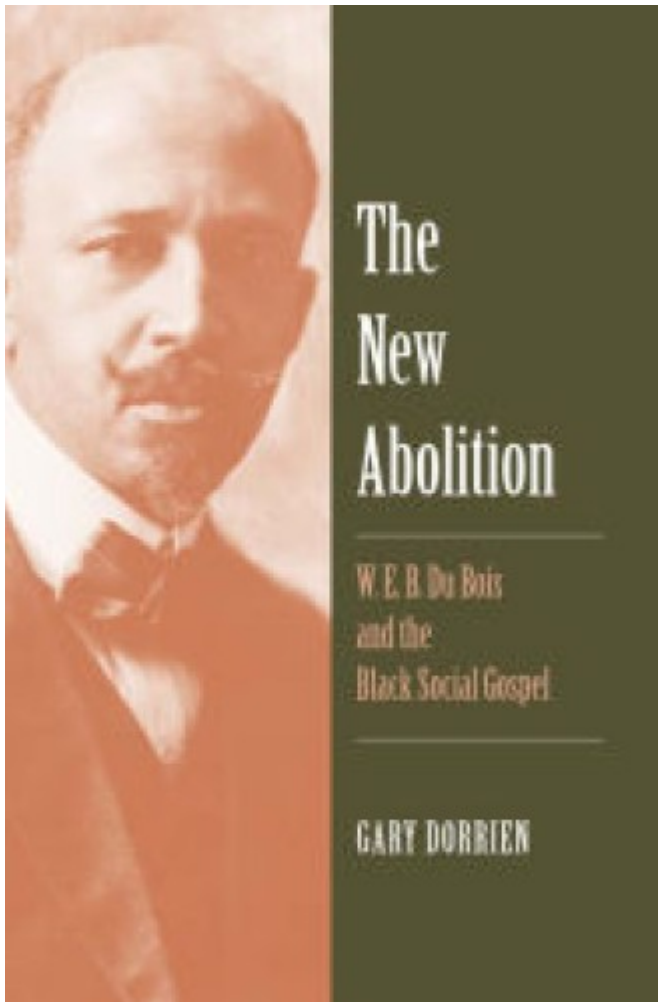


The black social gospel

by [Paul Harvey](#) in the [February 17, 2016](#) issue

In Review



The New Abolition

By Gary Dorrien
Yale University Press

The New Abolition is at least three books under one cover. First, it is a recovery of the black social gospel tradition that eventually led to the achievements of Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement. W. E. B. Du Bois stands at the center of a

swirl of personalities, organizations, and conflicts within the black church world, of which he was never really a part. In this sense, the book is a prehistory of the civil rights movement.

Without the witness and work of the black social gospelers and new abolitionists, Gary Dorrien contends, “the radical social gospel theology and activism of King are inexplicable.” King and the movement “did not come from nowhere,” and this book tells us a lot about where they did come from. Dorrien draws from much previous excellent scholarship, but *The New Abolition* will be the definitive volume on the topic.

The book is also a capacious intellectual history of important black religious intellectuals and activists from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century. Some will be familiar to readers. They include the 19th-century trailblazing theologian and activist Methodist bishop Henry McNeal Turner; the antilynching crusader Ida B. Wells-Barnett; Du Bois himself and his early 20th-century power-broker rival Booker T. Washington; Methodist social gospelers Reverdy Ransom; the minister and political power broker Adam Clayton Powell; and the Baptist dynamo Nannie Burroughs. Others will be less familiar, such as the long-lived educator and sociologist Richard R. Wright; the Christian socialist George Woodbey; and the 19th-century Baptist organizer William Simmons.

The book is more broadly a religious history of black America, centered on a series of detailed, candid, warts-and-all biographies that are always placed within the broader social context of the struggles of black Americans against the powerful forces of American racism. Dorrien concludes that the black social gospelers, who came in several varieties, “applied the rhetoric of the old abolition to the new tyranny of Jim Crow, appealing always to the bedrock Christian doctrine that every human being bears the image and Spirit of God.”

As is evident from the title, Du Bois features centrally, but before Dorrien even gets to him, he presents nearly 200 pages of biography and analysis of a number of other predecessor figures. In other words, we are nearly a third of the way into the book before we have reached the period typically thought of as the era of the Social Gospel. In that sense, this is a “long history of the social gospel movement,” much in the style that scholars have recently taken with the civil rights movement, with long before and long after sections. To Dorrien, they are all part of the same narrative thread.

Dorrien follows several strands of the black social gospel through the book. The first, aligned with Booker T. Washington and the “Tuskegee machine,” emphasized black self-help, by which blacks would pull themselves up by their bootstraps with some assistance from sympathetic white elites and philanthropists—precisely what Washington accomplished in building Tuskegee University. A related strand stressed the need for public protest alongside Washington’s trust in economic advancement (Washington secretly funded an overt civil rights agenda but never publicly identified with it). People who were associated with this strand of the black social gospel included many of the most important figures in black denominations in the first half of the 20th century.

Another strand, personified by Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, emphasized black nationalism and, in some cases, emigration to Africa. Yet another, identified with the founding of the NAACP and with Du Bois himself, carried on the abolitionist and egalitarian traditions of the 19th century. A final, much smaller group actively pursued Marxism and socialism, seeing black American struggles as a subset of a broader worldwide movement of oppressed working people. Later in his life, Du Bois aligned himself with this group. During that time, he published his pathbreaking book *Black Reconstruction in America*, one of the most important works ever written about American history even though it was completely ignored by the historical establishment of that era.

Scholars will delight at the exquisite detail of the narrative. General readers may find themselves skimming parts that don’t capture their attention while relishing the sections that do. No reader will doubt the consummate professionalism of the scholarship, or the passion that Dorrien clearly has about the subject: “I confess to admiring the black apostles that dreamed of abolishing America’s system of racial caste,” he writes.

The book amply documents why he feels that way, even as it probes the profound personal struggles and sometimes ugly personal conflicts of the figures he traces. The read is not for the faint of heart; it’s a significant time investment. But Dorrien smoothes the way with crisp narrative prose so the volume feels much shorter than it actually is.

Readers who stick with it will be rewarded with gems of analysis and great personal stories from the often astonishing lives and deeply disturbing experiences of the protagonists. I’ll give just two examples.

Dorrien summarizes Du Bois's complex relationship with Christianity as that of someone with a "spiritual wellspring of his own, a keen appreciation of Jesus, and a lover's quarrel with the black church." The sentence sums up the much-contested topic about as well as any I've ever read.

Toward the end, he reflects on the devastating impact of living behind the veil on even so accomplished a person as Richard R. Wright, who repeatedly saved American Methodist Episcopal publications from bankruptcy. The venerable AME leader hoped in print for "medical scientists to develop a pill that turned black skin to white." For a person who was "usually the sanest and most competent person in the room" and who "gave no sign of being a tortured soul, . . . that could only have been a reflection of decades of well-masked trauma." That happened in 1965.

This piercing anecdote from the end of the life of a significant black religious figure unearths the pain that haunted black Americans from emancipation to the civil rights movement and beyond. If the figures traced in this book sometimes seem sensitive, caustic, or overly contentious (and Du Bois was certainly all of those), they had their reasons. White Americans who are shocked at recent protests against the mass incarceration of black Americans, or who lamely respond that "all lives matter" when forced to confront the Black Lives Matter protests, simply fail to understand the deep legacy of black American pain. In American history, some lives have mattered; others have not. That difference fundamentally has been a racial one. Dorrien follows the stories of those who insisted, in their own Christian idioms and cultural ways, that black lives are sacred and do matter, and he honors them with his superior scholarship.