

# Lifting the Veil

Abolishing Oppression  
in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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Though I am not a DuBoisian scholar, I am a student of his work and strongly believe that *The Souls of Black Folks* has made an indelible mark on recent history. Du Bois tells a socio-psychological and racial story about a people who learned to survive within the segregated and often hostile social conditions in America that he calls life within the Veil; it is a story that needed to be told about the upward struggle, people had against meaninglessness. Du Bois uses several tools to tell his story on different levels; some of those tools were literary and others were philosophical motifs.

These same tools are parts of a homiletic that is, a homiletic informed by cultural and literary criticism, existential theology and American pragmatism. As Robert Frost has said of poetry it is a “momentary stay against confusion.” As this relates to our preaching, it is but a momentary stay against confusion and anxiety in our times. I assert that this means that all sermons are not perfect truth claims. Because they are based on biblical exegesis and theology, they are truthful far as preachers can see. Our sermons are steps toward perfection, as God continues, to disclose truth through sacred texts and by illumination upon the minds of exegetes, theologians and preachers of the gospel. Thus as we interpret texts, we interpret historical claims and contemporary assumptions of where God is going and prayerfully we hope to keep up. To do so we need two kinds of preachers those for the people and those of the people. Though he was not a preacher by any means, I believe that Du Bois’ seminal work was prophetic and bold; it was a work well ahead of its time. In fact, I believe that preachers will be enlightened by its content and social disclosure of where culture, society and people were located and Du Bois does not disappoint he offers a way – a forward leaning into the future.

## Du Bois as a Secular Theologian and Preacher

Du Bois passionately writes about his respect and initial meeting at Wilberforce University with the Reverend Doctor Alexander Crummell. In *Souls'* essay, "Of Alexander Crummell" is an ode and eulogy to the pan African intellectual and Christian theologian. In my view, Crummell's intellectualism and Christian faith influenced Du Bois and in this study, I attempt to make this connection between Crummell and Du Bois. The latter was a secular theologian and preacher, with Judeo-Christian tendencies as evidenced in the nuances carefully placed in *Souls*.

Like Crummell, it was too said of DuBois, that he was "a man *for* the people and not a man *of* the people."<sup>1</sup> I have written a complete chapter dedicated to this subject. However for now, let me say that for DuBoisian preachers who employ this "for" the people homiletic of justice and equality, they are men and women *for* the people not men and women *of* the people. By this I mean in contrast, those who preach an "of" the people homiletic and theology are aiding people to survive. This may be associated with plantation or slave preaching. On the other hand, those who preach a "for" the people homiletic and theology express a paradigm shift from surviving to striving, toward thriving as socio –economic and socio-psychological equals with dominate classes, and

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<sup>1</sup> Jerry G. Watts, "Souls and Afro – American Intellectual Life" in *The Souls of W.E.B. DuBois* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2006), 112. I have added italicize for emphasis on the differences to approaching leadership. This becomes of import later for a discussion on species of preaching, namely bifurcation and folk styles. See Evan Crawford, *The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 19. Crawford's seminal contribution to the academy is his work on information of the preacher or bifurcation, often as it is referred.

competitive and contributing citizens of his or her community. This preaching may be associated with abolitionist assignments.

Those who speak or preach, “For” the people must boldly forecast the future, by way of homiletic – rhetoric that is similar to Hebrew prophets; they must proclaim a world that does not exist, yet. As indicated, I will address the difference between preaching “of” and “for” the people later in this discussion. My claims are substantiated by taking notice of theologian Deotis Roberts. Roberts rightly argues for literate churchmen and women as pivotal in lifting the Veil, “Teaching or education must become central to the black church’s mission. Education must not be neglected even in the name of political activism. There is no substitute for intellectual enlightenment for those who would be free.”<sup>2</sup>

What is more, his contributions and demands for an educated African American clergy are underutilized; but his contributions and demands are a part of the key to a paradigm shift that moves all homiletic theory into the future. Roberts cites a familiar trivium : values, morals and education, as does Quintilian: *vir bonus dicendi peritus* or “the good man speaking well,” which supports that any person who is educated is also to be a person of moral values.<sup>3</sup> For Quintilian, formal education and moral character are prerequisites for the making of rhetorician. In general, persons who discipline themselves with laborious study, often develop good character, thus becoming a “good man speaking well.”

Nonetheless, preachers of all races and faiths, political and human orientations can learn much about themselves from black folks’ souls. By following the cultural and literary narrative of *The Souls of Black Folks*, I contend that we can better

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<sup>2</sup> J. Deotis Roberts, “Education and Ministry” in *The Prophethood of Black Believers: An African American Political Theology for Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 49.

<sup>3</sup> Lucy Lind Hogan and Robert Reid, *Connecting with the Congregation: Rhetoric and the Art Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 30. See also Quintilian’s *Institutes* 2: 15.

learn how to preach canonical texts in the early stages of the twenty – first century. In part, we learn to preach a new way from *Souls* because it accepts ambivalence and complexities that accompanies life (as the ensuing chapters will demonstrate). What is more, *Souls'* gives us ways to understand the importance of cultural criticism, literary tropes, metaphors and how those aid us in understanding the larger meta-narrative *Souls* represents within the Veil and that larger meta-narrative is Western culture's battle with nihilism.