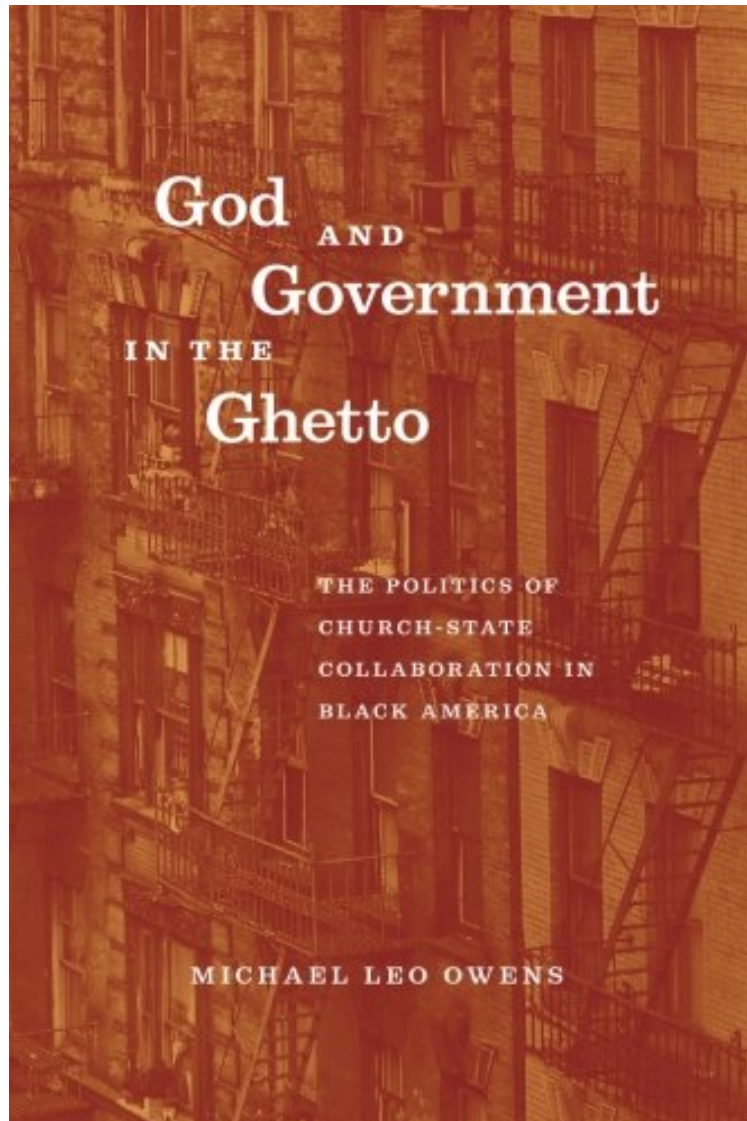


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God and Government in the Ghetto: The Politics of Church-State Collaboration in Black America (Morality and Society Series)

Michael Leo Owens

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Michael Leo Owens : God and Government in the Ghetto: The Politics of Church-State Collaboration in Black America (Morality and Society Series) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised God and Government in the Ghetto: The Politics of Church-State Collaboration in Black America (Morality and Society Series):

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy CustomerIt took a little longer than I expected to get here, but it was worth the wait.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Book Explores God and Government in the GhettoBy Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory UniversityGlory may be from God, but social welfare funds often come from state and local governments.In recent years, faith-based and community initiatives in inner-city neighborhoods have become commonplace, forging partnerships between black churches and government agencies who share the goal of community revitalization."I wanted to explore this area of collaboration, or as some would say, co-optation," says Emory Assistant Professor of Political Science Michael Leo Owens, an associated faculty member of the Center for the Study of Law and Religion and author of *God and Government in the Ghetto*, just out from University of Chicago Press. "Why were these churches, even those with a history of being confrontational with governments --especially Republican or conservative administrations --now cooperating with them?" Black churches have long provided safety nets for poor residents of urban neighborhoods, offering emergency relief funds, soup kitchens, and homeless shelters. Such activist churches also served as historic centers of political involvement, leading voter registration drives, organizing protests for social justice and civil rights, and backing candidates who shared their goals and vision.But as middle-class black congregants began to move out of the inner cities, some churches followed, others stayed behind to "save souls," and some remained in impoverished areas and worked to improve them, often assisted by government funds.As Owens studied activist black churches partnering with government, he observed them calling attention to neighborhood needs, seeking funds to provide social services and manifesting their faith."They believe Christ is to be made present in the world through bold acts of faith," says Owens. "And what greater act of faith could there be than to stay in these declining neighborhoods and believe you can turn them around?"Owens examines the scope and theoretical foundation of activist black churches' collaboration with government, including an in-depth study of several churches in the Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Morrisania, and South Jamaica areas of New York City. "The majority of African-American churches did not flee these areas, even though many of their congregants did, reverse-commuting long distances for Sunday worship services," Owens found. "The activist churches went a step further, and decided to stand with residents amid decline, crime, and blight, giving voice to and working on the problems."One minister said simply: "I am here because Jesus couldn't make it. If He were in town, I'm convinced that He would be here with us."Black clergy often set the agenda, whether the churches batted down the hatches and took care of their own or worked for the betterment of all, seeking partners in the private or public realm to do so. "The activist churches had very strong pastors leading the congregations, and very strong congregations too," he said. "They believed their communities could be redeemed, and were willing to use their resources, combined with government's, to make a difference."Some critics warned that such cooperation would lead to government "entanglements" with religion. "Any financial support mutes the voice of the church, for he who pays the piper calls the tune," said one black pastor from Bedford-Stuyvesant.But most black churches are open to church-state partnerships, seeing them as opportunities to improve the lives of the black poor, or even an equitable return of tax revenue to black neighborhoods. "I found that a minority of African-American churches partner with government, but a majority of them would do it, given the chance," Owens writes. "And a super-majority of blacks would support their doing it.Part of the reason is that black pastors are eager to reclaim their power as community leaders. Surveys suggest that a minority of blacks rate ministers as "very effective" leaders within black civic society, and they and their churches were viewed as increasingly irrelevant in the struggles for socioeconomic progress and the resurrection of black neighborhoods, according to Owens. Instead, they often point to secular leaders of black civil society as effective."Collaboration with government allowed these churches the chance to engage in more community outreach and enterprise and, in turn, acquire more attendees and more money, improve clergy reputations, and foster ecumenicism," Owens found.The benefits were worth the risks, as a pastor pointed out: "Even if you don't agree with someone's politics, per se, that does not preclude you from seeking their help. You can still keep your integrity and at the same time get resources, because that's what's important."In the final section of his book, Owens focuses on the challenges, process, and impact of church-state partnerships in increasing affordable housing in New York City neighborhoods. "I chose affordable housing as my policy lens because it is . . . the anchor and catalyst for public and private investment in declining neighborhoods as well as a symbol that tangible change is achievable," he writes.In support of this tangible revitalization, a pastor he interviewed in Morrisania quoted the Old Testament prophet Isaiah in saying, "And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of paths to dwell in." "The grand experiment of church-state partnerships is still underway," Owens says. "One thing we know, when it comes to trying to wrestle to the ground problems in inner-city America, we need to rely on cross-sectoral collaboration. There's no way around it. Churches are not going to save the cities by themselves. The way they'll be effective is by finding ways to collaborate with government and commercial sectors. So far, the evidence suggests that we should be hopeful."***The Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University is home to world-class scholars and forums on the religious foundations of law, politics, and society. It offers first-rank expertise on how the teachings and practices of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam have shaped and can continue to transform the fundamental ideas and institutions of our public and private lives. The scholarship of CSLR faculty provides the latest perspectives, while its

conferences and public forums foster reasoned and robust public debate.

In recent years, as government agencies have encouraged faith-based organizations to help ensure social welfare, many black churches have received grants to provide services to their neighborhoods poorest residents. This collaboration, activist churches explain, is a way of enacting their faith and helping their neighborhoods. But as Michael Leo Owens demonstrates in *God and Government in the Ghetto*, this alliance also serves as a means for black clergy to reaffirm their political leadership and reposition moral authority in black civil society. Drawing on both survey data and fieldwork in New York City, Owens reveals that African American churches can use these newly forged connections with public agencies to influence policy and government responsiveness in a way that reaches beyond traditional electoral or protest politics. The churches and neighborhoods, Owens argues, can see a real benefit from that influence but it may come at the expense of less involvement at the grassroots. Anyone with a stake in the changing strategies employed by churches as they fight for social justice will find *God and Government in the Ghetto* compelling reading.

This exceptional book will be crucial for those of us who study black politics. In this era of strange alliances between the Republican right and black Christian fundamentalists, research that illuminates how the formerly contentious and confrontational black church has adapted to certain political realities has cutting-edge relevancy.