

The New Abolition:
W.E.B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel

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The black social gospel is wrongly and strangely overlooked. Few books refer to it, there are no books on this tradition as a whole, and the phrase registers almost nothing on Google. Yet this is the category that best describes Martin Luther King Jr., his chief mentors, his closest movement allies, and the entire tradition of black church racial justice activism reaching back to the 1880s.

The civil rights movement began in 1884 with a call for what became the National Afro-American League in 1890 and had a brilliant moment of hope in the Niagara Movement of 1905 to 1909. It entered a second phase of activism in 1910 with the founding of what became the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). It entered a third phase in December 1955 by exploding into a historic mass movement. In every phase it had leaders that espoused the social ethical religion and politics of modern social Christianity.

But the name “civil rights movement” is usually reserved for the movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and most scholars have ignored the black social gospel that supported civil rights activism in all three of its historic phases, struggled for a place in the black churches, and provided the neo-abolitionist theology that the civil rights movement spoke and sang. Martin Luther King did not come from nowhere, nor did the embattled theology of social justice he espoused. There was a black tradition of the social gospel that gave leaders and ballast to the civil rights movement. It provided much of the movement’s intellectual underpinning. It built upon affirmations about human dignity and divine justice that most black churches proclaimed, but distinctly. And it remains a vital perspective.

The white social gospel movement is renowned and heavily chronicled. It arose during the Progressive era and was already a movement by the mid-1880s, with

national organizations and a movement agenda linked with Progressivism. It had its heyday from 1900 to 1917. It was the greatest wave of social justice activism ever generated by the white mainline Protestant churches in this country. It was championed by such extraordinary figures as Washington Gladden, Graham Taylor, George Herron, Jane Addams, Harry Ward, Vida Scudder, Francis McConnell, and the great Walter Rauschenbusch. By the 1930s it was mostly a peace and ecumenical movement.

The black social gospel arose during the same period and had its heyday in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It grew out of the abolitionist tradition, but responded to new challenges in a new era of American history: the abandonment of Reconstruction, the evisceration of Constitutional rights, an upsurge of racial lynching and Jim Crow abuse, struggles for mere survival in every part of the nation, and the excruciating question of what a new abolition would require. Like the white social gospel and Progressive movements, the early black social gospel responded to industrialization and economic injustice, and regarded the federal government as an indispensable guarantor of Constitutional rights. Like the white social gospel, it also wrestled with modern challenges to religious belief. But the black social gospel addressed these things very differently from white progressives, for racial oppression trumped everything in the African American context *and* refigured how other problems were experienced.

White social gospel theologians took for granted their access to the general public. Black social gospel theologians could barely imagine what it felt like to address the general public. They had to create a counter-public sphere merely to have a public. White social gospel theologians sought to be stewards of a good society and usually preached a moral influence theory of the cross. Otherwise they played down the cross of Jesus as problematic for modern Christianity. The black social gospel arose from churches where preaching about the cross was not optional, because black Americans experienced it every day as a persecuted, crucified people. Here the belief in a divine ground of human selfhood powered struggles for black self-determination and campaigns of resistance to white oppression.

Black social Christianity, like any tradition, can be defined broadly or narrowly. Broadly, there were four groups, plus a tiny Socialist flank. The first group identified with Booker T. Washington and his program of political accommodation and economic uplift. The second group contended that African Americans needed their own nation; African Methodist Episcopal (AME) bishop Henry McNeal Turner and Episcopal cleric Alexander Crummell were leading black nationalists. The third group advocated protest activism for racial justice, strongly opposing Washington; its early exponents included AME minister Reverdy C. Ransom and anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells-Barnett. The fourth group navigated between the pro-Washington and anti-Washington forces, imploring against factional division. Its leading proponents included Baptist pastor Adam Clayton Powell Sr. and Baptist educator Nannie Burroughs.

All four of these ideological factions existed before W. E. B. Du Bois emerged as the intellectual leader of the protest tradition. A full-fledged black social gospel tradition emerged from them, mostly from the third and fourth groups. It stood for social justice religion and modern critical consciousness. In addition to Ransom and Powell, it attracted leaders such as African Methodist Episcopal Zion bishop Alexander Walters, Presbyterian pastor Francis Grimké, and AME minister Richard R. Wright Jr. This full-orbed black social gospel—my operative definition of the category—combined an emphasis on black dignity and personhood with protest activism for racial justice, a comprehensive social justice agenda, an insistence that authentic Christian faith is incompatible with racial prejudice, an emphasis on the social ethical teaching of Jesus, and an acceptance of modern scholarship and social consciousness.

In the early 1900s black social gospel leaders debated what they should think about Booker Washington. After the NAACP was founded and the protest tradition won the ideological argument, the black social gospel attracted a new generation of leaders. Nearly all were ordained ministers and held graduate degrees. They included Howard University president Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, Morehouse College president Benjamin E. Mays, Baptist pastor Vernon Johns, theologian Howard Thurman, minister and politician Adam Clayton Powell Jr., and Episcopal activist and lawyer Pauli

Murray. Then came the King generation, especially the ministers of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, notably Wyatt Tee Walker, Fred Shuttlesworth, and Andrew Young, and the founders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, notably James Lawson, John Lewis, Diane Nash, and James Bevel. After King had come and gone, the black social gospel influenced the development of black liberation theologies.

Everyone that I just named after Booker Washington is, for me, a volume two figure. Meanwhile this is a volume one talk.

Today Booker T. Washington is remembered chiefly as the symbol of a demoralizing strategy that sold out black Americans and failed on its own terms. With so much counting against him it has become difficult to fathom why he was a colossal figure in American life, widely revered across racial lines, and remained so for decades after he lost the argument and passed on. Booker Washington was complex, wily, opaque, and awesomely accomplished. He built Tuskegee Institute in the face of Ku Klux Klan terrorism, a mania of lynching, a Southern civil religion of "Lost Cause" propaganda, and a suffocating plague of disenfranchisement and Jim Crow abuse. He cultivated an image of simple altruism while fighting in a savvy, calculated fashion for as much power as he could get, fulfilling the American fantasy of ascending from poverty and disadvantage to greatness.

Washington publicly accommodated disenfranchisement and segregation, and privately organized legal efforts to thwart both. He told African Americans to stay out of politics even after he became the nation's leading black patronage broker. He denied that he made federal patronage appointments for blacks long after he routinely made all of them. He hobnobbed with the high and mighty, but stayed in touch with the struggles of ordinary people. He attracted wealthy benefactors, became an advisor to four U.S. presidents, launched hundreds of community schools, and amassed a powerful political machine. He bought black newspapers and controlled them, denying that too. He controlled college presidents through his influence with philanthropists, monopolizing racial philanthropy, and bullied his competitors, hiring spies to infiltrate

rival organizations, which fueled a backlash against him. For a while he was so dominant that many Bookerites believed there was no such thing as a legitimate opposition. Washington believed it adamantly.

Booker T. keenly understood that most white Southerners of his time did not want black Americans to succeed at anything besides picking cotton. Any black success at anything else raised the frightening specter of “Negro rule.” A black postmaster represented Negro rule. A black shopkeeper, a black teacher, or a black lawyer represented Negro rule. But to give African Americans a glimmer of opportunity in a brutally hostile context, Washington pretended not to know it. He got to be Number One by bartering the civil and political rights of black Americans for a season of interracial peace and economic opportunity. On the few occasions that he explained his strategy, he wrote quintessential descriptions of political realism. But everything got worse for African Americans during this ostensible season, while Washington ascended to national eminence, setting him up for the devastating objection that black Americans had not appointed him to be Number One. Booker Washington was the first black leader to be selected by white Americans, an arrangement he lived to see unravel. For the “race problem” in America was white racism, and the antidote to it had no chance of coming out of Alabama.

Washington epitomized an influential version of the social gospel. He was powerfully linked with the conservative assimilation wing of the white social gospel, led by Brooklyn minister Lyman Abbott, editor of *Outlook* magazine. Abbott serialized Washington’s memoir *Up From Slavery* to his vast audience and lauded Washington as the answer to “the race problem.” The very term “social gospel” gained currency in the 1890s as the title of a journal by a white Christian Socialist community in Georgia seeking to build a school modeled on Tuskegee’s trinity of work, education, and Christianity. For Washington, Christianity was a practical faith, it nurtured the correct moral virtues, and it helped to build a good society—exactly as white social gospel leaders said. Washington urged that black church religion, especially in the South,

wrongly separated religion from morality. Churches needed to become more ethical, caring about righteousness, and less emotional, caring about rapture.

Every alternative to Washington was compelled to define its relationship to him. Nationalists took the Turner path of national separation and/or African emigration. Alexander Crummell was an important leader of this group, as was Episcopal bishop and missionary James T. Holly. Then as now, there were different kinds of black nationalism—the idea that all people of African descent share something as a nation or people. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the posited basis for national belonging was sometimes biological, rendering the nation as analogous to a biological organism, and/or ontological, making a claim about the distinct being of blackness, and/or cultural or socio-historical, making a claim about black cultural authenticity or distinctiveness. Defined this broadly, however, there were nationalists in all four streams of black social Christianity. The emphatically nationalist group espoused more stringent forms of nationalism, contending that blacks were a distinct people needing to create a sovereign nation-state and, even if the statehood project failed, a black civilization.

Some nationalists devoted themselves to colonizing West Africa, following Turner, or Haiti, following Holly, but many eventually gave up on emigration, following Crummell. Much of the nationalist tradition shared the emphases of Crummell and Turner on moral uplift, authority, elite leadership, and the shortcomings of ordinary black Americans. Despite its rhetoric of separation, the nationalist tradition ironically played a major role in transmitting assimilationist values into African American culture. Most black nationalists were politically conservative and nearly all were culturally conservative. Black nationalism had an electrifying moment after World War I, with the rise of Marcus Garvey's back-to-Africa movement. A generation earlier, Crummell and Turner clashed over the question whether nationalists should continue to strive for a separate nation-state. Turner became the dominant figure in this school of thought and activism by saying yes.

The third group vehemently opposed Washington's strategy and his "Tuskegee Machine," calling for a new abolitionist politics of racial and social justice. The full-fledged black social gospel emerged mostly from this group. There were many others in addition to Ransom and Wells—Baptist ministers James R. L. Diggs, Peter James Bryant, and William Jefferson White, Congregational minister Byron Gunner, Episcopal rectors Robert W. Bagnall and George Frazier Miller. But they are long forgotten.

The fourth group helped to sway how the argument over Bookerism turned out. In the early 1900s the groups advocating protest and accommodation fought each other ferociously, with a lot of name-calling. Both sides alienated people that disliked ideological bickering. Religious communities naturally brought together the rival camps and the nonaligned. At church, ministers appealed to Christian fellowship and racial solidarity; moreover, many ministers had friends on both sides of the partisan divide. The fourth group urged that Du Bois-style militancy and Washington-style realism were both indispensable. In addition to Burroughs and Powell Sr., leading figures included sociologists Monroe Work and George Haynes, Methodist minister William Henry Brooks, and Baptist feminists Lucy Smith and Sarah Layten.

Meanwhile there was a tiny flank that held out against capitalism. Baptist minister George W. Woodbey was a leading figure in this group. Woodbey had a long career as a Socialist Party organizer and was also active in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). There were black Socialists besides Du Bois and Ransom in the mainstream of the NAACP, notably Bagnall and George Frazier Miller. But Socialism had a lot going against it in black communities: a fantasized solidarity with a racist white proletariat, the specter of appearing to be anti-American, and the desire of African Americans to own property and succeed in the existing system. These factors suppressed Du Bois' socialism for twenty years.

For some in the fourth group, the founding of the NAACP in 1910 and the subsequent fading of Washington nullified the necessity of making a both/and argument, while others stuck to it for the rest of their lives.

Numerous conventions have long kept the black social gospel from being remembered, and they remain obstacles to recovering it today. It is usually assumed that the early black social gospel numbered only a handful of ministers; thus I have begun by refuting the deadliest assumption. For decades scholars claimed that the social gospel was an overwhelmingly white phenomenon that ignored racial justice issues. This twofold claim misleadingly generalized from a few social gospel leaders, obscuring the complex and conflicted debates that white Christian progressives held about racial justice, and it obscured the existence of black social gospellers. In addition, Washington and Du Bois are usually read out of social Christianity, notwithstanding that both influenced it enormously. Many scholars have recycled the convention that black churches were too self-centered and preoccupied with survival to advocate a social justice agenda, never mind that the black social gospel leaders thus ignored addressed this issue constantly.

A broader convention of American historiography has applied with particular vengeance to black social gospel leaders: Religious intellectuals no longer mattered by the end of the nineteenth century. In that case, black religious intellectuals do not matter whether or not they existed. Both verdicts got ballast from black academics of the early twentieth century that historians tend to favor—Ralph Bunche, Alain Locke, Abram Harris, E. Franklin Frazier, and Rayford Logan. All shared the customary academic prejudice against religion and religious intellectuals, contending that the black church was hopelessly provincial and conservative. So black social gospel intellectuals such as Ransom, Wright, and Johnson had no chance of being remembered, and even Mays and Thurman were overlooked for decades.

Another kind of dismissal flips the “unimportant” or “didn’t exist” rationales, reasoning that the category “social gospel” does not name anything worth distinguishing in African American Christianity. This objection comports with the image of a singular, politically active “black church” that many people hold. But black churches have always been widely diverse theologically, politically, culturally, and socially. There has never been a dominant or singular “black church” in the mold of the

usual stereotype, which ironically, is a social gospel construct. The very influence of the social gospel idea of what the “black church” is, or should be, has obscured that it is a social gospel idea, which many black religious communities reject.

Throughout the first and second phases of the civil rights movement, and even in its heyday third phase, only a minority of Afro-American congregations supported social justice preaching and activism. The chief founder of the National Baptist Convention, William Simmons, was accused throughout his career of replacing religion with politics, notwithstanding his powerful revival preaching. Ransom’s clerical colleagues in Chicago and Boston were so offended by his advocacy of the social gospel that they drove him out of both cities. This, despite the fact that Ransom belonged to an abolitionist denomination and he ministered in the two cities that seemed best suited to support social gospel activism.

Ransom and Wright, after years of being thwarted by bishops, reluctantly concluded that they had to become bishops, after which they vied with bishops that wanted nothing to do with protest movements. Carter Woodson, writing the first comprehensive history of black Christianity in 1921, organized his account around the battle between a minority tradition of progressives linked to abolitionism and the social gospel and a dominant tradition of conservatives that resisted modernity and social religion. A decade later, Benjamin Mays documented that most black churches did not preach or practice anything like his concept of social gospel religion. A generation later, King had ample experience with this problem, as his own denomination opposed the civil rights movement and only a minority of black congregations supported it during his lifetime.¹

The founders of black social Christianity were distinct and marginalized in their interactions with the white social gospel movement and within Afro-American Christianity. They were marginalized ecumenically because white American Protestantism was as segregated and white supremacist as the rest of American society. They were marginalized in black churches for pressing a national social justice agenda and for adopting social gospel theology. Some of them succeeded sufficiently to win

denominational leadership positions, take over the publishing houses, and change the mainstream. But the founders' long two-sided struggle for legitimacy and recognition kept them from being remembered after they were gone. Simmons, Ransom, Wells-Barnett, Burroughs, Walters, Woodbey, Johnson, and Wright would not have been forgotten had scholars and journalists paid attention to the black social gospel.

The black social gospel had a distinct integrity *and* much of it had significant dealings with white social gospelers and Progressives. Some black social gospel leaders became public figures by bridging both worlds, providing rare evidence that such a thing was possible in Jim Crow America. Walters, Johnson, Mays, and Thurman had sparkling careers on the lecture circuits of ecumenical organizations, especially the Student Christian Movement. Some black social gospel leaders had dual memberships in black and white Baptist denominations. Some belonged to black denominations that were deeply involved in the ecumenical movement. Some operated in predominantly white denominations, especially the Episcopal and Congregational churches. Ransom, Walters, Haynes, and Mays were important players in the Federal Council of Churches, and Woodbey was the Socialist Party's leading black organizer and author. But these relationships were not reciprocal. White church leaders did not treat their Afro-American colleagues as equal contributors to social gospel ecumenism, and the Socialist Party made little attempt to recruit black members.

I confess to admiring the black apostles that dreamed of abolishing America's system of racial caste. They resisted with shimmering dignity, even as some were deeply wounded by racism. They wrung a liberating message from the Christianity of their time. They did not settle for making segregation more tolerable. They rebelled and endured, taking the long view, laying the groundwork for something better than the regime of oppression and exclusion they inherited. They conceived what social salvation meant in post-Reconstruction black religion.

Sometimes they played into the hands of white racists, advocating what scholars today call the "politics of respectability." This approach recycled harmful stereotypes about Afro-American culture and manners. The nationalist tradition, in particular,

sometimes folded ugly denigrations of black humanity into its message of racial solidarity. Some social gospel preaching about family life caused particular harm to women in perpetuating stereotypes. Many social gospel ministers exhorted women to keep the churches going with no chance of becoming church or public leaders. Whenever they preached about gay and lesbian sexuality, it was in condemnation. Sometimes they exaggerated the conservatism of their black church opponents, which undercut the very moral agency they sought to mobilize. But the problems of developing black leaders and transcending “compensatory religion” were terribly real for black social gospel ministers, and without their witness the radical social gospel theology and activism of King are inexplicable.²

Henry McNeal Turner and William Simmons were pioneers of black social Christianity, bridging the Civil War and Progressive generations, in different ways clearing a path for the social gospel. Turner enabled new abolition movements he did not join, as he believed that America was hopelessly hostile territory for blacks. He was singly responsible for much of the explosive growth of the AME Church in Georgia during Reconstruction. He roared for equal rights and the dream of African emigration. He preached a gospel of Christian revival and personal responsibility, teaching that God is black. He defied white terrorists fearlessly. He railed against enemies, but was rough on under-achievers and whiners too, blistering what he called “scullions.”

Having worked hard for the Republican Party, Turner wanted to love it, but he despised it after the party sold out Reconstruction. Turner became easy to forget after Du Bois entered the picture, but he was a giant figure in the black church struggle against white racism that distinctly prefigured liberation theology. Simmons had a similar generational experience, though he died young, and his modernism was stronger. Like Turner, Simmons worked hard for Radical Reconstruction, he treasured the abolitionists, and like them, he conceived the God of the Bible as a partisan, liberating friend of the poor and oppressed.

As a journalist, author, educator, and minister, Simmons kept alive the witness and lore of David Walker, Sojourner Truth, Nat Turner, Henry Highland Garnet,

Frederick Douglass, and other black abolitionists. He stood up for the rights and empowerment of women, insisting that feminism had an important role to play in the new Christian abolition. He mediated the debate among black Baptists over assimilation versus separatism, taking a middling position that did not prevail in the National Baptist Convention. He also mediated, before Du Bois came along, an intense debate among black Baptists about the priority of higher education. Had Simmons lived to see the issue become Du Bois versus Washington, he undoubtedly would have kept saying that higher education and vocational education were equally important and should not be set against each other. At least, he would have kept saying it until this question was no longer a defining issue for the new abolition.

Reverdy Ransom, Ida Wells-Barnett and Alexander Walters played major roles in early black social Christianity. Ransom espoused liberal social gospel theology and radical social gospel socialism. He personified the spirit of the Niagara Movement. He pioneered the cause of black Christian socialism and cut his teeth in politics by joining Wells' anti-lynching crusade. Wells, more than anyone, established that the struggle against lynching had to be defining for the new abolition. She inspired, implored, and shamed such a movement into being. For a while, in the early 1890s, she was a sensational figure. Then she married Frederick Barnett and pulled back from full-time activism, just as Washington skyrocketed to eminence and Walters emerged as a civil rights leader. Walters tried to redefine the black Christian mainstream by blending social gospel theology, political independence, pan-African consciousness, and civil rights activism. He symbolized the volatile racial politics of the early twentieth century, advocating civil rights while trying to hold together an activist organization with pro-Washington and anti-Washington flanks. In Walters' case the usual story of embattlement with the church did not occur, as the AME Zion Church took pride in his leadership. But he had his hands full trying to sustain a protest movement.

These figures differently made society a subject of redemption, and all made a mark before Du Bois versus Washington became the issue, which soon cut to a famous binary. Kelly Miller introduced the distinction between black radicalism and black

conservatism that has ruled the field ever since, identifying Du Bois with radicalism and Washington with conservatism. Miller was a Howard University dean and sociologist, socially conservative, anti-feminist, strongly pro-capitalist, thoroughly middle-class, and imbued with indignation that white America violated his rights as a human being and a citizen. His binary had an unintended upshot, as he tried to keep the two groups from breaking apart. Miller stressed that even black conservatives opposed racism and the Du Bois faction was vastly outnumbered. Many ministers implored against breaking apart; Adam Clayton Powell Sr. put it poignantly many times. There are no black conservatives, Powell would say, so why are we fighting over radical versus conservative?

Liberationist historian Gayraud Wilmore, in his landmark work *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (1973), offered an answer that built upon Miller's historic distinction. First, there was definitely such a thing as black conservatism, contrary to integrationist liberals like Powell. Second, what mattered was to define and defend black radicalism. Wilmore offered a three-factor definition, explaining that the radical tradition in black religion sought to be liberated from white domination, commended respect for Africa, and used protest and agitation in the struggle for liberation. Wilmore noted that black radicalism, thus defined, was usually less political and ideological than other forms of radical politics, such as social democracy, Communism, or Progressivism. In black radicalism, "race and color are at the root of the problems of Western civilization." Black radicalism perceived the soul sickness of white society—something deeper than mere racism. Thus it did not sing the liberal song of racial integration.³

For Wilmore, the exemplary black radical was Turner, who towered above all others of his time. Turner was deeply alienated from white society, and he called for reparations to finance black emigration to West Africa, whereas social gospel liberals (like Powell) complained about fighting because they lacked the will to fight white supremacy. On this basis, Wilmore ignored black social gospel leaders of the early twentieth century—barely mentioning any—in his indispensable account of black

religion, a textbook that dominated black religious historiography for four decades. Wilmore argued that Turner should have challenged Washington for national leadership after Frederick Douglass died, but Turner failed to try, and afterwards black Christianity got a generation of leaders barely worth mentioning.

The black social gospel founders deserved more credit than that. They advocated social justice causes that Turner spurned, and there were three large reasons why Turner did not challenge Washington in the late 1890s. He lost influence by insulting African Americans with harshly demeaning statements. He lost followers by insisting on back-to-Africa. And he shared most of Washington's ideology. Had Turner felt compelled to choose between Washington and Du Bois, he would have chosen Washington, for whom he had greater respect. As it was, Turner believed that Du Bois versus Washington was about the wrong things, so he looked away in disgust.

Afro-Americans had to have their own nation. For Turner, everything else was a sideshow, a waste of time. The Du Bois group had a better idea, even if it eventually required cutting a deal with white liberals, something that black social gospel leaders were willing to do, with no lack of commitment to abolishing white oppression. Du Bois is central to this story because he changed the conversation and made everybody deal with him. He did not merely take up an existing critique of Washington's strategy, putting it more colorfully and memorably. He inspired a revolution of consciousness that defined the problem of the twentieth century. He provided a language for the problem of the color line and helped to launch the pan-African movement, the Niagara movement, and the NAACP. And he helped to radicalize the black social gospel through his influence on Ransom, Wright, Walters, Waldron, Powell, Johnson, Mays and others.

The double-consciousness that Du Bois projected onto all African Americans was deeply and powerfully true for him and a source of creativity in him. He was simultaneously black and American. He grew up with little experience of racial abuse, yet became an unsurpassed critic of the color line. He railed against the evils of white civilization while affirming the intellectualism and progressive social ideals that he

internalized from white civilization. Du Bois fashioned an alternative to the draining debate between nationalists and integrationists by affirming his own tortured double-consciousness. Black Americans had to stop taking sides about which of their selves to give up, opting for a richer, contentious, full-bodied struggle for liberation and radical democracy.

Du Bois was educated during the heyday of evolutionary idealism and Social Darwinism, and his early writings were shot through with both. It took him several years to drop neo-Lamarckian theory and Social Darwinism, temper his emphasis on moral failings and uplift elitism, let go of romantic imperialism, and pull back from his neo-Hegelian idealism. Later he absorbed Freud and Marx, and dropped the too-simple, idealistic, dualistic idea of double-consciousness. But through all his shifts and phases, Du Bois fixed on exemplary individuality--the character, status, personhood, and circumstances of personal examples. He construed his life as an example through which he fashioned his ideas about race.

Du Bois mined the fissure between his status as a member of a denigrated caste and his role as a race leader. He stuck to this focus long after he mitigated its elitist drawbacks by embracing radical democratic Socialism. For many years Du Bois had to live down the charge that he cared about elite performers while Washington cared about ordinary workers. There was always something ridiculous about this comparison, yet Du Bois provided grist for it by insisting, in the spirit of Crummell, "The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men." This trope provided quotable material for countless sermons, editorials, church bulletins, and commencement addresses. Gradually, Du Bois bridled at hearing it from speakers lacking his commitment to radical democracy. He got increasingly forthright about economic justice and the ravages of global capitalism. But that did not dissuade him from focusing on what it meant to be an exemplar in a wretched time.⁴

Du Bois loathed religious orthodoxy, because it stunted human souls. He could be blistering on this theme, which gave heartburn to social gospel ministers, who tried to say similar things without offending churchgoers. In 1940, speaking at Wilberforce

University's commencement, Du Bois excoriated the school's Christian legacy as "childish belief in fairy tales, a word-of-mouth adherence to dogma, and a certain sectarian exclusiveness." Wilberforce's tradition of religious orthodoxy, he charged, was "a miserable apprehension of the teaching of Christ."⁵

Du Bois, however, had a spiritual wellspring of his own, a keen appreciation of Jesus, and a lover's quarrel with the black church. His writings were strewn with religious images and references throughout his career, even after he supposedly dropped religion for Marxism. His book, *The Souls of Black Folk* famously invoked "our spiritual strivings" and lauded the spirituals. His book, *Darkwater* began with Du Bois' social gospel "Credo," conjured a black baby Jesus in his essay, "The Second Coming," conjured an adult black Jesus in his scathing essay, "Jesus Christ in Texas," and ended with a "Hymn to the Peoples" in which the Buddha walked with Christ. As late as the 1950s Du Bois was still writing about saving "the tattered shreds of God."⁶

His passionate, unorthodox spiritual sensibility came through to many readers. They caught that a religious, arguably Christian passion lay behind Du Bois' furious attacks on unworthy ministers and church dogmatism. Even at Wilberforce, lashing the university for hiding behind mediocre religion, Du Bois stumped for social gospel religion: "Christianity means sympathy; the realization of what it costs a human being to live and support a family in decency...Christianity means unselfishness; the willingness to forego in part one's personal advantage and give up some personal desires for the sake of a larger end which will be for the advantage of a greater number of people."⁷

By 1940 that was an echo of what the younger Du Bois had hoped the church would become under the sway of the social gospel. In the early twentieth century he was a critical booster, taking for granted that the movement for black liberation had to be religion-friendly. Nothing compared to the black church as a source of inspiration, hope, solidarity, identity, belonging, moral language, and transcendent meaning. Black Americans owned nothing else outright. Du Bois stressed that any movement worth building had to share in the life of the black church, speaking its language of hope and

redemption. The Niagara movement, and later the NAACP, had to have religious leaders, reaching beyond the usual circle of urban professionals.

My work on this subject is distinctly important to me and is long in coming. I grew up in a lower class, semi-rural area in mid-Michigan, where my father became passably white by moving away from Michigan's Upper Peninsula. His Cree heritage made him a target of racial abuse while growing up, and he raised his five sons as definitely white, never mind that we had obviously Native American relatives. My nominally Catholic family got to Mass just enough for something to break through my everyday, lower class, sports-fixated horizon: The image of the suffering God on a cross. Then the stunning witness of King and the civil rights movement similarly broke through, eventually melding in my thought and feeling with the cross of Christ. Long before I understood very much about politics or religion, King was the formative figure for me, the exemplar of the peacemaking and justice-making way of Christ. That was the sum total of my religious worldview when I squeaked into college, mostly to play sports. Four decades later it is still my bedrock.

My neighbors and relatives did not talk about going to college or having a "career," and they would have repudiated the notion that being white conferred any cultural privileges upon them--even as they struggled to secure whatever white privilege they could get, and passed it to me. Interrogating one's racial bias is exceedingly difficult. Interrogating one's complicity in white supremacy--a structure of power based on privilege that presumes to define what is normal--is harder yet. I am torn between knowing that I am terribly limited as an interpreter of African American social Christianity and believing it deserves all the books it can get, even from me. For twenty years I have sprinkled discussions of the black social gospel into various books, arguing that this category best describes the theological and social ethical line that led to King. Twenty years ago there were not many of us; now there are many more, mainly because African American scholars have entered the academy in significant numbers. Clayborne Carson, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Calvin Morris, Randal Jelks, Anthony

Pinn, Jonathan L. Walton, and Walter Fluker have played leading roles in recovering the black social gospel.⁸

I have one misgiving in contributing to this work of retrieval and correct naming, namely, that this is overwhelmingly a tradition of male ministers. Some women broke through anyway, achieving public influence, usually by working through organizations they created. Burroughs, Lucy Smith, and Sarah Layten worked through a national organization they created, the Women's Convention of the National Baptist Convention. Mary Church Terrell, Lucy Thurman, Mary B. Talbert and others similarly served as leaders of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), which began in 1896 with Victorian calls to true womanhood and purified homes, but went on to become deeply involved in suffrage, anti-lynching, and anti-segregation activism. For many women, the coming of the NACW was a godsend because it offered Afro-American women an opportunity to work together outside the church.

Some women found their way to Holiness or Pentecostal congregations, which rejected the assimilated formality of traditional churches and allowed female leadership. The Holiness and Pentecostal movements were overwhelmingly female on both sides of the color line, featuring oral music, rhythm, testimony, ecstatic praise traditions, and a holistic worldview. The irony of Sanctification Christianity thus cuts across the color line. With few exceptions, the churches that had female leaders did not embrace social justice religion, and the churches that embraced the social gospel did not allow female leaders.

Historian Barbara Dianne Savage, in her luminous reflection on the politics of black religion, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us*, notes that three scholars had the greatest influence on the historiography of nineteenth and early twentieth century black American Christianity: Du Bois, Woodson, and Mays. All were unsettled by the emotional fervor of rural black worship and the Sanctification churches. All appreciated the emotional vitality of black religion while calling for modernized churches committed to social justice theology. All said sympathetic things about the women that comprised and sustained black churches. And all three perpetuated the view that black

churches needed strong and progressive male ministers more than they needed anything else. Savage aptly observes that Du Bois, Woodson, and Mays, by giving highest priority to developing a male clerical elite, silenced the two largest groups in this picture: “The majority of church members, who were women, and the majority of men, who remained outside the churches.”⁹

Black America needed an elite of male ministers because it had a dearth of male leadership and the church was the most important institution in African American life. Du Bois said it as a sympathetic fellow traveler who rarely went to church. Mays said it as a Baptist minister and theologian who mentored students as a college president. Woodson said it as a Baptist layman who founded the *Journal of Negro History* and what became Black History Month. Woodson attended Shiloh Baptist Church in Washington DC, for two reasons: (1) “I find there better people than I do on the outside” and (2) “I find my people there, and I cannot help them unless I remain among them.”¹⁰

That was a decidedly social gospel rationale for belonging to a church. Woodson acknowledged that women made the best Christians and kept the black churches going. But his only word for them was to carry on as they were. He had a bold vision of a united black super-church that got rid of all denominations, but he envisioned no female leaders in it. The wing of black Christianity that talked about being progressive and modern pulled back when it came to women; among the male founders, the leading exceptions were Turner, Simmons and Ransom. For similar reasons it had no progressive inklings concerning gay and lesbian sexuality, a subject on which both Powells spoke vehemently from the pulpit.

The black social gospel thus had shortcomings in the very areas that roil churches today. But this tradition has a legacy unsurpassed by any religious tradition or movement in U.S. American history. For fifty years black religion fixed on the dream of abolition. Then came Emancipation—a veritable ‘Coming of the Lord,’ as Du Bois put it—only to be followed by the terrible necessity of imagining a new abolition. Black Christian leaders of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had much at stake in the question whether they should fuse social justice politics with progressive

theology. There were just enough of these defiant, dignified, visionary figures to make a difference. They paved the way to the civil rights explosion of the 1950s and 1960s, helping to inspire America's greatest liberation movement.

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1 Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington DC: Associated Publishers, 1921); Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph W. Nicholson, *The Negro's Church* (New York: Institute of Social and Religious Research, 1933).

2 On the "politics of respectability," see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 185-229; Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 31-78; Walter Earl Fluker, "Recognition, Respectability, and Loyalty: Black Churches and the Quest for Civility," in *New Day Begun: African American Churches and Civic Culture in Post-Civil Rights America*, ed. Drew Smith (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 120-124. On "compensatory religion," see Mays and Nicholson, *The Negro's Church*, 25-26.

3 Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans* (New York: Doubleday, 1973; 3rd edition, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), quotes ix, 197.

4 W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," in *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of To-day* (1903; reprint, New York: AMS, 1970, "the Negro," 33; see Lawrie Balfour, *Democracy's Reconstruction: Thinking Politically with W. E. B. Du Bois* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 71-75.

5 W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Future of Wilberforce University," *Journal of Negro Education* 9 (October 1940), quotes, 564-565.

6 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1920; reprint, Mineola, New York: Dover, 1999), 1-2, 60-62, 70-77, 161-162; Du Bois, "Untitled," in *Creative Writings by W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1985), "save the tattered," 41; Jonathon S. Kahn, *Divine Discontent: The Religious Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3-8.

7 Du Bois, "The Future of Wilberforce University," quote 565.

8 See Clayborne Carson, "Martin Luther King Jr. and the African-American Social Gospel," in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*, ed. Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude Jr. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 696-714; Calvin S. Morris, *Reverdy C. Ransom: Black Advocate of the Social Gospel* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990); Randal M. Jelks, *Benjamin Elijah Mays: Schoolmaster of the Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Anthony B. Pinn, *The African American Religious Experience in America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2005); Walter E. Fluker, *They Looked for a City: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King Jr.* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989).

9 Barbara Dianne Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), quote 23.

10 Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us*, "I find," 47; Carter G. Woodson, "A United Negro Church," *New York Age* (August 15, 1931), 9; Woodson, "Difficulties in Way of the United Church," *New York Age* (August 21, 1931), 9.