W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) wrote a significant amount on religion from a penetrating sociological perspective. He should be considered the first American sociologist of religion. This article calls attention to Du Bois as a founding sociologist of religion and summarizes his major scholarly contributions. His work in the sociology of religion is characterized by 1) a reliance upon standard and diverse sociological methods in generating data; 2) a focus on the religious life of African Americans, and 3) pioneering special attention to the this-worldly, communal, specifically social rewards which religious affiliation provides.

INTRODUCTION

While many sociologists continue to overlook the significant contributions W.E.B. Du Bois made to sociological theory and practice (Ashley and Orenstein 2001; Pampel 2000; Ritzer 2000; Hadden 1997; Cuzzort and King 1989), others have recently helped to establish his much-deserved place in the canon (Collins and Makowsky 1998; Farganis 2000; Kivisto 2000; Lemert 1993; Brint and LaValle 2000). Rodney Stark (1985) has been particularly important in highlighting the foundational contributions Du Bois made to the development of sociology in the United States.1

Du Bois's work on race, history, and politics has generated the greatest amount of scholarly attention (Bell, Grosholz and Stewart 1996; Byerman 1994; Green and Driver 1978; Broderick 1974; Blackwell and Janowitz 1974), but few are aware that he was also a seminal sociologist of religion. In fact, The negro church (1903), a book he edited and co-wrote, is the first specifically sociological book-length study of religion published in the United States. Du Bois's additional writings reveal a lifelong interest in religion, an interest which was quite sociological in nature. And yet, nearly all recently published sociology of religion survey texts fail to mention his name (Greeley 1995; McGuire 1997;

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1 Stark's Sociology (1985) was one of the first textbooks to cite Du Bois in the opening chapter as a major foundational pillar of American sociology.
Thrower 1999; Bainbridge 1997; Kurtz 1995; Hamilton 1995; Turner 1997; Aldridge 2000) or do so very briefly, only in passing (Johnstone 1997; Chalfant, Beckley and Palmer 1994). Indeed, as a sociologist of religion, Du Bois remains virtually unknown. Why have his writings on religion been ignored for so long? Perhaps because he has been so well-known as a scholar of race, that his significant contributions in other areas have simply been ignored by default. But it may be more pernicious than that: most of Du Bois's sociological work was ignored or overlooked by mainstream sociology for decades. This unfortunate exclusion from the canon is an important topic in its own right, but beyond the scope of this article. It has been dealt with thoroughly elsewhere (Sibley 1995; Basu 2000; Anderson 1988).

The goals of this article are: 1) to call attention to Du Bois's sociology of religion in the hopes of generating more attention to and appreciation of his work; and 2) to summarize his contributions, illustrating their continued relevance for the sociological study of religion. In brief, Du Bois's treatment of religion is typified by three characteristics: 1) a reliance upon standard sociological methods in generating data; 2) a focus on the religious life of African Americans; and 3) special attention paid to the this-worldly, communal, specifically social rewards which religious affiliation provides. These aspects of his work will be discussed in greater length below.

SOURCES

Before proceeding further, a few words concerning my sources. Researching Du Bois's work on religion is a difficult task for the following reasons: many of his most significant contributions are out of print and quite hard to find, for example, *The negro church* (1903). Also, much of what he had to say concerning religion is scattered throughout an array of collections and edited volumes, often published for the first time after his death. Additionally, some of his most important insights were delivered as speeches or included in various newspaper and/or magazine articles, most of which, again, were published posthumously (see Green and Driver 1978; Weinberg 1970; Foner 1970). The main sources for my research into Du Bois's sociology of religion included: 1) his well-known works, such as *The souls of black folk* (1903 [1989]) and *The Philadelphia negro* (1967 [1899]), which contain individual chapters that specifically address religion; 2) his lesser-known (and out of print) works, such as *The negro church* (1903), *The gifts of black folk* (1968c [1924]) and *The negro in the South* (Washington and Du Bois 1970 [1907]; 3) collections of his personal writings and correspondences (Aptheker 1973, 1976, 1978); and finally 4) his creative writings, including novels, poems, and short stories (Aptheker 1985), which are actually quite often sociological in nature. For additional information concerning Du Bois's major writings on religion, see *Du Bois on religion* (Zuckerman 2000).
A LIFE

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, on February 23, 1868. He died in Accra, Ghana, on August 27, 1963. He married Nina Gomer in 1896 and they had two children: a son, Burghardt (who died at age three), and a daughter, Yolande. A year after Nina's death in 1950, he married his second wife, Shirley Graham. He received his B.A. in 1888 from Fisk University, a second B.A. from Harvard in 1890, and an M.A. from Harvard in 1892. After two years of study at the University of Berlin, he received his Ph.D. from Harvard in 1895. He studied under such notables as Max Weber, George Santayana, and William James. He was Professor of Greek and Latin at Wilberforce University from 1894-1896, Assistant Instructor of Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania from 1896-1897, and at Atlanta University he was Professor of Economics and History from 1897-1910 and chair of the Sociology Department there from 1934-1944. He wrote over twenty books and hundreds of essays and articles throughout his life, and edited several major magazines, including The Crisis, from 1910-1934. He was a principal founder of the Niagara Movement and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; a world leader of the Pan-African movement; and a leader of many subsequent Pan-African Congresses.

Du Bois's religious identity developed from that of a faithful Christian to a skeptical agnostic. Though religion permeated his early writings and infused the first third of his life; from his college days onward he was critical of organized religion and skeptical of traditional religious doctrines (Du Bois 1968a[1940], 1968b; Rampersad 1976).

DU BOIS'S SOCIOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

Du Bois's sociology of religion bases itself firmly upon standard sociological research methods (Stark 1985; Blackwell and Janowitz 1974). In The souls of black folk (1989:107 [1903]), Du Bois chastises the "car window sociologist" who draws conclusions about people without engaging in hands-on research. In a letter written in 1904, he asserts that in order to draw sociological conclusions,

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2 It is crucial to highlight that Du Bois died an agnostic, but not an atheist, per se. In 1948, a priest wrote to Du Bois asking him whether or not he believed in God. Du Bois replied: "Answering your letter of October 3, may I say: If by 'a believer in God,' you mean a belief in a person of vast power who consciously rules the universe for the good of mankind, I answer No; I cannot disprove this assumption, but I certainly see no proof to sustain such a belief, neither in History nor in my personal experience. If on the other hand you mean by 'God' a vague Force which, in some uncomprehensible [sic] way, dominates all life and change, then I answer, Yes; I recognize such Force, and if you wish to call it God, I do not object." (Aptheker 1978:223).

3 A collection of previously unknown prayers written by Du Bois was published in 1980 titled Prayers for Dark People. These writings are deeply spiritual, as are many of the poems published in Darkwater (1920), such as "Credo" and "A Litany in Atlanta."
we must not do so from "inside [our] office," but "get down here" and live among those we wish to understand, studying them "first hand" (Aptheker 1973:75). As Blackwell and Janowitz (1974:27) note, he had "a zeal for collecting 'facts'" and little patience for "armchair generalizing."

His emphasis upon an empirically-driven research agenda was impressively ambitious, as is evidenced not only by such works as *The suppression of the African slave trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870* (1954 [1896]), *The Philadelphia negro* (1967[1899]), *The negro* (1915), and *Black reconstruction in America* (1935), but by the sound scholarship generated through the annual symposiums he organized, chaired, and participated in while a professor in Atlanta. From 1896 through 1914, Du Bois published a book *every year* based on the sociological research presented at these conferences concerning various aspects of African American life.

Du Bois's emphasis upon empirically driven research is clearly evidenced in his study of religion: he got involved with the religious life that surrounded him to a degree unparalleled by other scholars of his day. He personally conducted extensive research (qualitative and quantitative) among living religious participants prior to arriving at and publishing his insights, impressions, and conclusions (Green and Driver 1978). His rich essays on black Southern religious life that appear in *The souls of black folk* (1989 [1903]), namely, "Of the Faith of the Fathers" and "Of Alexander Crummel," are based upon extensive participant observation and in-depth interviews, respectively. His ground-breaking *The Philadelphia negro* (1967[1899]), which was the first in-depth sociological study of an urban community conducted in the United States (Lester 1971; Basu 2000), provided detailed information on the religious life of the black community of Philadelphia, thereby offering the first in-depth study of black congregations in an urban setting (Baer 1998). The information therein was based upon thousands of interviews, extensive participant observation (he actually lived in Philadelphia’s seventh ward for a year), in addition to detailed content analysis of church budgetary and membership records. Additionally impressive is the array of traditional research methods successfully employed a few years later in *The negro church* (1903): in-depth interviews, participant observation, and a variety of questionnaire and survey analyses.

It is important to note that Du Bois's contemporaries (and recognized founders of the sociology of religion), while offering brilliant insights, did so without a similar reliance upon what today would constitute standard sociological research methods. Emile Durkheim's classic *The elementary forms of the religious life* (1915) is based on questionable secondary source material (see Nielsen 1998:148; TenHouten 2000; Evans-Pritchard 1965). Max Weber's (1963[1922]) seminal scholarship is steeped in pre-existing historical and theological literature, but is not grounded in anything resembling participant observation, in-

In sum, at a time when early social theorists set about studying religion and formulating the insights which would shape the discipline, one of them — Du Bois — was not only a theoretical innovator, but a specifically sociological pioneer, grounding his scholarship in standard sociological research methods to an unparalleled degree.

**AFRICAN AMERICAN RELIGION**

Du Bois's sociology of religion focuses on African American religious life. He was intrigued by African American religion, extensively documenting and exploring its significance in such works as *The negro church* (1903), *The negro in the South* (Washington and Du Bois, 1970 [1907]), *The gift of black folk* (1968c[1924]), the *Souls of black folk* (1989[1903]), and other miscellaneous essays, speeches, and articles, including such important contributions as “The Negro Church” (published in *The crisis* in 1912) and “Will the Church Remove the Color Line?” (published in *The christian century* in 1931).

Du Bois provides a rich social history of African American religious development, and his analysis is essentially one of syncretism: how the enslaved Africans fused their traditional spirituality and practice with the Protestant Christianity of the South. In describing this socio-historical process, he details the struggles within the various white Christian denominations concerning whether or not slaves could/should be baptized/converted, why the Baptists and Methodists were most open to and successful in spreading the gospel to the enslaved Africans, and the dramatic lives of early black religious leaders. In addition to exploring these and other significant details, Du Bois emphasizes that religion was the one realm in which the enslaved Africans maintained a modicum of agency: “At first sight it would seem that slavery completely destroyed every vestige of spontaneous social movement among the Negroes,” he wrote in *The negro church*.

[but] this is not strictly true; the vast power of the priest in the African state...his realm alone — the province of religion and medicine — remained largely unaffected by the plantation system in many important particulars. 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. From such beginnings arose and spread with marvelous rapidity the Negro Church, the first distinctively Negro American social

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4 It should be acknowledged, however, that Weber's essays concerning churches and sects in the United States, particularly “The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism” (Gerth and Mills 1946) were at least formulated while Weber was touring the United States and informally observing the religious life there.
institution. It was not at first by any means a Christian Church, but a mere adaptation of those heathen rites which we roughly designate by the term Obe Worship, or “Voodooism.” Association and missionary effort soon gave these rites a veneer of Christianity, and gradually, after two centuries, the Church became Christian...but with many of the old customs still clinging... (Du Bois 1903:5)

Du Bois also provided valuable information of great socio-historical import concerning black religious life during the post-slavery decades as well. In The Philadelphia negro (1967[1899]), he analyzed congregational economic life, from the value of church properties and the salaries of pastors, to debts and membership contributions. He carefully observed how intra-black class divisions played themselves out in stratified congregational affiliation, antedating Liston Pope’s classic Millhands and preachers (1942) by nearly half a century. He studied a multitude of religious organizational structures and social functions — charitable organizations, missionary efforts, insurance societies, homes for the aged — detailing an intricate web of church-related activities, concluding that “so far reaching are these functions of the church that its organization is almost political” (Du Bois 1967 [1899]:201). In The negro church (1903) he charted the growth and success of the major black denominations; he probed the financial, social, and spiritual state of more than one hundred individual congregations; he surveyed the opinions of the laity concerning their clergy; he surveyed over 1,300 black children in Atlanta concerning their religious identities; etc. A plethora of portraits of the rich, grass-roots religious life of African Americans pervade the pages of The negro church (1903), as in this one illustrative excerpt below:

St. Annis’ Primitive Baptist (Primitive Orthodox Zion Baptist Church). This church is the most interesting of the three [in Florida] from the standpoint of the student of sociology. It is the principal church of Yamassee... the building is valued at $1,800 and it has never been painted... the floors are uncarpeted. . . . The seating capacity is 300, the membership fifty-six, twenty of whom are male. . . . No children under twelve years are admitted to membership...

Its members believe in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, in predestination, in the fall of man, in the covenant of redemption, in justification, regeneration, in the resurrection and general judgement, baptism, the Lord’s supper, and foot washing. . . . The service generally ends with a kind of dance, which they call “Rocking Daniel.” No information could be gained as to the origin of this most peculiar custom. A leader stands in the center of a circle, which the members form in front of the pulpit. They begin with singing the lines: “Rock Daniel, rock Daniel, rock Daniel till I die.” Gradually they move round in the circle, single file, then begin to clap hands and fall into a regular step or motion, which is hard to describe. Finally, when they have become worked up to a high state of excitement, and almost exhausted, the leader gives a signal, and they disperse...

These people seem to believe thoroughly in a noisy religion. They frequently interrupt the speaker with shouts of approval or disapproval and songs...

Generally speaking, the ministers are men of good character... They all agree that the Negro was given citizenship long before he was ready for it; that his only salvation lies in education... (Du Bois 1903:66-68).
Du Bois often praised the black churches, and was quite complimentary of their achievements. He spoke respectfully of the African Methodist Episcopal Church of America as "the most remarkable product of American Negro civilization" (1967[1899]:21). He characterized black churches as sites for potential political awakening (Du Bois 1963:117), as well as centers for "social betterment" and racial consciousness, and lauded their essentially democratic nature (Du Bois 1985:84). He spoke highly of religious black women and the role they played in uplifting their race during the dark days of slavery (Du Bois 1920:174; see also Higginbotham 1993). He spoke well of black preachers, as in his chapter on one of his mentors, Alexander Crummell, in The souls of black folk (1989[1903]). He wrote with great pride of black religious music: "the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil" (Du Bois 1903:134). He acknowledged the ultimate achievements of organized black religion, declaring that

It has accomplished much. It 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 (Du Bois 1972:332).

As Aptheker (1980:viii) has written of Du Bois:

He viewed the Black church as, at best, the "basic rock" of his people, their shield and sword, their solace and goad; an indispensable source of their persistence and historical confidence despite all oppression.

However, Du Bois could also be quite critical of black religion. In a commencement speech delivered to the graduating class of Fisk University in 1938, during the depths of the Depression, Du Bois (1970a:110) openly criticized the black organized religious community:

... behold ... the Black Churches of America ...

Their five millions of members in 40,000 groups, holding $200,000,000 in their hands, are the most strongly organized body among us ... what is this church doing today toward its primary task of teaching men right and wrong, and the duty of doing right?

The flat answer is nothing if not less than nothing. Like other churches and other religions of other peoples and ages, our church has veered off on every conceivable side path, which interferes with and nullifies its chief duty of character building.

It has built up a body of dogma and fairy tale, fantastic fables of sin and salvation, impossible creeds and impossible demands for unquestioning belief and obedience.

He criticized black urban churches for catering to the better off and betraying the "working man" (Du Bois 1972:330), and for taking too great a portion of poor families' income, money which would be better used for more pressing needs, such as better housing (Du Bois 1967[1899]:xiii, 185). Through-
out *The negro church* (1903), he included multiple portraits of black ministers as ignorant, drunken, unlearned, dishonest, and immoral.

But Du Bois's harshest criticisms in the realm of religion were reserved for white Christianity. Throughout his life, Du Bois noted how white American racism played itself out in the religious sectors of society. "A nation's religion is its life," he declared, "and as such white Christianity is a miserable failure" (Du Bois 1970b:309).

He declared:

> It is painfully true that White Christianity has in the twentieth century been curiously discredited... the leading nations representing His [Jesus'] religion have been murdering, maiming and hurting each other on a scale unprecedented in the history of Mankind... into the White Church of Christ race prejudice has crept to such an extent it is openly recognized... and is considered the natural and normal thing... These facts do not impugn Christianity but they do make terrible comment upon the failure of its white followers (Du Bois 1985:84).

He noted that religion in America was essentially "Jim Crowed from top to bottom;" that "no other institution in America is built so thoroughly or absolutely on the color line" (Du Bois 1970b:216-217). He rebuked white American Christianity, a system which "theoretically opens the doors to all men and yet closes it forcibly and insultingly in the face of black men" (Washington and Du Bois 1970[1907]:178).5

And furthermore:

> When the [white] church meets the Negro problem, it writes itself down as a deliberate hypocrite and systematic liar. It does not say "Come unto me all ye that labor:" it does not say "love its neighbor as itself; it does not welcome "Jew and Gentile, barbarian, Scythian, bond and free;" and yet it openly and blatantly professes all this... the church 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 (Du Bois 1970b:217).

Again on White Christian hypocrisy:

> The [white] church aided and abetted the Negro slave trade; the church was the bulwark of American slavery; and the church today is the strongest seat of racial and color prejudice. If one hundred of the best and purest colored folk of the United States should seek to apply for membership in any white church in this land tomorrow, 999 out of every 1,000 ministers would lie to keep them out. They would not only do this, but would openly and brazenly defend their action as worthy of followers of Jesus Christ (Du Bois 1972:334).

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5 A brief note on this reference; *The Negro in the South* was first published in 1907 and is quite noteworthy because it was co-authored by Booker T. Washington, an African American leader with whom Du Bois would subsequently have a difficult and often antagonistic relationship.
He wrote disparagingly of Christian missionaries, speaking of "all their evil" wrought upon the native peoples of Africa (Du Bois 1920:64). For Du Bois, Christian missionaries "represent the oldest invasion of whites" and their purported religious activity was essentially a "cloak for conquest" (Du Bois 1915:89). He implored the people of Africa to "reject the weakness of missionaries who teach neither love nor brotherhood, but chiefly the virtues of private profit from capital, stolen from your land and labor" (Lester 1971:661).

Du Bois' treatment of white Christianity sheds light upon the glaring hypocrisies of late 19th and early 20th century American life noted over half a century earlier by Harriet Martineau. In her book Society in America (1837), Martineau observed that the United States was characterized by a blatant contradiction between its "morals" (stated ideals or beliefs) and its "manners" (actual patterns of action and behavior). The contradiction most glaring — America's greatest anomaly — was its stated belief in liberty and freedom alongside its institutionalized system of slavery. How is it possible, Martineau wondered, that a nation so clearly professing a love of human freedom, could so blatantly degrade that ideal by forcing millions of human beings to live as slaves? A similar question is inherent in Du Bois's consideration of white Christianity. How is it possible that a people could profess a creed of Christian love, and yet simultaneously exhibit such oppressive hatred to their fellow [black] Christians? What Du Bois's discussion of white Christian hypocrisy ultimately illustrates is a basic principle of the sociology of religion, namely, that "religion" is never a separate sphere in society, but always and in every instance intersects with other social phenomena. In the case of the United States, race relations have always clearly inter-twined with religion, and the results have often been worthy of criticism.

In sum, from his research on slave religion to his descriptions of early black religious leaders, from his examination of black congregational life to his thoughts on religion and racism, it is without question that the sociological study of African American religion (and by extension, significant aspects of white American religion) begins with the work of Du Bois. His scholarship represents the starting point for any serious consideration of the role of religion in the black American experience.

RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS AS SOCIAL CENTERS

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Du Bois's stress throughout his work was upon understanding and analyzing religious institutions as social/communal centers. While Du Bois recognized the spiritual, other-worldly elements of religious life, he focused on the specifically "social," this-worldly rewards religious involvement affords, antedating Herberg's (1960) discussion of religious involvement as a source of ethnic attachment by over half a century.
A major insistence of the sociology of religion is that religion isn’t just about the other-worldly, the transcendent or intangible (i.e., God, heaven, the soul, belief, prayer, miracles, faith), but that religion is about lived, everyday reality as well (McGuire 1997; Stark and Finke 2000). The sociology of religion examines how religion plays itself out here on earth within the broader social world (Johnstone 1997; Hamilton 1995). Given this perspective, religion is understood as being marked by specifically social behaviors, social networks, social organizations, and social institutions (Ammerman 1997). And this is exactly how Du Bois approached religion, examining its specifically social elements.

In 1897, Du Bois published an essay entitled “The Problem of Amusement” (reprinted in Green and Driver 1978). It is a remarkable account of religious life — but religious life not in terms of God, prayer, or faith, but in terms of the day-to-day, the mundane, “real” life. In this essay, Du Bois explores amusement and recreational options for young African Americans, and notes that 1) young black people are excluded from most American public places for amusement; and thus 2) “the chief purveyor of amusement to the colored people is the Negro church” (quoted in Green and Driver 1978:227). In elaborating on this latter issue, he proceeds to characterize the black church as a religious body that is—in Durkheim’s words—“eminently social.” The black church is not merely a house of prayer, nor solely a center for spiritual awakening, but a communal center for socializing and human bonding:

The Negro church is not simply an organism for the propagation of religion; it is the centre of the social, intellectual, and religious life of an organized group of people. It provides social intercourse, it provides amusements of various kinds, it serves as a newspaper and intelligence bureau, it supplants the theater, it directs the picnic and excursion, it furnishes the music . . . it serves as a lyceum, library, and lecture bureau — it is, in fine, the central organ of the organized life of the American Negro . . . (quoted in Green and Driver 1978:228)

This essay is the starting point of Du Bois’s career-long and pioneering theme when studying religion; namely, that religious institutions do much more than connect people with God — they connect people to one another. In The souls of black folk (1989[1903]:136-37), he described the black church as “the social centre [sic] of Negro life in the United States” and went on to characterize the typical black church as

the central club-house of a community. . . . Various organizations meet here, — the church proper, the Sunday-school, two or three insurance societies, women’s societies, secret societies, and mass meetings of various kinds. Entertainments, suppers, and lectures are held. . . . Considerable sums of money are collected and expended here, employment is found for the idle, strangers are introduced, news is disseminated and charity distributed . . .

Such churches are really governments of men . . . a proscribed people must have a social centre, and that centre for this people is the Negro church.
In *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois (1967[1899]:205) argued, that the black church “is, to be sure, a social institution first, and religious afterwards . . .” [emphasis added]. Du Bois’s meaning is clear: “social” refers to the profane elements of communal living and human bonding; “religious” to the sacred, the devotional, the spiritual. Du Bois acknowledged, of course, the spiritual aspects of black religious institutions, but he stressed their social aspects above all else. For Du Bois, the black church was not distinguished simply by its doctrinal, spiritual, or theological significance, but in even larger measure by its communal/social import.

Throughout his scholarship, Du Bois thus reveals the ways in which the church is more than just a house of worship and prayer — it is a hub for communal activities and social bonding, or in the words of Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993:10), a “social space.” Du Bois reminds us to recognize the ways in which all religious institutions are not merely houses of God, but houses of people — friends, families, peers, colleagues, lovers, partners — who come together not merely for spiritual communion, but social communion, as well. Although the ostensible purpose of a church is to provide spiritual fulfillment, its deeper purpose may often be to provide community, social fulfillment. And Du Bois illustrates this fact: for blacks in America, the church was ostensibly a place to worship God, but an ever salient function involved providing community; the church was a place where people could feel a sense of social solidarity, security, communal refuge in an often hostile world. This insight is not limited to black American churches, but is generalizable to all religious institutions, to greater or lesser degrees (for instance, see Bruce’s (1996) discussion of religion as a source of “cultural defense”).

Social theorists have provided a plethora of widely discussed reasons as to why people are religious: they personally experience the holy or numinous (Otto 1924; James 1936[1902]); they draw from a sense of “collective effervescence” (Durkheim 1915); they respond to religious theodicies and soteriologies (Weber 1963[1922]); they have personal/psychological needs for comfort, consolation, and security (Freud 1961; Marx 1974); they seek ultimate meaning (Parsons 1954; Berger 1967; Geertz 1973); they seek spiritual compensation (Stark and Bainbridge 1985), to name some of the more well known (Thrower 1999; Greeley 1995).

All of the above matters are relevant when seeking to understand and explain people’s involvement with religion. And we should confidently add Du Bois’s discussion of the this-worldly social benefits religion provides to the above list. Yes, religion provides theodicies, cosmic explanations, psychological comfort, ultimate meaning, etc. But it also provides — to use Du Bois’s phrasing — “club-houses.” It is this basic and yet incredibly important insight concerning the nature of religious life that Du Bois clearly illustrates throughout his work.

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6 Higginbotham’s discussion is actually based upon Habermas’s (1989) discussion of the “public sphere.”
Not all rewards and comforts people reap from religious involvement are other-worldly, spiritual, or cosmic. Sometimes religion involves the need to find, maintain, and enjoy a sense of human connection, a place of communal belonging, a social center.

CONCLUSION

W.E.B. Du Bois's work on religion has, for too long, been ignored. His exclusion from the canon has had significant consequences for the development of the sociology of religion, especially here in the United States. His numerous analyses of black religious sacred group enthusiasm and dramatic emotional ritual (as in the "rock Daniel rock" excerpt quoted earlier) preceded and anticipated Durkheim's theories of "collective effervescence." His exploration of the role of the black church as a safe haven for African Americans in a world of racist segregation/persecution greatly embellishes Freud's understanding of religion as a source of comfort and Weber's focus on theodicy; specifically, religion does not only serve as some sort of "cosmic" or existential balm in the face of life's deep mysteries or questions, but religious institutions can also serve as immediate, everyday, this-worldly sources of communal comfort in the face of everyday oppression.

In sum, what Du Bois wrote on religion was insightful, relevant, and specifically sociological in nature. He should be regarded as the first American sociologist of religion. He employed standard sociological research methods to a degree unparalleled by the canonized classical sociologists of religion. He focused specifically on the important phenomenon of black American religious life, providing landmark contributions in that area. And most importantly, Du Bois stressed the ways in which religious institutions can be recognized as social, communal centers which provide this-worldly rewards and comforts. He implicitly argued that religious involvement need not solely be explained as a quest for cosmic communion or psychological compensation, but as an avenue for communal refuge and social bonding.

It is hoped that the summation and discussion of his work provided here will generate greater scholarly appreciation of his seminal, pioneering contributions to the sociological study of religion.

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