–assistance narratives such as these chart the move from tribulation (welfare dependency) to transformation (productive endeavors) and, ultimately, triumph (spiritual dependency complemented by pro–active Christian service). Such stories mirror the retrospective accounts conveyed by ex–convicts or recovering alcoholics who have effectively wrestled with and scored victories over their own “demons” (cf. Denzin 1987, 1993). Perhaps most importantly, recovery and redemption narratives at Temple Zion are personalized, autobiographical accounts of *my life* and *my family* in which the poor are understood not as “they” or “them” but as “us” and “ours.” The sense of intimacy conveyed in these narratives provides fertile soil for cultivating social capital. Elder Smith recounts how some churches lament that very poor persons “clutter...their foyers and their lobbies.” He is critical of such views, and also implicitly critiques outreach efforts that offer relief to the poor from afar: “To us, it is [the poorest people] who we want. We want to show love to the most dejected people who are nearest [by us] to help. And so we look for those kinds of folks.”

It is in this spirit that Elder Smith addresses the expectation of church attendance from recipients of congregational relief. According to Elder Smith, success rates in their relief programs are significantly lower for non-members. The distinctively therapeutic interaction provided by *both* counseling *and* church attendance—the latter of which entails personal commitment and fosters a deep connection with the community of believers—is apparently the key to producing such positive results. Utilizing this “both/and” strategy of aid provision, Elder Smith says that those who seek out the most holistic forms of counseling at Temple Zion “get their lives straight with the Lord and with each other.” Continuing in this vein, Elder Smith asserts: “You cannot expect to be irresponsible, cannot expect to be footloose and fancy free, not go anywhere near the church and expect the church to always help you. You have got to get into a church and support that church.”

Thus, while Temple Zion stops short of formally *requiring* aid receivers to join *their church*, recipients are strongly encouraged to join *a church* or to reactivate their membership in the church they previously attended. In fact, Temple Zion aid workers will phone a church listed by a prospective recipient and inquire about his or her status at that church. In Elder Smith’s view, African American church membership in the South is not so much a question of rational choice or personal preference; rather, it is a necessity for survival: “Because truly, in my opinion, the black church is the only hope black folk have. Always was.”

Consequently, Elder Smith is extremely positive about the potential for his church to expand their current slate of services with an infusion of government monies. Elder Smith contends that, when compared with government welfare, church-based relief is far superior. Faith-based aid, he says, can “cut through the bureaucracy and get the money to the people in a much more efficient manner.” In Elder Smith’s eyes, the efficiency of faith-based social service delivery is due, in part, to churches facing lower overhead costs “than they are paying downtown” in government offices. Under Charitable Choice, this reasoning goes, faith communities can use volunteer labor and existing congregational networks to register significant savings in wages, benefits, and operating expenses.

Denominationalism Trumps Blackness: Religious Incivility among African American Churches

Elder Smith sees an important role for African American interfaith and parachurch organizations as Charitable Choice initiatives are considered. However, Elder Smith seems dismayed by the fact that parachurch groups have not developed strong social ties in his local township. Elder Smith argues that white churches have been working cooperatively for some time now, and he believes that black churches must begin doing the same. Taking an optimistic future-oriented tone, Elder Smith envisions black faith communities wielding significant power if they work collectively for social change. He charges that black churches in his county alone control nearly four million dollars. He laments the fact that these monies are currently spread over various financial institutions in the region.

Yet, if “the Black Church”—as he uses this singular term—were to pool their resources and invest such monies collectively, they could transform supracongregational financial clout into political leverage:

For that money, we [would] want that bank to give us a board position so that we can sit on that board and watch how that bank does business. How it makes its loans and is it fair and viable? Out of those concerns, we believe the Black Church can become [a social force] to get things done. Out of those concerns, we believe the Black Church could become a voting block that could control campaigns, that has the ability to do petitions, and to get things done as an effort to pull us together—both economically and socially—which is what has not been done in the past. The preacher in the past has made his money by amplifying differences. Your Baptist, our Pentecostal, your Methodist, our Presbyterian— through those differences, we have kept ourselves apart. And we are the only group that does it, because even though

the white brothers may be Pentecostal or Baptist or Presbyterian, they have a council of churches. They get together and they make decisions in those church meetings that coincide with the church meetings down the road. And they get things done. That is what we haven't been doing.

In connecting the collective deployment of church-based resources to would-be institutional transformations outside of the congregational setting, Elder Smith and pastors like him offer an extremely expansive conceptualization of faith-based aid. From this vantage point, churches should not simply be in the business of caring for down-and-out individuals on an intermittent or even semi-regular basis. Rather, Elder Smith argues that churches can and should function as critical institutions within civil society—critical in the sense that faith communities could represent the interests of the oppressed who may otherwise be invisible in the most powerful social institutions (e.g., banks, lending agencies). As the community's collective conscience, such churches could mobilize the oppressed through petition drives and marches to advance the causes of equity and justice.

Why, then, has “the Black Church” as envisioned by Elder Smith not coalesced in his home community? His reply is short and pointed: “I think our prejudices and our Reformational racism is probably worse than the white people.” It would seem that the collective interest of African Americans in local Southern communities has been undermined by denominational splintering that separates different factions of black Protestants, black Christians, and even black religious adherents in general (e.g., Christian vs. Muslim) one from another. In this way, local black congregations have found the cultivation of broad-based, bridging capital most elusive. Because these faith communities remain divided by congregational and denominational boundaries, Elder Smith recognizes that churches are not wholly insulated from producing pernicious social hierarchies of their own. Congregations that show great civility toward the poor can be most uncivil with one another.

Local Empowerment in Rural Mississippi: Redeeming Community or Resurrecting Jim Crow?

Divisions among churches, Elder Smith warns, could influence Charitable Choice initiatives if not implemented with sensitivity to this issue. As noted above, Elder Smith says that some of his fellow African–American clergymen have bought into erroneous characterizations of welfare as a “black issue.” Apart from the empirical inaccuracy of such conceptualizations, these notions could place the burden of responsibility for “fixing” welfare squarely—if not solely—on the shoulders of black social institutions, African–American community leaders, and the alleged lack of initiative exhibited by “their” welfare recipients. Such reactions actually reinforce the idea that welfare—and, perhaps, welfare reform through Charitable Choice—is the problem of black America.

In addressing this prospect, Elder Smith recounts how a white pastor from an affluent church nearby recently inquired about routing his church’s aid through Temple Zion. While Elder Smith was initially interested in the idea of serving more needy persons with monetary assistance from this nearby church, he found the other pastor’s motivations for the proposed plan to be highly suspect upon hearing the details:

A while back a large white church in Mississippi came to me ... [A pastor from that church inquired:] “Can we funnel our assistance programs through you?” I saw this as a great opportunity to get more money to more people. I said, “Certainly. What are you talking about putting through?” This was a large church. This church probably does three million [dollars] a year or more, so [it is] a large white church. And so I said, “What are you talking about money–wise?” And the pastor said to me, “We will give you four thousand dollars a year.” I was insulted. I stood up and walked out, and he said, “What is the problem?” I said, “I am insulted.” ... At this time our gross income was roughly two–

hundred thousand [dollars] a year or a little better. I said, “We spend anywhere from \$14,000 to \$20,000 in helping people already. You mean to tell me you are going to offer me \$4,000 a year to run all of your people through us? Your problem is you simply want to rid your lobby of a certain kind of people and put them in my lobby. You are not serious about the problem. So, when you want to spend some real money, we will talk.” So I think the problem we are going to have is that if the government I going to do this, there has to be some real strict guidelines on how the money is appropriated at a state level so that it won’t get into the wrong hands and the wrong churches [but] will get to where the people really need it.

Narratives such as these reveal the concerns that some pastors who are positively disposed toward Charitable Choice harbor about the actual implementation of such initiatives. When offered a minuscule sum to perform a great deal more anti-poverty work, Elder Smith realized that the pastor wishing to route that church’s aid programs through Temple Zion was less concerned with assisting the poor than with maintaining a comfortable social distance between an increasingly visible underclass and the affluent congregants of his white church.

Elder Smith’s last words on this subject clearly indicate his concern that pastoral and congregational motivations to help the poor are an important consideration as political devolution places the responsibility for welfare administration and work placement on local communities. Local communities—for all of the merits of grassroots empowerment—are not bereft of their own stratification mechanisms, including denominational, racial, and class-based hierarchies:

Whenever I hear people in Congress and the senators say things like, “We have to make government smaller and giver power back to state governments” [pause]. To a Southern black person

[pause]. Whenever I hear them say those kinds of terms, I know that means that [political power and resource control] is going to be put in the hands of the good old boys. It is going to be handled the way it was handled all the time. And the people who need [help] most won't get it. And so for that reason, I opt to say, "Let's keep the government [big]." I too would like to see a small government. But I would like to see a more fair system to where the government could be smaller because we have rectified the problem [of] each state being able to discriminate when they want to.

Thus, while expressing his generally positive affect toward Charitable Choice partnerships, Elder Smith advances a pointed critique of pro-welfare-reform discourse and a stern warning about placing too much faith in the political devolution of federal assistance programs.

Praising Local Empowerment at Main Street Southern Baptist

In many respects, Main Street Southern Baptist Church is a very different religious congregation than Temple Zion. Whereas Temple Zion's Elder Smith is not seminary trained, Main Street's pastor Robert Davidson obtained his Doctor of Ministry from New Orleans Baptist Seminary. Pastor Davidson, in his late fifties, ministers to a large, affluent, upper-middle-class congregation. Main Street boasts a membership of well over two-thousand persons and operates debt-free with an annual budget approaching one-and-a-half million dollars. The complex of buildings that make up this church house a chapel capable of seating eight-hundred Sunday service attendees, and include fifty classrooms, ten offices, expansive kitchen facilities, and one of the largest children's playgrounds among area churches. Main Street, situated at the geographical and social center of the small Southern town in which it resides, has been housed on its current site for more than one-hundred and fifty years. Pastor Davidson, an articulate minister who is well-acquainted with Southern culture through his pastoral training and recent

appointments, is proud that his church has “always been very strong and active locally” during his tenure there.

Religious Incivility toward the Poor? Faith–Based Benevolence and Highway Bums

Main Street, which offers church–door aid to about twenty persons in a typical month, administers a range of relief programs directly: payment of rental, utility, or medical bills; food assistance; temporary shelter; counseling. These direct forms of congregational relief are complemented by Main Street’s extensive support of several local interfaith efforts. As Pastor Davidson explains, Main Street’s

benevolence program...is well–known in the city. Sometimes too well–known because of the number of calls we get, and the people who refer people to us for help. We sometimes kid about it—that somewhere out on a bridge on the outside of town is our phone number with our names. So that people who are sort of the highway bums—and that’s not a derogatory term, it just is a term—[we sometimes kid that] if they come to town...[they can easily find out] what our phone number is and who to call for a handout, for food, for money.

Pastor Davidson adds that his church gets referrals from “just about everyone” in town, including the emergency telephone service, the police department, and various aid agencies. In addition to the list of relief efforts described above, most of Main Street’s Sunday school classes have adopted needy families. These adopt–a–family relief efforts often provide the children in less privileged households with school clothes, winter coats, and other needed items over a sustained period of time.

Main Street Baptist is also involved in parachurch relief efforts. The church supports and coordinates some of their activities with Outreach and Uplift Relief (OUR) Ministries, an interfaith organization that provides select material goods (e.g., food, clothes) to needy residents.

OUR Ministries commands more resources than many small churches in the area and serves as the “go-to” option for small-church pastors when faced with aid requests that would deplete their meager resources. Interestingly, Main Street’s connection to OUR Ministries is the converse of that of many small churches. Pastor Davidson stresses that Main Street’s own aid programs are more financially robust than virtually any nearby parachurch agencies. “They probably send more people to us than we do to them,” Pastor Davidson concludes, adding: “they probably have less to work with in that whole organization than our church.”

In addition to these relief endeavors, Main Street has also offered assistance in opening a local emergency shelter for children. Main Street has allocated approximately one thousand dollars per month to underwrite that shelter, which is run by the local Salvation Army. Pastor Davidson refers to this cooperative partnership financed by Main Street as “great,” adding: ‘I’m proud that we don’t run [the children’s shelter]. I told our Church family, I said, “You’ve got to look at this and say, ‘A thousand dollars a month is cheap.’” Pastor Davidson considers all of their current relief efforts to be effective, and explains tersely: “our goal is ministry, not programs.”

Welfare Culture and the Problem of Accountability

Yet, Pastor Davidson’s tone takes a less than sanguine turn when he reflects on his church’s experience with ex-Governor Fordice’s Faith & Families of Mississippi program—the first faith-based welfare reform initiative of its kind in the U.S. (Bartkowski and Regis 1999, 2000). Echoing the sentiments expressed by other pastors at white churches of privilege in our study, Pastor Davidson expresses frustration with the apparent failure of program applicants to appear for their designated appointments with the church. Pastor Davidson recounts the typical scenario: “The Faith & Families office will call us and they’ll say, ‘We’ve set up an appointment for you with Ms. So-and-so to come see you at a certain time related to your involvement [in Faith & Families].’ And then the person doesn’t show ... And [Faith & Families] will try to follow up and [the applicant] can’t reschedule.” Pastoral frustration with this state of affairs is

amplified by the fact that Main Street was among the churches who were most supportive of this program in its initial stages.

As Pastor Davidson sees it, the underlying cause of this no-show outcome is the reluctance of welfare recipients to submit themselves to the church's scrutiny. From this vantage point, welfare recipients have a strong aversion to being held accountable for their lifestyle and actions. With choice words that underscore the social distance between Main Street and the undeserving poor, Pastor Davidson contends: "We've basically raised up a culture that says, 'We really do deserve the money and you don't deserve anything from us.'" Remembering the sixties as a period of cultural decadence rather than progressive social change, he asserts: "Since the 1960s, it has been a problem because we've developed a culture to allow people who really don't want any accountability required [of them]." He links this anti-accountability orientation to the problems associated with the Faith & Families program: "I think a lot of times, if a person realizes maybe if they are going to get involved in having a church and a mentorship, they are probably going to have to change some things in their lives. And they are going to have to face some responsibilities they don't want to face."

Memorializing Civility on the Southern Plantation

Pastor Davidson says that longstanding public assistance programs were initially predicated on an altruistic, "want to help" mentality. Yet, they blossomed into a "welfare system" fraught with corruption: "The welfare system basically operates in America today not for the poor person, but for the administrators." He asserts that such corruption is currently not incidental, but intrinsic to federal government programs: "What is it they say? That something like twenty-something percent of all federal welfare money is gulped up in fraud. In dishonesty." In contrast to Elder Smith at Temple Zion, Main Street's pastor reviles big government and strongly supports political devolution: "Most of those people [in the federal government] got those jobs through political appointments. They were put there to do just what they're doing—that's to lie, cheat, and steal ... I don't have a lot of appreciation for [federal

government workers].”

As a counterpoint to federal government fraud, Pastor Davidson highlights the grassroots altruism that he says emerged in local northeastern Mississippi communities during the protracted power outage recently resulting from a winter ice storm. This storm, which left thousands without electricity and in many cases heat for as much as one week, was met with “neighbors...show[ing] up with chain saws and drag[g]ing limbs and help[ing] their neighbors. And they want to help. They want to cover that roof. They want to give food.”

Consistent with his celebration of local altruism, Pastor Davidson is confident that his church could figure prominently into Charitable Choice initiatives if they were to be implemented in Mississippi. When asked what type of relief programs his church could sponsor with an infusion of block grant monies, he answers confidently, “Anything.” However, his optimism toward Charitable Choice at Main Street does not translate into blanket support of such initiatives. Churches as a group, Pastor Davidson contends, are not above reproach where funds designed to underwrite relief provision are concerned. Now qualifying his optimism about Charitable Choice, Pastor Davidson mentions several instances in which financial partnerships between the state and local congregations have gone awry. In one instance, he says that a Memphis church “organized themselves to accept money—government money—to build public housing. And the pastor got sent to jail eventually because he spent most of the money on himself and his family, his brother-in-laws ... And eventually there were no houses built. The same thing happened on the Gulf Coast with a guy ... And so, sometimes the unscrupulous have a unique way of getting into those things.”

In a striking point of departure from Temple Zion’s Elder Smith, Pastor Davidson argues that attitudes about race and ethnicity would generally not affect the distribution of aid under Charitable Choice. When asked if race would affect the disbursement of funds to churches or, ultimately, to the needy, he responds point blank: “No, because any group involved in [providing] aid today, to anyone, has long since dealt with that one.” So, whereas Elder Smith points to the persistence of racism within both black and white local churches, Pastor Davidson

charges that racism is an issue of the distant past—the quite distant past, it would seem.

According to Pastor Davidson, blacks were previously offered “help” by Southern plantation owners and farmers. Pastor Davidson’s views of enduring white altruism toward “the black community” are most clearly evidenced when he is asked if he thinks race affects the way in which relief is currently provided by local congregations:

No, I doubt that [race currently affects the distribution of church aid]. In fact, see, particularly in the South [pause]. And, you know, I’m a Southerner. [I] grew up in the South, [and] have lived in a lot of other places, but [pause]. Southerners have always seen themselves as having to help, say, the black community. You know, the old plantation owner, he did it. The farmers did it. It’s always been there. And so, race has—in my own lifetime—has never been a problem in relationships. Even when you had the active Ku Klux Klan and the marchers and everything, there’s always been a desire to help. And I don’t think that’s ever been on a racial basis.

Using such language, Pastor Davidson suggests that even during tumultuous times—Klan activity and public marches supporting racial segregation and Jim Crow laws—white Southerners have “always seen themselves as having to help...the black community.” One of the most striking features of this narrative is the way in which it portrays whites as the benevolent, compassionate agents of relief. Given this discursive memorializing of the past, white benevolence effectively trumps Klan activity and paints “old [Southern] plantation owners”—popularly viewed as a source of black oppression—in a positive light. This revisionist narrative, however, assumes a singular and homogeneously needy “black community,” claims which would likely draw criticism from Temple Zion’s Elder Smith. Recall that Elder Smith pointedly criticizes racialized “welfare myths” which equate neediness and aid reciprocity with membership in “the black community.”

Civility toward the Deserving Poor: The Plight of Working Families

In the end, however, Pastor Davidson argues that the group about whom he is “most concerned” are not the recipients of welfare, but instead working poor families. The race of the hypothetical working poor family he describes is unmarked. However, the father in this nuclear family evinces an impressive work ethic, faces a heavy tax burden, and—through no fault of his own—cannot afford to provide the children he loves with the most basic forms of health care.

Pastor Davidson explains:

That’s the man who’s going out there and working everyday—forty and fifty hours a week. And yet, after he pays his social security and gets his income tax taken out of this salary—his pay—he comes home and he doesn’t have enough money to [look after] the basic needs of his family. And for whatever reason, the company he is working for does not provide insurance coverage or medical benefits. And he can’t afford the hospitalization insurance for his family. So, his children can’t go to the dentist. His children can’t get their vaccinations and their check-ups. When they get a fever, they just do the best they can. That’s the group now that I am most concerned about. And in our system we’re destroying that family.

Although issues of “deservingness” are not addressed directly in this narrative of the struggling working poor family, one could argue that the committed breadwinner in such families makes a compelling foil against which the stereotypical “welfare mother”—bereft of a hard-working husband/provider, and perhaps prone to shiftlessness herself—can be counterposed. In fairness, Pastor Davidson does not draw such invidious comparisons. Yet, his overriding concern for this intact working poor family hints at a moral orientation that could affect the implementation of church–state partnerships in his congregation and others like it.

Compassion, Judgment, and Religious Civility: Pursuing Civil Society through Faith-Based Poverty Relief

In this era of Charitable Choice, how effectively can faith-based poverty ministry function in the “parallel polis” of American civil society? What are the prospects and pitfalls associated with inviting religious organizations to participate more centrally in social service provision to the poor? The portraits of poverty relief in two prominent Mississippi congregations presented here provide us with some intriguing—though admittedly programmatic—answers to such pressing questions.

Where poverty relief is concerned, congregations can act as comforting, neighborly organizations even as they impose various demands upon the recipients of their benevolence. Faith-based poverty relief, in many respects, adheres to the “strong democratic” vision of civil society by seeking to balance personal freedoms with moral obligations. Precisely how do congregations engaged in poverty relief navigate between rights and responsibilities? As illustrated here and in our other work on this topic (Bartkowski and Regis 2000), congregations act upon their vision of the good society and the model citizen by melding together two otherwise competing moral logics—compassion and judgment (cf. Bartkowski 2001; Bartkowski, Wilcox, and Ellison 2000; Becker 1997). As a moral imperative, compassion mandates empathy, mutuality, and forgiveness. Judgment, the moral counterpart of compassion, mandates accountability standards, ethical discernment, and (where needed) social hierarchies to adjudicate moral disputes. Religious organizations imagine and pursue their visions of civil society through poverty relief efforts that draw together compassion and accountability in congregationally distinctive ways.

At Temple Zion, compassionate giving is manifested in the kinship its congregants claim with the poor. Temple Zion assists over twenty times more persons per month via direct church-door relief than does Main Street—where religious leaders jest that they are too well-known among the local “highway bums.” Temple’s Elder Smith argues that his relief providers

consciously seek to aid the poorest of the poor within the local community. On the face of it, then, Temple Zion seems to evince a more compassionate orientation toward the poor. Yet, compassionate benevolence at Temple Zion is only part of the “moral” in this story. Such compassion is deftly interwoven with accountability standards at this COGIC congregation. Temple’s pastor and aid-providers strive to convert recipients of church relief to become members of their congregation by continually “offering Christ” to non-believers. Temple Zion’s aid-providers want beneficiaries of their benevolence to belong to a church, and will even call the home congregation named by prospective aid recipients to determine if these individuals are committed church members or “footloose” solicitors. Such accountability standards are imposed with the hope that aid recipients will recognize their dependency on God and avoid welfare dependency, which Elder Smith chides from the pulpit as an “insult” to the Almighty.

Compassion, of course, is not absent from Main Street’s benevolence programs. Rather, the moral logics of compassion and accountability are woven together—albeit differently—within this congregation. Main Street offers financial support to many local benevolence agencies. Agencies underwritten by Main Street’s financial support serve as a liaison—even a buffer—between this upper-middle-class congregation and the less privileged poor. Compassion in this context is manifested not through direct kinship, but rather via congregational philanthropy to middle-man charitable organizations. Moreover, Main Street’s Pastor Davidson exudes compassion for the hard-working, two-parent family whose father’s income, after taxes, leaves him unable to meet his children’s basic needs. Yet, this same compassion is not manifested toward those families unwilling to submit their lives to the scrutiny of the church—which Pastor Davidson chides as an aversion to “accountability.”

The decidedly different mixes of compassion and accountability within these two congregations produce divergent definitions of civility and disparate appraisals of political devolution. As an African American raised in the South, Temple Zion’s Elder Smith worries that political devolution under welfare reform will effectively prevent the federal government from supervising local “good old boy” networks which historically functioned to reproduce class

and race-based hierarchies in rural Southern townships. The federal enforcement of Civil Rights legislation in states such as Mississippi may generate antipathy against “government interference” among some local residents, including white conservatives, whose enthusiasm for a new federalism may be rooted in a desire to preserve racial privilege rather than in more lofty philosophical commitments to grassroots democracy or local empowerment. Terms such as “local empowerment” raise concerns for this Southern black pastor who fears a return to Jim Crow politics in which local power structures trump federal Civil Rights legislation and erode gains made through federal mandates of equal opportunity and Affirmative Action.

By contrast, Main Street’s Pastor Davidson is a champion of the new federalism and political devolution. He believes that racial issues in the South are largely resolved. In his view, Southern whites have always looked after local African Americans—even during the plantation era. Much of his support for welfare reform and Charitable Choice is linked to his commitment to grassroots empowerment, which he has seen manifested most recently during harsh winter power outages in his local community.

In the end, our study reveals that pastoral visions of civil society vary dramatically across congregational contexts (see also Bartkowski and Regis 2000). To be sure, the pastors featured in this study are not thoroughgoing libertarians, nor are they wholehearted communitarians. By melding the logics of compassion and judgment, congregational poverty relief gravitates between these moral poles. In many respects, the pastoral discourse of poverty relief featured here aligns closely with a strong democratic vision of civil society in which freedom and flexibility are placed in ongoing tension with moral obligation and accountability (Barber 1999). Although Temple Zion and Main Street share a joint commitment to a strong democratic vision of civil society, these two congregations utilize very different poverty relief strategies, and mix the moral antinomies of compassion and judgment in culturally distinctive ways. Thus, as religious organizations become more central to social service provision in twenty-first century America, there is much to be gained by observing—carefully yet critically—the complex moral orientations adopted by religious leaders and their congregations. Civility demands nothing less.

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