

Of Faith and Fiction: Teaching W. E. B. Du Bois and Religion

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THE SUBJECT OF VOLUMINOUS STUDY in American history, W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963) is widely known as a champion for the political rights of African Americans, founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), aggressive advocate of Pan-Africanism, staunch supporter of female suffrage, and one of the creative forces behind the Harlem Renaissance. Further still, Du Bois is known for his storied debates with Booker T. Washington and his magisterial *Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Some are aware that after nearly twenty-five years at the NAACP, Du Bois returned to college teaching in 1935. Thereafter, he worked again at the NAACP for four years (1944-1948), and continued journalistic efforts in newspapers such as *Chicago Defender*, *Amsterdam News*, and *National Guardian*. Still others might know that in the closing decades of his life, Du Bois published a trilogy of historical fiction titled *Black Flame*, and lectured across the globe, including talks in Russia, China, and Africa. Du Bois's activism in his later years also included work on a United Nations charter, presiding at a fifth Pan-African conference, chairing the Peace Information Center, and running for the U.S. Senate in New York on the Labor Party ticket. Bitterly critical of the United States and its support of racial apartheid, Du Bois died in 1963 in Accra, Ghana, a member of the Communist Party.¹

Fewer still know the extent to which Du Bois engaged religion, religious themes, and spirituality throughout his life. Du Bois often spoke using religious terms, language, and ideas; composed spiritual short stories about a Black Jesus in modern America; and even wrote prayers for his students at Atlanta University. His fiction, which included short stories and novels, often contained characters such as ministers, missionaries, or religious skeptics. Moreover, Du Bois corresponded regularly with laypeople and church leaders, patiently responding to nearly every request and every question, and even counting politically progressive Christian clergy among some of his closest friends.²

For years, many people—including nearly all of Du Bois’s biographers—assumed that his critical comments toward Christianity coupled with a membership in the Communist Party, U.S.A. meant that he was agnostic or an atheist. However, one of Du Bois’s closest admirers and comrades (and later editor of many of his writings), the Marxist scholar Herbert Aptheker, maintained in 1980 that Du Bois had great respect for “social Christianity” and admired the “revolutionary, or at least radical and challenging” message of Jesus. In an article published two years later, Aptheker continued to make the case that although Du Bois was probably an agnostic, scholars should examine critically the spiritual dimensions of his life.³

Throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, scholars acknowledged the validity of Aptheker’s claims and transformed understanding of Du Bois. Those who study Du Bois and religion uniformly show how religion constituted a major part of his social scientific analysis of the world. Others document how a latent spirituality informed Du Bois’s outlook on politics, economics, and society. Most of this work analyzes Du Bois’s major studies and only minimally makes use of Du Bois’s creative writing, with even less attention on what he wrote for *The Crisis*, the NAACP’s magazine that he edited from 1910 to 1934. This essay complements the existing scholarship on Du Bois and religion by attempting to more fully utilize what I call his “*Crisis* corpus.” More specifically, by utilizing the latest scholarly perspectives, I offer pedagogical strategies by sharing document-based lessons on Du Bois and religion from my own experience teaching in a secondary setting and university classroom. I will discuss how I incorporate columns from the NAACP’s *The Crisis* magazine into lessons on early twentieth-century America. Reading the contents of *The Crisis*—in particular the appearance of religion on its pages—can provide a more nuanced understanding of the rapid changes that defined the first few decades of twentieth-century American history.⁴

W. E. B. Du Bois and Religion: Spiritual Short Stories

Below, I summarize and analyze four spiritual short stories Du Bois published in *The Crisis* between 1913 and 1933. Due to its similarity to *Crisis* essays and utility for the classroom, I also include an important story from a 1942 issue of *Amsterdam News*. The settings vary and characters change, but in each account, the appearance of a Black Christ challenges a Caucasian Christianity that bolstered inequality and supported a segregated church. Du Bois's Jesus came preaching a message of liberation, and embodied an ethics of inclusion that displayed the democratic promise at the core of American identity.

"The Three Wise Men" (1913)

In the December 1913 issue of *The Crisis*, Du Bois offered a creative retelling of Jesus' birth, titled "The Three Wise Men." Devoid of mangers, inns, and animals, in Du Bois's story, Jesus' advent took place in the city. Instead of a Star of David shining with cosmic intent and announcing the birth of a Savior, a blazing comet beckoned what Du Bois called "the three wise men."⁵

This Christmas tale began with sounds of the city and descriptions of burgeoning urban life in America. Praises, petitions, and chants from religious services at churches and synagogues met urban dwellers, and the three wise men—a priest, a rabbi, and a pastor—began to follow a comet that soon became a star. "So the three men threaded the maize [sic] of the Christmas-mad streets," Du Bois wrote, "neither looking on the surging crowds nor listening to the shouts of the people, but seeing only the star." The wise men traveled toward an apartment building and all arrived at the same time, strangely astonished at the simultaneous moment; up to the seventh floor they ascended. Du Bois contextualized this early twentieth-century Christmas story, placing the three wise men in the middle of New York City's holiday bustle while faithfully executing their religious tasks and following a spiritual sign. The hustle and bustle of urban life proved a difficult new reality for both Southern migrants and European immigrants.⁶

Beckoned by the star, the three wise men met a "tall and shapely and well gowned" woman, from whom was born immortal love. The woman bore witness to the revelation that she—poor, working, struggling Black Woman—was to gift the world with everlasting love. Echoing the so-called "Mary's Song" found in the New Testament gospel of Luke, Du Bois narrated her joy: "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God, my saviour. For he hath regarded the low estate of

his hand-maiden, for behold! From henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.” The story ends with loud praises, as the maiden sings a line from the gospel of Luke: “Glory to God in the highest; and on earth peace, good will toward men.”⁷

“The Great Surgeon” (1922)

Du Bois returned to the city in the December 1922 issue of *The Crisis* to tell the story of “The Great Surgeon,” a Black Christ figure from whose hands came not physical healing, but new knowledge and self understanding. The story is set in urban America at a hospital called St. Michael’s. Within the white walls of the hospital lived not only sick patients, but also the nurses and the superintendent of nurses. Yet in the story, it was one sick patient—the rich owner of the hospital, a businessman committed to white supremacy expressed in the healing of white bodies—who eventually received healing from the black hands of the Jesus figure.⁸

When the great surgeon, a man “short and square, bald with a fringe of black curly hair,” entered the hospital early for surgery, both the junior surgeon and the superintendent of nurses decried “[t]he idea of a Jew operating at St. Michael’s!” Du Bois’s narration of the conversation that followed provided necessary background to the surgeon’s life and practice. Newspapers reported that in addition to very low rates and no doctor’s office, with the surgeon’s healing touch, “the deaf hear, the blind see, and the crippled walk!” The Great Surgeon was also known to “roam the streets of the yellow East side and the red West Side and black High Harlem. You can see him any day talking with harlots, touts and cripples, thieves, merchants and peddlers, grinning children, dogs and stray cats.”⁹

Strikingly, the hospital owner found the Great Surgeon on the street and asked, “What must I do to be saved?” Into surgery he went. Recovering after the operation, the family of the hospital owner arrived at his bedside only to be met with this statement: “You are poor. You have left but the things on your backs. I have sold all my goods and restored them to the Poor. I have taken this hospital from the Rich and given it to the Son of Man—to the sons of men; to the good and the bad, the black and the white, Jew and Gentile—all human kind of every race and creed.” To this revelation, the Great Surgeon replied, “He that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall be live; and whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die!”¹⁰

“The Sermon in the Cradle” (1921)

While Du Bois effectively narrated aspects of black urban life in early twentieth-century America in his religious fiction, in the early 1920s, he

also gave voice to the Pan-African movement after organizing several international meetings in Europe. One such story, titled “The Sermon in the Cradle,” appeared in the Christmas 1921 issue of *The Crisis*. Set in Africa, this spiritual short story retold Jesus’ birth as if it happened under colonial rule in Benin. Wise men came from the East to inquire about this “new Christ,” which then troubled the Prime Minister and other officials. Du Bois rewrote the Nativity prophecy from the Old Testament book of Isaiah: “And thou Benin, in the land of Nigeria, art not the least among the princes of Africa: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my Negro people.” The star later guided the wise men to the birth site (“in a house”), and upon seeing this new African Christ, the men worshiped and offered gifts of “gold and medicine and perfume”—presents with symbolic significance and practical value.¹¹

All of the wise men then left (warned by God in a dream not to return to London), except one black wise man who was from Benin. He “lingered by the cradle and the new-born babe,” Du Bois wrote. Eventually, “the multitudes” showed up and the Black Christ child broke into sermon. At the story’s end, Du Bois reconfigured Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount:

Blessed are the poor folks for they shall go to heaven. Blessed are the sad folks for someone will bring them joy. Blessed are they that submit to hurts for they shall sometime own the world. Blessed are they that truly want to do right for they shall get their wish. Blessed are those who do not seek revenge for vengeance will not seek them. Blessed are the pure for they shall see God. Blessed are those who will not fight for they are God’s children. Blessed are those whom people like to injure for they shall sometime be happy. Blessed are you, Black Folk, when men make fun of you and mob you and lie about you. Never mind and be glad for your day will surely come. Always the world has ridiculed its better souls.¹²

“The Son of God” (1933)

About eight months before Du Bois resigned from the NAACP, he published a short story in the December 1933 issue of *The Crisis*, titled “The Son of God.” Set in the American South, the first part of the story depicted the contentious relationship between Joe, a jealous and violence-prone laborer, and Mary, a slim, attractive, and humble black maiden. In the story, Mary ended up pregnant, and in fits of rage, Joe demanded to know who the father was because he was convinced Mary had been unfaithful. In time, she gave birth to a son—in December—and she named him Joshua. By the age of twelve, Joshua’s questions and challenges in Sunday school raised the ire of the local Methodist minister, and his father once found him in the midst of the church elders preaching and exhorting as one with divine authority.¹³

As Joshua grew into adulthood, he decided to become a carpenter. Joe was often at odds with Joshua, since he made little money and wore second-hand clothing to work. Joe noticed Joshua spending time with “curious people” like “[o]utcasts and tramps” and “holding meetings and haranging [sic] on street corners” where “white women were listening.” Joshua’s parents witnessed one of these meetings and heard their son proclaim:

Heaven is going to be filled with people who are down-hearted and you that are mourning will get a lot of comfort some day. It’s meek folk who are lucky, and going to get everything; and you that are hungry, too. Poor people are better than rich people because they work for what they wear and eat. There won’t be any rich people in Heaven....God’s sons are those that won’t quarrel. You must treat other people just like you want to be treated....And say, you know how folks use to think they must get even with their enemies? Well, I’ll tell you what: you just love your enemies. And if anybody hits you, don’t hit ’em back.¹⁴

Joshua’s egalitarian message, a reformulation of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, challenged the connection between white supremacy and economic control, and even declared that earthly suffering of the poor, weary, and marginalized would meet with vindication in the afterlife. Radical teaching, both in fiction and reality, was often met with resistance, and in “Son of God,” the socialist thrust of Joshua’s preaching resulted in the extralegal practice of white supremacy: lynching.

At the end of the story, a mob grabbed Joshua. Levying charges against him, including carousing with white women, sparking a revolution, and engaging in criminal activity, the mob lynched the young, radical carpenter. Mary’s resolve astonished and frustrated Joe, as he yelled at her and ultimately threw himself on the ground in grief over his son’s unjust execution. “He is despised and rejected of men, [a] man of sorrows and acquainted with grief,” Mary cried. “His name shall be called Wonderful, Councillor, the Mighty God, the Ever Lasting Father, and the Prince of Peace....Behold the Sign of Salvation—a noosed rope.”¹⁵

“The Missionaries” (1942)

In the midst of World War II, Du Bois published a story in *Amsterdam News*, titled “The Missionaries,” which was an imaginative offering that reflected his concerns about Christianity, imperialism, and Africa. Du Bois told the tale of three humble African, Episcopal missionaries who traveled to New York in order to preach the gospel to the United States. They were also on official business to the U.S.; the Archbishop of Canterbury sent a letter they were to deliver to the local rector at St. Bartholomew Church in Harlem. After the missionaries completed their delivery, the rector read the letter twice. He said: “If I get the implication of His Grace’s

letter, you are here to covert. . . . America to Christianity?” The missionary responded affirmatively, to which the rector replied: “And why, might I ask, did you not first convert England?” The Archbishop of Canterbury reported that England was too busy to convert, the missionary maintained. Plus, the Archbishop said that England would “immediately follow” the course of the United States should it embrace the Christian faith. The rector smiled sarcastically, and with humored astonishment asked, “[D]o you not consider us Christians already?” The missionary sheepishly skirted around a direct answer. “You see we are humble followers of the Great Missionary, who came to us in Africa from America, years ago,” the missionary said. Assuming that a request for money was part of the missionaries’ pitch, the rector changed the subject to ask if they needed additional funding. “O, no Sir, no. We want no money. We have plenty for our few needs. We want simply to preach Christianity to poor, dear America, for no reward—just to convert them.”¹⁶

Pressing further, the rector now swelled with a sense of white privilege and Euro-American authority: “And why do you and the Archbishop of Canterbury think us heathen?” The lead missionary then asked his collaborator, Brother Iguenye, to preach. Again referencing Christ’s Sermon on the Mount, the missionary said:

Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth. . . . Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. . . . Ye have heard it hath been said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth; But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.¹⁷

Hearing this, the rector seethed with rage. Turning red, he exclaimed “We are at war[!]” making reference to the United States’ entrance into World War II following the December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. Not flinching at all, the missionary proclaimed, “War is terrible, is it not? And I am afraid it is unchristian, Christ said!” As if to add fuel to the fire, Brother Iguenye continued his sermon: “Ye have heard that is has been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.”¹⁸

Teaching Du Bois and Religion, Part 1: Lessons and Strategies

Among the nearly two dozen spiritual short stories Du Bois authored for *The Crisis*, the selected four provide rich primary source material from which to craft engaging assignments that reframe students’ understanding

of modern America. Moreover, adding the *Amsterdam News* story about missionaries, imperialism, and war not only contextualizes Du Bois's short stories in *The Crisis*, but also offers a way to think about religiously informed and spiritually inspired dissent in American culture.¹⁹

I use these Du Bois spiritual short stories in a two- to three-day lesson in order to broaden students' grasp of religion, race, and culture in early twentieth-century America. Each story is convenient for classroom use, both in terms of readability and length. Most are one or two pages long and are provocative enough to get students' attention. I begin this assignment with a *PowerPoint* overview lecture to highlight the basic biographical details in W. E. B. Du Bois's long life. Basic details include Du Bois's:

- a. educational accomplishments at Fisk, Harvard, and in Germany;
- b. role in the Niagara Movement and how it gave birth to the NAACP;
- c. major publications, with a focus on *Souls of Black Folk*;
- d. organizing work in the Pan-African movement;
- e. participation in the Harlem Renaissance;
- f. persistent activism during the last thirty years of his life;
- g. 1951 McCarthy-era trial at which he was acquitted;
- h. final move to Ghana at Kwame Nkrumah's invitation.

Throughout the lecture, I also play selected clips from a 1961 Du Bois interview, available as a Smithsonian Folkways CD. The combination of text, image, and sound through my introductory Du Bois lecture not only aims to address multiple learning styles, it equips students with enough historical understanding to analytically examine and contextualize the spiritual short stories I assign.²⁰

On day two (or three) of my Du Bois lesson, before handing out the short stories, I discuss briefly the scholarship on Du Bois and religion. From there, depending on the class size, I divide students into two or three groups of no more than five students each and hand out a different short story to each group. I first have students read the short story silently. To enhance understanding and to capture nuances of Du Bois's language, I employ a "popcorn" reading strategy, where several members of each student group read aloud. Very briefly, a volunteer from each group identifies the date and title of the assigned short story, and summarizes its contents.

At this point, discussion begins and through a series of guided questions and measured observations, students start to compare and contrast the details, aims, and main ideas of each story. My lesson plan for the reading and discussion day clusters around several questions:

- a. What month and year did Du Bois publish each story? Would such a publication date be significant? Why? What national or international events occurred simultaneously to the story's publication, and to what extent would these events illuminate the contents or meaning of the story?

- b. What is the setting of the story? If set in the North, list 5 facts about life in urban America in the 1920s and 1930s. If set in the South, list 5 facts about life in the South during the first three decades of the twentieth century.
- c. To what extent does urbanization, industrialization, immigrant life, tenement living, sharecropping, etc., help to make sense of the story?
- d. In what way(s) did Du Bois use religion—and most specifically the figure of a Black Christ—to address issues of political equality, civil rights, and economic justice? Why? How do you think readers would respond to these stories in the 1920s and 1930s, both in the North and in the South?
- e. How does today’s discussion enhance, challenge, or refine your understanding of early twentieth-century American history? Of W. E. B. Du Bois? Of race and religion in modern American history?

By posing these questions, I attempt to provide students with the tools necessary to understand major changes in early twentieth-century America in terms of immigration, urban industry, Progressive reform, the Great Migration, religion, and literary journalism, among other topics. I also aim to expand the image of W. E. B. Du Bois—most readily present in many standard U.S. history textbooks such as *American Pageant* and *The American Promise*—as co-founder of the NAACP, author of *Souls of Black Folk*, and archenemy of Booker T. Washington. Du Bois was a complex, sometime contradictory figure whose creative powers have yet to be fully appreciated. Focusing on Du Bois’s fiction and creative works documents that he had the ability to both write and speak to scholars and ordinary people.²¹

Teaching Du Bois and Religion, Part 2: The Big Picture and Student Assessment

Several goals inform the questions I ask and shape the general aims of the lesson. First, the initial point to make is the date of publication for each story. Each appeared in a December issue. I discuss with students that this suggests that Du Bois understood the significance of Christian celebrations and the liturgical cycle, a point some of his readers no doubt did as well. While my assertions neither confirm nor deny any personal religious convictions Du Bois may or may not have possessed, they do suggest that he had a religious imagination informed by familiarity with Episcopal and Congregational polity. Moreover, the religiously themed artwork featured on the covers of *The Crisis*, much of it by Harlem Renaissance artists Laura Wheeler Waring and Aaron Douglas, reinforced the stories’ key ideas and provided for readers what art historian Amy Helene Kirschke called a “visual vocabulary” for readers of *The Crisis*.

Using Kirschke's formulation, I include covers from *The Crisis* with discussion of Du Bois's spiritual short stories in order to prompt students to think about the politics of artistic representation *and* to exemplify Du Bois's commitment to producing "propaganda" that challenged the ubiquity of white supremacy.²²

Coupling analysis of "The Three Wise Men" (1913) and "The Great Surgeon" (1922), I prompt students to think about the setting of each story: the city. This is important because the early twentieth century witnessed the migration of millions of African Americans to Northern cities. Individuals and families traveled to escape the toxic racial atmosphere of the South and to seek better economic opportunities. Du Bois used religion as a way to narrate these realities, showing that Jim Crow segregation infected both the South *and* the North. Documentary evidence from the period shows that religious ideas and religious practice played important roles in African American city dwelling and the construction of a religious identity.²³

In "The Great Surgeon," Du Bois addressed access to urban medical care, something not always readily available to African Americans during the early twentieth century. Here, he inverted expectations: a black "surgeon," medically trained and spiritually equipped, brought healing to a white body where freedom and liberation came by way of death. Du Bois also implicitly critiqued Christianity, contrasting the hospital with the stone cathedral as the physical space for (spiritual) healing.

In "The Three Wise Men," Du Bois incorporated Judaism and Jewish worship in the religiously pluralistic atmosphere of New York City. The story also focused on the experiences of a black woman, someone who was deeply religious and could imagine a better future for herself since she gave birth to a political liberator. As Garth Pauley documented, placing a female as the central character typified much of Du Bois's writing in *The Crisis*. Incorporating an accomplished black woman who birthed a savior serves as further testimony to Du Bois's support for women's suffrage.²⁴

Du Bois's "Son of God" (1933) works well when contrasted with "The Three Wise Men" or "The Great Surgeon." The rural setting of the story captures the economic, social, political, and emotional realities of life in the black South. A modern tale of the Holy Family, Joshua evidenced deep religious learning early in life by challenging local pastors. And fitting with the Southern economy of the early twentieth century, Joshua became a carpenter whose life was a physical and financial struggle. Similar to Jesus in the New Testament Gospels, Du Bois placed Joshua on the side of the poor, marginalized, and mistreated; Joshua also defied Southern conventions by speaking with white women. As with all of Du Bois's spiritual short stories set in the American South, "The Son of God" ended with a lynching. In death (there is no resurrection moment in "The Son of

God”), Du Bois presented the Black Christ named Joshua as upright and ultimately triumphant. Du Bois contrasted this with the actions of the white “Christians,” whose lynch mob activities undercut their claims to faith. Moreover, through Joshua’s teachings about cooperative economics, Du Bois attacked the exploitative aspects of capitalism, the system on which white wealth was built and black labor exploited. Published in the midst of the Great Depression, Du Bois used religion as a way to roundly criticize the collusions between Christianity, capitalism, and lynching.²⁵

Du Bois’s short story “The Sermon in the Cradle” (1921) was unique among the spiritual fiction he published in *The Crisis*. It was the only story that featured the birth of an African Christ. Moreover, the appearance of this story represented Du Bois’s increasing work on Pan-African issues, playing important organizing roles in the first Pan-African Congress in Paris in 1919 and another in Belgium in 1921. Pan-African and anticolonial movements were well underway during the 1920s. It is also significant that Du Bois chose the story and teachings of Jesus as one way to creatively narrate these larger global concerns. Du Bois did not find salvation in Bethlehem, but in Africa, and he placed God on the side of black folks. The reformulated Sermon on the Mount highlighted Du Bois’s explicit focus on the ethical dimensions of Jesus’ teaching. There are no miracles, and “The Sermon in the Cradle” is devoid of divinity.

The publication of “The Missionaries” shortly after the United States entered World War II offers a keen example of Du Bois disputing associations of religion and nationalism. Du Bois drew from the urban setting of New York City with which he was very familiar, and inverted traditional missionary narratives by crafting a story where missionaries brought Christianity to a nation that was presumably “converted” already. Du Bois also exhibited pacifist beliefs borne from moral rectitude, as the missionaries highlighted Jesus’ teaching to love one’s enemy. The convictions Du Bois displayed in “The Missionaries” foreshadowed a resolve that would later combat the Communist hysteria of the McCarthy era.²⁶

After walking students through analysis of each short story’s setting, identifying the December publication dates, and assessing the political messages wrapped within the narratives, I explore more fully Du Bois’s spiritual short stories in their historical and social contexts. While “The Missionaries” falls outside of the historical scope of the Harlem Renaissance, the four other stories serve as examples of New Negro literature. The spiritual short stories were literary creations that placed black characters at the center of the narrative, and sought to artistically render life for black people in modern America. As editor of *The Crisis*, not only was Du Bois one of the founders of the Harlem Renaissance, he

regularly published New Negro poets and authors such as Countee Cullen, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Claude McKay.

Harlem Renaissance writers sometimes narrated their life experiences using religious ideas and religious images, some of which included depictions of a Black Christ or a critique of white Christianity. Langston Hughes, for example, published the poems “Goodbye, Christ” and “Christ in Alabama” in 1931. “Goodbye, Christ” offered a fierce criticism of the Christian church, which Hughes believed rejected the teachings of Jesus that focused on love, equality, and inclusion. “Christ in Alabama,” similar to Du Bois’s short stories, depicted Jesus as black and associated lynching with crucifixion. Much like the works of Hughes, Countee Cullen’s “Christ Recrucified” (1922) and *The Black Christ and Other Poems* (1929) imagined the life of a Jesus of African descent in early twentieth-century America.²⁷

Du Bois’s spiritual short stories of a Black Jesus were also part of what theologians call the quest for the historical Jesus. Originating in nineteenth-century German historical scholarship, New Testament scholars began to critically examine the history of Christian origins in its Middle Eastern context; assess biblical claims in light of archaeological evidence (or lack thereof); and reevaluate the teachings, sayings, and miracles of Jesus in the context of modern scholarship. Most notably associated with the work of Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (1906) symbolized the movement to critically analyze the historicity of Jesus and emblemized a trend to popularize a modern Jesus for the masses, in text, in image, and in moving pictures. Charles Sheldon’s *In His Steps* (1896) is among the most well-known accounts of a modern Jesus, as is Bruce Barton’s presentation of a business-savvy Christ in *The Man Nobody Knows* (1925).²⁸

As part of the modern quest to understand the message of Jesus, the Social Gospel version of Christianity, as articulated by liberal Protestants, influenced many writers to offer a Christ concerned with the squalor of urban America, and a Jesus who sided with the working class and supported trade unions, among other subversive activities. British writer William Stead’s *If Christ Came to Chicago!* (1894), for example, imagined a church that would “not ensconce [sic] itself in the pews stuffed with comfortable ecclesiastical cushions . . . but will find the true service of the sanctuary in going down into the depths, even to the depths of ward politics and electoral agitation, in order to attempt, amid the dust and the din of the world-struggle to rebuild society on the foundation of the Kingdom of God.” Similarly, Upton Sinclair’s *They Call Me Carpenter* (1922) followed a Christ figure through a modern city whose concern focused on the poor, and his *Profits of Religion* (1918) valorized religious practice that addressed the needs

of the marginalized. Above all, rather than philosophize about systems of theology, writers influenced by the Social Gospel worked to present a faith that *practiced* the attributes and teachings of Christ. Some wrote Social Gospel novels, while others created fictional stories with didactic intent.²⁹

Du Bois's spiritual short stories from *The Crisis* fit within the Social Gospel tradition. The religious fiction in which a Black Christ brought salvation to the city and redemption to rural America displayed, to use the words of literary scholar Gregory S. Jackson, "narrative enactments aimed at merging fictive settings with the reality of the readers' everyday lives." Further, the homiletic thrust of Social Gospel literature "aimed to facilitate private devotion, strengthen moral autonomy, and foster social engagement through particular acts of reading."³⁰

In terms of assessment, a small part of the grade depends on students' participation in the reading group exercise. I also require students to construct either a chart for each story (including title, publication date, setting, characters, and historical context) or a mind map titled "W. E. B. Du Bois and religion." A follow-up re-teaching/review exercise allows students to briefly present their chart or mind map, during which time I restate the major organizing questions of the lesson plan. Alternative assessments might focus specifically on writing. One idea is a short in-class essay that asks students to identify several facts about urban and rural life in early twentieth-century American society through two or three of Du Bois's short stories. Another is to focus on the Harlem Renaissance by prompting students to connect Du Bois's literary expressions of a Black Christ to artistic depictions of an African American Jesus from the work of artists such as Aaron Douglass or Gwendolyn Bennett in publications like *The Crisis*, *Opportunity*, and *The Masses*.³¹

Conclusion

In his spiritual short stories, Du Bois captured urban dimensions of African American life; he movingly articulated the rugged plight of American blacks who lived in rural environments. While Du Bois understood the role that religion played in the personal and collective lives of African Americans, he was also keenly aware of the place Christianity occupied in the nation's civic life. Utilizing the tools of social scientific analysis, accounting for historical context, and displaying creative expression, Du Bois used religion to narrate the perils and possibilities present in early twentieth-century America. Du Bois's readable short stories from *The Crisis* prove useful for creating challenging, document-based exercises, and bring attention to an understudied, underappreciated

portion of Du Bois's extensive publications. Just as Du Bois brought these stories of faith and fiction to readers one hundred years ago, by highlighting his association with *The Crisis*, educators can keep Du Bois's memory and legacy alive for another century.

Notes

1. Helpful Du Bois biographies include Manning Marable, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Black Radical Democrat*, New Updated Edition (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2005 [1986]); David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993); David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000); Gerald Horne, *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Biography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2009).

2. For examples of these exchanges, see *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois: Volume I, Selections, 1877-1934*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973) and *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois: Volume III, Selections, 1944-1963*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1978), specifically for letters between Du Bois and Joseph B. Glenn (Vol. I, pp. 308-311); between Du Bois and John R. Timpany, S. S. J. (Vol. III, pp. 26-27); between Du Bois and E. Pina Moreno (Vol. III, pp. 213, 223); and between Du Bois and Monica Morrison (Vol. III, pp. 290-292). See additional exchanges between Du Bois and the Reverend Alouin Knecht, Du Bois Papers, reel 33, frames 560-562. Du Bois also published commentary titled "The Catholic Church" in his "As the Crow Flies" column on February 27, 1941 and "Again the Catholics" on April 19, 1941, both in *Amsterdam News* (Du Bois Papers, reel 84, frames 333, 342). On Du Bois's friendship with progressive ministers William Howard Melish and John Howard Melish, see W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007 [1968]), 271-272 and Shirley Graham Du Bois, *His Day is Marching On: A Memoir of W. E. B. Du Bois* (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1971), 232-235.

3. The biographical exception is Edward J. Blum, *W. E. B. Du Bois: American Prophet* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). W. E. B. Du Bois, *Prayers for Dark People*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980); Herbert Aptheker, "W. E. B. Du Bois and Religion: A Brief Reassessment," *Journal of Religious Thought* 39, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 1982): 5-6.

4. On Du Bois and religion, the best places to start are Blum, *W. E. B. Du Bois: American Prophet* and W. E. B. Du Bois, *Du Bois on Religion*, ed. Phil Zuckerman (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2000). Also useful are Manning Marable, "The Black Faith of W. E. B. Du Bois: Sociocultural and Political Dimensions of Black Religion," *The Southern Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1985): 15-33; Don Hufford, "The Religious Thought of W. E. B. Du Bois," *Journal of Religious Thought* 53/54, no. 1 (1997): 73-94; Phil Zuckerman, "The Sociology of Religion of W. E. B. Du Bois," *Sociology of Religion* 63, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 239-253; Edward J. Blum and Jason K. Young, eds., *The Souls of W. E. B. Du Bois: New Essays and Reflections* (Macon, GA: Mercerburg University Press, 2009).

5. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Three Wise Men," *The Crisis* (December 1913): 80-82.
6. *Ibid.*, 80.
7. *Ibid.*, 83.
8. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Great Surgeon," *The Crisis* (December 1922), 58-60.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 60.
11. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Sermon in the Cradle," *The Crisis* (December 1921): 58-59.
12. *Ibid.*
13. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Son of God," *The Crisis* (December 1933): 276.
14. *Ibid.*, 277.
15. *Ibid.*
16. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Missionaries," in W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, reel 81, frames 493-494.
17. *Ibid.*, reel 81, frame 493.
18. *Ibid.*, reel 81, frame 494.
19. On this subject, for example, see Patricia Applebaum, "Material Pacificism," Material History of American Religion Project, <<http://www.materialreligion.org>>; and Patricia Applebaum, *Kingdom to Commune: Protestant Pacifist Culture between World War I and the Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). On Du Bois and pacifism, see Marable, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Black Radical Democrat*, 83-85.
20. *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Recorded Autobiography, Interview by Moses Asch* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1961).
21. David Kennedy, Lizabeth Cohen, and Thomas Bailey's *The American Pageant* placed Du Bois in a chapter on the Progressive Era, and rightly noted his role in founding the NAACP. The chapter also highlighted Du Bois's conflict with Booker T. Washington over industrial training and scientific education. See *The American Pageant*, thirteenth ed. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 575. Conversely, *The American Promise: A History of the United States*, authored by James L. Roark, Michael P. Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, Sarah Stage, Alan Lawson, and Susan M. Hartman, devoted a mere paragraph to Du Bois's feud with Washington in a chapter on Progressivism, but focused specifically on African American participation in World War I in the context of Du Bois's famous 1917 *Crisis* column, "Close Ranks." See *The American Promise*, third ed. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), 784, 822-823.
22. For analysis of Du Bois as aesthetically formed propagandist, see Amy Helene Kirschke, *Art in Crisis: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Struggle for African American Identity and Memory* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007).
23. For helpful accounts of urban religion and the Great Migration, see Robert Gregg, *Sparks for the Anvil of Oppression: Philadelphia's African Methodists and Southern Migrants, 1890-1940* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993); Milton C. Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Wallace D. Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915-1952* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Susan Nance, "Mystery of the Moorish Science Temple: Southern Blacks and American Alternative Spirituality in 1920s Chicago," *Religion and American Culture* 12, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 123-166; Clarence E. Hardy III, "'No Mystery of God': Black Religions of the Flesh in Pre-War Urban America," *Church History* 77, no. 1 (March 2008): 128-150.
24. Garth E. Pauley, "W. E. B. Du Bois on Woman Suffrage: A Critical Analysis of His *Crisis* Writing," *Journal of Black Studies* 30, no. 3 (January 2000): 383-410.

25. Blum, 135-137.
26. Marable, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Black Radical Democrat*, 144-217; Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Racial Equality and the American Century*, 349-571; Horne, *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Biography*, 115-191.
27. On religion and the Harlem Renaissance see Jon Michael Spencer, "The Black Church and the Harlem Renaissance," *African American Review* 30, no. 3 (Autumn 1996): 453-460. On Hughes and religion, see Mary Beth Culp, "Religion in the Poetry of Langston Hughes," *Phylon* 48, no. 3 (Fall 1987): 240-245. On Cullen's *Black Christ*, see James H. Smylie, "Countee Cullen's 'The Black Christ,'" *Theology Today* 38, no. 2 (July 1981): 160-173. Regarding Hughes's "Goodbye Christ," educators may wish to further contextualize the poem by referencing its controversy involving Los Angeles minister Aimee Semple McPherson. In 1940, McPherson's personal assistant along with other church members protested Hughes's speaking engagement at a Pasadena, California hotel by marching and circulating a leaflet associating him with Communist Russia. McPherson's brand of religiously informed nationalism contrasted sharply with Hughes's depiction of a Communist Christ. See Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 244-246.
28. Walter P. Weaver, *The Historical Jesus in the Twentieth Century, 1900-1950* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 313-359; Richard Wrightman Fox, *Jesus in America: Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 307-350.
29. William T. Stead, *If Christ Came to Chicago* (London, U.K.: Laird and Lee, 1894), 339; Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 87-123; Gregory S. Jackson, *The Word and Its Witness: The Spiritualization of American Realism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 157-214.
30. Jackson, *The Word and Its Witness*, *Ibid.*
31. Kirschke, 64, 75, 77, 87, 98; Caroline Goesser, *Picturing the New Negro: Harlem Renaissance Print Culture and Modern Black Identity* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 207-245.