

Race and religion in america book review example

[Countries, United States](#)



The religious impulse is one of the most deeply seated within all of us. Because it involves the totality of our response to the events of our lives, it begins with our emotional responses to events when we are too young to have the ability to process those events on a more rational level. Often, it is the effects of these events that shape the way that we deal with others our whole lives. When one is in an ethnic group that is the object of discrimination, religion can become an important part of one's life, as the suffering that comes with oppression can become a topic that is only addressed at church. In the case of the black church in the decades after Emancipation, the roller coaster existence that included the euphoric sweep to power in many states in the former Confederacy during the close supervision of the South by the Northern Republicans during Reconstruction - but also included the sellout of the freedmen by the Republicans in order to capture the 1876 Presidential election - was proof that, even 100 years after the white Declaration of Independence, justice had yet to "roll like a river" through the United States for everyone.

The observations of W. E. B. DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk* show his study of blacks at worship. While blending in with the other blacks in church, DuBois viewed himself as a sociologist. That did not stop him from becoming personally involved with the religious life around him, though. While he was conducting quantitative and qualitative research, he was also taking part in the religious life of his community. The essays "Of the Faith of the Fathers" and "Of Alexander Crummel," both a part of *The Souls of Black Folk*, come from exhaustive interviews that he conducted and observations that he made. His study *The Philadelphia Negro*, done for years before *The Souls of*

Black Folk, was the very first detailed sociological study of an urban community in the United States (Basu). The information in this study, conducted with black congregations in the city, required that he live in Philadelphia's seventh ward for twelve months and conduct thousands of interviews. He also pored over church records of membership and finance.

There were others who also conducted sociological studies, but they did not use the methods that DuBois used - methods that would become part of the accepted norms for sociological study. A contemporary study to DuBois', Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, is only based on secondary sources. Weber's 1922 studies on religion in the inner city has a strong basis in theological and historical tradition, but omits interviews, observations, or survey analysis. Gilman's 1923 study *His Religion and Hers*, which focused on gender rather than ethnicity, contains no experimental data. At a point in time when the earliest studies of religion were taking place, the only scholar carrying out methods that would come to be the standard for sociological inquiries was DuBois.

When it comes to religious liberty, DuBois found matters in the United States to be quite wanting. He wrote that American religion was "Jim Crowed from top to bottom" and that "no other institution in America is built so thoroughly or absolutely on the color line" (DuBois 1970, 216-217). He goes on to say that the white church in the South has "opposed every great modern social reform; it opposed the spread of democracy, universal education, trade unionism, the abolition of poverty, the emancipation of women and the emancipation of the Negro slave (DuBois 1970, 217).

However, when DuBois visited the black churches, he was awed by many of their achievements. He saw the African Methodist Episcopal Church of America as perhaps the pinnacle of the culture's civilization in the United States, and he viewed black churches as potential hubs for political and religious awakening (Zuckerman 245). The church could possibly become, for him, places for racial awareness and social improvement, as they were more democratic to him than much of the rest of the company. In his chapter about Alexander Crummell, he gushes about the greatness of black religious music, calling it "the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil" (DuBois 1903, 134). In the vacuum that slavery and, later, oppressive racism had created, as far as powerful social and moral values guiding Southern culture, DuBois write that the church "has instilled and conserved morals, it has helped family life, it has taught and developed ability and given the colored man his best business training. It has planted in every city and town of the Union, with few exemptions, meeting places for colored folk which vary from shelters to luxurious and beautiful edifices (DuBois 1903, 187).

That is not to say, of course, that DuBois thought that the black church was a perfect institution. He thought that the black church was taking away money from poor people who needed it, in the form of tithes and offerings. He wrote that families should put their hard-earned money to use buying better housing, and he also thought that many black ministers just spent their time drunk, immoral and dishonest (Zuckerman 245-246).

The separation between white and black in the American South created some strange sights in religious worship services. When revivals would sweep through towns, the primary image would be huge tents filled with people. There would be speakers from “ different denominations speaking from different preacher’s stands at the same time, throngs of men and women both black and white (though often seated or gathered separately)” (Lippy 94). Therefore, even access to religious ecstasy became something to parse with Jim Crow. Members of both groups would be “ seized by spiritual forces beyond their control, an example of what analysts call ecstatic religious experience” (Lippy 94). At times, when the Calvinist camp meetings came to towns, “ rich and poor, educated and illiterate, black and white, male and female” (Lippy 95) would come together for the meetings, but then split back up into their gender and race-based groups once the meeting was over. The camp meetings were viewed as a sign of unity in the evangelical community, even though the cohesion of all members of a given town or locality only lasted for the duration of the worship service. Whether or not the unity was just for show is an open question. What is known is that, throughout the South, once the religious services were over, the old racial lines reemerged, and blacks and whites went back to living their separate existence. If one spends any time at all reading the parts of the Old Testament that have to do with liberty, or with equal treatment of one’s fellow man, it becomes clear that we are all to treat one another with dignity and love, regardless of the color of one’s skin. The preaching that was taking place during that time period must, one suspects, have focused on other matters, since for decades, particularly in the Old South, enthusiastic

worship took place in segregated churches on both sides of the tracks, with the power on the white side of those tracks.

In the past 50 years, there have been a variety of interactions between the American presidency and religious leaders, as religion has become increasingly associated with political entities. In 1979, for example, when President Carter felt he had alienated many evangelicals because of his support for such ideas as the Equal Rights Amendment, he invited a group of conservative evangelicals to a White House breakfast, including Charles Stanley, Tim LaHaye, Jerry Falwell, Jim Bakker and Oral Roberts. Because the feminist movement in those days was seen as something that might harm the nuclear family, he wanted to shore up some of the political damage he had suffered for supporting the amendment.

In situations that mix politics and religion, frequently the purpose is to give a visual symbol with which the American public can identify. In the 1970's, when the feminist movement was at its height, the notion that a woman could go into the workplace and receive equal treatment and equal pay with a man was viewed as a threat in conservative circles. Even now, conservative religious seminaries offer programs for study that are targeted at women who will be performing more traditional roles in the home. Instead of studying Greek and Hebrew (the original biblical languages) or church music or Christian counseling, many women are encouraged to take the equivalent of home economics at seminary. There are classes that teach them how to perform basic domestic tasks and how to manage a home while their husbands are working as ministers. The effect that these sorts of ideas

have on women are patronizing on a number of levels. First of all, basic household management skills, while important, are not an academic course of study. They do not require a semester's worth of classwork (not to mention tuition) for an adult student. Second, the idea that these are women's studies is preposterous in the mores of today's way of thinking. Given the fact that the economic realities of the present day require that both spouses go to work, expecting just one of them to manage the home is not fair; given the emphasis on equality that appears throughout the Old and New Testaments, one might expect the church to do better.

Because religious impulses have such deep emotional connections for many of us, matters of faith often resonate with us on levels that we often do not understand. The associations between religious beliefs and liberty can often conflict, as our religious beliefs can differ with notions of freedom, and the impulse to want liberty often comes much later in life, even in adolescence or later, than the impulse to believe does. Over the course of history, this has had many implications, particularly in the case of American slavery, but also in other periods of American culture. The important question, of course, is whether or not we have the ability to give others the same freedom we want for ourselves, in terms of belief and livelihood.

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