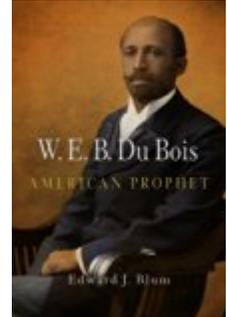


**Edward J. Blum.** *W. E. B. Du Bois: American Prophet.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. viii + 273 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4010-8.



**Reviewed by** Curtis Evans

**Published on** H-Amstdy (October, 2007)

W. E. B. Du Bois: A Spiritual Prophet and Religious Sage?

Edward J. Blum's book is one among many recent books that have sought to restore the towering W. E. B. Du Bois to his rightful place in American intellectual and cultural history, except that Blum is critical of those works that de-emphasize the religious and spiritual aspects of Du Bois's life and writings.[1] Blum argues that Du Bois was "one of America's most profound religious thinkers" (p. 11). He insists that an "irreligious" Du Bois has been created by historians for the purposes of a secularized academy (a major criticism that Blum merely asserts, but does not demonstrate). Blum defines religion as "an ideological system that explains and orders events, behaviors, and ideas in terms of concepts perceived to be sacred, supernatural, divine, or eternal" (p. 12). By adopting this understanding of religion, he is able to examine Du Bois's writings and reflections within a new framework.

Blum rightly notes that there were "multiple religious selves" warring within Du Bois. One was a religious critic who urged black and white

churches to incorporate racial fairness, justice, morality, and a critique of the social and political injustice of society into their religious practices and theology. There was also Du Bois the "apostate" who disregarded traditional religious dogmas and Du Bois the "priest" who authored prayers and hymns for oppressed peoples (p. 12). By paying attention to the performative aspects of Du Bois's autobiographies and writings, Blum is able to avoid traditional biographical questions such as whether or not Du Bois "believed" in God, the psychological and social bases of his belief or unbelief, and how his personal religion changed over time (pp. 15-16).

Blum astutely provides a genre-based approach to Du Bois to highlight what these disclose about him and his religion in various social contexts. Each of his five chapters focuses on a separate topic or corpus of Du Bois's writings: his autobiographies; *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903); historical and sociological studies; creative poems and fiction; and the turn to Communism and political struggle. Most effective, in my judgment, are Blum's probing analyses of Du Bois's autobiogra-

phies and fictional works. He notes that through his "numerous autobiographical acts, Du Bois produced didactic mythologies of self to reveal the many sides of his soul and to speak sacred truths to the world" (pp. 24-25). Drawing on the theories of literary theorist and psychoanalyst Joseph Campbell, Blum presents Du Bois as a folk hero with a "black face" whose personal journeys and struggles acquired a mythical significance in his autobiographies, allowing Du Bois to portray himself as a hero-priest and prophet-teacher who disclosed the divine and black America. According to Blum, Du Bois's personal story was scripted as a way of opening up the spiritual state of African American communities and thereby subversively exposing the false claims of white supremacist mythologies that demonized black people and denied their connection to the divine (pp. 24-26).

In his excellent analysis of Du Bois's religious vision, Blum alerts his readers to manifestations in Du Bois's literary works of black Christs, apocalyptic visions, and retranslations of Jesus's teachings into the American scene. By situating Du Bois's work and thought within a historical tradition of African American autobiographical reflections on the pervasiveness of racism and white imaginings of the divine, Blum convincingly presents Du Bois as an articulate religious critic whose writings evince a persistent struggle with the problem of evil and suffering in black America. Blum provides an unvarnished portrayal of how Du Bois unflinchingly wrestled with the religious meaning of white violence against blacks, even as he reworked and reimagined a black God who was on the side of African Americans. In my view, chapter 4 of Blum's work will no doubt make the greatest contribution, while his painstaking analysis of the black religious imagination through Du Bois's literary works will surprise and enlighten many readers.

Although Blum successfully makes the point that most historians and biographers have been too eager to depict Du Bois as a dogmatic atheist

or agnostic, I am not sure that Blum appreciates why Du Bois has been regarded as an atheist or agnostic. Blum's own analysis indicates the persistent criticisms of religion that Du Bois uttered throughout his long life. Although, he accounts for this by making a few remarks about Du Bois's normative or idealized conception of "true Christianity," I do not think this will persuade most specialists that this is the best way to understand Du Bois's animus against religion as it existed during his lifetime (not as "religion" may have been in some idealized ahistorical realm). At one point, Blum comes close to getting at a better description of Du Bois and his religious sentiments when he briefly notes that Du Bois regularly minimized the supernatural in his reimagining of religion and should therefore be seen as a religious modernist (p. 160). I have always felt that this is a much more fitting description of Du Bois in light of his constant criticisms of black churches for their alleged backwardness and puritanical prohibitions, and his scathing critiques of white churches for their failure to treat blacks fairly.[2] Du Bois's emphasis on ethics at the expense of traditional doctrines and theology places him firmly in the religious modernist or Protestant liberal camp. If Blum had set out to argue that Du Bois was a religious modernist rather than an atheist or agnostic, I think his book would have been richer and this approach would have taken the unnecessary edge off the book in its strong stance against those who reportedly have underappreciated Du Bois's religiosity. Du Bois as the religious modernist also elucidates Blum's own description of Du Bois's positive relationship with white liberal Protestants such as John Haynes Holmes, pastor of Community Church in New York, and John Howard Melish, pastor of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church (pp. 187-189). That Du Bois attended these churches during the late 1940s and early 1950s, when he was most critical of religion and moved leftward politically (until he joined the Communist party), provides the kind of evidence that Blum needs to substantiate his claims about the meaning and

importance of religion in Du Bois's life. Attention to Du Bois's literary works, his "religious imagination," and religious sentiments and descriptions expressed by those at his funeral and admirers of his books, while important and enlightening, does not satisfactorily demonstrate that he was a religious prophet (not to mention the problem of gaining any consensus on this ambiguous and highly personal term). After all, religious language and rhetoric are enormously difficult to link to personal behavior and religious practice (as modern-day elections and campaigning clearly indicate).

This is a very important work and it will surely raise a host of questions about scholarly bias and social location as powerful factors in shaping how we represent historical figures and what we deem as important motive forces in their lives. Blum's book is a welcome addition to our expanding knowledge of Du Bois and the cultural study of race and religion in American history.

#### Notes

[1]. Recent examples would include David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993); idem, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000); and Shamoan Zamir, *Dark Voices: W. E. B. Du Bois and American Thought, 1888-1903* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[2]. Curtis Evans, "W. E. B. Du Bois: Interpreting Religion and the Problem of the Negro Church," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75 (June 2007), 268-297.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-amstdy>

**Citation:** Curtis Evans. Review of Blum, Edward J. *W. E. B. Du Bois: American Prophet*. H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews. October, 2007.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13705>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.