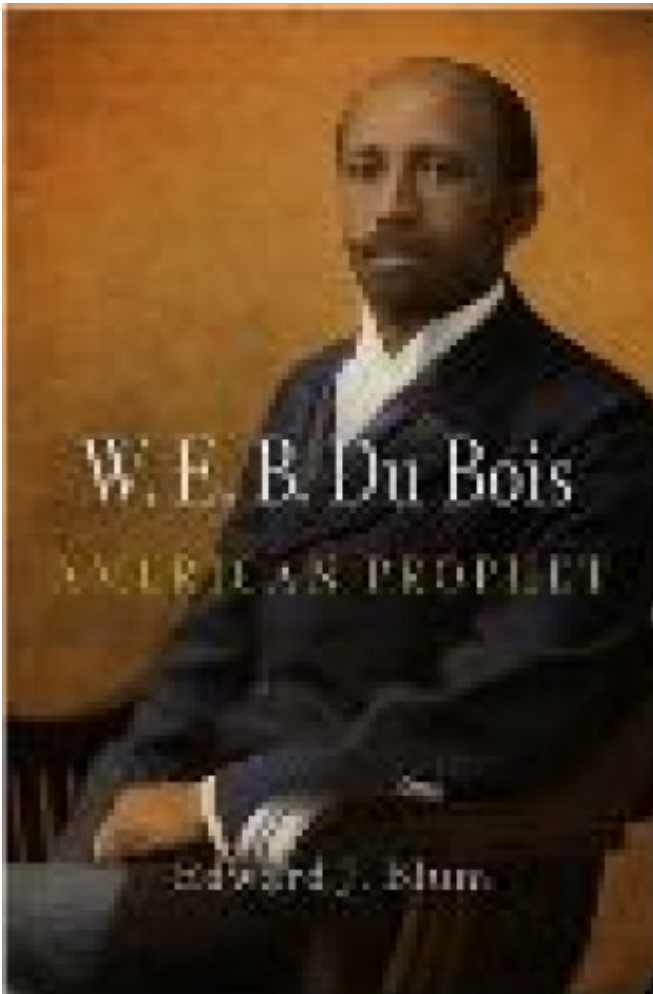


W. E. B. Du Bois: American Prophet

reviewed by [Robert Cornwall](#) in the [March 25, 2008](#) issue

In Review



W. E. B. Du Bois: American Prophet

Edward J. Blum

University of Pennsylvania Press

Before Martin Luther King Jr. there was W. E. B. Du Bois. Like King, Du Bois was a civil rights activist. We usually don't think of his life or his activism in religious terms.

He was a historian, sociologist, educator and journalist, and he was not a member of the clergy. But religion permeated his thought and spurred his actions.

Edward J. Blum, a professor of history at San Diego State University and author of *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865-1898*, considers Du Bois to be a quintessential American prophet. His religious perspectives and practices might have been complex or untraditional, but Du Bois rooted his critique of a racist America in his own spiritual experiences and understandings.

This is an unconventional biography—organized around the various genres Du Bois employed rather than chronologically—that is on one level addressed to partisans of the reigning scholarly consensus on Du Bois's religiosity. Most scholars consider Du Bois to have been irreligious if not antireligious. Blum insists that his literary record suggests otherwise, and he appears to succeed in his effort to set the record straight.

The scholarly debate is interesting, but it's Du Bois's critique of white American religion that makes this an important read for the nonspecialist. What we discover is a deeply spiritual man, influenced by the Social Gospel and religious modernist traditions, who is repelled by the hypocrisy of Christ's white followers. Du Bois's critique of white Christianity is hostile, but he doesn't reject religion or Christianity—only its distortions.

Du Bois was born in Massachusetts just three years after the Civil War ended. His earliest religious experiences were in an Episcopal Sunday school class. There he learned the stories of the faith but also encountered hypocrisy. He would come to love Jesus but not the white churches that proclaimed his name. In his experience, with few exceptions white American Christianity was racist and oppressive to blacks.

One of America's great intellectuals, Du Bois understood himself to be engaged in a heroic venture—Blum uses Joseph Campbell's categories of myth to interpret his vocation. Seeing himself as engaged in a cosmic struggle to reclaim the very personhood of the African-American people, Du Bois took on white supremacist religion in works such as *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), in which he challenged the idea that blacks are animals without souls. He would also challenge linkages of whiteness with godliness and blackness with evil. Turning the tables on the oppressors, he envisioned whites as immoral and blacks as the truly spiritual people.

Interpreters might take this hostility to white Christianity as antireligious, but Blum demonstrates that this wasn't the case. Du Bois recognized the power of religion, and so he sought to reform it.

A central insight in Blum's presentation involves the degree to which Du Bois's work presaged black theology and even womanist theology. Attracted to the life and message of Jesus, which he chose to interpret in nonsupernaturalist ways, he found it necessary to reclaim Jesus by reimagining him as a black Christ—the lynched one who was the embodiment of virtue in a sinful nation. Du Bois thus linked black suffering to the suffering Christ.

Du Bois's commitment to liberation was furthered by his rejection of materialism and the prosperity gospel, which had enticed some in the black community, and by his embrace of communism, which he found to be rooted in Jesus' own teachings. For him, communism was the economic and political manifestation of Christianity; his God was the God of the oppressed.

Even before Du Bois joined the Communist Party, his leanings were well known and led to his resignation from Atlanta University and to the NAACP's decision to distance itself from him. His embrace of the party led to his denial of Stalin's atrocities—a blemish on his record.

Though it is addressed to the academy, this is a very readable biography, one that opens our eyes to the ease with which Christianity has been and can be used in the service of oppression. It may not tell the complete story of Du Bois's life, but in these pages we discover an American prophet who “became a rogue saint and a dark monk to preach the good news of racial brotherhood, economic cooperation, and peace on earth.”