

Views on the Black Megachurch:
Du Bois, the Tuskegee Machine and World Changers Church International

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Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

December, 2015

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:

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Introduction

In his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois identifies the most critical and most cited issue in human social relations, stating, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line...”¹ While arguably not *the* problem of the twenty-first century, the color-line is still a significant problem, as seen in the recent murders of people of color by militarized police forces and in the racially charged chants of white fraternities promoting the exclusion of blacks into their organization. Many scholars have dedicated their lives and their work to studying the problem of the color-line, and in this essay I want to evaluate what Du Bois posed as a part of the solution – the black church.

In the resolution of his study, *The Negro Church*, which was published in 1903, the same year as *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois states:

*The great engine of moral uplift is the Christian church. The Negro church is a mighty social power to-day; but it needs cleansing, reviving, and inspiring, and once purged of its dross it will become as it ought to be, and as it is now, to some extent, the most powerful agency in the moral development and social reform of 9,000,000 Americans of Negro blood.*²

Du Bois saw the potential in the church, believing that it is capable of confronting issues of race, class, and difference in the world. Du Bois understood the primary role of the church to be a social institution, and its secondary purpose as an institution concerned with the spiritual uplift of its members. This possibility first calls for an internal cleansing, however. But what does a cleansing look like? What process must the black

¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover, 1994), 9.

² W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Negro Church* (Atlanta: Atlanta UP, 1903), 208.

church undergo in order to move into its calling? Du Bois contends in the final lines of *The Negro Church*, “The race problem will be solved when Christianity gains control of the innate wickedness of the human heart, and men learn to apply in dealing with their fellows the simple principles of the Golden rule and the Sermon on the Mount”³.

Ultimately, Du Bois argues that the black church should rise up and be the site for social change, a place where priority is given to morals and character above religious dogma and petty denominational differences. What would be the outward evidence that such a stance has been taken within the black church? Du Bois believed that the newer denominations would drive the fulfillment of the call to cleanse, as he notes:

*There is a strong tendency in my country toward the newer denominations. This tendency will have two results: These newer denominations will continue to draw the young people and will continue to push the crusade for religious education. Second, this growth and popularity of the newer denominations will stimulate the older ones to greater efforts and to more intelligent worship. In these and other ways the race is gradually coming out of the darkness into the light, and the next generation will see all the denominations of the South exerting a stronger religious and moral influence upon the Negro than they are to-day doing.*⁴

As an adept sociologist, Du Bois was right. In contemporary American culture, the new denomination is the non-denomination, and these churches are filled with young people. Individuals join and in turn proselytize their friends and families so that eventually they, too, become members. One of the prime examples of the intersection between the non-denominational church and youth is the Black Megachurch, which appeals to younger audiences through the internet, especially through social media.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, 62.

Many Black Megachurches are able to appeal to widely diverse audiences because of the way in which they have branded themselves and have packaged the word of God. The focus of these churches is the individual's relationship with God and converting the young so that they can live long lives dedicated to serving the Kingdom of Christ.

The Black Megachurch, like most African-America Christian institutions both large and small, traces its roots back to slavery, the slave, and the liberation from sorrow interpreted by enslaved Africans most noticeably in the Negro spirituals. These songs are illustrations of how enslaved Africans superimposed their own spiritual beliefs onto Christianity, the very institution used to enslave and justify the bondage of African peoples, as a means of survival. This Africanized Christianity focused on the concepts of paradise in eternal life, as well as the self-recognition found in the liberation stories of the Israelites. In the section "Of the Sorrow Songs" in *Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois explains the melody, the spirit, and the origin of the Negro spirituals. Most importantly he writes,

Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins.⁵

As detailed by Du Bois these songs hold the history, or more accurately, the spiritual and psychological context through which the Black church emerged. Africanized Christianity provided an opportunity for the enslaved peoples to process the horrific traumas experienced during life on the plantation. In his book *Slave Culture in America*, Sterling Stuckey writes:

⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls*, 24.

Fortunately for the slave, the retention of important features of the African cultural heritage provided a means by which the new reality could be interpreted and spiritual needs at least partially met, needs often regarded as secular by whites but as often considered sacred to blacks. The division between the sacred and the secular, so prominent a feature of the modern Western culture, did not exist in black Africa in the years of the slave trade, before Christianity made real inroads on the continent. Consequently, religion was more encompassing to the African in slavery than before, the ring shout being a principal means by which physical and spiritual, emotional and rational, needs were fulfilled. This quality of African religion, its uniting of seeming opposites, was perhaps the principal reason it was considered savage by whites.⁶

Stuckey notes that the uniqueness of Africanized Christianity lies in what whites considered to be the joining of the sacred and the secular. This fusion of the sacred and secular allowed for opportunities for enslaved Africans to release some of the toxicity bound up in their psyche and in their bodies deposited by the cruel bondage of slavery. Africanized Christianity became a coping mechanism, a means of survival and in some instances a call for revolt.

Established on this historical foundation, the black church has now evolved further into the Black Megachurch. Whereas the enslaved Africans took their own spirituality and merged it with Christianity to create an Africanized Christianity, it seems that Black Megachurches have merged the historical and realized institution of the Negro church that developed from Africanized Christianity with the American megachurch of mainstream Protestantism, circa the 1980s, to create another unique synthesis.

The Hartford Institute of Religion Research defines the megachurch as a Protestant church with a weekly attendance that averages 2,000 worshippers or more⁷. However, according to Scott Thumma, large congregations are not a completely new

⁶ Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture in America* (New York; Oxford UP, 1987), 24.

⁷ <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megachurches.html>

development; appearing first around 1955, the modern megachurch culture expanded rapidly during the 1980s⁸. Since its rise in the United States, it has been a focus of study within a variety of disciplines. Alan Wolfe writes that the megachurch is where “American faith has met American culture – and American culture has triumphed”⁹. African-American megachurches have emerged and developed in parallel with the steady rise of the American megachurch. Like other American megachurches, the African-American megachurch has a global reach with international offices, locations, services, businesses, and service projects. Anthony Pinn, a Black Megachurch scholar, and one of its main critics, argues that a link exists between the currently popular “prosperity preaching” practiced in most megachurches – both in America as well as abroad – and the capitalism inherent in American cultural practices. Pinn further asserts that for the African-American megachurch, this prosperity ideology rests on the foundation of the psychology of the slave ancestors and their association of material wealth with prosperity¹⁰. With such large memberships and following the Black Megachurch has a lot of power.

The Black Megachurch differs from the Negro church that Du Bois experienced in that instead of being born directly out of the slave experience, it stands on the trials, tribulations, sacrifices, and successes of the Negro Church, and this heritage grants it a certain level of respect and, more importantly, power both within the immediate

⁸ Scott Thumma, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: Megachurches in Modern American Society* <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/dissertation.html>, 17.

⁹ Alan Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005), 3.

¹⁰ Anthony Pinn, <https://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/divine-acquisition/>

community and specifically in American culture at large. This power and acceptance into American culture and more importantly politics, can be illustrated by megachurch pastor, Bishop T.D. Jakes. T.D. Jakes, founder and pastor of the Dallas based megachurch, The Potter's House, was named "America's Best Preacher" by *Time* magazine in 2001¹¹. He also acted as spiritual advisor to both President Clinton and President Bush, Jr¹²; it appears that Black Megachurch pastors are experiencing positions within larger society that were unimaginable in Du Bois's time.

Because its rituals and practices are often historically rooted in the traditional Black church, the organization of the Black Megachurch does not distinguish it significantly from the church of Du Bois's time as much as the cultural and political context upon which each was able to develop and emerge. It seems that because of the explicit racism that manifested itself through lynchings, rapes, etc., the church known to Du Bois acted as a place of refuge and comfortable socialization. The contemporary megachurch can still be considered in a similar manner, with the added benefit of the political and economic power they possess in greater society.

Many Black Megachurches are nondenominational churches. Some of the most criticized of these practice Word of Faith theology, which states that people speak their situations, good and bad, into existence. These churches seem to uphold a theology of spirituality over religiosity; this seems to fall in line with both Du Bois's professional and personal beliefs. However, a deeper look reveals that within this philosophy lies an inherent materialism.

¹¹ <http://www.thepottershouse.org/Press/TPH-Press-Kit/TDJ-Biography.aspx>

¹² Ibid.

The institutional structure of the Word of Faith megachurches and their leadership does, consequently, reflect a philosophical foundation that is reminiscent of the very culture that Du Bois condemns – capitalism. Many megachurches, black and white, have designed their infrastructure with the very blueprints used by corporations, and because of their status as non-profit organizations, they are protected from federal inquiry. Du Bois reverently called forth educated and moral pastors as he saw the black preacher as the transformed obeah-man, the leader of the Negro race, eventually embodied in figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. Du Bois recognized the importance of the black preacher and would likely be proud to see that the leaders of these Black Megachurches are business savvy, well-educated, and possess political power. However, in all its becoming, in all its desire to appeal to a large audience by mimicking the institutions that compose its cultural context, the Black Megachurch has appropriated capitalist values. These are the same values that once justified the enslavement of Africans. These are the same values that are still dehumanizing persons for profit. Thus, the potential that Du Bois saw in the black church does not anticipate Black Megachurches, such as Word of Faith, despite the potential that its size alone has to bring about change.

In this essay, I argue, then, that not all Black Megachurches are part of the solution to the problem of the color-line. In fact, not only are they not a part of the solution to the color-line, but they are, or are becoming, a part of the problem Du Bois saw the church as combating, since the Black Megachurches deploy capitalist practices and fashion themselves in a manner that complicates their relationship with the status quo. Word of Faith Churches, like Creflo Dollar's World Changers Church International,

can be considered the religious reincarnation of the Tuskegee Machine, and thus subject to a critique similar to that which Du Bois offered in regards to Booker T. Washington and his Institute. This specific critique is troublesome because essentially it undercuts the potential of the black church to be an innovator for change and suggests that it has been re-enlisted by society at large to uphold the status quo. Considering his variegated response to religion, several scholars have studied Du Bois' own personal beliefs, causing many to declare that the scholar was ultimately more spiritual than religious. Yet no one has applied his personal and professional beliefs to the study of the emerging and popular Black Megachurch.

While the Negro church is still in existence in congregations that are not considered megachurches, I have chosen to focus the Du Boisian perspective on these particular churches for a number of reasons. Firstly, their size indicates the power within the communities as well as the larger communities of which they are a part. Secondly, the large boom in the megachurches suggests that we are seeing a trend that may soon become the normative ways in which Black congregants, or more broadly American Christians worship. Thirdly, the Black Megachurches represent an interesting intersection where the fruition of the American dream and the desire to integrate into larger American society are made possible by the acceptance of the entertainment value of black preaching. Scholars including Sandra Barnes, Scott Thumma, Mary Hinton, and Tamelyn Tucker-Worgs, have added valued and much needed research to the study on megachurch culture in America.

In the first part of this essay, I will detail how applying Du Bois' critique of the Tuskegee Machine to World Changers Church International, despite a temporal distance

that totals more than a century, exposes similar issues within the organization and its self-proclaimed function within larger society. In the first section of this essay I will contextualize the Tuskegee Institute and its founder, Booker T. Washington and detail the nature of Du Bois's critique of Tuskegee and Washington's philosophy. In the second section I will provide a brief history and information on Rev. Dr. Creflo Dollar's church, World Changers Church International (WCCI) and use selected criteria developed and employed by Du Bois in his study of the Negro church to provide a Du Boisian perspective of this church. I will then detail exactly how Du Bois's critique of the principles and practices of the Tuskegee Machine can be applied to those of WCCI and in doing so how the church acts as a living example of the successes and problems of living out the principles faithfully espoused by Washington.

Part I: Du Bois's Critique of the Tuskegee Machine

In order to analyze and reapply Du Bois' critique of the Tuskegee Machine, we must first understand the Institute itself, which cannot be done without discussing its founder, Booker T. Washington. Washington spent his early childhood as a slave. Upon emancipation, the newly freed Washington worked in salt mines as well as other hard labor jobs before obtaining employment as a houseboy for Viola Ruffner¹³. As mentioned in his autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, it was his relationship with Mrs. Ruffner that had a profound effect on his principles and ultimately the philosophy that

¹³ Robert J. Norrell, *Up From History: The Life of Booker T. Washington* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2009), 25 – 26.

built and upheld the glorious Tuskegee Institute: “Viola Ruffner instilled in Booker the essence of what German sociologist Max Weber later called the Protestant work ethic, which taught the values of industry, sobriety, thrift, self-reliance, and piety [which] accounted for success in modern capitalist societies”¹⁴. Washington’s subscription to the tenets of hard work and cleanliness were further solidified at Hampton Institute under the tutelage of the school’s headmaster and mentor General Samuel C. Armstrong¹⁵. Moore writes,

In creating a school intended to lift blacks from poverty and ignorance and placing it in the South, Armstrong could have encountered opposition. His advocating industrial education, however, placated conservative whites by assuring them that he did not intend to upset the social hierarchy. At the same time, he had a genuine opportunity to improve the quality of life for his students¹⁶

It is obvious that Armstrong and the principles of the Hampton Institute had a predominant effect on Washington’s personal and professional life. He took what he learned as a student at Hampton and sought to elaborate the model in an attempt to uplift the Negro in the best way he thought possible, by building within the confines of the American societal structure: “...Washington thought of Armstrong as the father he never had; he modeled himself after the man, and Tuskegee after Hampton”¹⁷. Eventually Armstrong recommended Washington for a position as the principal of the Tuskegee Normal School in Alabama and Washington was offered the job and gratefully accepted¹⁸. The humble beginnings of the Tuskegee Institute were located in an old

¹⁴ Ibid, 26.

¹⁵ Jacqueline Moore, *Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Struggle for Racial Uplift* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2003), 21.

¹⁶ Ibid, 22.

¹⁷ Ibid, 23.

¹⁸ Ibid, 26.

church located where the Butler Chapel A.M.E. Zion Chapel of Tuskegee currently stands. The institute was guided by Washington and his conservative practices of how the Negro can uplift himself and subsequently his race through hard work, thrift, and economic prosperity¹⁹. Tuskegee rapidly expanded at the hands of its leader and its pupils. Students took courses in practical fields like agriculture, and sewing, and they also participated in work study by completing jobs around campus, such as planting, caring for livestock, and constructing new buildings²⁰.

The guiding principles of the Tuskegee Institute are embodied by the statue of Booker T. Washington, titled “Lifting the Veil of Ignorance” designed by Charles Keck and dedicated in 1922²¹. It shows the honorable Booker T. Washington uncovering the head and body of a slave draped in heavy cloth. It illustrates the power and desire held by Washington and those at Tuskegee Institute to uplift the Negro through a very specific type of education. Washington proposed that in order for the Negro to advance in America, he had to work hard and develop and maintain strong morals, self-reliance, and self-respect. Thus, the training of the Institute emphasized earning the respect of the whites through agricultural and trade education, and business acumen that translated into economic prosperity and landownership as well as through strong moral character and cleanliness.

Many people – black and white – agreed that Washington’s principles would greatly aid the Negro in advancing his position in society. They were moved by the

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, 27 – 31.

²¹ <http://btwsociety.org/library/honors/09.php>

humble beginnings of the former slave and his tenacity and drive in carving out a better life for himself. Even Du Bois reviewed and praised Washington's autobiography and thought of him as a great man and leader. However, contention arose when his "Atlanta Compromise Speech" sought to promote his strategies of what many critics have labeled "accommodationist" *over* other ideas that more actively resisted the inequalities faced by the Negro in America. One of the most cited lines of this speech is, "In all things social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."²² He calls for both blacks and whites to "cast down your bucket where you are" and to accept the status quo, for now, and work within it to make it out of poverty into a position of more equal standing. The speech was initially received with great applause by both blacks and whites. Ultimately it sought to reconcile black and white Southerners through black hard work and civility.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois analyzes what he believes to be the three main parts of Washington's plan so eloquently declared in his "Atlanta Compromise" speech. Du Bois writes that Washington urged Negroes to "give up, at least for the present, three things - ...political power...insistence on civil rights...higher education of Negro youth, - and concentrate all energies on industrial education, the accumulation of wealth, and the conciliation of the South"²³. Du Bois understood Washington's philosophy and his desire to focus foremost on these three ideas; however, because of his great ability as a sociologist to notice patterns - hence the eerie accuracy of *Souls* in

²² Booker T. Washington, <http://www.historytools.org/sources/Washington-Atlanta.pdf>

²³ Du Bois, *Souls*, 30 - 31.

reference to contemporary society – Du Bois foresaw the potential implications of actively pursuing Washington’s philosophy.

Du Bois lists three major setbacks in the advancement of the Negro in America at the time: “1. The disenfranchisement of the Negro. 2. The legal creation of a distinct status of civil inferiority for the Negro. 3. The steady withdrawal of aid from institutions for the higher training of the Negro”²⁴. Immediately after listing these societal issues Du Bois states, “These movements are not, to be sure, direct results of Mr. Washington’s teachings; but his propaganda has, without a shadow of a doubt, helped their speedier accomplishment”²⁵. He then articulates some of the implications of Washington’s teachings. In other words, Du Bois juxtaposes Washington’s plans and the most pertinent societal issues faced by the Negro as a way to then highlight what he considers to be the “triple paradox” in Washington’s theology:

*1. He is striving notably to make Negro artisans business-men and property-owners; but it is utterly impossible, under modern competitive methods, for working men and property-owners to defend their rights and exist without the rights of suffrage. 2. He insists on thrift and self-respect, but at the same time counsels a silent submission to civic inferiority such as is bound to sap the manhood of any race in the long run. 3. He advocates common-school and industrial training, and depreciates institutions of higher learning; but neither the Negro common schools, nor Tuskegee itself, could remain open a day were it not for teachers trained in Negro colleges, or trained by their graduates*²⁶

In this triple paradox Du Bois lists Washington’s key principles and reveals why each one is problematic by explaining the consequences following from each idea. Can this same logic be an accurate critique when applied to other institutions – in this case

²⁴ Ibid, 31.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

Creflo Dollar's World Changers Church International? This is something we will explore in greater detail in the second section of this essay.

People like to place Du Bois and Washington on the opposite ends of a political spectrum. However, it is important to note that the differences between Du Bois and Washington's philosophies are more nuanced than radical. Du Bois strongly disagreed with Washington's concept of focusing on economic prosperity *instead of* political rights. To be clear, Du Bois was an avid supporter of the economic stability of the black community. In his study, *The Negro Church*, he lauded congregations who managed to stay out of debt and provide useful services to the community. Du Bois recognized the importance of capital as debt was easily becoming the new form of slavery. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, he argues that when Black farmers were doing well instead of saving or investing their profits, they were encouraged to spend, to buy more, to eventually go into debt²⁷. In the post-slavery South, there is no such thing as freedom. Blacks are kept in bondage through debt because of the common belief that "only by the slavery of debt can the Negro be kept at work"²⁸. So, in order for the Black man to be freed from the bonds of debt, Du Bois applauded attempts by individuals and churches to garner their own economic clout.

The destruction of black Wall Street can be seen as evidence of the legitimacy of Du Bois's critique of economic prosperity over political power and suffrage. Black Wall Street was a part of the Negro section of Tulsa, Oklahoma in the early 20th century. As detailed by Scott Ellsworth, in 1921 African-Americans lived on the black side of Tulsa,

²⁷ Ibid, 90.

²⁸ Ibid, 91.

called the Greenwood section²⁹. The black citizens of Tulsa followed the segregation laws and only shopped in their part of town which allowed for a large economic boom³⁰. This town seems like it was prophesied by Washington. Here were Negro people, in their own town, using property and capital to earn the respect of their white neighbors; instead they became the target of a deep-rooted jealousy that ended with the entire town being burned down by envious whites, and because of the lack of legal equality, these people were not protected by their earnings, and the whites who destroyed their town and their livelihoods suffered no consequences³¹. The cause of this incident may have been described by Du Bois as "...the ignorant Southerner hates the Negro, the workingmen fear his competition, the money-makers wish to use him as a laborer..."³². Whites destroyed the prosperous town out of fear and without full citizenship, without representation in government, capital gain was taken away by the lighting of a match, the dropping of a homemade bomb, and the deep-seated fears of inferiority by the members of the other race. With the riots of Tulsa, it is easy to understand why Du Bois valued political representation and suffrage before economic prosperity.

Part of Du Bois's critique states that Washington encourages a submissive role for the Negro as he doesn't seek equality and instead remains silent on crises perpetuated by whites and the social structure that negatively impacts the black community; one example is Washington's silence on the horrors of lynching. Many of his contemporary

²⁹ Scott Ellsworth, "The Tulsa Race Riot." *Tulsa Race Riot: A Report* (Oklahoma City: OK Commission, 2001), 40.

³⁰ Ibid, 43.

³¹ Ibid, 55 – 59.

³² Du Bois, *Souls*, 34.

and even later critics note how Washington stayed silent on the dominant issues of the day including lynching because he did not want to lose the support of sympathetic whites and wealthy benefactors as their monetary contributions were necessary to continue feeding the Tuskegee Machine. Without funding, black people would lose opportunities to get an education, even if it was an industrial one: “For blacks at the bottom of the ladder, Washington’s program offered education, a self-help formula, and, importantly for a group demoralized by the white aggression of that period, a social philosophy that gave dignity and purpose to lives of daily toil”³³. Some critics even assert that his compromising theology was also an attempt to maintain his well-crafted image as well as his position as the H.N.I.C. (Head Negro in Charge), or, as historians and researchers like to call him the “Wizard of Tuskegee.” As detailed by one of his biographers, Robert Norrell, considering the cultural context it would have been quite dangerous for Washington to speak out against lynching because even with his accommodationist position and his relationship to President Roosevelt, his dinner at the White House left him at the receiving end of death threats and overall severely compromised his position as the white nominated spokesperson for the Negro³⁴. Even Du Bois, later in life, long after Washington’s death admitted that for a man who discouraged young men’s involvement in politics that Washington was the ultimate politician who worked within societal restraints to obtain Negro uplift³⁵.

³³ Louis R. Harlan and Raymond Smock, “Booker T. Washington and the Politics of Accommodation,” in *Booker T. Washington in Perspective: Essays of Louis R. Harlan*, (Jackson: U of Mississippi, 1988), 178.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 291.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 177 – 178.

Du Bois saw the university, more generally, the attainment of higher education, and the black church as *the* institutions that would uplift the Negro. Biographer Robert Norrell states that Washington, “saw in Malden [his hometown] that the dominant group in the post-Civil War South regarded black schools and churches, institutions that represented rising black status and independence, as a threat, and as such, they were every bit as vulnerable as the people who filled them”³⁶. Black schools and churches were sites of black agency, and they still are today, though they are arguably less subject to overt racism. There is a connection between the church and the university in that they both seek to educate the black man. We can, then, take the Du Boisian critique applied to places of higher education, Tuskegee Institute, and its leaders, Booker T. Washington, and apply it to what Du Bois considered the future, after cleansing and refocusing, of the Black church, which is more and more prevalently becoming the Black Megachurch. With this strategy and Du Bois’s own prophecy of the place and function of the black church, we can note how his critique of the Tuskegee Machine, might be applied to the Black Megachurch.

Despite more than a century between Washington and Dollar, Tuskegee and World Changers Church, they maintain a similar vision and embody a specific position in larger society that allows for the drawing of comparisons. In some regard, the accommodationist choices made by Booker T. Washington during a time in the society when lynchings and cross burning ran rampant through the South, is more understandable that Dollar’s social and political passivity and silence, as neither the pastor nor the church

³⁶ Norrell, *Up From History*, 28.

has verbally participated in the Black Lives Matter Movement, for example. But as the cover of an issue of *Time* magazine, depicting a black and white photo of a young black man running away from a group of police, adorned in full riot gear, with the caption “America, 1968” crossed out and replaced with the year 2015 illustrates, one can argue that the persistent dehumanization of the black person bridges the gap between the eras of Washington and Dollar. Thus, analyzing and applying Du Bois’s critique of the Tuskegee Machine to World Changers Church International provides unique insight into the latter.

Part II: World Changers Church International – The Religious Reincarnation of the Black Megachurch

Du Bois saw the Black Megachurch as a part of the solution to the problem of the color-line. With megachurches fast becoming a common institution for fellowship and worship, it appears that their popularity promotes an opportunity for the uplift of the Negro as desired by Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, although their methods to attain this enrichment varied. As mentioned earlier Du Bois felt that the black church should focus on the theology of the golden rule and the Christian ethics preached by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. It seems that based on the grandeur of worshippers attending Sunday services and Bible study, that these principles are being taught to and practiced by a large part of the population – especially considering that attending a service can be as simple as turning on the television or visiting a webpage. However, despite its impressive figures, numbers alone are not indicative of an environment

dedicated to social/collective uplift. As we dig deeper, perhaps certain practices of the Black Megachurch are reminiscent of the wolf in sheep's clothing; maybe it is a capitalist institution masked/clothed in the superficial tropes of the black church – the shout music, charismatic preaching, speaking in tongues, and praise dancing. It is with this hypothesis that we will examine World Changers Church International.

In this section we will evaluate World Changers Church International using criteria employed by Du Bois in his study, *The Negro Church*. We will pay close attention to the pastor's education and morality as well as the financial health of the church as its theology and practices involving economic responsibility and success. Before applying this critique I will provide a brief background and history of the church and its leaders.

Dr. Creflo Dollar, Jr., which according to the church websites, is his real name, serves as the pastor of the non-denominational World Changers Church International. He has a bachelor's degree in education from West Georgia College, which is now the University of West Georgia. The biography on his website also mentions that he has a master's and doctorate in counseling. Dollar was also awarded an *honorary* doctorate of Divinity from Oral Roberts University in 1998. His wife, Taffi Dollar, serves as the Co-Pastor of the church and her educational background includes a bachelor's degree in mental health and human services. In addition to the role of co-pastor, Taffi Dollar is also the founder and CEO of Arrow Records, "a Christian-based recording company"³⁷ as well as the creator and overseer of several women's ministries within the church. While

³⁷ <http://www.creflodollarministries.org/About/TaffiDollar.aspx>

these two are the only listed leaders, they seem to have the educational credentials that would deem them fit to lead, at least initially by Du Boisian standards.

While both Creflo and Taffi Dollar both arguably exceed Du Bois's call for preachers to be educated, degrees are not the only mark by which Du Bois considers a person to be a good leader. Du Bois also contends that as leaders, pastors need to live moral lives. According to Du Bois morality is equally as important as "the pulpit is not the only place where the preacher preaches"³⁸. In addition to the preacher's home life acting as an example of good living Du Bois asserts that morality can be assessed in "1. Temperance; 2. Debt paying and business honesty; and 3. Sexual morality"³⁹ Using this as our definition of good moral standing we can apply it to Dollar.

While Rev. Dollar has not displayed any immoral behavior in terms of temperance or sexual lewdness, he is often the source for much criticism. Part of this public criticism stems from his Word of Faith, prosperity teaching, as we will see. Dollar's desire and ability to purchase the church building without any bank financing illustrates his commitment to living a debt free life, but the lack of transparency of World Changers Church International and Creflo Dollar Ministries leaves many to question his business honesty. The organizational structure of the church is unclear and has been a site of contention for many. "As a nondenominational entity, WCCI has no reporting or accountability structure"⁴⁰. Without the oversight of a denomination WCCI is able to decide for itself how to handle the finances of the church.

³⁸ Du Bois, *The Negro Church*, 62.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Mary Hinton, *The Commercial Church: Black Churches and the New Religious Marketplace in America*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2011), 84.

On March 13, 2015 Dollar took to his television program to ask his followers to donate money so that he could purchase a new G650 luxury jet. Dollar professed to his followers that if 200 thousand people donated a ‘mere’ \$300 each, the jet could be purchased in no time and the church could, “help us to continue to spread the gospel around the world”⁴¹. After waves of criticism and backlash from the media, including gospel music pioneer, Kirk Franklin, Dollar removed the request from his website. On one hand, Dollar, espouses freedom from debt and economic prosperity to his congregants. On the other, he petitions them for money that may be outside the range of their budget so that he can purchase an extravagant plane that the congregants will never see, let alone fly in. “The Root” published an article with a video clip on April 23, 2015 where Dollar cites the devil as trying to stop him from spreading the gospel by using people to criticize him for wanting to purchase a \$65 million dollar plane through the donations from his followers.⁴² He preaches to an eager and supportive crowd that he will not let critics keep him from dreaming and trusting and believing in God for material blessings and neither should they. Dollar seems to use his voice to justify his lavish lifestyle to critics who condemn him for profiting off his poor congregants, and to relieve himself of the potential criticism of questioning followers as his material prosperity is of God and only a testament to his faith, and that they too can attain this wealth.

⁴¹ Sarah Posner. "Creflo Dollar's Scam Hurts Taxpayers - CNN.com." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 19 Mar. 2015. Web. 21 Mar. 2015. <<http://www.cnn.com/2015/03/16/opinions/posner-creflo-dollar-gulfstream/>>.

⁴² “Creflo Dollar Says the ‘Devil’ Blocked His Dreams of a \$65,000,000 Jet,” Accessed April 25, 2015.

While I am not sure if Du Bois would call this hypocritical, he would definitely have a complicated response to such displays of immorality. Furthermore, in his piece “The New Negro Church,” Du Bois asserts that in addition to practicing business honesty, the church should play a role in financially bettering the lives of its members. He proposed that churches should procure land and homes to offer congregants at a discounted rate. In other words the church should be a place where all participants, not just pastors, can benefit from pulling resources together⁴³. Dollar seems interested in asking members of his church, many of whom are working-class people, to pool their money and invest in something that solely benefits the pastor, but packages it as the church’s dedication to the spread of the gospel. Du Bois would cite such behavior as immoral and not useful to the economic potential of the church in helping everyone live better lives, not just one person.

On a certain level, the church is interested in the financial well-being of its members, despite directly contributing to the creation and maintenance of the wealth of individuals. World Changers Church International members are expected to mimic the institution’s economic practices as it is inherent in the church’s philosophy. The church offers numerous classes, workshops, seminars, and literature that seeks to educate its members of the importance of fiscal responsibility. In other words, Dollar and his congregation preach and promote financial independence. WCCI expends massive amounts of time and energy expressing the importance of capital in communal and

⁴³ W.E.B. Du Bois and Herbert Aptheker, “The New Negro Church,” in *Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, Addresses, 1887 – 1961* (Amherst, MA: U of Massachusetts Press, 1985), 83 – 85.

individual lives. With a focus on improving the financial lives of its members and the institution as a whole, WCCI, can be likened to what Washington prescribed as the role of the Negro post-slavery. Washington and by default, his Tuskegee Institute, functioned on the principle that if Negroes, for the moment, focus on economic prosperity and attaining land and creating businesses, that over time, they would earn the respect of white Americans. Du Bois did not argue with the importance of blacks being land and business owners, but that it should not be the main focus at the time and that it should not take the front seat to issues of political equality.

Dollar's practices can be indicative/symptomatic of his subscription to the Word of Faith gospel also known as prosperity preaching; he preaches that individuals have the ability to obtain total prosperity – financial, spiritual, health – by speaking positivity and declaring the good effect of God's Word in their lives⁴⁴. There seems to be an emphasis on financial freedom in his theology and the beliefs of the church. While Neo-Pentecostalism, arguably the umbrella term for Word of Faith churches, does not espouse separation from the world as a key principle, this concept can be seen in the church's traditions and practices as it reflects a desire to be in the world, but not of it. As pointed out by Mary Hinton, megachurches are responding to this tenet by becoming an all-inclusive, one stop-shop, of daycare services, exercise facilities, restaurants, and numerous other services and capacities⁴⁵. Therefore, it is arguable that in some ways they are mimicking the materialist, capitalist structure of current American society in their attempt to separate themselves. The adaptations of the secular world to the spiritual

⁴⁴ Hinton, *The Commercial Church*, 95.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 54.

world is not a simple process by which the original commodification strategies are now devoid of their meaning once they have been adopted into the church world.

Tamelyn N. Tucker-Worgs notes that Milmon Harrison declares that the Word of Faith movement is characterized by three main tenets, “(1) know who you are in Christ, (2) positive confession, and (3) divine health and material wealth.”⁴⁶ Interestingly enough these tenets neatly align with the philosophy of Washington and his Tuskegee Institute. “Knowing who you are in Christ” and “positive confession” can be considered a religious variation of displaying self-respect, dignity, and pride in your person as well as expressing belief in the ability of the black people to unite under the leadership of the sole voice of Washington. “Divine health and wealth” seem almost synonymous with Washington’s consistent focus on cleanliness and the accumulation of wealth through business and landownership.

It is apparent that capitalism is alive and well as illustrated by many of the megachurches’ business practices. In some ways this continued commodification experiences renewed vigor under the protection of the church’s operation as a non-profit and which limits governmental regulation. In Hinton’s analysis of WCCI, she notes the lack of transparency of Dollar’s organization, as it is unclear how monetary donations are used for the greater good of the kingdom.⁴⁷ Hinton also mentions how WCCI website has no formal listing of the pastors and leaders of his church. Creflo Dollar, and his wife,

⁴⁶ Tamelyn Tucker-Worgs, *The Black Megachurch: Theology, Gender, and the Politics of Public Engagement*, (Waco, TX: Baylor UP, 2011), 90.

⁴⁷ Hinton, *The Commercial Church*, 84.

Taffi Dollar are listed as the pastor and co-pastor of the WCCI.⁴⁸ Since they list no other ministers or leaders on their website, one can only assume that they have the final say on all things church related, including how finances are distributed amongst clergy and church operations. Instead of investing in a level of transparency, the church instead focuses on teaching and preaching about individual fiscal responsibility.

As listed on Dollar's websites, there are numerous classes and events available that are dedicated to developing members into good stewards over the financial blessings that God has bestowed upon them. According to his rhetoric and the programs offered by the church Rev. Dollar wants members to be debt free. Du Bois also wished to see Negroes free from debt as he considered it a variegated form of slavery. Du Bois writes that racist philosophy proclaims "that only by the slavery of debt can a Negro be kept at work"⁴⁹. Whilst Du Bois saw debt-free lives as a way of moral and social uplift and freedom from another form of oppression, many consider Dollar's petitioning as a self-serving tactic. It appears that such say interest positions himself and the church's adherence to being economically responsible as a method to simultaneously deflect attention away from and justify his own accumulation of wealth.

In addition to preaching the power of speaking positivity, Dollar tells his congregants that if they are not getting the breakthroughs they are seeking from God, then they need to increase their tithing. Considering WCCI's lack of transparency in their business and leadership structure, his plea for his followers to donate money toward his purchase of a \$65 million jet, and his personal assets – which includes multiple

⁴⁸ Ibid, 85.

⁴⁹ Du Bois, *Souls*, 91.

million dollar homes in both Manhattan and Atlanta, and a Rolls Royce that was gifted to him by his congregation – it seems that Dollar is exploiting his members for material gain.

Dollar's influence is not limited to Atlanta Georgia or even the United States, as he is seen and heard on six continents. Overseas affiliate churches are urged to become Vision Partners. By donating money to World Changers Church International they become a part of the family and in return are promised prayers from Creflo and Taffii Dollar. Dollar's Vision Partners include churches in Russia, South Africa, India, and many additional countries. These practices not only open WCCI and its leader, Dollar, to critiques from Du Bois' perspective on questions of morality, but are also susceptible to the critique that Du Bois applied to the white church. While it is not necessarily hypocritical, WCCI, when reducing its members to sources of capital to purchase extravagant things like luxury jets, then it is exploiting its people in the same way as the white church. With its large, international reach, this exploitation transcends borders and becomes somewhat reminiscent of a modern day form of colonialization.

Dollar's ministries do not seek to encourage financial responsibility as a method of freedom from a modern-day forms of enslavement. Their main focus is individual prosperity and it is indicative of a larger decision: that of customized, privatized religion that asks what God can do for an individual and not what the individual can do for the collective body of Christ, especially those still out in the world. The followers of the Word of Faith wave also believe that as they prosper so shall they give and in the case of WCCI specifically, are encouraged to tithe regularly in order to see the hand of God move in their lives. The problem with this philosophy is that when an institution is

heavily dependent on and committed to accruing capital, a side effect is that they are less likely to engage in activities, no matter how justified, that will upset those who financially contribute to their cause:

*Word of Faith churches tend to be apolitical and do not want to significantly alter the basic structures of American society. These groups see the economic system of capitalism, for example, as basically good, and those who suffer under it and who are poor are this way because they are afflicted with mental and spiritual poverty... This theology is individual oriented and promotes the idea that individuals, not societal structures, must change for their situation to change. Thus these churches tend to abstain from public engagement activities... that focus on affecting social structures.*⁵⁰

Dollar's ministries remain silent on social injustices, like the militarized police forces murdering black persons. What excuse do pastors like Dollar have for remaining silent on the black lives being taken by police? In a time where blacks are excelling more so in the job market, as reflected by the large number of middle class congregants in some of these Black Megachurches, where we have a black President, where these pastors revel in luxurious comfort and the protection of being celebrity pastors – what keeps them silent? Money. Dollar's prosperity preaching and his luxurious lifestyle have been openly criticized by many. He is known for his fancy suits and his expensive cars, as well as his multi-million dollars homes in Georgia and New York City. Overall, he practices what he preaches, as Word of Faith churches believe "God wants his followers to be prosperous, the faithful will be prosperous, and believers can be prosperous economically and otherwise by transforming behaviors and beliefs"⁵¹. Dollar's followers look to his abundant prosperity and see it as blessings from God for his

⁵⁰ Tucker-Worgs, *The Black Megachurch*, 96.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 99.

faithfulness in the ministry and his dedication to speaking affirmative words into his life, of naming and claiming.

Black Megachurches like World Changers Church International highlight how the line between church and state is even blurrier now. In the past religious beliefs informed political decisions, now it is more common that government funding is supporting non-profit organizations shaded by the umbrella of its mother church. This trend suggests that Black churches – once in stark opposition to the government are becoming an extension of it. As they forgo questioning the status quo constructed and enforced by the government in favor of producing and maintaining economic prosperity.

According to Du Bois, economic leverage should not be sought at the expense of obtaining political rights, as espoused by Washington, especially since, as mentioned earlier, the black church is supposed to be the site of social change. By Dollar's adherence to an economic model similar to Washington's ideals, as well as his embodiment as Wizard of the Black Megachurch, he, too, is espousing economic prosperity over social justice. In essence, Black Megachurches are reveling in their economic superiority by remaining silent in what is turning out to be a massive social issue regarding the expression of the devaluing of black lives through police murder and brutality. While no one can be sure what is done by individual pastors behind closed doors, churches like Dollar's have remained silent on such problems which leads one to only speculate that this silence is connected to their desire to continue wealth accumulation.

As institutions that represent, and in many ways promote, a certain level of agency, the history of black churches and universities is intertwined in their desire to promote specific types of education with the same goal of Negro uplift. Their shared goal presents an opportunity to evaluate their methods. As one of the first major black institutions of its time, with a massive amount of financial and cultural support, Tuskegee developed as the premiere school for Negroes seeking to earn a level of mobility, albeit within defined parameters. As the school and the influence of Washington and his accommodationist ideals grew, the more the leader became implicated in the exclusionary practices of the society at large as he used his power to repudiate other black scholars who spoke out against him or disagreed with his philosophy and or methods. Seeing himself as the only viable spokesperson for the Negro race, and the peacekeeper between blacks and whites, Washington engaged in controversial practices that caused professional and personal harm to his Negro colleagues. Thus, Tuskegee, an institute created and developed to foster Negro uplift also became a machine designed to protect itself even at the cost of its foundational principle of Negro improvement. Representing the preservation of African culture and customs unlike any other institution, the Black church is built upon a rich history. From this backdrop emerges the Black Megachurch. The nondenominational stance of the Black Megachurch is liberating, but also provides a degree of discordance from its grounding history. This gap has been filled by capitalism and like the Tuskegee Institute of Washington's time, Black Megachurches, like World Changers Church International, have also become divorced from their initial inspiration, the uplifting the Negro race.

History has detailed the legacy of Booker T. Washington and The Tuskegee Institute as well as the early black church. What will become of the black church as it evolves into the megachurch and distances itself from its black liberation roots? Will it simply be a new tool used to colonize people of color outside of the country and inculcate in them American values in God's name? If the black church is enroute to becoming a part of the problem, what can we look to as the solution to the current problem of the color line where the humanity of black lives is *still* being disregarded?

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