

# Divine Discontent

*The Religious Imagination of  
W. E. B. Du Bois*

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# Introduction: Divine Discontent as Religious Faith

I cannot promise you happiness always, but I can promise you *divine discontent* with the imperfect.

—W. E. B. Du Bois<sup>1</sup>

In 1940 W. E. B. Du Bois rose to the podium and delivered the commencement address at Wilberforce University, where forty-six years earlier he had assumed his first academic post. Du Bois, never known for his tact, announced himself to his audience as an “open and frank” critic of Wilberforce and, true to his word, then launched into an address that surely scorched his audience’s ears. He began bluntly: “One searches almost in vain for tangible evidence of scientific work done by Wilberforce professors and graduates. . . . You have not produced great scholars or scientists, great technicians nor great thinkers, and yet there is no earthly reason why you should have not done this.”<sup>2</sup> As hard as this must have been to hear, his remarks on the place of Christianity at Wilberforce, founded in the mid-nineteenth century by the great AME bishop, Daniel Payne, and directed by the African Methodist Episcopal Church, surely cut the deepest:

I have noted in your president’s report the insistence that Wilberforce University is a Christian institution. This is an old note. . . . It was a matter of emphasis when I was here near a half century ago and it did not impress me because it was all too evident that what most people at Wilberforce called Christianity was as childish belief in fairy tales, a

word-of-mouth adherence to dogma, and a certain sectarian exclusiveness. It often seemed to me when I was here a miserable apprehension of the teaching of Christ. . . . Frankly, I have never found at Wilberforce University any outstanding evidence of this kind of Christianity.<sup>3</sup>

To us and certainly to his Wilberforce patrons, the irreligion in these words—his unvarnished anticlericalism, his suspicion of religious dogma, his rage at what he saw as black Christianity’s hypocrisy and betrayal of its central cause of helping the poor and disenfranchised—is deafening. The causticity of his irreligion is hardly surprising or anomalous. Throughout his career, Du Bois’s irreligious voice thundered against whatever he considered religious betrayal and treachery. The Wilberforce talk gives expression to a representative strain of Du Boisian discontent with religion and divinity, as well as the moral and political dispositions to which he saw them leading. Du Bois held aspects of African American religion, in particular the black church, in opprobrium.<sup>4</sup> In his most famous text, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois, in cadences that portend a young Malcolm X, reproved African American religion for having sent black folk “wooing false gods and invoking false means of salvation, and at times has even seemed to make them ashamed of themselves.”<sup>5</sup> He lambasted the black church as “pathetically timid” and “stand[ing] on the side of wealth and power.”<sup>6</sup> Of course, Du Bois did not reserve his lashings for his own community. He saw nothing but moral failure and rank hypocrisy in white Christian America’s unwillingness to “prayerfully inculcate, love and justice for our fellow men, but on the contrary the treatment of the poor, the unfortunate, and the black within our borders is almost a national crime.”<sup>7</sup> At the end of his life, as his Marxist commitments became more explicit, Du Bois extolled the Soviet Union for having the “courage to stop” “allow[ing] children to learn tales and so called religious truth. . . . One can hardly exaggerate the moral disaster of this custom.”<sup>8</sup> In short, Du Bois’s discontent with the divine was acute.

Irreligious sentiments like these make it easy to understand why the last fifty years of Du Bois studies have been dominated by readings that either ignore Du Bois’s relationship to religion or pronounce him a foe of religious faith after finding his irreligion simply self-evident. Adolph Reed’s major work on Du Bois effectively silences his use of religious language by stating that it is limited to an “occasional use of biblical metaphor.”<sup>9</sup> Prominent critic Cornel West finds in Du Bois’s encounters with religion the hostile mien of an Enlightenment *philosophe*, distant from the religious folkways of black America.<sup>10</sup> But no text is more persuasive or influential than David Levering Lewis’s Pulitzer Prize–winning, two-volume biography of Du Bois. Lewis gives

short shrift to the topic of Du Bois and religion, flatly pronouncing him a “serene agnostic” who, as an undergraduate at Fisk, decisively discarded “the familiar architecture” of his youth, his Congregationalist religious faith. Lewis writes that “he calmly adjusted, outwardly at least, to the departure of another central force in his life . . . his religious faith shriveled in the hot breath of hypocrisy and intolerance.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, Lewis implies that the unexpected commercial success of *Darkwater*, which “sounds the emotional depth of a whole people,” occurs only *in spite of its* “hieratic language” and its “trances, Gnostic visions, dark nights of the soul and . . . other intensely religious moments that are surprising at first to see in an agnostic and publicly restrained Du Bois.”<sup>12</sup>

My hope in writing this book is to contest this normative view of Du Bois as one-sidedly hostile to religion, as uninterested in religion and its rhetoric, concepts, narratives, and practices, and most important, as bereft of something recognizable as religious faith. Indeed, I believe Lewis has it exactly backward. Du Bois achieves the strong emotional and popular hold on his readership in writings such as *Darkwater* and, more significantly, *Souls* on the strength of his use of religious vocabulary. There is much evidence that black America responded to Du Bois’s writings precisely because it heard a prophetic voice of deep religiosity. We would do well to listen to historian and editor of Du Bois’s work Herbert Aptheker, who cautions against mistaking Du Bois’s anticlericalism or even his doubts about normative Christian supernatural commitments for total irreligion: “The impression exists that Dr. Du Bois was areligious or even antireligious. The facts are otherwise.”<sup>13</sup> These “facts” deserve greater attention.

If we are open to the religious timbre of Du Bois’s writings, we will find his use of religious modalities hiding in plain sight. If in breaths Du Bois sounded deeply irreligious depths, expressing for example genuine doubt about the existence of God, in other breaths, indeed, at times in the next breath, he expressed deep devotional desires. (As we will see in a moment, the Wilberforce speech is just such an example.) From his epoch-making *Souls*, to his neglected *Prayers for Dark People*, to *Darkwater* and his largely unstudied series of parables that depict the lynching of an African American Christ, Du Bois was unable to keep his hands off religion’s resources. His work is a rich world of sermonic essays, jeremiads, biblical rhetoric, and prayers, all of which are devoted to the overarching goal of fighting for the spiritual, political, and social conditions of those who “live within the Veil.” In a word, Du Bois’s corpus is thoroughly inhabited by religious resources and modalities. This book is devoted to listening to and analyzing this Du Bois in order to determine what sorts of religious oils his writings are dipped in. *Pace* Lewis, there was nothing serene, shriveled, or withered about Du Bois’s relationship to religion. The error that

Lewis and others make is to assume that Du Bois's hostility toward the corruption and hypocrisy he sees in religious institutions represents irreligion *in toto*. When accounts of the religious in Du Bois are limited to his rejection of religious convention, they reveal little about Du Bois and more about their authors' impoverished understanding of the nature of religion.

My claim for Du Bois's religiosity goes beyond acknowledging that Du Bois the sociologist and historian, in texts like *The Philadelphia Negro* and *The Negro Church*, recognized and researched the centrality of religion to the creation, politics, and survival of African American life. My deeper claim is that Du Bois's writings exhibit a spiritual life of their own—that in light of his vast and powerfully engaged uses of religious modalities, a portion of Du Bois's work expresses a deep religiosity or religious sensibility. That sensibility cannot be reduced to an Enlightenment embrace of morality. Against a Kantian ethos, Du Bois insists on including in the resolutions of the Eighth Conference for the Study of the Negro Problems (held at Atlanta University), that "religion of mere reason and morality will not alone supply the dynamic of spiritual inspiration and sacrifice."<sup>14</sup> Religion needs to do more. It provides the political bravery and the courage to seek the greater moral good; it provides the good with its vigor, its captivating qualities, and its ability to ensoul, which is to say to sustain people through tragedy and suffering. In those same Atlanta conference resolutions, Du Bois writes, "We need, then, first the strengthening of ideals of life and living; of reverent faith in the ultimate triumph of the good and of hope in human justice and growth."<sup>15</sup> At its heart, this study is committed to two tasks: tracking down what Du Bois means by reverent faith and showing how his own writing embodies it. Du Bois's use of religious modalities turn his works into religious resources that fortify the varieties of work he wants to accomplish in the world: political protest, social uplift, the honoring of one's ancestors, the development of moral ideals, and even the carving out of time for personal reflection. These are the efforts of Du Bois's reverent faith.

Du Bois expresses a similar notion in the closing moments of his central chapter of *Souls*, "Of the Faith of the Fathers." There he announces a "seeking in the great night a new religious ideal."<sup>16</sup> Like the phrase "reverent faith," this mention of a "religious ideal" is, too, a cryptic and abbreviated line, one that he does not explicate further in systematic detail. Yet, both of these early turn-of-the-century pronouncements of religious desire arc deep into the heart of his corpus. Critics may protest that Du Bois's use of religious modalities is more apparent at the beginning of his career. It is true that in 1903 he stands in *Souls* like Moses "peering from this high Pisgah, between Philistine and Amalekite, we sight the Promised land."<sup>17</sup> Yet as late as the 1950s, Du Bois was trying to salvage a vision of God. For example, in a poem written in 1952,

when his Marxism is typically thought to be resolute, Du Bois exhorts, “Save the tattered shreds of God!”<sup>8</sup> In between we find a diverse and eclectic variety of appeals to religion; by 1920, with his growing internationalism, Du Bois nods toward Buddhism and Islam: “So sit we all as one. . . . The Buddha walks with Christ! And Al-Koran and Bible both be holy!”<sup>19</sup> The activity of Du Bois’s religious imagination—his invocations of biblical language, his depictions of a black Christ, his prayers and jeremiads, and his repeated return to slave spirituals as a form of spiritual renewal—needs to be understood as a lifelong effort to imagine, fashion, and embody a reverent faith or a new religious ideal.

How to fathom Du Bois’s efforts? What kind of religious ideal is he after? What does he revere, and to what is he faithful? What is certain is that his religious sensibilities do not make for straightforward reading. His is a cross-hatched religious sensibility. Du Bois himself uttered perhaps no truer words of self-description than when declaring himself a religious heterodox: “I do not subscribe to ordinary Christian doctrine.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, twenty or so years after he wrote his palimpsest, *Prayers for Dark People*, Du Bois questions the very idea of prayer: “I do not believe in prayer. I do not believe that there is a personal conscious King of the world who will, upon fitting petition from me, change the course of world events to suit my needs or wishes.”<sup>21</sup> As late as 1939, Du Bois can be heard, on the one hand, professing his belief in “the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and earth; and in Work, his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by Human Vision, born of the Virgin Need, suffered under Poverty; was crucified, died and buried,”<sup>22</sup> and, on the other hand, casting doubt on that very creed: “I do not believe in the miraculous birth and the miracles of the Christ of the Christians.”<sup>23</sup> Du Bois seems Christian but only to a point; as not only a ready user of the language of divinity and the Bible but also a deep skeptic of supernatural truths, he is both suspicious of ecclesiastical convention and institutions and sympathetic to the African American religious tradition.

Du Bois’s religiosity exists and thrives without normative bulwarks of religiosity. In fact, his protests and admonitions against religious institutions and what he understood as a banal theological hope for divine intervention were often framed and adorned with a host of religious modalities. In other words, a crucial characteristic of Du Bois’s irreligion is that it often gives expression to his religious longings. At these moments, his irreligion itself turns religious. Du Bois’s speech at Wilberforce, in fact, exemplifies this dynamic, for Du Bois follows his unvarnished brickbats with a Christian vision of his own cobbling. He insists that “Christianity means sympathy; the realization of what it costs a human being to live and support a family in decency. . . . Christianity means unselfishness; the willingness to forego in part one’s personal advantage and

give up some personal desires for the sake of a larger end which will be for the advantage of a greater number of people.”<sup>24</sup> In this account of Christian sacrifice, Du Bois urges Wilberforce to reform itself *religiously*, and yet religion in Du Bois’s key seems to hold the supernatural at arm’s length. He finishes his speech by proclaiming a vision of godliness in what becomes one of his mantras: “Love is God and Work is His Prophet.” And in his last word, with a biblical line that appears repeatedly in his work, Du Bois consecrates this vision with a moment of biblical prophetic flourish from Isaiah: “Awake, awake, put on thy strength; O, Zion, put on thy beautiful robe.”<sup>25</sup> The pattern of the Wilberforce speech—scathing irreligion followed by an emphasis on Christian virtues such as love, sacrifice, and work—runs through his writings. The result is a religious disposition that is synonymous with social criticism of this-worldly conditions and concerns.

It is here that I turn to the epigraph that heads this chapter and from which I draw the title of this book: “I cannot promise you happiness always, but I can promise you divine discontent with the imperfect.” I submit that we hear the key phrase, “divine discontent,” not as Du Boisian disgust and rejection of religion. It is misread as flatly or vituperatively irreligious—as though Du Bois warns or threatens against divinity and religion. Instead, we should hear in “divine discontent” a promise, a covenant, and an urging toward a state of dissatisfaction with politics and society. Du Boisian discontent is a religious sensibility and a spiritual achievement.<sup>26</sup> “Divinity”—religious language, ideas, narratives, virtues—becomes in Du Bois’s hands a tool to express discontent. His uses of religion do not distract from the imperfect but focus attention ever more intently on the imperfect and on what exists in order to transform it into a worldly ideal. Divine discontent is an accomplished state that Du Bois seeks. His divine discontent becomes a state of grace.

Consider, for example, the following passage from *Souls*: “Some day the Awakening will come, when the pent-up vigor of ten million souls shall sweep irresistibly toward the Goal, out of the Valley of the Shadow of Death, where all that makes life worth living—Liberty, Justice, and Right—is marked for ‘White People Only.’”<sup>27</sup> In this moment of religiously imbued social criticism we find the pattern of Du Bois’s religious ideal and reverent faith—his divine discontent. His focus is on this world and not on the supernatural. Du Bois brings the eschaton down to earth, which is where ideals must be made to live and flourish. Here he constructively relies on religious images and notions as levers for fashioning political sensibilities, deploying “divinity”—religious language, ideas, and form—to *give expression* to his discontent. Through religious language, Du Bois draws attention to political and social disquietude. Religion serves as an agitating agent; it enables



him to imagine ideals but only by evincing and articulating the imperfect more clearly. Ideals for Du Bois are dialectically grounded in unflinching acknowledgment of limitations and infirmities. Arnold Rampersad speaks of the “instability of his religion” and urges us not to “deny its vitality or scope.”<sup>28</sup> He is exactly right to point out its eclecticism (though he does not go beyond these few words). My suggestion is that Du Bois’s religious spirit is rooted in its peripatetic instability. Du Bois’s idiosyncratic use of religious vocabulary produces a reverent form of discontent that comes from critical questioning, from challenging dogma, and from attempting to tie tradition to future demands. This is the promise of divine discontent.

I do not want to give the impression that I am the first to alight upon the notion that Du Bois’s relationship to religion matters. In this respect, my work builds on other remarks that have intuited the importance of this connection. Langston Hughes’s famous association, “my earliest memories of written words are those of Du Bois and the Bible,” and Rampersad’s more recent claim that “[a]mong black intellectuals, above all, *The Souls of Black Folk* became a kind of *sacred* book”<sup>29</sup> speak to the type of religious ethos of Du Bois’s work that I suggest accounts for its preeminent place in black American life and letters. Aptheker notes that “[t]he language of the Hebrew Prophets permeates Du Bois’ speeches and writing; their major lesson—let justice prevail though the heavens fail—was a fundamental theme in his long and fabulous life.”<sup>30</sup> Yet, Aptheker’s remarks do not go much beyond this.<sup>31</sup>

In truth, there are only two substantial and sustained writings on Du Bois and religion. The first is Manning Marable’s 1985 essay, “The Black Faith of W. E. B. Du Bois,” which is notable for its ear for the richness of Du Bois’s use of religious vocabulary. The second is Edward J. Blum’s *W. E. B. Du Bois: American Prophet*, which was published in 2007 and represents the first full-length text on Du Bois’s engagements with religion. In a certain respect, Blum’s Du Bois embodies a more resounding and abounding version of Marable’s claim of Du Bois as a “passionate convert to the black version of Christianity.”<sup>32</sup> Blum, too, turns Du Bois into a Christian by placing him in Gayraud Wilmore’s narrative of radical black Christianity. While there is much to recommend Blum’s text, the echo in Blum of Marable’s language of “conversion” to Christianity overlooks what is fundamental and distinct about Du Bois’s religious sensibilities.<sup>33</sup> Du Bois did not accept or abide by the doctrines, beliefs, and practices of an already-established religious tradition, institution, or way of life. It is ill fitting to describe Du Bois unproblematically as a Christian. His heterodoxy runs too deep, and throughout his life he chafed against the label “Christian.”

To Blum’s credit (and unlike Marable), Blum is all too aware of Du Bois’s heterodoxy. For example, Blum acknowledges that Du Bois’s Christ parables

eschew resurrection scenes and are scrubbed clean of supernaturalisms. The problem is that Blum does not capitalize on insights like these and do more with the religious Du Bois who cannot be comfortably suited into his Sunday best. The most we get is this suggestive line: “Minimizing the supernal elements of the Bible did not necessarily position Du Bois in the agnostic or secularist camp. Rather, it showed that he was a religious modernist.”<sup>34</sup> What does it mean to be a religious modernist? How is this category compatible with Christianity, and how does it fit into African American religious thought? Blum does not pursue these threads. Moreover, when he falls back on seeing Du Bois as a part of a normative tradition of black Christian thought, he does not capture the way Du Bois complicates categories not only of “the religious” and “the secular” but also of African American religious thought. Doing this complicating work is a major goal of this text.

Finally, in this book I understand my work as putting aside the biographer’s desire to definitively determine how Du Bois understood his own religiosity. I want to dispense with the need to positively establish whether Du Bois thought of himself as a theist, deist, agnostic, or atheist (and the evidence is mixed on this). Instead, I focus on how Du Bois adopts and adapts the language and resources of religion in his work. My primary interest is not in crawling inside Du Bois’s head to ascertain what he believed. Rather, I want to characterize the sort of sensibility that Du Bois creates textually through his varied uses of the religious modalities. In addition, I want to characterize this sensibility and explain what these varied uses of religious vocabulary were good for. What sort of ends and purposes do his uses effect? What does religious language enable him to do?<sup>35</sup> My answers to these questions engage philosophical, literary, and political sources, not historical ones. I ask now for the reader’s forgiveness if, when speaking to these questions, I sometimes slip and make what sounds like a claim about Du Bois himself. The slippage is merely rhetorical. I make no pretense of understanding what the “great man” himself believed. I am after the sensibilities, ends, and actions to which the “great man’s” writings about religion appeal.

### Five Theses on Du Bois’s Religious Imagination

At the heart of this book are the following five claims about Du Bois’s religious imagination:

1. Du Bois’s religious voice is decidedly antimetaphysical. Poignantly, Du Bois is not interested in the essence or real nature of God, nor

does he believe that God's will forms the superstructure that sustains the history and fate of the world. Indeed, Du Bois often marshals religion in order to challenge Christological explanations in which God intervenes in world events and functions to confirm a divine economy. For Du Bois, these sorts of explanations represent "the temptation in the wilderness," and he mocked and reviled religious folk who saw the world in these terms: "Must not God himself and his angels come and come quickly to settle this awful problem of color and race? . . . He stared at the devil. The devil was a priest in robe and mitre chanting long prayers."<sup>36</sup> Like Nietzsche, a certain type of God—imperious, authoritative, historically determinative—is dead for Du Bois.<sup>37</sup> In short, the terminus of religious devotion for Du Bois is not in establishing a metaphysics of the divine, what Clifford Geertz calls "an authoritative conception of the overall shape of reality."<sup>38</sup> Repeatedly Du Bois begs off a foundational metaphysics: "Our whole basis of knowledge is so relative and contingent that when we get to argue concerning ultimate reality and the real essence of life and the past and the future, we seem to be talking without real data and getting nowhere."<sup>39</sup> When Du Bois speaks religiously—when he uses God talk, when he prays, when he refers to the Christ—it is not to confirm the existence of a supernatural divine order.

2. Du Bois deploys religious vocabularies in order to craft a moral and political sensibility attuned to the finite needs of selves and communities (most often black selves and communities, but not exclusively) struggling against concrete social and political realities. As I said earlier, Du Bois uses religion to pull the eschaton down to earth. For Du Bois, religion is (or can be made to be) essential to life only if it is reworked to help minister to human finitude. Concerns such as rights, education, and historical self-understanding are at times religious concerns for Du Bois. Here is a characteristic sentiment: "Christianity for black men started with the right to vote, and nothing less."<sup>40</sup> Religious formulations are also valuable in that they are tools for philosophical reflection on the conditions of human finitude: "The true joy of living dwells in that Higher Life, that sitting above both sunshine and shadows, that values them at their worth and strives to wind them to his will. In that higher life, my friends, there are three things: Work, and Love and Sacrifice—these three—but the greatest of these is Sacrifice."<sup>41</sup> Do not be fooled by Du Bois's idealistic rhetoric: The higher life is clearly moored in earthly acts: work, love, and doing

without for the sake of others. The focus of the higher life is on the earthly conditions of “living” and the hard-fought efforts needed to secure its goods. Salvation exists for Du Bois, but its dimensions are human.

3. Religious vocabularies enable Du Bois to craft ends that appear to sit in tension with one another. On the one hand, Du Bois uses religious modalities to argue for black people as a fundamental, irreplaceable part of the larger American nation; in this there is an integrationist force to his use of religious vocabulary. On the other hand, Du Bois uses religion to fashion a sense of black peoplehood central to his conception of black American identity. Religion enables Du Bois to bind black people—through hope, love, and at times reprimand. In other words, religious modalities allow him to chart a taut and dialectical path between a unifying account of American democracy that includes black and white together and an account of black identity with an integrity of its own, Du Bois’s version of a “nation within a nation.”
4. Three interrelated religious virtues dominate Du Bois’s religious discourse: piety, jeremiadic protest, and sacrifice. All three virtues are the crucial instances in which Du Bois revises normative Christian notions.
5. In light of the way he uses and approaches religion, Du Bois needs to be understood as an African American pragmatic religious naturalist. By this I mean that, like Du Bois, the American tradition of pragmatic religious naturalism, which runs through William James, George Santayana, and John Dewey, seeks religion without metaphysical foundations. The central complications of Du Bois’s religious register—tension between religious disbelief and devotion, refusal to attribute earthly events to divine metaphysics, construction of identity, peoplehood, and nation from the lived exigencies of race and not racial essences, as well as pursuit of an earthly form of human salvation rooted in human relations rather than antecedent realities—mirror basic pragmatist commitments. Moreover, they set Du Bois outside of normative black Christianity. At the same time, the sources on which Du Bois draws in fashioning this heterodox religiosity are African American. The existentialism of the slave spirituals, the protestations of the African American jeremiad, and a preacher’s facility with biblical rhetoric and interpretation compose his religious voice. Du Bois’s faith is most certainly black.

My claim is that Du Bois drinks fully from both streams—from pragmatist and African American traditions. In drawing on these two traditions—in creating a race-imbued pragmatic religious naturalism—Du Bois transforms both the American philosophical tradition and African American religious thought. By using pragmatist tools—by embracing religious resources without metaphysical commitments and by using these resources to address the realities of race—Du Bois creates a new black faith: a radical version of pragmatic religious naturalism that displays a grasp of the sociopolitical implications of pragmatist thought that is more powerful than the pragmatists themselves. Du Bois inaugurates a line of African American pragmatic religious naturalism.

What exactly is pragmatic religious naturalism, and why is it relevant to reading Du Bois on religion? I admit that the category of pragmatic religious naturalism sounds decidedly recondite, perhaps more abstruse than profound. I also admit that it is possible to accept the validity of seeing Du Bois's engagements with religious vocabulary as antimetaphysical, as rooted in social conditions, and as striving for both a specific black identity and a place in the larger American nation (theses 1–3) without necessarily seeing him as a pragmatic religious naturalist. Nonetheless, it is precisely these characteristics that make Du Bois a pragmatic religious naturalist. Pragmatic religious naturalists subvert traditional religious metaphysics of ultimate truth and foundational beliefs while holding tight to religious stories, moods, symbols, rhetoric, and moral values because they are links to the past, because they are powerful tools and narratives for shaping and envisioning life, and because they can allow for a type of spirituality that emphasizes the fallibility, fragility, and power of the human-made ties that bind us and make us dependent on each other. Santayana writes: “Religions will thus be better or worse, never true or false.”<sup>42</sup> Pragmatic religious naturalists use religion for ends that have to do with exploring the angled perplexities of human finitude and not the wholeness of godly infinity. Pragmatic religious naturalists conceive of religion as funding the deepest sources of ourselves, while insisting that those sources get their depth from linguistic and historical webs of meaning. We would be remiss in not seeing that Du Bois's religious voice follows these lights.

My placing of Du Bois in pragmatist waters follows the work of Cornel West, George Hutchinson, Ross Posnock, and Paul Taylor.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, my insistence on seeing Du Bois as part of a tradition of African American pragmatism and religion follows the path set by Eddie Glaude and Beth Eddy, who have begun the work of showing the ways in which pragmatic religious naturalism

resides at the crossroads of religion, politics, and identity in black American rhetoric.<sup>44</sup> Of course, there are also the often-quoted lines from Du Bois in which he aligned himself, albeit quite generally, with James's pragmatism.<sup>45</sup>

However, my reasons for bringing the category of pragmatic religious naturalism to bear are not rooted in Du Bois's remarkable biographical proximity to the early pragmatists at Harvard.<sup>46</sup> Instead, I do so because pragmatic religious naturalism is textually apposite—because it is a frame through which Du Bois's disjunctive, intemperate, and quixotic religious voice can be made to congeal. I insist on Du Bois's pragmatic religious naturalism because it captures the eclectic, disjunctive, and dynamic religious voice that exists in Du Bois's texts. Here I am following a crucial essay by Taylor, who defends Du Bois's pragmatism solely on the basis that thinking of Du Bois as a pragmatist throws new light onto Du Bois's writings and thereby allows us to evince aspects of his work that have been neglected and overlooked.<sup>47</sup>

In the same way, I invoke pragmatic religious naturalism because it alerts us to Du Bois's uses of religion. Pragmatic religious naturalism, because it allows for religion without metaphysical commitments, enables us to see Du Bois's uses of religion as legitimately religious. The vocabulary of pragmatic religious naturalism frees us from shoehorning Du Bois into ready-made Christian constructions and allows us to imagine Du Bois as practicing what might be understood as an original black American faith—one that pays homage to African American Christian pasts but radically reconfigures them for an ecumenical future. Pragmatic religious naturalism corrects Lewis's failure of imagination in seeing Du Bois's "indifference to the hypothesis of an interactive supreme being as to be indistinguishable from atheism."<sup>48</sup>

What emerges is a slightly antinomian and deeply devotional religious imagination that Du Bois uses to endow his world with meaning. Du Bois's black faith—his African American pragmatic religious naturalism—imagines grace and sacredness rooted in the work and efforts that humans effect collectively. Salvation—whether in the form of racial reconciliation or African Americans ministering to their own needs—is necessarily a precarious and fragile construction that must be tended to in light of human hands, human standards, and human limitations. Du Bois's black faith eschews the certainty and pretense of true belief and uses indeterminacy and impertinence to fund his most important spiritual strivings. With it, he is able to express an appropriate sense of hope that acknowledges the hardships faced by black people. He turns critical thinking into a form of religious practice. He expresses his love for black people while (or even through) constantly interrogating that love. He speaks a prophetic language of sacrifice and the jeremiad that seeks concrete redemption in the here and now while forgoing promises of otherworldly

divine promise; in this Du Bois reshapes American democracy by disrupting the very ideas of the American consensus and divine guarantee and presenting a dialectical account of American unity that allows for a black nation responsive to its own pressing need and interests. Finally, as I argue in my conclusion, Du Bois stands at the head of a rich and complex twentieth-century tradition of African American pragmatic religious naturalists: Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin all belong. Like Du Bois, they, too, reject conventional theological and institutional religious strictures. They also use God talk not to talk about true belief but to unsettle or destabilize conventional loyalties to race, nation, and religion.

It is possible, if we are so inclined, as I am, to look to Du Bois and the African American pragmatic religious naturalists who follow him for hope in this modern age, where religious dogma and theological certitude can dominate our political discourse. The lasting legacy of Du Bois's black faith, his divine discontent, is the way he uses religion to introduce indeterminacy and impertinence without relinquishing religion's power to inspire, motivate, and vivify. Uncertainty and ambivalence do not drain religion of its galvanizing powers. Du Bois and the tradition of African American pragmatic religious naturalism respond to Weberian disenchantment by reenchancing the world with a religious disposition that thrives on criticism, protest, uncertainties, irony, and a deep wonder at the human condition of mutual dependence. Du Bois provides religious rejuvenation that relies on critical energies. The United States today would do well to adapt this combination of critical faith, devotion, and reverence, along with progressive politics, for the challenges we collectively face in the twenty-first century. The sacred, by my lights, lies in these hills. My hope is that this work on Du Bois better equips us in our contemporary world to explore them.

### Some Final Brush Clearing: Are Du Bois's Uses of Religious Modalities Really Religious?

What does it mean to call Du Bois's heterodox engagements with religion religious? Is there a notion of religion that is applicable to and survives Du Bois's types of irreligion: his heated anticlericalism and skepticism of the supernatural?

Current critic Jeffrey Stout argues not only that the term *religion* survives the absence of these two characteristics but also that there exists a strong tradition of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American religious voices who, though critical of religious dogma and unassailable truth, are not pejoratively dismissive of religion *in toto*. Stout argues for a "neglected tradition" of religious

ethicists who have operated “outside of institutional settings in which clerics, ecclesial or academic, exercise power.”<sup>49</sup> These critics have persisted with and relied on religious attitudes, dispositions, and ideals in order to meet the democratic demands of political and social pluralism. In conceiving of this tradition of religious ethics, Stout casts a wide net: Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, John Dewey, Kenneth Burke, Ralph Ellison, and Wendell Berry all belong. He does not mention Du Bois in this tradition of modern religious ethical discourse, but it is the central conviction of my work that Du Bois belongs.<sup>50</sup> “It would be foolish,” Stout writes, “to construe either the *arguments* these authors produce or the *authors* themselves as nonreligious... simply because they are not tied to a religion—which is to say an institutional setting officially designated as religious.”<sup>51</sup> For these writers, there remains, as ever, the need for notions of the good and virtuous forms of communal practice. For these writers, certain aspects of religion, when distanced from its normative institutions and normative metaphysical claims, emerge as critical and vibrant resources for imagining democracy.

When Stout says that it would be “foolish” to try to deny the terms *religion* and *religious* to figures like Du Bois, I take him to be saying the following about the category of religion. “Religion” has no fundamental essence or essential definition. Since its inception, religious studies has struggled mightily to produce a stable, single definition, and these efforts, though they have led to enormous insight into the workings of aspects of religious life, have failed. Religion is a manufactured category, built for certain contexts and for certain purposes.<sup>52</sup> Acknowledging this does not mean that we should no longer use “religion” and “religious.” By all means, we should continue to use the terms, but we need to be explicit about which questions about the nature of religion they are really about. They are not about determining a definitive account of religion. Instead, questions such as “What does that *remark* have to do with religion?” are better understood as questions about the sets of interests and commitments that constitute a context in which religion comes to mean one thing rather than another.<sup>53</sup> Our answers to these questions will always tell us about the grammatical conditions in which we live.

So let me tell you what I mean when I call Du Bois’s uses of religious vocabulary religious. I am not assuming an essence of religion. What I mean is that his uses of the modalities of religion are religious in that they bear enough similarity to other language uses, ideas, and narratives that we already agree upon as representative of religion. When Du Bois talks—as you will see—in the language of the Bible or about the virtues of sacrifice or in the tones of the American jeremiad—he is drawing on recognizably religious contexts: American and black American forms of Christianity. Moreover, when we read



Zora Neale Hurston on the “characteristics of Negro expression,” we learn that African American rhetoric has long been marked by an inventiveness that defies normative boundaries.<sup>54</sup> Religion in the African American tradition has never lived solely in the church; it has always spilled out into the streets and public political contexts. Thus, even though Du Bois’s use of religious rhetoric is distinct and heterodox, it is sufficiently in touch with the larger religious tradition to allow us to think of his engagement with religious vocabulary as religious itself.

Wittgenstein called this line of reasoning a “family resemblance,” and he insisted that all attempts to define anything necessarily follows this logic: “Why do we call something a ‘number’? Well, perhaps because it has a direct-relationship with several things that have hitherto been called number; and this can be said to give it an indirect relationship to other things we call the same name. And we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.”<sup>55</sup> The central idea here is that concepts are discursive, not essential. Concepts are tools; by pointing out the connections words have to other words and contexts, we indicate that they either illuminate matters or they do not. Wittgenstein suggests that the use of the concept of religion rests solely on the idea that pointing out family resemblances amounts to something that makes sense to others. The *plausibility* of a family resemblance is what matters most, where plausibility is a matter of social reception and acceptance. Most important, this situates arguments over the concept of the religious in the appropriate arena: Religion becomes a cultural and contextual conversation.<sup>56</sup> The strength in this, as Wittgenstein suggests, is in the way that defining religion becomes an interdependent affair—a pluralistic practice of interpretation.<sup>57</sup>

What I am counting on is this: that enough readers will be convinced that even though Du Bois does not readily believe in a normative Christian God or belong to a Christian church, his substantial borrowings from these contexts should count not simply as interesting but also as religious. The very nature of Du Bois’s religion—an unsystematic, improvisational borrowing from religious contexts while both skeptical and critical of those very same contexts—speaks to the dynamic nature of African American and American religion. Rafts of scholars of religion—no more so than in our modern moment—have told us that the boundary between the secular and religious has long been permeable, flexible, and dynamic.<sup>58</sup> Du Bois is an overlooked example of this unsteady dynamic, and part of the fruits of puzzling over the religious Du Bois is his emergence as a rich and overlooked example of the intertwined complexities of the religious and the secular in American culture. In fact,

Edward Blum is on exactly the right track by suggesting that “the irreligious Du Bois . . . is a mythical construction that serves the purposes of the secularized academy far more than elucidates the ideas and beliefs of Du Bois.”<sup>59</sup> Those purposes have been to construct “religion” as diametrically opposed to the “secular.” Du Bois confounds this distinction; with Du Bois we can begin to see the way the secular and the religious are porous and intertwined.

Is it not the case that many of us today find ourselves echoing Du Bois’s disposition: skeptical about religious dogma but drawn, no matter what, to the power of religious narratives, concepts, and practices? When we are unwilling to consider Du Bois “religious,” I think we have revealed an intense Protestant bias toward insisting that religion is synonymous with belief in supernatural divinity. The only reason I see to deny the concept of religion to Du Bois is to make a polemical point about the necessity of denominational supernaturalism to religion. However, if we do not feel the need to make this polemical point—which I do not—then lots of other typical religious concerns emerge in Du Bois’s work. These include, for example, the use of biblical rhetoric and narrative to give priority to questions of justice and one’s obligations to one’s neighbor; the self-conscious creation of moments of giving thanks; and the development of habits and virtues that acknowledge dependencies on things bigger than oneself.

One might object that this study of Du Bois is simply a study in rhetoric—an examination of the ways and ends for which Du Bois deploys religious symbols, language, and forms. I object to the idea that his rhetoric is “mere” if what is meant by this phrase is meaningless language. I equally object to the idea that Du Bois’s use of the language of religion is merely contrived and strategic—as though Du Bois did not “believe” in invocations of religious modalities and instead turned to them purely to appeal (read: manipulate) to an African American and a larger American audience, for whom religion was deeply important. Not only do those views minimize the abundance of religious symbols in Du Bois’s corpus, but they also more basically mischaracterize the function of language. All language is strategic—it is designed to communicate. All strategic language is substantive; it works to shape and motivate human identity, politics, culture, and ethics. If we are narrowly focused on figuring out the deep beliefs at the bottom of language, we will miss the real work that language does with or without (mostly without!) deep agreement on belief.

In this I follow Kenneth Burke, for whom “the subject of religion falls under the head of *rhetoric* in the sense that rhetoric is the art of *persuasion*, and religious cosmogonies are designed, in the last analysis, as exceptionally thoroughgoing modes of persuasion.”<sup>60</sup> On this view, the question of Du Bois’s

“substantive” uses of religious language becomes a matter not of ferreting out his deepest and truest beliefs about religion but of characterizing and analyzing what the language is persuasive of. Here again Burke is helpful in that his interest is “not directly with man’s relationship to god, but rather with his relationship to the *word* ‘God.’”<sup>61</sup> In this statement, Burke, I believe, is severing the normative obligation to take that use of the word *God* to reflect commitments about who God is and what God’s nature might be. Why should we assume that God talk is religious only when it is understood as having a theological importance? What if we understand religious language not as expressive of the deepest substratum of reality but, as Sally McFague urges, as metaphorical, “constantly speaking about the great unknowns, mortality, love, fear, joy, guilt, hope, and so on.”<sup>62</sup> Understanding religious language as metaphorical and not symbolic of fixed realities shifts our focus to the effects of that language: “Good metaphors shock, they bring unlikes together, they upset conventions, they involve tension, and they are implicitly revolutionary. . . . In this regard, one could characterize symbolic. . . thinking as priestly and metaphorical thinking as prophetic.”<sup>63</sup> Du Bois is just this sort of metaphorical prophet. As we will see, he uses the language of religion not to reflect on God’s nature but to urge changes in this-worldly realities such as justice, mortality, love, guilt, and hope—though always shaped by the circumpressure of politics and race.

For my purposes, not a great deal would be changed if a historian were to discover a hidden document in which Du Bois admits that he turned to religion purely as an artifice in order to appeal, say, to the readers of *The Crisis*, the NAACP newspaper he stewarded, in which so many of his religious invocations appeared, or to white America writ large. Du Bois would still have left behind a universe of religious rhetoric that played on black Americans’ and white Americans’ relationship with the word *God*. This would still require interpretation by scholars of religion.