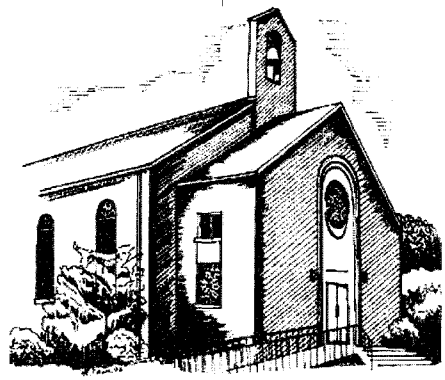
The Role of Higher Education in the Religious Transformation of W.E.B. Du Bois

Brian Johnson

IRONICALLY, WILLIAM EDWARD Burghardt Du Bois (1868-1963), future agnostic, was born on Church Street in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. His mother and father rented this abode from Thomas Jefferson "Old Jeff" McKinley (an escaped slave). And Du Bois was raised within the First Congregational Church of Great Barrington and its Sunday school, which was likewise incongruous given his looming beliefs.

His mother, Mrs. Mary Burghardt Du Bois, is listed in the records of the First Congregational Church of Great Barrington as having become a member in 1878. Until then, Mary Du Bois and her son attended services at St. James Episcopal Church.



While the facts surrounding the life of Du Bois' father, Alfred Du Bois, are rather enigmatic, he left the family well before Du Bois' tenth birthday. In the 1885 Massachusetts state census, Great Barrington had a population of 4,471 and of these citizens, 107 were classed as "native blacks," and under such familial and communal circumstances, it is not difficult to understand why in a town where there were very few African Americans, Du Bois' main interactions with the people of the town was through the church. Yet and still, such an early communal attachment to the local Great Barrington church community would not be enough to keep perhaps the most influential African-American scholar of the twentieth century from embracing (and partly fashioning) a brand of higher education that would thrust him into the depths of agnosticism.

Reverend Evarts Scudder was the minister at First Congregational Church of Great Barrington during Mary Du Bois' and her son's membership. Scudder's pastoral tenure, lasting 19 years, was second only to that of the founding pastor, Reverend Samuel Hopkins. Scudder was a learned man — having studied two years at both Harvard University and Williams College and finally receiving a theological degree at Andover — and he was fundamentally Calvinist. According to Joseph S. Clark's *Historical Sketch of Congregational Churches in Massachusetts*, he ministered the church's Articles of Faith, reflecting the strict Calvinism of his distant predecessor Reverend Hopkins. The divine authority of the Bible, the sinful nature of man, the absolute dependence of man upon the atonement of Christ, and sanctification by Christ were recurring themes in Scudder's sermons.

Yet unlike his predecessor Reverend Hopkins (though Hopkins' remarks hardly moved much beyond the injustice of slavery), Minister Scudder's preaching and doctrinal exposition contained little if any references to the plight of African Americans and provided even fewer practical applications devoted to moral, ethical, and social behaviors that would help them to negotiate the unique societal obstacles they faced. Moreover, Minister Scudder inevitably failed to make any lasting impression upon the theological development of the young Du Bois. In his award-winning biography of Du Bois, David Levering Lewis suggests, "Neither the god of Moses nor the redeeming Christ appears to have spoken deeply to Mary Silvina's brainy, self-absorbed son."

Notwithstanding, it appears that both mother and son were among the church's most devoted and pious parishioners until Mary's death and Du Bois' departure to Fisk University in 1884 and 1885, respectively. And while Du Bois did not seem to allow the more ethereal elements of Great Barrington Calvinist morality to become permanently lodged within his center, Scudder's doctrine left an indelible mark upon Du Bois' stern New England — even puritanical — moral, ethical, and intellectual disposition that would echo and reverberate throughout his long career as a reformer, social scientist, and finally, an agnostic.

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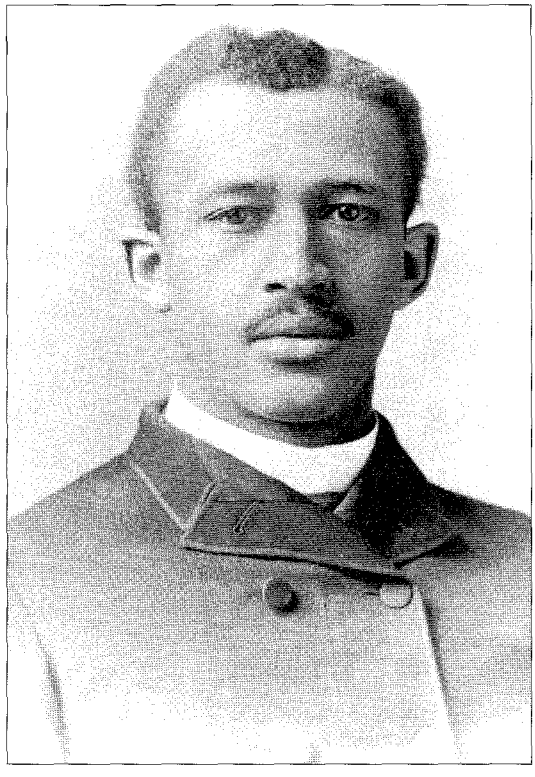
Even as Du Bois' matriculation from the town of Great Barrington to academic institutions Fisk, Harvard, and the University of Berlin represents his formal academic rite of passage into his chosen vocation as a reformer and social scientist, in many ways, these academic destinations also served to cement his leanings towards agnosticism. The zealotry and religious fanaticism of Fisk University would perpetually repel and disgust Du Bois, and the pursuit of burgeoning modern, philosophical and scientific ideals that largely excluded considerations of mystical Providence at Harvard and the University of Berlin greatly stimulated his natural affinity for the life of the mind. And the former's disregard for an active intellectual and scholastic life in all matters — including religion — and the latter's philosophical and scientific demonstration that the modern university's break from Protestantism was a permanent one, compelled Du Bois to wittingly or unwittingly lay the intellectual framework for his later agnosticism through a rudimentary version of Christian pragmatism that eventually became social science during this period.



W.E.B. Du Bois as a student at Harvard University

Du Bois at Fisk University

Although Du Bois would become permanently distanced from the First Congregational of Great Barrington church of his youth, it would — along with much of the Great Barrington's wider religious community — play an important role in his future academic career. Under the direction of a local Congregational minister, each of the Congregational churches in Great Barrington undertook to send Du Bois to Fisk University by furnishing him with $25 a year which sustained him throughout his tenure at Fisk University. David Levering Lewis cleverly explains, "Whatever his bedrock beliefs at the time, Willie knew that the church could help promote him in life and his Sunday school enthusiasms were largely a vehicle to further that eventuality, just as his affiliation with the AME Zion congregation advanced his social side."

Even as Du Bois' own interests were served in this endeavor, so were the Great Barrington ministers', perhaps even more so; Scudder and his ministerial associates would be able to provide for the least amongst its Great Barrington African-American community — an orphan — for Du Bois' mother passed away during his senior year in high school. Besides this, Fisk University was a deeply religious institution and adhered to some brand of Protestant doctrine like most nineteenth-century African-American colleges and universities newly established in the South.

One would be remiss to think that his gradual movement towards agnostic belief at this point in his academic career was owing to some radical repudiation of the New England Congregationalism and wider Protestant Christianity that Du Bois was exposed to in Great Barrington. To the contrary, Du Bois' agnosticism seems to have sprung forth from an urgent sense of dissatisfaction with the unintelligible ways in which Christianity was practiced — particularly among both southern and religious African-American community members. For Du Bois (at least while pursuing studies at Fisk University) attempted in some measure to follow Minister Scudder's exhortations to Christian duty and obedience. Besides, hailing from a town where there were no African-American male figures possessing occupations that Du Bois' abilities were certain to occupy, prominent Great Barrington white men like Justice Dewey, Mr. Painter, Mr. Van Lennep, and finally Minister Scudder (all of whom possessed some affiliation with the local church as well as professional standing within the Great Barrington community) likely inhabited the imaginations of Du Bois' vision of moral uprightness and ethical usefulness for African-American community members. And this New England Congregationalist worldview of orthodox religion was evident in Du Bois as early as the first epistle sent to Minister Scudder and the First Congregational Church of Great Barrington near the beginning of his Fisk University tenure in 1886.

Eager to meet with Reverend Scudder's approbation of his Christian exercises, Du Bois wrote, "I am glad to tell you that I have united with the Church here and hope that the prayers of my Sunday-school may help guide me in the path of Christian Duty. Tomorrow Mr. Moody will present at our chapel exercises." From there, he goes on to recall his preference for the New England brand of Protestantism versus that which he had likely experienced during Fisk University chapel services: "Although this sunny land is very pleasant, notwithstanding its squalor misery and ignorance spread broad cast; I often wish I could join some of your pleasant meetings in person as I do in spirit."

One can easily imagine that Du Bois' notion of "pleasant" probably involved the kind of learned erudition that made the more ethereal notions of Protestant Christianity far more palpable to someone of Du Bois' ilk in comparison with the sheer fanaticism and emotionalism he would later document about African-American churches in the South. Moreover, Du Bois' mentioning of the Sunday school — and not Minister Scudder's sermons — also intimates that the young scholar actually mourned the absence of the more cerebral discussions about the efficacy of religion and learning held there. (Du Bois' Sunday school was under the direction of Judge Justin Dewey who would become notoriously known for his adjudication of the Lizzie Borden trial and his intermittent challenges to Minister Scudder's refusal to rely upon advanced liberal training to assist the Great Barrington church in social reform efforts.) Nonetheless, it is clear that Du Bois was deeply concerned about fostering some brand of moral and ethical aptitude loosely based upon Christianity, but certainly not the fanatical sort he began to encounter at Fisk University.

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Restrictions upon individual freedom, moral rigidity and unintelligible application of biblical text were the three important problems that were deeply etched into Du Bois' burgeoning resistance to the Fisk brand religion. And each was rooted in the contradistinction between what Du Bois had experienced in the public schools and Congregationalist churches of Great Barrington as opposed to what he was experiencing in the rural, religious, and predominantly southern African-American environment in which he was now living. Fisk University, at the time, generally associated all forms of dancing with the sexual licentiousness and lasciviousness found in the very same southern African-American rural communities that Du Bois would seek to reform later in his career; Du Bois' employment of dance — in a radically different sphere in highly puritanical and cultured Great Barrington — was probably enjoyed within the confines of constant adult supervision. Besides this, Du Bois was one of the very few young African-American male teens in the Great Barrington area, which means the opportunity for moral depravity was lessened due to the fear of inappropriate interactions with white females as well as the general paucity of Great Barrington African-American young women, particularly those with loose morals. Yet and still, Du Bois likely convinced himself that the accusation from the Fisk University community merely proved his point that southern African Americans needed enlightened and "trained leadership" and "he was sent to help furnish it." And this leadership would manifest itself into some newfangled idea for reform loosely based on Christianity.

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One of Du Bois' editorials is of particular interest to his evolving beliefs in fashioning some measure of Christian pragmatism. In January 1888, the Fisk editor exhorted his readers, "as Christians, we should not forget the practical side of Christianity." For it was the practice of Christianity — its deeds and its manifest usefulness — that Du Bois felt was wanting in both the Fisk and wider African-American community. Du Bois' interests in creating a stronger union between Christianity and its ensuing moral and ethical results is easy to understand given his Great Barrington rearing and undergraduate experience at the southern and religious historically African-American university. Fisk's president during Du Bois' tenure was Erastus Cravath. Du Bois described him during the delivery of his eulogy in 1901 as a man "who early came to believe in the possibilities of the

Negro race and the reality of the broader humanity taught by the Christian religion and did not hold this merely as a theory, as an intellectual belief, but as a thing worth living and fighting for and for it he lived and fought." Nearly everyone else at the religious Fisk possessed a version of religious faith badly in need of revising. Nonetheless, even after distancing himself from the Fisk brand of Christianity while a graduate student at Harvard University, Du Bois would remain zealous in his preoccupation with what would soon manifest itself as an embryonic philosophy of Christian pragmatism whenever he addressed the question of moral and ethical efficacy.

Du Bois Goes to Harvard

After a successful stint at Fisk University and having received many glowing recommendations from his Fisk professors, Du Bois entered Harvard University as a junior in 1888. And somewhere between the time Du Bois graduated from Harvard with a B.A. (cum laude) in 1890 and receiving the M.A. in history in 1892 (Du Bois would later receive his Ph.D. from Harvard in 1895), he wrote a little-known speech that offered his most pointed criticisms within his early educational career about his sense of a Christian pragmatism necessary for African-American churches. In "Does Education Pay?" — delivered before the National Colored League in Boston on March 10, 1891 — Du Bois addresses those within the African-American community who suggest that education contaminates religion: "The argument that college education makes a man irreligious seems to me mere fol-de-rol. Either religion is true or it is not true; if it is not true, men ought to be irreligious; and if it is true, learning will serve to make it firmer than ever. The Puritans did the best thing for morality and religion, when they backed their church by an institution of learning in my opinion. A religion that won't stand the application of reason and common sense, is not fit for an intelligent dog. As to the snobbery connected with education, let me say that no thoroughly educated man ever turned up his nose at a fellow human being."

In addition, Du Bois proposed seven organizations that should facilitate education within the African-American community, and paid considerable attention to the role of churches: "Our churches are not active in Practical Christian Work; they do not encourage manly character. You may visit them almost in vain to hear serious and thoughtful discourses of any kind and the young people who ought to be the mainstays of the church are not found in it, except to while away the time or catch a beau. When the church ceases to stand for education and morality, it must go. No power could do so much for the education of the colored people of Boston, for preparing them for the duties of citizenship and the responsibilities of life, as the church; and let us hope that the future may have a more hopeful record than the past."

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He also adds: "I don't care whether you love Jesus Christ or not; if you are not an honest man you are a scamp. The Christianity which Jesus of Nazareth taught the world means manliness, courage, and self-sacrifice or it means nothing and yet some of our prayer meetings seem to teach that it means a rough and tumble scramble for heaven. You have got to come to the point where you will call the man who announces a lecture and gives you 15 minutes of rambling nonsense, a liar; the church which advertises a concert and gives a fiddle, a thief; a father who doesn't educate his children, a public enemy; a man who allows a single penny to influence his vote a traitor; and a woman who puts all her money on her back instead of in her head a fool. We must insist upon our duties more and our rights less, upon work and talk less, upon doing right more and getting religion less."

Resembling Jefferson's enlightenment preoccupation with reason and results more than religious profession in his *Notes on the State of Virginia,* Du Bois' speech was far more concerned with what African-American churches should do to aid others now instead of in the time to come. However, what is most intriguing about the speech is that in it one discovers that the seeds of Du Bois' agnostic development were actually sown in his conception of "practical Christian work."

It appears that the young man from Great Barrington by way of Fisk University simply possessed a desire to see moral, ethical, intellectual, and social dimensions of Christianity actualized within African-American communities; and he desired this in a manner similar to Judge Justin

Dewey who raised similar concerns about the social contributions of his Great Barrington fellow citizens when Du Bois was a congregant at The First Congregational Church. And if this suggestion is correct — that the seeds of agnosticism were sown from Du Bois' youthful and naïve desire to see African-American Christians make Protestant New England notions of both morality and learning manifest in their own communities — these seeds both germinated and came into fruition through the pragmatism of William James, which he encountered during his undergraduate experience at Harvard. Du Bois would affirm this suggestion in several writings: "At Fisk a very definite attempt was made to see that we did not lose or question our Christian orthodoxy. Eventually it landed me squarely in the arms of William James of Harvard for which God be praised." Du Bois also remarked in *A Negro Student at Harvard at the End of the Nineteenth Century*, "I chose therefore Palmer's course in ethics but since Palmer was on sabbatical that year William James replaced him and I became a devoted follower of James at the time he was developing his pragmatic philosophy."

"Young people who ought to be the mainstays of our church are not found in it, except to while away the time or catch a beau."

Du Bois' undergraduate essay in James' Philosophy IV course titled, "The Renaissance of Ethics: A Critical Comparison of Scholastic and Modern Ethics" was an admirable attempt to demonstrate the relative failings of both scholasticism and modern philosophy to arrive at comprehending moral and ethical ends, and to humbly propose his own solution to the quandary. In it, Du Bois offers a rather startling solution about the best available teleology for coming to terms with observable human morality and ethics: "One momentous fact, however, future science must not forget: *Christian teleology* is the only one yet presented which seems worthy of a man."

Though "A Renaissance of Ethics" hardly resembles an apologetic for a Christian pragmatism, it does follow James' line of pragmatist thinking coupled with his own unvarying commitment to addressing moral and ethical behavior within African-American communities. Instead of seeking to "systematically and elegantly" transform James' pragmatist philosophy into a "Du Boisian pragmatism to frame the concept of race," he attempted in "A Renaissance of Ethics"— though "he could not see the way to it clearly" — to pursue a scientific method that perhaps would help explain or provide guideposts for the apparent moral and ethical inconsistencies he observed in African-American experiences with Christian teleology.

Yet such a method was not to be had with James (or Harvard for that matter), who at the time possessed no clear formulation about how to do so scientifically. For the university "had in the social sciences no such leadership of thought and breadth of learning as in philosophy, literature and physical science. She was then groping toward a scientific treatment of human action." For this, Du Bois ultimately had to turn to Germany — but not Martin Luther's Germany — for "it offered an opportunity to construct an intellectual roadmap that merged science and ethics."

Du Bois Studies in Germany

When Du Bois began his two years of graduate study at the University of Berlin in 1890, nineteenth-century German universities offered the world's best education in socially scientific research. A far cry from Luther's maxim, "Sola gratia" (by grace alone and not works), several professors within the University of Berlin sought to ground all phenomena of human behavior in some form of scientific-based study. Du Bois writes about his education in Germany: "In Germany I turned still further from religious dogma and began to grasp the idea of a world of human beings whose actions, like those of the physical world, were subject to law. I could not lull my mind to hypnosis by regarding a phrase like 'consciousness of kind' as a scientific law. I was going to study the facts, any and all facts, concerning the American Negro and his plight and by measurement and comparison and research, work up to any valid generalization which I could. I entered this primarily with the utilitarian object of reform and uplift; but nevertheless, I wanted to do the work with scientific accuracy."

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Similar to his experiences at Harvard where James provided the beginnings of a scientific attempt to grapple with

morality and ethics through pragmatism, Gustav Schmoller at the University of Berlin supplied the tools of social science to help Du Bois in his efforts to "reform and uplift" African Americans with "scientific accuracy."

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Only a handful of Du Bois commentators have attempted to reconstruct his shift to German social sciences. Axel Schaefer argues that the "German historical school of economics, which became a crucial conduit for European social science methodology and thought for a generation of progressive reformers and scholars, suggested to Du Bois a theory of social ethics that had radical implications for his thinking on race."

Rutherford B. Hayes

In the end such exhortations and methodological tools for social science research would be all that Du Bois would take with him from Germany to his first professorial appointments at Wilberforce University and shortly thereafter, Atlanta University, both African-American universities. Du Bois secured funding from the Slater Fund for two years of study abroad at the University of Berlin from 1892 to 1894 shortly after receiving his master's degree from Harvard University in 1892. After a series of letters to former U.S. president Rutherford B. Hayes, who was chair of the Slater Fund for the Education of Negroes until his death, the Slater Fund would not renew Du Bois' allotment for a third year. This would have enabled him to complete the residency requirements necessary to earn a doctorate from the German university. This was the case despite letters of support from his German professors (one of whom was Gustav Schmoller) to receive the German doctorate. In spite of Schmoller's apparent regard for Du Bois, both the 1968 posthumously published *Autobiography* and *Dusk of Dawn* do not offer much more substantive thoughts about the extent to which Schmoller helped cultivate Du Bois' socially scientific approach to observing and documenting the moral, ethical, and social behavior of African Americans; this approach would ultimately yield the first comprehensive series of sociological studies on African Americans in Du Bois' *Atlanta University Studies*. Moreover, "the disappearance of his German doctoral thesis" and the very few notes taken from his German lectures do not shed additional light on this intellectual influence.

Nevertheless, Du Bois' exposure in Berlin to the most rigorous form of socially scientific methodology available in the late nineteenth century would apparently spur him towards an avowed commitment to commingle his earlier desire to see manifest within African-American communities a more appropriate moral, ethical, intellectual, and social framework — namely a *true* Christian pragmatism that resembled what he experienced within the Congregationalist Great Barrington community — and the method by which he would be able to observe and document it — namely, social science. And this rather naïve oil-and-water philosophy held by the first African American to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1895 would remain irreconcilable for the still developing agnostic who would embark upon his career as a social scientist and reformer as a professor at Wilberforce and Atlanta universities. Much further, it probably led to the most pronounced silence in Du Bois' utterly detailed chronology, autobiographical writings, and personal correspondence — his tenure within the American Negro Academy (1897-1903) and his relationship with Reverend Alexander Crummell. For this period of deafening silence represented Du Bois' final deep breath before his plunge into the depths of agnosticism. JBHE

The Indignities of Race Do Not Disappear Even for an Ivy League University President

"A 55-year-old black woman named Ruth Simmons came to New York on an autumn shopping trip in the first year of the twenty-first century and chose to examine the finery at Saks Fifth Avenue, one of the city's premier emporiums. She soon became aware that her movements were being closely followed by the store's security people, evidently fearful that she was a potential, if not likely, shoplifter. 'And I greatly resented that,' she said in recounting the incident. To add to her distress that day, a taxi driver locked his door as Simmons neared so that she could not get in. What made these slights, endured daily and disproportionately by black Americans, worth noting is that Ruth Simmons is president of Brown University."

—Richard Kluger, in
Simple Justice
(Vintage Books, 2004)