The New Abolition

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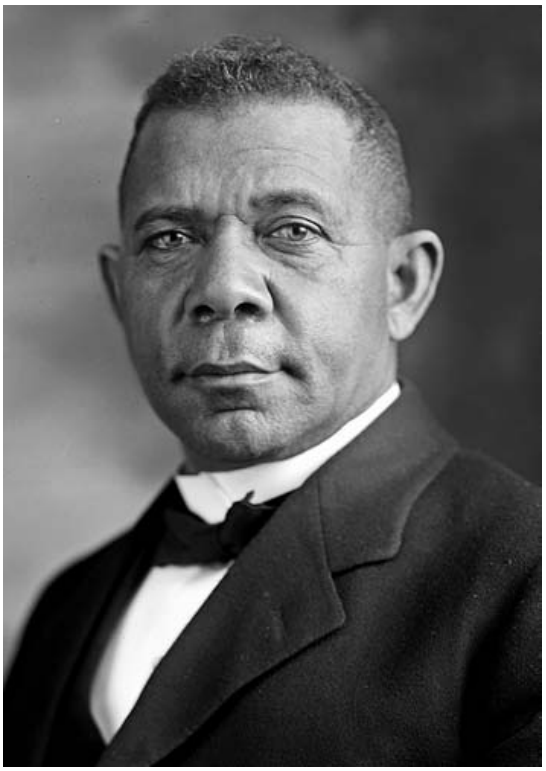

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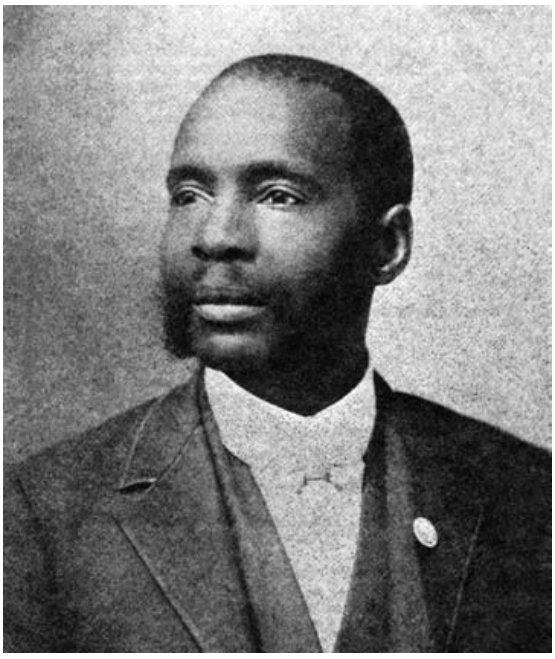

George W. Woodbey

Richard R. Wright Jr.

The New Abolition

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Recovering the Black Social Gospel

The black social gospel is wrongly and strangely overlooked. One might expect there to be dozens of books on a tradition of thought and activism that began in the 1870s, that included the mentors and allies of Martin Luther King Jr., plus King himself, and that remains relevant today. Instead there are none. Few books even refer to the black social gospel, and there are no books that deal with this tradition as a whole. In recent years scholars have begun to rectify the former situation, but it is no easy task to overcome decades of stereotypes about a tradition that supposedly had few proponents and was best left for dead for other reasons too.

The civil rights movement began in 1884 with a call for what became the National Afro-American League in 1890, and it had a brilliant moment of hope in the Niagara Movement of 1905 to 1909. It entered a second phase of activism in 1909 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 who 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 of social justice that the civil rights movement proclaimed and sang. This book describes the tradition of black social Christianity that arose in the Progressive Era, gave leaders and ballast to the civil rights movement, provided much of the movement's intellectual underpinning, and 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, and 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 King years. It lacked movement organizations during the early struggle for civil rights, but the black social gospel gave church leaders, intellectuals, and activists to the civil rights movement, advocating protest activism within reluctant religious communities and helping to create an alternative public sphere of excluded voices. Later, as a succeeding book will recount, black social gospelers Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, Benjamin E. Mays, and Howard Thurman influenced King and other leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Still later, the black social gospel influenced the development of liberation theology and progressive black theology. But most of its founders are forgotten, and the work of remembrance is strewn with obstacles.[1]

The black social gospel arose during the trauma and abandonment of Reconstruction, resuming the struggle for black freedom in America. Like the white social gospel and Progressive movements, it espoused principles of social justice, conceived the federal government as an indispensable guarantor of constitutional rights, struggled with industrialization and economic injustice, and grappled with the Great Migration. Like the white social gospel, it also wrestled with modern challenges to religious belief. But the black social gospel addressed these things very differently than white progressives did, for racial oppression trumped everything in the African American context *and* refigured how other problems were experienced.

The black social gospel affirmed the dignity, sacred personhood, creativity, and moral agency of African Americans and responded to racial oppression. It asked what a new abolitionism should be and what role the churches should play within it. Like the white social gospel, it had numerous ideologies and theologies, but here the trump concern was distinctly given, obvious, and a survival issue: upholding black dignity in the face of racial tyranny. Here the belief in a divine ground of human selfhood powered struggles for black self-determination and campaigns of resistance to white oppression.

The early social gospel heralded the growing prosperity and democracy of U.S. American society during the very period when black Americans were stripped of their constitutional rights in much of the nation and terrorized by an epidemic of racial lynching. This contradiction did not stop black social gospel leaders from employing the rhetoric of progress and idealism, but it shaped

their understanding of how the church should struggle for social justice. 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 counterpublic 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.[2]

Like any tradition, the black social gospel can be defined broadly or narrowly. I will do both, describing four streams of black social Christianity and a full-fledged progressive black social gospel that emerged mostly from the third stream. All four of these traditions have rich legacies, but the black social gospel that led to King came mostly from the protest group aligned with Du Bois and some figures in the fourth stream, plus a tiny Socialist flank. The full-fledged black social gospel 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. Reverdy Ransom, Alexander Walters, Adam Clayton Powell Sr., Richard R. Wright Jr., Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, Howard Thurman, Benjamin E. Mays, Pauli Murray, and Martin Luther King Jr. were exemplars of it, comprising an ample tradition by themselves.

I could have made things easier by restricting my focus to this line of figures, plus Du Bois. But to confine this work to the figures that joined Du Bois in the Niagara Movement and the NAACP, espoused liberal theology, and led to Mays and King would miss nearly half the story. Du Bois himself had an ambiguous religious standpoint, though he had a huge influence on what became the black social gospel. The same thing is true, very differently, of Booker T. Washington, who epitomized the social gospel to a vast audience. Moreover, Henry McNeal Turner dismissed the black social gospel, but he and William J. Simmons paved the way to it. Ida B. Wells took no interest in modern theological scholarship, but she gave the black social gospel an unsurpassed example of righteous Christian militancy. Thus, this book begins with a broad rendering of black social Christianity before narrowing to the specific version of it that fired America's greatest liberation movement.

Certain things that define the category "social gospel" apply across racial and denominational lines. The social gospel was fundamentally a movement, not a

doctrine, featuring a social ethical understanding of the Christian faith. It taught that Christianity has a mission to transform the structures of society in the direction of social justice. This idea was rooted in the commands of the Bible to lift the yoke of oppression and to build a just order. At its best it refashioned the demand of antebellum abolitionism to break the chains of racial caste. The social gospel, however, had something that previous socially oriented forms of Christianity lacked—modern social consciousness, especially the idea that there is such a thing as social structure. The concepts of "social structure" and "social justice" came into being in the 1880s with the rise of the Socialist, trade union, and Progressive movements. Not coincidentally, so did the social gospel, the fields of sociology and social ethics, the idea of social salvation, and the idea that theology had to be modernized to deal with social salvation and the modern world. Only with the rise of modern social Christianity did Christian thinkers begin to say that salvation had to be personal *and* social to be saving. If there was such a thing as social structure, salvation had to be reconceptualized to take account of it.

In Europe this idea was called Christian Socialism, a movement radiating out of England and Germany. In the United States it had to be called something else. Until 1910 it was usually called "applied Christianity" or "social Christianity." Afterward it was called the social gospel. In the social gospel, society became a subject of redemption. Christianity had a mission to transform society as a whole, building the kingdom of God on earth. Ransom, Wright, Walters, Powell Sr., and George Washington Woodbey spoke this language with full self-consciousness and conviction. In the succeeding generation, so did Johnson, Mays, Thurman, Murray, King, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., and many others. These black Christian leaders spoke of "Christianizing" American society, calling America to fulfill the Declaration of Independence and the Reconstruction Amendments. Many of them believed that "advanced" societies got to be advanced by submitting to supposedly universal laws of civilization, attaining the inevitable social progress that came with submitting to the laws. Much of black social Christianity was procapitalist, equating capitalism with freedom and economic self-determination, but the full-fledged black social gospel stream was usually critical of capitalism, holding out for equality and economic democracy. The black social gospel had radical wings that espoused democratic Socialism and/or anti-imperialism, and it had accomplished proponents that were wrongly forgotten.

The founders of Afro-American social Christianity were products of the bitter defeat of Radical Reconstruction, who were forced to imagine a new abolitionist politics and Christianity. For them, Christianity had no social

relevance if it did not lift the struggle for racial justice above everything else. It was not simply a matter of reclaiming the abolitionist religion of David Walker and Sojourner Truth, for the new struggle for racial justice took place amid the turmoil of the modern social problem. The legacy of abolitionist "radical religion" was foundational for black social gospelers, but they lived in a time of new problems, ministering in churches that for the most part did not support the idea of social justice ministry.

Turner and Simmons lived through the drama of Reconstruction and went on to pioneer forms of social Christianity in the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) and the American National Baptist Convention. Turner is usually understood, rightly, as the last of the nineteenth-century black religious radicals, a throwback to the abolitionist era who found himself living in a time of Gilded Age smallness, the evisceration of the Fourteenth Amendment's "privileges or immunities" of citizenship, and the betrayal of the Fifteenth Amendment's right to vote. But to view him only as the symbol of a shattered liberationist or nationalist dream is to perpetuate the misreading that there was no black social gospel. Turner also marked the beginning of something, as did his Baptist peer, Simmons.

The racial crisis of the 1890s yielded four versions of black social Christianity, plus a tiny Socialist flank, before and after Du Bois rose to prominence. Booker T. Washington became a colossal figure in American life by bargaining with white elites for a season of peace and economic opportunity for blacks. He had a vast national following among blacks and whites, counting black and white social gospel leaders among his strongest allies. For a while, the Washington group was so dominant that many Bookerites believed there was no such thing as a legitimate alternative or opposition; Washington believed it adamantly. His black supporters included powerful denominational leaders such as AME bishops Wesley J. Gaines and Abram Grant, African Methodist Episcopal Zion (hereafter AME Zion) bishop George W. Clinton, and Baptist officials E. C. Morris and R. H. Boyd.[3]

The second group of socially active black Christians took the Turner path of nationalist separation and/or African emigration. The only hope for African Americans was to have their own nation. This group had a distinguished leader in Episcopal missionary and intellectual Alexander Crummell, an equally Anglophile leader in Episcopal bishop and missionary James T. Holly, and a loyal follower of Turner in AME missionary Alfred L. Ridgel. Then as now, there were different kinds of black nationalism. Broadly defined, black nationalism is the view 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 sociohistorical, making a claim about black cultural authenticity or distinctiveness. Defined broadly, however, there were nationalists in all four streams of black social Christianity. The second group espoused stricter and more emphatic forms of nationalism, contending that blacks were a distinct people that needed to create a sovereign nation-state and, even if the statehood project failed, a black civilization.

Some nationalists devoted themselves to the hope of 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 and culturally conservative, and most had a conflicted relationship with Washington after he rose to prominence. But some combined protest egalitarianism and separatist politics. Baptist minister Sutton Griggs and Congregational minister William Henry Ferris, for example, each had one foot in the Niagara Movement. Black nationalism had an electrifying moment after World War I, with the rise of Marcus Garvey and his movement. A generation earlier, Crummell and Turner clashed over the question of 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.[4]

The third group vehemently opposed Washington's strategy and his "Tuskegee Machine," calling for a new abolitionist politics of racial and social justice. Boston journalist William Monroe Trotter had church-based allies in this cause before Du Bois emerged, notably AME minister Reverdy Ransom, AME journalist Ida B. Wells (later, Wells-Barnett), and Baptist ministers J. Milton Waldron and William Henry Scott. After Du Bois emerged and cofounded the Niagara Movement, there were numerous black social gospelers that identified with Niagara protest activism, notably Ransom, Wells-Barnett, Waldron, AME minister Richard R. Wright Jr., Baptist ministers James R. L. Diggs and Peter James Bryant, Congregational minister Byron Gunner, Episcopal rectors Robert W. Bagnall and George Frazier Miller, and Baptist layman and historian Carter G. Woodson. Eminent Presbyterian minister Francis J. Grimké was an ally of this group, as was his brother Archibald Grimké, a prominent attorney with ties to Trotter. Diggs, while serving as president of

State University in 1906, boasted to Du Bois, "I am indoctrinating our students with the Niagara spirit."[5]

The fourth group was equally important for what became the black social gospel. These figures advocated civil rights activism while relating more diplomatically to Booker Washington and Bookerism. In the heyday of the battle between the protest and accommodation parties, nearly every public gathering of one party evoked a name-calling riposte from the other. The Bookerite *New York Age* called the Niagarites "an aggregation of soreheads" that selfishly prized notoriety over the interests of black Americans. Both sides, however, alienated people that disliked ideological bickering, a fact that each side ruefully acknowledged. 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 conceived the social gospel as a both/and enterprise, contending that Du Bois–style militancy and Washington-style realism were both indispensable to the civil rights movement that was needed. AME Zion bishop Alexander Walters, Baptist educator Nannie H. Burroughs, Howard University dean Kelly Miller, and Baptist minister Adam Clayton Powell Sr. were leading figures in this group. Others included sociologists Monroe Work and George Edmund Haynes, Methodist Episcopal minister William Henry Brooks, Baptist feminists Lucy Wilmot Smith and Sarah Willie Layten, Congregational ministers Henry Hugh Proctor and William N. DeBerry, and Gammon Theological Seminary theologian J. W. E. Bowen.[6]

Meanwhile, Baptist ministers George W. Woodbey and George W. Slater Jr. tried to shift the debate to the ravages of capitalism, espousing a Marxian socialist version of the social gospel. 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, who served Episcopal parishes in Detroit and Brooklyn, respectively. Bagnall and Miller wrote for A. Philip Randolph's Harlem Socialist magazine the *Messenger*; Bagnall served as director of branches of the NAACP; and Miller led Howard University's alumni association. But Socialist activism 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's Socialism for twenty years.[7]

These four groups, plus the Socialists, constituted the orbit of black social Christianity in the early twentieth century. Some of the figures I have named

were full-fledged social gospel progressives, and some were not progressive about anything. But all had some connection to social Christian intellectualism or activism. The borderline cases were sufficiently prominent as activist ministers, church workers, or religious intellectuals that excluding them is harder to justify than naming them. Washington is the towering example of a mostly conservative black social Christian leader. Kelly Miller was equally conservative on many issues, but he was an important player in the development of social Christian intellectualism. Monroe Work, despite moving into a secular career, had a background in the ministry and belonged to the social gospel network of ministers and intellectuals, as did George Edmund Haynes, a longtime associate of the Federal Council of Churches. These figures contributed to the defining social gospel discussion of how to make Christianity relevant to modern life and the struggle for civil rights. There were enough of them to make a difference and to launch a tradition that bloomed into something historic.

For some in the fourth group, the founding of the NAACP in 1909 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. The black social gospel brought ordinary church members into the civil rights movement, though never as many as Du Bois and Woodson envisioned, which prompted both to sharply criticize the churches. The founders called for a second great movement of abolition, passing this cause to Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, Vernon Johns, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Benjamin E. Mays, Howard Thurman, Pauli Murray, Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Abernathy, James Lawson, Wyatt Tee Walker, Andrew Young, Gardner Taylor, Samuel Proctor, Jesse Jackson, and many other leaders of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. This roll of black social gospel leaders is vastly more accomplished and interesting than its white counterpart, and is every bit as variegated theologically. Yet most of the founders are long forgotten, and even the familiar figures often are not identified with the social gospel.

Numerous conventions have long kept the black social gospel from being remembered, and they remain obstacles to recovering it today. It is often assumed that the orbit of early black social Christianity was very small, numbering 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 gospelers.

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 that were thus ignored addressed this issue constantly.[8]

A broader convention of American historiography has applied with particular vengeance to black social gospel leaders. The convention is that religious intellectuals no longer mattered by the end of the nineteenth century. In that case, black religious intellectuals did 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 Thurman and Mays were overlooked for decades.[9]

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. The leading architects of this quite particular idea were Simmons, Ransom, Walters, Wells-Barnett, Du Bois, Wright, Powell, Woodson, Johnson, Mays, and King. They realized it was a modern social Christian idea, and said so.

The black social gospel produced significant religious intellectuals and activists, and not only during the King era. The Progressive Era was an emergency for African Americans that posed new problems that became defining for black religion. For fifty years black religion had 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 churches in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had much at stake in the question of whether they should support efforts to fuse social justice politics with progressive theology. Subsequently the black social gospel paved the way to the civil rights explosion of the 1950s, and it continues to be

espoused wherever religious leaders carry on the legacies of Ransom, Walters, Mays, Murray, and King.

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s was sufficiently profuse, unwieldy, and many-layered to yield vastly different accounts of what it was, how it came together, and where it went. Undeniably, the movement had a religious dimension, but scholars debate almost every aspect of this influence, pushing back against interpretations that attribute too much importance to religion or too little, or too much or too little emphasis on charismatic leaders, community organizations, or anything not at the local level. Much of the best scholarship of the past generation has restored due credit to black churches for helping to spark and sustain the movement, serving as the sites at which most of it took place. Other important works have pushed back against too much religion, usually by playing up community organizing. But religion versus community organizing is a strange debate, revealing more about interpretive fashions than about what happened. "Religion" goes hand in hand, in the case of the civil rights movement, with local communities, activist organizing, and public intellectual discourse. We need to take the story back to the black social gospel tradition that pressed the issue of social justice, organized at the community and denominational levels, and created public intellectuals. King did not come from nowhere, and neither did the civil rights explosion of the 1950s.[10]

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. Turner and Simmons were accused throughout their careers of replacing religion with politics, notwithstanding that Turner was a powerful revival preacher and Simmons preached about the saving grace of sincere piety. 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 facts 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. 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, 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.[11]

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 as prone to white supremacism 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. Turner, 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. As it is, Wells-Barnett had to wait until the 1970s to be remembered, and the others, until recently, have been confined to histories of the black Methodist and Baptist Churches.

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, while Egbert Ethelred Brown carried out a pioneering ministry at Harlem Unitarian Church. 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 leaders of a social gospel tradition or as equal counterparts in the development of ecumenical social Christianity, and the Socialist movement made little attempt to recruit black members.[12]

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 a "politics of respectability" that 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 leaders or public leaders of any kind. 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 problem of transcending "compensatory religion" was terribly real for black social gospel leaders, and without their witness the radical social gospel theology and activism of King are inexplicable.[13]

NEW ABOLITION FOUNDERS

Turner and Simmons were pioneers of black social Christianity, bridging the Civil War and Progressive Era generations, in different ways clearing a path for the social gospel. Turner enabled new abolition movements that 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 underachievers 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's rough edges and his fixation with colonizing West Africa caused him to fade in later life, but he was a giant figure in the black church struggle against white racism who distinctly prefigured liberation theology.

Simmons had a similar generational experience, although 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, Alexander Crummell, 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 was the person most responsible for getting black Baptists to pull together in a national convention. He also mediated, before Du Bois entered the picture, 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.

Ransom, Wells, and Walters played major roles in early black social Christianity. Ransom advocated 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's 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 generated more publicity and controversy than any black American, seizing the years that fell between a fading Frederick Douglass and an ascending Booker Washington. Then she married Frederick Barnett, just as Washington skyrocketed to eminence and Walters emerged as a civil rights leader. Walters espoused social gospel theology, political independence, Pan-African consciousness, civil rights agitation, and, most important, united-front activism for civil rights. He symbolized the volatile racial politics of the early twentieth century by leading an organization that featured pro-Washington and anti-Washington flanks. In Walters's case the usual story of embattlement with the church did not occur, as the AME Zion Church took pride in his leadership and accomplishments. But he had his hands full trying to hold together and sustain a civil rights protest movement.

In different ways these figures made society a subject of redemption, and all made a mark before Du Bois versus Washington became the issue. A black tradition of the social gospel was already coming when Du Bois dramatically entered the picture. It already had four ideological tendencies when Du Bois burst into prominence, which cut to a famous dualism shortly afterward. Kelly

Miller introduced the distinction that has ruled the field ever since, identifying Du Bois with black radicalism and Washington with black conservatism. Miller was a Howard University dean and sociologist, socially conservative, antifeminist, strongly procapitalist, 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 black social gospel 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?[14]

Liberationist historian Gayraud S. 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, tended to be "less political" and "less obsessed with ideology on the grand scale" than other forms of radical politics, such as social democracy, Marxist syndicalism, 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.[15]

Wilmore cogently explicated much of the religious contribution to black radicalism, an intellectual tradition analyzed by political scientist Cedric J. Robinson in his classic work, *Black Marxism* (1983), and developed theologically in the seminal works of James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970) and *Martin & Malcolm & America* (1991). Though Robinson did not mention Wilmore or Cone, he developed a similar critique of Western religiosity as a structure of domination, emphasizing the unique experiences of blacks in Western contexts. Robinson described Du Bois, Trinidadian cultural critic C. L. R. James, and novelist Richard Wright as the major exemplars of this tradition. For Wilmore, the exemplary black radical was Turner, who towered above others "without peer in the early twentieth century." Turner was deeply alienated from white society, Wilmore explained, 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 otherwise outstanding 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 Douglass died, but Turner failed to try, and afterward black Christianity got a generation of leaders not worth mentioning, except Ransom and Walters, whom Wilmore mentioned only in passing.[16]

The black social gospel founders deserved greater credit for advocating social justice causes that Turner spurned, and many of them were equally or more radical than Douglass, who advocated progressive assimilation to the end of his days. There were three large reasons why Turner did not challenge Washington in the late 1890s: He lost influence by insulting the majority of 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 progressives were willing to do, with no lack of commitment to abolishing white oppression. Ransom, Wells, Walters, Waldron, and Wright were leading examples. All were already adamant, when Du Bois came along, that Washington did not epitomize black social Christianity. Many others said it more gently, fashioning a Booker-yes, Booker-no dialectic. The founders established a tradition of black social Christianity that was as radical as Du Bois on one flank and nearly as conservative as Washington, for a while, on the other flank. Put differently, there were black social gospel founders that fully belonged to the tradition of black religious radicalism, there were others that did not, and both things were already true before Du Bois came out against Washington.[17]

But 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 and provided a language for it. He helped to launch the Pan-African movement, the Niagara Movement, and the NAACP, and 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 but 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.

Eventually, Du Bois tempered his emphasis on moral failings and uplift elitism, dropped neo-Lamarckian theory and his early Social Darwinist tropes, let go of romantic imperialism, pulled back from his neo-Hegelian idealism, 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.

Though he began as a Crummell-style elitist and neo-Lamarckian, Du Bois later adopted what he called a "vaster and far more intricate jungle of ideas conditioned on unconscious and subconscious reflexes of living things." Political theorist Lawrie Balfour aptly cautions that Du Bois traded on his readers' awareness that he was too important to be a "mere example." Du Bois mined the fissure between his status as a member of a denigrated caste and his role as a race leader, and he stuck to his focus on exemplary individuality 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, in response, about economic justice and the structural ravages of global capitalism. But that did not dissuade him from focusing on what it meant to be an exemplar in a wretched time.[18]

For two decades that question overwhelmingly favored Washington. Du Bois grew up in a quiet New England town where white men took pride in having

fought to free blacks from slavery; Washington was born into slavery and schooled in oppression. Du Bois was encouraged by admiring teachers to fill his head with Hegel and social theory; Washington had to claw his way to a vocational school, where he was trained in survival education. Washington achieved a level of national renown and esteem that few Americans have experienced, widely regarded as a paragon of virtue, but Du Bois brilliantly challenged Washington over the future of black Americans. Washington lived to see the argument turn in Du Bois's favor, but the upshot was only beginning to appear when Washington passed from the scene.

Today 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 widely revered across racial lines and remained so for decades after he lost the argument and passed on. Booker Washington was complex, wily, and awesomely accomplished at a time when the constraints on what most black Americans were allowed to accomplish were horrendous. In the face of Klan terrorism, an upsurge of lynching, a southern civil religion of "Lost Cause" propaganda, and a suffocating plague of disenfranchisement and Jim Crow abuse, Washington built a powerhouse institution in Alabama—Tuskegee Institute. 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 accommodated disenfranchisement and segregation while organizing 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 implored blacks to stay in the South even as he spent half of each year fund-raising in the North. He hobnobbed with the high and mighty but stayed in touch with the everyday 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 and professors through his influence with philanthropists, and hired spies to infiltrate rival organizations. Had Washington not been a great organizer and fund-raiser, Tuskegee Institute would not have survived any of its first twenty years. But he monopolized racial philanthropy and bullied his competitors, which fueled a backlash against him.

Washington keenly understood that most white southerners 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 plainly expressed 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 that 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. Here the ties between black and white versions of social Christianity were strong, because Washington owed much of his fame to Lyman Abbott and other leaders in the right-assimilation wing of the social gospel. Abbott serialized Washington's memoir *Up from Slavery* to his vast audience in *Outlook* magazine and published articles lauding Washington as the embodiment of the social Christian ideal. The very term "social gospel" gained currency in the 1890s as the title of a journal by a white Christian Socialist community in Georgia that sought to build a school modeled on Tuskegee's trinity of work, education, and Christianity. Washington contended that black church religion, especially in the South, wrongly separated religion from morality—exactly as northern social gospel missionaries said. 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.[19]

Many of these leaders were Washington's personal friends, especially Abbott and white social gospel founder Washington Gladden. Gladden and Washington implored that black churches needed to become more ethical, caring about righteousness, and less emotional, caring about rapture. Gladden preached on personal faith every Sunday morning and on social issues every Sunday night, contending that Christianity was a social ethical religion linking personal and social redemption. On the first Sunday of every year he preached about how America and the world had improved over the past year. These practices fit Washington's idea of how Christianity should be espoused in a modern, progressing world, though he and Gladden agreed to disagree about trade unions and corporate capitalism.[20]

The deepest commonality between the white church and black church traditions of the social gospel is that both responded to the charge that the church did not care about society's poorest and most vulnerable people. The social gospel arose as a response to the corruption of the Gilded Age, the end of Reconstruction, the rise of industrialization and urbanization, and the challenge of what became the Great Migration. Gilded Age capitalism was structurally similar in America's major northern cities, notably Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, New York, Philadelphia, and St. Louis. A machine ran the municipal government, which served the capitalist class while distributing patronage to working class allies. Meanwhile, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1886 that corporations were legal persons under the Fourteenth Amendment and that states could not regulate interstate commerce passing through their borders, thus annulling the legal powers of states over powerful trusts, railroads, and holding companies.

This was the political-economic context that gave rise to Progressivism, Populism, and the social gospel. All espoused reforms on behalf of economic equality and opportunity. The Progressive and white social gospel movements sought to clean up government, especially at the federal and city levels. To many white reformers, the domination of urban politics by capital made political rights seem useless, so they turned urban corruption and labor reform into moral issues. This agenda lifted urban and labor reforms above political rights at the very time that African Americans were stripped of their rights under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. The Progressive and white social gospel movements, at their worst, consented to this trade-off, or simply ignored African Americans. At their best, these movements urged that America only worked as a multiracial, multiethnic democracy that fulfilled its constitutional pledge to African Americans. Usually they sought to democratize American society on decidedly middle-class terms, except when they fused with Socialist or Populist movements.

In the South the Populist factor loomed larger and the social gospel was usually a form of Populism. Many southern states had a Populist movement, dominated by white farmers, that sought to wrest control from the planter class and the Rockefeller-Vanderbilt-Harriman class of capitalists. In the South and Midwest the movement generally took on political form as a farmers' alliance or a farm and labor party. At the national level, the People's Party of 1892 nominated James B. Weaver for president, calling for government ownership and control of the railroad, telephone, and telegraph systems. In some places, Populist movements injected vile racist demagoguery into their polemics against bankers, railroad barons, and the plantation class; white nationalism

readily took on an aggrieved Populist hue. In other locales Populists took a different tack, appealing for black votes.

Disenfranchisement was a brutally direct method of preventing African Americans from voting for Populists, white Republicans, or themselves. Lynching was another. Lynching had been a feature of southern culture long before the Civil War. Between 1840 and 1860, three hundred people were hanged or burned by southern mobs, and 90 percent of the victims were white. Lynching did not become an instrument of racial terror until Reconstruction. Blacks were brutalized long before racist lynching erupted in the 1880s and 1890s, a fact that the C. Vann Woodward school of southern historiography underplayed in its emphasis on the novelty of white nationalist hostility. Still, the unleashed hatred of white nationalists *was* even worse than the commonplace white American racism that denigrated blacks for their supposed inferiority. With the ascendancy of white nationalism in the 1880s, the stereotype of the dim-witted inferior was recast as a predator and enemy. South Carolina governor and U.S. senator Ben Tillman described black men as beastly rapists. Georgia Populist Tom Watson, running for the presidency in 1904, excoriated the Democratic Party for basing its southern existence on race hatred. The following year he smoothed his return to the Democrats by giving racist speeches. Many voters that Watson tried to woo said that Tillman was right about black barbarism. But the barbaric spectacle in this story was the lynching mania that swept the American South.[21]

In northern cities the social gospel, black and white, forged alliances with the Progressive movement, which was usually averse to Populist rhetoric and leaders. The site of fusion was usually a settlement house modeled on Toynbee Hall in London's East End. The settlement houses, in the North and South, provided care for infants and toddlers, nursed the sick, organized garbage removal, and offered lecture programs, concerts, reading groups, and discussion groups. The lodestar American settlement, Hull House in Chicago, founded by Jane Addams, was a pillar of the national College Settlement Association. In the black Methodist and Baptist denominations, where settlements were called "institutional" churches, the pioneers of settlement ministry were Ransom and Waldron—figures who welcomed the Great Migration as a potential game changer for Afro-Americans and American politics.[22]

Most black congregations were too small and embattled to become social welfare agencies, but nearly every U.S. American city with a sizable black population had a few large, socially conscious congregations that developed programs offering child care, health care, garbage removal, and employment counseling. These congregations were anchors of the black social gospel. Waldron's Shiloh

Baptist Church in Washington, DC, was a prototype. Other leading black institutional churches included Powell's Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, Henry Hugh Proctor's First Congregational Church in Atlanta, George Freeman Bragg's African Episcopal Church in Baltimore, William N. DeBerry's St. John's Congregational Church in Springfield (Massachusetts), Lacey Kirk Williams's Olivet Baptist Church in Chicago, W. W. Browne's Metropolitan Baptist Church in Harlem, Walter H. Brooks's Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in Washington, DC, Charles T. Walker's Tabernacle Baptist Church in Augusta, and J. E. Ford's Bethel Baptist Church in Jacksonville (Florida), where Waldron established social welfare programs.[23]

These congregations established or cofounded literary societies sponsoring debates, lectures, discussion forums, recitals, and elocution contests. Literary societies flourished in some cities where social welfare ministries lagged. For example, Brooklyn had the gold-standard black literary society—the Brooklyn Literary Union, founded by Siloam Presbyterian Church in 1886. T. Thomas Fortune and many of Brooklyn's black elites played active roles in this organization, and it spawned other Brooklyn literary societies in which Fortune usually played a role, notably the Concord Literary Circle of Concord Baptist Church, the Nazarene Literary Society of Nazarene Congregational Church, the Young People's Literary Society of Union Bethel AME Church, and the Progressive Literary Union of Fleet Street AME Zion Church.[24]

The literary societies were devoted to cultural literacy and building a cultured black public, and the settlement movement was the usual point of intersection for social welfare ministries that crossed racial lines. The white settlement leaders were usually female and socioeconomically privileged. They struggled with how they should relate to black communities and questioned whether their houses should be located in predominantly black communities. Waldron and Nannie Burroughs replied that the movement needed as many black social workers as it could find; otherwise white settlements merely reinforced white domination.

The settlement movement reinforced the social gospel predisposition to keep sectarian theology to a minimum, because settlement houses served a variety of ethnic and racial groups. The social gospel and liberal theology did not necessarily go together. It was possible to embrace the social gospel without accepting biblical criticism or Darwinian evolution, and it was possible to embrace liberal theology without adopting the progressive or radical politics of the social gospel. For many black ministers, the social gospel was more palatable than liberal theology because the latter seemed to disavow biblical authority and evangelical doctrine. But in the early twentieth century the social gospel

swept the elite northern seminaries and divinity schools, where it was deeply intertwined with liberal theology. Many Christian leaders judged that the social gospel and liberal theology arose together and fit together because they were the same thing. This reading acquired taken-for-granted status across most of the theological spectrum, which increased the difficulty of making inroads for the social gospel in black churches.

The leading black social gospel ministers, activists, and academics did not back down on the need for a modernized theology. They pressed the case for it forcefully, even as they struggled with problems of greater magnitude. They built a tradition of their own that drew mostly on black Christian experience and operated mostly in segregated black space while also drawing upon their connections to religious and political white Progressivism. This dialectical consciousness already pervaded black social gospel rhetoric before Du Bois offered a famous description of it. The black social gospel founders were influenced by the same debates over social science, social ethics, Social Darwinism, and Socialism that shaped the white social gospel, and at the popular level, Charles M. Sheldon's best-selling social gospel novel, *In His Steps* (1897), readily crossed racial lines, urging readers to ask themselves, "What would Jesus do?" But Du Bois's description of double-consciousness was brilliantly illuminating for describing the differences drawn by the color line, which made all things different.[25]

DU BOIS AND THE BLACK SOCIAL GOSPEL

Du Bois was enormously important for the black social gospel, and not only because he said that the black church was enormously important. He loathed every kind of religious orthodoxy, which, in his view, yielded stunted and provincial souls. Du Bois could be blistering on this theme. In 1940, speaking at Wilberforce University's commencement, he 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." 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. *The Souls of Black Folk* famously invoked "Our Spiritual Strivings" and lauded the spirituals. *Darkwater* began with his social gospel "Credo," conjured a black baby Jesus in "The Second Coming," conjured an adult black Jesus in the scathing "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."[26]

His passionate, unorthodox spiritual sensibility came through to many readers. They caught that a religious, arguably Christian passion lay behind Du Bois's furious attacks on unworthy ministers and church dogmatism. Religious studies scholar Jonathan S. Kahn notes that Du Bois gave expression to his religious longing by attacking forms of religion that he considered to be backward, reactionary, and/or oppressive: "At these moments, his irreligion itself turns religious." Historian Edward J. Blum cautions that even the language of "irreligion" or "anti-religion" should be used carefully when applied to Du Bois, because he had religious feelings that many of his secular protégés and interpreters did not fathom: "Du Bois was not anti-religious; he was against faith used for fraud, belief used to bully, and Christianity when used to control." 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 forgo 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."[27]

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. Du Bois stressed that it was the only institution that black Americans owned outright. Any movement worth building in the black community had to share in the life of the black church, speaking its language of hope and redemption. Bookerism, as Du Bois realized, was strong in this area, equating its bootstrap ethic with good religion, although some complained when Washington sermonized in pulpits about carpentry and bricklaying. The early anti-Booker party was long on secular professionals; thus, so was the Niagara Movement. But to reach beyond its limited circle of urban intellectuals and professionals, the Niagara Movement and the NAACP had to have religious leaders. When Du Bois called for an anti-Washington uprising, three of the four figures he called out—Kelly Miller, J. W. E. Bowen, and Francis Grimké—were religious intellectuals. Then he found a firebrand in Ransom, who prized his standing as the Du Bois figure in black Christianity.[28]

Ransom gained a national following and won a bishop's chair. But he lacked a movement vehicle, the tasks of the episcopacy wore him down, and the

unrelenting hostility of white society bruised and exhausted him. Moreover, Ransom lived to see his social gospel rhetoric of progress and ideals become quaint under the devastation of the Great Depression. Union Theological Seminary theologian Reinhold Niebuhr led the Depression Era attack on social gospel idealism. In the 1920s Niebuhr was a social gospel progressive and pacifist. In the 1930s he repudiated social gospel idealism and pacifism as a radical Socialist. In the 1940s he blasted the social gospel from a theologically neo-Reformation and politically liberal-centrist Democratic Party perspective, which he called Christian realism. The social gospel, Niebuhr claimed, failed to take seriously the realities of sin, evil, and power politics.[29]

This did not mean that Niebuhr repudiated modern social Christianity. Throughout his career he assumed the core of the social gospel—that Christianity has a social ethical obligation to support movements for social justice. The field in which Niebuhr taught—social ethics—had no history and no basis apart from this assumption. Niebuhr shared most of the modernizing theology that went along with the social gospel, especially its recognition that biblical myths are myths. But he heaped powerful ridicule on the social gospel attempt to fashion a social ethic from the teaching of Jesus and modern humanism. Niebuhr's neo-Reformation theology of sin and grace featured an existential rendering of the doctrine of original sin. He taught his readers to view the world as a theater of perpetual struggles for power among selfish competing interests. He forged a dialectical, ironic, paradoxical approach to social ethics, which both fired and limited his own involvement in the civil rights movement of the 1950s, and he symbolized the adjustment of ecumenical churches to the global traumas of his time.[30]

Everything that Niebuhr wrote was a form of public apologetics for his version of modern, realistic, social Christianity. And everything that he wrote was of deep interest to King, especially Niebuhr's analysis of nonviolence as a stratagem of power. But with Niebuhr there is always an irony, his favorite trope. Two ironies stand out in the present case. One, the foremost critic of the social gospel played a major role in advancing the causes and legacy of the social gospel. But, two, Niebuhr's influence also played a significant role in obscuring the black social gospel. If the social gospel was a bad idea, as Niebuhr was repeatedly, simplistically claimed to have said, better not linger with the social gospel. If Niebuhr was the hero of twentieth-century American theology, the black tradition of the social gospel was better left for dead, along with Gladden and Rauschenbusch. King grappled intently with that possibility as a student in seminary and graduate school, writing papers that compared Niebuhr to the unreconstructed liberals favored by King's teachers. Niebuhr said things

about power and social evil that rang true to King. He also said things about theological and political realism that were off-kilter for King, undercutting the hope that kept black Americans from falling into cynicism and despair.

The importance of keeping hope alive outstripped everything else. Here the black social gospelers who succeeded Niebuhr held the same conviction as the black social gospelers who preceded Niebuhr. They did not believe that the biggest problem with the social gospel was that it dreamed too wildly. They never thought that the social gospel erred by projecting its ethical idealism into the public realm, and they did not have the cultural privilege that allowed Niebuhr to dichotomize between the religious and political spheres. They believed the problem with the white social gospel was that it gave low priority to the struggle against racism. The black social gospel leaders who directly influenced King—Johnson, Mays, and Howard Thurman—acquired their social agency on the social gospel conference circuit sponsored by the YMCA, the YWCA, and the Fellowship of Reconciliation. They came up through the Student Christian Movement, an international social gospel organization blending YMCA and YWCA activists, as did black social gospel colleagues Channing Tobias, Juliette Derricotte, Frank Wilson, Marion Cuthbert, Max Yergan, and Sue Bailey Thurman.[31]

For these ecumenical leaders and activists, the social gospel was indispensable and still in an early phase. They wanted church leaders to stir up their courage and idealism, advocating racial justice with the same ethical passion that the white social gospel devoted to peace, temperance, and economic cooperation. If Christianity had *any* moral meaning in the U.S. American situation, the churches had to confront the evils that oppressed black Americans. Black social gospel leaders vehemently denied that the social gospel exaggerated the kingdom of God as a spiritual and social ethical ideal. How was that possible, if the teaching of Jesus centered on the kingdom of God?

I have long argued that "black social gospel" is the category that best describes King, his mentors, many of his movement allies, and the founders of black social Christianity. Twenty years ago there were not many of us; now there are many more, mainly because black scholars have entered the academy in significant numbers. Historian Clayborne Carson, religious historian Calvin S. Morris, religious studies scholar Anthony Pinn, religious historian Randal M. Jelks, social ethicist and religious historian Walter E. Fluker, and religious studies scholars Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt, among others, have played leading roles in recovering the language and history of the black social gospel. For all my stumping for an overlooked tradition, however, I am careful not to exaggerate the influence of early black social Christian leaders, who played only supportive roles in the Niagara Movement and the NAACP.[32]

My relationship to a related scholarly trend is more qualified. Today many scholars push hard against "spotlight" history, contending that Du Bois and King get too many books to the exclusion of others. Historian Angela Jones says it forcefully in her valuable work *African American Civil Rights*, adding that spotlight history produces accounts of the civil rights movement that give too much attention to religion. Historian Shawn Leigh Alexander, in his excellent history of the Afro-American Council, *An Army of Lions*, contends that scholars give short shrift to the council because they habitually exaggerate the importance of Du Bois. In his words: "Du Bois has mistakenly become central to our understanding of this period of African American history." Alexander gives the Afro-American Council its long-denied due by "shifting attention away from Du Bois and his leadership of the Niagara Movement."[33]

Here I am emphatically two-handed. I agree with Jones, Alexander, and others that we must recover the forgotten or overlooked players in this story. And I agree with Alexander that the Afro-American Council deserves greater consideration than it has long received. But I do not agree that doing so should make Du Bois less central to the story, and I have similar convictions about King. Du Bois shined too brightly not to be at the center. Even his political rivals, plus many who just didn't like him, called him the breakthrough genius of his time. He was deeply learned, exceedingly brilliant, and historic. He was a warrior for humanity and human culture, exactly as he thought, and a prickly egotist who could be abusive to allies that deserved better, as he knew. Near the end of his first major work, *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois wrote a stunning sentence that explained what it meant to fight for humanity and where he was headed: "If in the heyday of the greatest of the world's civilizations, it is possible for one people ruthlessly to steal another, drag them helpless across the water, enslave them, debauch them, and then slowly murder them by economic and social exclusion until they disappear from the face of the earth—if the consummation of such a crime be possible in the twentieth century, then our civilization is vain and the republic is a mockery and a farce." Nobody else wrote like that.[34]

Du Bois had warm and jovial relationships with a small circle of friends, and he gave brusque treatment to pretty much everyone else, in the manner of many withholding male hero types. At least he was reflective about the gender factor. Du Bois grasped and acknowledged that churches, male intellectuals, and activist organizations lived off the labor of women, taking credit for their achievements. Here, prophetic brilliance, personal foibles, sexist presuppositions, and feminist insight meshed together. Du Bois handed out shabby treatment to his wife, Nina, humiliated her with numerous long-running affairs, and excluded black women who threatened to steal attention from him. Ida

Wells-Barnett, Anna Julia Cooper, and Mary Church Terrell got icy put-downs from him, and he went out of his way to marginalize Mary McLeod Bethune too. His early writings on the "degradation" of black family life helped to fuel a pernicious tradition of attacks on the character and culture of black women, and black studies scholar Hazel Carby exaggerates only slightly in censuring Du Bois for his "complete failure to imagine black women as intellectuals and race leaders."[35]

My caveat on "complete" is that Du Bois played a role in lifting up black female writers during the Harlem Renaissance, and he commended the social activism of black women, which implied something about leadership. Sociologist and black studies scholar Cheryl Townsend Gilkes notes that Du Bois offered the first "self-consciously sociological interpretation of the role of African American women as agents of social change." Despite his personal chauvinism and his conflicted record concerning women's agency, Du Bois passionately defended the dignity and rights of black women, offering a feminist critique of male domination, with a pinch of idealistic chivalry. In *Darkwater* he wrote a perfect comeuppance to churches (nearly all of them, of every denomination) that depended on women they put down: "As I look about me in this veiled world of mine, despite the noisier and more spectacular advance of my brothers, I instinctively feel and know that it is the five million women of my race who really count. Black women (and women whose grandmothers were black) are today furnishing our teachers; they are the main pillars of those social settlements which we call churches; and they have with small doubt raised three-fourths of our church property."[36]

The women in this story that broke the grip of male domination and presumption were usually good at working with others and building new organizations. Burroughs, Lucy Wilmot Smith, S. Willie Layten, Mary Cook, and Virginia Broughton were backed by the power of a national organization they created, the Woman's Convention of the National Baptist Convention. Terrell, Lucy Thurman, Mary B. Talbert, and others similarly derived much of their social agency from the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), which originated with Victorian calls to true womanhood and purified homes, but went on to become deeply involved in suffrage, anti-lynching, and antisegregation activism. For the NACW's founding leaders—Terrell and Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin—and for many others, the coming of the NACW was a godsend precisely because it offered Afro-American women an opportunity to work together outside the church. Mary McLeod Bethune, an NACW president in the mid-1920s, similarly won renown as a school founder in Daytona, Florida, before winning renown as a New Deal leader. Even Wells-Barnett, who

had trouble working with others, at least recognized the importance of organizations and played a role in cofounding several of them. These figures had to be as creative and stubborn as they were tough, working with religious communities that denied women the right to lead.[37]

Some women found greater opportunity and enrichment in the Wesleyan/Holiness movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries or the Pentecostal movement that emerged in the early twentieth century. Holiness congregations claimed to restore the emphasis of Methodist founder John Wesley on the necessity of born-again conversion as evidenced by a holy life. Hundreds of white Holiness communities, such as the Church of the Nazarene, and black communities, such as the Evening Light Saints, taught that sanctification was a second part of the conversion experience. To be sanctified was to be freed from all sinfulness of the heart, something necessary for total salvation. The Pentecostal movement grew out of Holiness religion, originating at a revival in 1906 at the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles led by former Evening Light Saints preacher William J. Seymour, who taught that sanctified living was not sufficient proof that one had received the Holy Spirit. Seymour preached about the gift of ecstatic speech in an unknown tongue—Pentecostal experience.[38]

The "Sanctified Church"—the collective term for the Holiness and Pentecostal Churches—rejected the regularization of worship in the Baptist and Methodist Churches and the tendency of these churches to assimilate culturally. Black Holiness groups restored the oral music and ecstatic praise traditions of slave religion, sometimes with female leadership. Seymour spoke at the front of the congregation without a pulpit or platform, encouraging congregants to speak in tongues. The Pentecostal movement featured singing, dance, shaking, trances, dreams, and healing. It spread immediately at a phenomenal rate, for a while as an interracial movement, until white Pentecostals came up with doctrinal reasons to dissociate themselves from blacks, forming the Assemblies of God denomination in 1914. From the beginnings of the black Holiness and, especially, Pentecostal movements, women in disproportionate numbers flocked to the participatory testimony, music, rhythm, and holistic worldview of the Sanctified Church.[39]

Traditional black denominations already featured, as Du Bois famously observed, the "frenzy" of shouting, the personality of the preacher, and the beauty and longing of black music. Most northern black churches spurned gospel music until the southern migrants came along and refused to be denied, infusing urban congregations with their expressive music. But long before gospel music surged into the North, black churches North and South worshipped

buoyantly around "a king in a private kingdom," as civil rights icon James Farmer vividly described the black (especially Baptist) preacher. This commanding figure was "both oracle and soothsayer, showman and pontiff, father image to all and husband-by-proxy to the unattached women in the church and others whose mates are either inadequate or missing. More than a priest, he is less only than God." Farmer, having grown up as a preacher's kid (PK), stressed that preachers had a tendency to overwhelm: "The old thesis about maternal dominance in the black family has no validity here whatever. The PK lives with a dominant male image." For many women and some men, the historic churches had too much of that, plus they were too formal and assimilated. Many were migrants who took up storefront religion after feeling unwelcomed by northern congregations. Some found their way to large sanctification churches such as Chicago's All Nations Pentecostal Church, headed by Elder Lucy Smith. A few found refuge in scattered community churches. Gilkes puts it bluntly, observing that for these reasons the sanctification churches became "overwhelmingly female," leading some to permit female leadership.[40]

The feminist irony of Sanctification Christianity cuts across racial lines. Traditional black churches, with the partial exception of the AME Zion Church, were like most traditional white churches in excluding women from ordained ministries. But these were the churches where the social gospel made the deepest inroads. Meanwhile, the churches that allowed women to preach were not the ones that produced social gospel ministers. 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 expressed appreciation for 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 the black churches. And all three perpetuated the view that the 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."[41]

Black America needed an elite of male ministers because it had a dearth of male leadership in general 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*, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, and what became Black History Month. In Woodson's telling, he had two reasons for belonging to Shiloh Baptist Church in Washington, DC: (1) "I find there better people than I do on the outside fighting the institution," and (2) "I find my people there, and I cannot help them unless I remain among them." That was a decidedly social gospel rationale for belonging to a church, a form of religious pragmatism. Woodson readily 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 the church's future, urging black Christians to discard their denominations and form a united black church. But Woodson envisioned no expanded role for female leaders in the black superchurch. 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 Powell Sr. and Powell Jr. spoke vehemently from the pulpit.[42]

The founders of black social Christianity had to modernize their theology without losing their homes in embattled churches. Significant Christianization of America's slave population did not begin until the 1760s. It did not come into full swing until the 1830s. The great revival movements of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—the so-called First and Second Awakenings—sent most black American Christians into the Baptist and Methodist camps. These two religious groups became the primary keepers of the dream that religion might bridge America's racial chasm and thereby bring relief to oppressed black Americans. From the beginning it was an evangelical dream. Black ministers kept it alive even after they were driven by white racism to form their own denominations. The early black social gospel leaders, in order to make inroads into denominations to which they belonged, had to be convincingly evangelical, even as they introduced critical perspectives on the Bible and Christian teaching that challenged the folk traditions of many congregations.

The social gospel *was* essentially evangelical, in the sense of being centered on the life, teaching, and cross of Jesus, in its black and white Protestant forms. Otherwise it would have gotten nowhere. But modern theology had a demythologizing spirit that introduced the way of doubt and negation wherever it entered. The black social gospel, though always embattled for purveying a modern critical consciousness, did better at restraining the way of doubt,

because existential life-and-death issues were palpable in black churches and the black social gospel held fast to gospel norms about the sacred personality of God and all human beings.

Most black social gospel leaders preached in pulpits about a personal God who demanded justice and loved all the children. They welcomed pragmatists like Woodson and drew strength from Du Bois, whatever they made of his personal beliefs. Today scholars vigorously debate the latter point, variously contending that Du Bois was a radical Christian theist, an atheistic Marxist, a skeptical Deist, a Hegelian idealist, or a pragmatic religious naturalist. I believe that Du Bois carved a place for pragmatic heterodox religion within the black radical Christian tradition. He drew upon and employed the language of Christian prophecy, declaring that his work expressed "divine discontent with the imperfect," but he declined to call himself a Christian. He wrote moving prayers during his teaching career at Atlanta University but questioned "whether they were orthodox or reached heaven." Du Bois believed that religion is rightly about struggling with religious meaning and sacrificing for it, and he had a definite exemplar of good religion—the social gospel Jesus, who befriended the marginalized, prayed to a God of the oppressed, and taught that God was present in the poor and oppressed. That was enough for Du Bois, even as he variously mediated Marx, Hegel, Crummell, Turner, William James, and a host of others in thinking about religion.[43]

The black social gospel had debates about dual identities and permeable boundaries, it identified with the NAACP as soon as the NAACP existed, and it had a small flank that fused NAACP liberalism with social gospel Socialism. Moreover, the NAACP was more religious on the ground than it advertised, like the NACW. For decades the NAACP routinely convened in church sanctuaries, welcomed ministerial leaders, and opened and closed its meetings with prayers. Often it sang a hymn or two. Du Bois, blasting NAACP leaders during his stormy farewell in 1934, noted that the staunchly antisegregationist NAACP would have no place to exist or meet without its twenty thousand segregated black churches. The issue of segregation, he said, was not as simple as the NAACP pretended to believe. Many black ministers boasted that the church was the one place that African Americans *chose* to be segregated. Black social gospel leaders negotiated this complex reality long before Du Bois made a ruckus about it, adopting simple, conflicted, and complex views in dealing with it.[44]

Today theorists debate what to make of Du Bois's assertion that he was doubly conscious as a black and American. Literary theorist Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes this expression as a singularly illuminating metaphor for "the Afro-American's peculiar psychology of citizenship." Lawrie Balfour describes it as

Du Bois's trademark rhetorical device marking his own experience as a symbol of uplift and a member of an oppressed caste. Political theorist Robert Gooding-Williams says that Du Bois employed this idea chiefly to criticize the failings of black political leaders. Historian Joel Williamson says that Du Bois took this idea from Hegel and refashioned it brilliantly as the spirit of freedom realizing itself behind the veil of color. Cornel West says that Du Bois rightly fixed on the in-but-not-of dialectic of black self-recognition but oversimplified the cultural predicament of black Americans. Sociologist Lawrence Bobo and political scientist Adolph L. Reed Jr. counter that Du Bois was too committed to being an empirical social scientist to stick with a trope that didn't explain anything (Bobo) or that smacked of late-nineteenth-century neo-Lamarckian social science (Reed). Historian Ernest Allen Jr. says that Du Bois used this idea merely as a tactic, a "double sleight of hand" to ease the fears of "Talented Tenth" achievers that their success in the white world would be discredited. Social ethicist Eboni Marshall Turman says that Du Bois left a problematic legacy for black moral agency by pathologizing black embodiment. Cultural theorist Paul Gilroy, in his early career, employed Du Boisian double-consciousness as a precursor of Gilroy's dialectic of fulfillment and transfiguration, but later Gilroy judged that this idea belongs too much to the nineteenth century to handle the postmodern experience of cultural multiplicity and hybrid identities.[45]

Double-consciousness, though variously conceived and historicized, remains the subject of profuse contention, and not solely on account of Du Bois. For nearly all of us involved in social theoretical discussions of "race" assume a baseline smacking of Du Boisian double-consciousness: Race is a social invention, yet it is terribly real and embedded in psyches, social structures, and communal legacies. Black social gospel theologians were familiar with the complexities of these claims. They debated varieties of integration, cultural distinction and interchange, equality, and theological pluralism while giving priority to the political struggle for justice. Thus the two leading denominations in this story, the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the National Baptist Convention, though operating very differently, advocated essentially the same social ethic of moral responsibility, equal rights, and human brotherhood/sisterhood under the sovereignty of a personal God—as social ethicist Peter J. Paris showed in his seminal study *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches*.[46]

The black Methodists had major pioneering roles, but they belonged to small denominations. One black denomination, the National Baptist Convention, dwarfed all others, boasting over two million members by 1905. But it did not exist until 1895, partly because black Baptists struggled more than

any other group with the separatism-versus-assimilation issue. The black Baptists, being Baptists, had special problems creating a denominational structure beyond congregational and regional levels. More important, they debated separatism versus assimilation for decades before they assembled a huge denomination. By the time that black Baptists founded the National Baptist Convention, the separatist party prevailed, usually with Booker Washington politics, conceiving the church as a refuge from a hostile white society. But that did not settle any aspect of the separatist issue, for black Baptists wanted two things that did not go well together: a separate identity and an important role in changing American politics and society. Neither of these things comported well with a fading Bookerism.

Black Baptist churches used the philosophy of self-help to survive America's racial caste system, which continually raised the question of how separate they should want to be. Northern Baptists had the same debates as Northern Methodists about whether they owed special obligations to southern migrants and whether they needed to sing the migrants' gospel music. But Northern Baptists got to yes more often, which put them in the forefront of the black social gospel, which forced them to decide how modernist they wanted to be. Always there was a diversity of views about what worked and how one should think about the separatist issue. But black social gospelers tended to converge on the pragmatic verdict that the best way to overcome the pernicious doctrine of racial inferiority was to build strong black institutions.