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W. E. B. Du Bois, ed. *The Negro Church: Report of a Social Study Made under the Direction of Atlanta University; Together with the Proceedings of the Eighth Conference for the Study of the Negro Problems, Held at Atlanta University, May 26th, 1903.* Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2003. xxx + 212 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7591-0328-3.

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Pioneering Methodology and Polemical Purpose

In his mammoth 1972 analysis of slave culture, Eugene Genovese repeatedly praised the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, arguing, in one case, that there was "much that is wise as well as humane in Dr. Du Bois's point of view, and it seems incomprehensible that it should so long have been ignored."[1] For decades, the white academic establishment had indeed relatively disregarded Du Bois, a slight which Genovese and more recent scholars have corrected.[2]

Today, we appreciate Du Bois as an innovative scholar and social activist, characteristics prominently displayed in this centennial reprint edition of *The Negro Church*, a conference compilation work edited and predominantly written by Du Bois. The introduction, written by Phil Zuckerman, Sandra Barnes, and Daniel Cady, admirably places the work in the context of Du Bois's own shifting religious beliefs and intensifying activism. *The Negro Church* is presented as both an excellent example (although not appreciated in its own time as such) of progressive era scholarship and "the first book-length sociological study of religion ever published in the United States" (p. vii). Du Bois may now be widely recognized, but *The Negro Church* is not. That it remains one of the least-cited of Du Bois works–largely due, as Zuckerman argues, to a lack of available copies–is an oversight this reprint aims to redress (p. vii).

Du Bois begins with a lengthy historiographical essay on the African roots and American development of religion among transplanted blacks through 1890. His periodization remains congruent with dominant current interpretations. The degree of autonomy achieved by many black ministers and slave congregations by 1800, for example, was severely hampered by white fears in response to the Haitian Revolution and Nat Turner's rebellion (pp. 22-26). Du Bois's chief aims in this section, however, are twofold. First, he denounces the prevalent notion, derived from scientific racism, that blacks were inherently inferior by locating the roots of "Negro Problems" not in the nature of blacks, but rather in the destruction wrought by slavery: "That powerful institution, the polygamous African home, was almost completely destroyed and in its place in America arose sexual promiscuity, a weak community life, with common dwelling, meals and child-nurseries" (p. 4). Second, Du Bois praises the leadership of black preachers during slavery: "The Negro priest ... early became an important figure on the plantation and found his function as the interpreter of the supernatural, the comforter of the sorrowing, and as the one who expressed, rudely, but picturesquely, the longing and disappointment and resentment of a stolen people" (p. 5). Such examples of Du Bois's trademark poetic eloquence, peppered throughout his other works, are rare in *The Negro Church*, especially as the text shifts from historical essay to social science. Likewise, his glorification of the slaves' preachers shifts starkly toward condemnation of the training, morality, and effectiveness of contemporary black ministers.

Dedicated to studying the turn-of-the-century "Negro Problems," the "greatest group of social problems that has ever faced the Nation," Du Bois's Atlanta Conference sought to empirically identify causes (p. xviii). Accordingly, denominational analyses and local sociological studies (several of which written by others) form the vast majority of *The Negro Church*. Census data, survey responses, congregational statistics, seminary reports, and budget tables dominate the text, often to the extent that the reviewer longed for more of Du Bois's insightful analysis.

Yet, several themes emerge from this data. First, the conference focused on the religious experiences of black youth amidst growing concern that, since the days of slavery, the "church appears to be occupying a somewhat less prominent place in the social life of the people," and more children were growing up outside its influence (p.

85). The youth were particularly important to Du Bois simply because they potentially represented a new generation of ministers. The data collected regarding black preachers' conduct was a scathing indictment of church leadership. A typical response, from one of the "Intelligent Colored Laymen" surveyed in Georgia, answered the question "Are the ministers good?" as follows: "Out of ten, three are sexually immoral, one drinks, three are careless in money matters" (p. 64). Another major concern was the financial condition of black churches. The situation was bad but apparently improving. Moreover, the examples of blacks capably managing and governing their congregations provided further evidence against the claims of scientific racism as to the inherent corrupt nature of the Negro race. The African Methodist Episcopal Church was "chiefly noteworthy" in that regard as "a peculiar case of Negro government, with elaborate machinery and the experience of a hundred years" (p. 130).

On the whole, however, Du Bois was "impressed by the great crying need of a strengthening of religious effort and moral inspiration among the masses of the Negro people" (p. 207). The church, he thought, could become the principle agent of change in resolving the many problems at hand. This would involve a major change in the teachings and practice of faith, as Du Bois asserted that the "low moral and intellectual standard of the past and the curious custom of emotional fervor are not longer attracting the young and ought in justice to repel the intelligent and the good" (p. 207). Du Bois criticized preachers' tendencies to stress preparation for the next life at the expense of the resolution of this life's problems.

Was Du Bois, then, truly interested in the faith of a people or only the potential for political and social change between the races? In closing, he claimed the former "religious and moral qualities are independent of the eventualities of the race problem; no matter what destiny awaits the race, Religion is necessary either as a solvent or as a salve" (p. 208). However, Du Bois, who by 1903 had abandoned the religious beliefs which characterized his early years, in fact, had little patience for theology and tended to distrust any evidence dealing specifically with faith. Hence, the religious utterances of faith offered by surveyed children either were "without doubt theological and understood by few who used them," or "pointed to a lack in the moral training of Negro children" (pp. 188, 189). Such biases are connected to the methodological problems with Du Bois's evidence. One survey response highlights such issues: "To the first question I beg to say that it is too vague to enable me to reply" (p. 165).

It would of course be unfair to apply modern scholarly standards here without properly recognizing the ground-breaking nature of Du Bois's methods in his own time. His data may be problematic in some cases, but his efforts constituted a landmark in American religious sociology. The defining characteristic of *The Negro Church*, however, is the fervor and urgency with which a leading scholar makes an empirical argument. In this case, Du Bois's passion is not in his prose, but rather in his method.

Notes

[1]. Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), p. 310.

[2]. Most notably, see David Levering-Lewis's two-volume biography: *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York: H. Holt, 1993), and *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: H. Holt, 2000).

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