

Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium

Volume 1

Article 4

12-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Davis, Cyprian O.S.B. (2007) "Catholicism and the Color Line: Black Catholics Beyond the Veil," *Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium*: Vol. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/jbcts/vol1/iss1/4>

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Catholicism and the Color Line: Black Catholics Beyond the Veil Keynote

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*This paper, delivered in Atlanta, Georgia on October 9, 2003, was the keynote address of the 2003 Annual Meeting, which was dedicated to the centennial anniversary of W.E.B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk*. Here, Davis discusses the history of the 'double consciousness' as perceived by Black Catholics throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.*

One hundred years ago, William E.B. DuBois published *The Souls of Black Folk*, a work that was unique in both its time and in its scope. If no longer unique, it still remains a defining statement for us today. *The Souls of Black Folk* is a collection of essays, nearly all of which had been published before by DuBois. DuBois was one of the most prolific black writers of his time. These essays were published as a volume in 1903 by A.C. McClurg and Company in Chicago. One overriding theme governs the collection, namely the experience and the worldview of black people, their mentality, their heart, their spirit, and their place in the world of that time. DuBois was a careful scholar who combined the disciplines of a sociologist, a historian, and a philosopher in his writings; but he was also a man of letters and a poet. The essays in *The Souls of Black folk* are filled with metaphors, similes, and the periodic sentences of 19th-century prose. There are three

themes which have made this text important: the color line, double consciousness, and the veil.

We black Catholic scholars are gathered together in the shadow of DuBois, remembering his influence and his legacy in this city, and we also recall that 2003 is also the 40th anniversary of his death in Ghana on the day before the March On Washington in 1963. And finally for us as black Catholics, we remember that this is the see city of two of our own, our beloved two tragic heroes, Archbishop Eugene Marino and Archbishop James Lyke.

In this paper, I will consider the work of five Catholics who, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, found themselves struggling with the very problems that DuBois described: Joseph Anciaux, Girolamo Cardinal Gotti, Daniel Rudd, Fredrick McGhee, and Thomas Wyatt Turner.

In the foreword to his work, DuBois wrote: "Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here at the dawning of the Twentieth Century...for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line."² In 1903 and in 1904, two documents appeared which had great significance for those caught on one side of the color line in the Catholic Church at that time. First, there was printed a document in Latin addressed to the pope. It was not for general publication and I have seen only two copies: one in the Josephite Archives in Baltimore; the other in the Vatican Archives among the papers of the Apostolic Delegation. It was written by a Belgian priest, Joseph Anciaux, who for a few years served as a Josephite in the United States. Entitled *De miserabili conditione catholicorum nigrorum in America*

² W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. (New York: New American Library. A Signet Classic, 1969). Forethought. Xi.

(The Wretched Condition of Catholic Blacks in America),³ this small red-bound volume of 46 pages is alive with passion, anger, and indignation at the situation of black Catholics in the United States. He addresses in the first place, the social and political situation of African Americans in general and then addresses the situation within the Catholic Church:

All hope certainly ought to be placed in the zeal of the missionaries and in securing ready admittance into Catholic churches for Negroes along with white people.

But alas what do I see?

Almost all the priests (even the most pious) fear the reprehension of the white citizens so much that they hardly dare to make the slightest gesture in behalf of the Negroes; in truth others are so imbued with prejudice that they say: "I do not care about the Negroes: they are not of my flock."

A certain priest in speaking of me said: "He squanders time and money in vain in caring for Negroes;" and another while talking with me said: "What reason in the world can you have for being so very solicitous for the Negroes?"...

...A few months ago when I came to the cathedral church of New Orleans I greeted the respected Vicar General the [illustrious John Marius] Laval and spoke with him in a familiar way about the Negroes. His Reverence is endowed with genius, virtue, and charity, and I have no intention of offending him, but he

³ *De miserabili conditione Catholicorum nigrorum in America. Ad Sanctissimam Sedem. (Confidentiale).*

(Namur: E Typis Jac. Godenne. Via Bruxellensii, 13). Originally addressed to Pope Leo XIII, who died in 1903, was quickly changed to Pius X, who took office in 1903.

expressed this astonishing opinion: “In America no Negro should be ordained. Just as illegitimate sons are declared irregular by Canon Law, so, to settle the whole question, the Negroes could be declared irregular because they are held in contempt by white people.”

And he added: “I offer this as my private opinion, as it were.”

Would that it were a private opinion: But it is not only private, but very false and most alien to the mind of the Church:

For always and everywhere the supreme pontiffs have fostered with the greatest solicitude the education of a native clergy.

It should be noted carefully that no reason or even pretext of danger or immorality is invoked by this prelate against the Negroes. His entire feeling is included in these words: “Irregular because Black.”⁴

Stephen Ochs in his book, *Desegregating the Altar*, points out that Anciaux was related to highly placed curial officials in Rome.⁵ No doubt, it is in this way that his missive on the wretched condition of American blacks reached some of the cardinals and perhaps even the desk of the pope.

Without doubt, the letter, dated January 18, 1904, from Girolamo Cardinal Gotti, the prefect of the Congregation of the Propaganda, sent to the apostolic Delegate for delivery to Cardinal Gibbons was the result of Anciaux’s plea on behalf of African American Catholics:

⁴ Ibid., 14, 19-20.

⁵ See Stephen Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar. The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests. 1871-1960.* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990). 138-140.

Your Excellency:

It has been referred to this Sacred Congregation that in some of the Dioceses of the United States, the condition of the Catholic negro, not only in respect to the other faithful, but also in respect to their pastors and Bishops, is very humiliating and entirely different from that of the whites.

As this is not in conformity with the spirit of Christianity which proclaims the equality of all men before God, that equality which foment charity and tends to the increase of Religion by multiplying the number of conversions. I ask, Your Excellency, to call the attention of His Eminence Cardinal Gibbons to this matter...⁶

Terse, brief, and without much diplomacy, the cardinal prefect left little room for excuses. In fact, in my opinion this letter marks the beginning of a long series of not too friendly correspondence between the Curia and the American bishops in regard to African American Catholics.

African American Catholics had begun to organize themselves some dozen years before the appearance of *Souls of Black Folk*. Despite the fact that the first blacks who walked on territory that would become the United States were all Catholics in religion and Spanish in language, the overwhelming majority of African Americans was Protestant.⁷ Nevertheless, in the last decade of the 19th century there were five black lay Catholic Congresses. The first one was held in 1889 in Washington, D.C. The idea of a black lay Catholic Congress, came from a thirty-five year old newspaper editor named Daniel Rudd, who was born a slave in Bardstown, KY in 1854. Rudd was a journalist, a

⁶ Gotti to Gibbons. 101 G6. Archives of the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

⁷ The first blacks arrived in Florida in 1565.

lecturer, an organizer, a publicist, and an ardent Catholic, who believed that the Catholic Church would eventually do away with the color line. He wrote in his newspaper: “The Catholic Church alone can break the color line. Our people should help her to do it.”⁸ Or as he wrote in the same year:

We believe there is no leadership quite so capable as that of the Catholic Church, because she has up to this time, been the only successful leader of men of all the other races.⁹

Rudd, in fact, predicted that there would be a massive conversion of blacks to Catholicism.

Unlike DuBois, Rudd was neither an intellectual nor a professor. They both spoke German and they both had a vision for black people. But DuBois walked in the halls of academe; Rudd was all over the country talking about the fusion of Catholicism with the black race and the “new civilization” that would arise. Their religious moorings were entirely different: DuBois was Protestant and Rudd was very Catholic. DuBois was aloof and critical; Rudd was optimistic, expansive, enthusiastic, and a bit of an operator. Rudd was a self-taught man. His knowledge of Catholicism—much more developed than one might think—went into the publication of the *American Catholic Tribune*—published in Cincinnati and then in Detroit—from 1888 to about 1894 or perhaps later. This newspaper proudly declared that it was the only Catholic Journal owned and published by Colored Men. It was in the columns of his own newspaper that he set forth his reasons and his purpose in calling for a congress of black Catholics.

⁸ *American Catholic Tribune*. January 3, 1891.

⁹ *Ibid.*, April 18, 1891.

One notices immediately that one of the underlying themes is the notion of “double consciousness,” but for Rudd this consciousness is positive not negative.

By the spring of 1888, Rudd was writing articles in his newspaper about the first black Catholic Congress scheduled to be held in Washington, D.C., January 1-4 of 1889. He points out that his idea for a congress of black Catholics came from the similar congresses of lay Catholics that had already been held both in Germany and in Belgium. He then gave his *rationale* for such a meeting. Double-consciousness is the key.

First then, Colored Catholics ought to unite. Let the leading Colored Catholics gather together from every city in the Union in some suitable place, where under the blessing of Holy Mother, [the] Church, they get to know one another and take up the cause of the race. *The American Catholic Tribune* feels sure...that the Hierarchy of the Church...our Catholic fellow-citizens, white and black alike, will gladly hail the day when a congress of Colored Catholics would assemble to raise a united voice for Holy Mother Church and for our people.

Rudd goes on to say that our people will be able to realize “the Church’s extent among them.” He said that black Catholics “are hidden away, as it were. Let us stand forth and look at one another.” In fact, as a newspaperman he complained that the African American press tended to ignore them. He stated that their fellow blacks “fancy...that because a Negro is a Catholic, he is nigh a renegade to his race; they look on him, as one, who would almost reforge the fetters of the past.” For him, it is here that the

consciousness of twoness for black Catholics arises from black Protestants.

Every Colored Catholic must, at times, feel that his Colored brethren look upon him as alien and may, even be told us. Our Protestant friends have false notions of us. At the hearing of a gathering of Colored Catholics, almost the first thoughts in their minds will be: Will the Church allow Catholics to meet? What will they do in their assembly? Who will be there?¹⁰

Although Rudd spoke with assurance and optimism about the forthcoming congress of black Catholics, the actual fact is that Cardinal Gibbons, the archbishop of Baltimore, warned that the eyes of all would be on the delegates at the Congress and that these would not be friendly eyes. The congresses were, in spite of everything, a great success. They did bring about a unity in the black Catholic community. And even more, they provided a forum where African American Catholic lay leaders were able to express their beliefs regarding the Church, regarding racism within the Church, and a deep love and loyalty to the Catholic Church. They expressed not a “double consciousness” but rather a consciousness that they were an integral part of the Catholic Church in this country.

I quote a passage from the “address of the Fourth Congress of Colored Catholics to the Reverend Clergy and [the] laity of the Catholic Church of America.”¹¹

¹⁰ *American Catholic Tribune*. May 4, 1888.

¹¹ University of Notre Dame Archives. typescript. Fourth Black Catholic Congress. September 4-8, 1893.

With thorough confidence in the rectitude of our course in the enduring love of Mother Church, and the consciousness of our priesthood, we show our devotion to the church, our jealousy of her glory and our love for her history in that we respectfully call the attention of the Catholic world and in particular of the clergy, to these wrong practices which mark the conduct of those of the clergy who have yielded to the popular prejudice. Instances of such weakness, though not numerous are still not so rare... Those who have departed from the teachings of the Church, we would see reclaimed and those of our own people who have not yet had their eyes opened to the light of God, we would see converted.¹²

The black Catholic lay leaders at the end of the 19th century were all part of the congress movement. A few of them were wealthy, some were local political leaders, some were professionals. One name is important because he played a crucial role in the career of W.E.B. DuBois. Fredrick McGhee was born a slave in Mississippi in 1861.

After the war the family moved to Knoxville, TN where McGhee went to school and later to college. Later still he studied law in Chicago and in 1885 was admitted to the bar. The next year he married a woman from Louisville. Afterwards he moved to St Paul where he became the first black to be admitted to the bar in the upper Midwest. He soon became a well known trial lawyer, famous for his oratory in the courtroom. He would become one of the first black lawyers to argue a case before the Supreme Court. McGhee converted to Catholicism in 1891. He was very much impressed by the strong condemnation of racial segregation and racist attitudes by John Ireland, the

¹² Ibid.

archbishop of St Paul. Upon becoming Catholic, McGhee became one of the leaders in the African American Catholic Congress movement. In fact, he was one of the six members who signed the address that came from the fourth black Catholic lay congress. He, no doubt, had much to do with the drafting of that document.

McGhee was very active in local politics. Republican at first, he became a Democrat and a friend and supporter of Booker T. Washington. This changed, however, when he gradually withdrew from the ideas and tactics of Washington. He turned then with heart and soul to the position of DuBois on civil rights, political stances regarding race, and the urgent need to change the situation of blacks. McGhee drew up the plan to be submitted at the conference which established The Niagara Movement. The plan called for “a nation-wide organization with committees assigned to definite Negro problems.”¹³ Twenty-nine black militant leaders assembled at Niagara Falls in Ontario, Canada in July, 1905. McGhee played a major part in this meeting. When the Niagara Movement fell apart, DuBois joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Although he played a leading role in the legal activities of the Niagara Movement, McGhee died in 1912 before playing the same role within the NAACP. In an article entitled “What the Catholic Church Means to the Negro,” McGhee concluded with the following words:

To the Negro the Catholic Church means a shelter in the mighty storm, a fountain of water in a great oasis, a sufficient army and navy of

¹³ Broderick, Francis L., *W.E.B. DuBois. Negro Leader in a Time of Crisis*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959)75-76. Lewis, David Levering, *W.E.B. DuBois. Biography of a Race. 1868-1919*. (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1993). 315-16.

defense, a light shining in the darkness, showing the danger boulders and plainly pointing to a safe haven.¹⁴

In looking at Catholics beyond the veil, one black Catholic leader would most certainly stand out. This man would be Thomas Wyatt Turner. Born in 1877 in Charles County, Maryland, Turner was the son of Catholic sharecroppers. Unlike DuBois, Turner was from the upper South, a man of the soil, who grew up in the traditionally black Catholic world of Southern Maryland, where the Jesuits had owned the slaves and had spread the Faith. Like McGhee, Turner was a very convinced Catholic. Like both McGhee and DuBois, he was an intellectual, having studied at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. before that pontifical university closed its doors to blacks and did not open them again until the 1940s. Turner completed his work at Howard University, eventually receiving the doctorate in botany from Cornell University in 1921. Later he would teach at Howard and then at Hampton Institute.

Turner like DuBois was a scholar before he was an activist. A scientist, he contributed to education and scientific knowledge by his writing, his conferences, and his teaching. Turner was like DuBois, not only as an intellectual, but also as an uncompromising activist against racial segregation and a fighter for a radical change in moving society towards social and civil justice. From 1913, he began to write and to organize for an end to racial segregation within the Catholic Church. He organized the Federated Colored Catholics in 1925, whose program was to unite black Catholics, to raise the awareness of African American Catholics, and to work together for leadership and

¹⁴ "What the Catholic Church Means to the Negro," *Howard's American Magazine* (1900):360-66.

responsibility for African Americans in the American Catholic Church. Turner welcomed whites into the organization, but he insisted that the organization must be led by blacks. He welcomed priests, but he insisted that the leadership should be in the hands of lay persons. Like DuBois, Turner was a man before his time. His enemies were two great Jesuit leaders, John LaFarge and William Markoe, who worked tirelessly on behalf of African Americans. Like DuBois, Turner fought many battles over the question of race. Like DuBois, there were blacks who sided with the clergy against Turner. Nevertheless, Turner always remained a faithful Catholic. When he was 99 years old, he received an honorary doctorate from the Catholic University — Turner had led the fight all the way to Rome to blot out the scandal caused by a pontifical university which would refuse entrance to Catholics just because they were black. Turner died at the age of 101 in 1978.

Today in this city where William E.B. DuBois lived and worked, labored and argued, fought and organized and also wrote his classic, *The Souls of Black Folk*, we might ask ourselves what significance this should have for us—African American Catholic intellectuals. One century later, we can say that the color line for us still exists. We who work in institutions of higher learning or who are still sweating over dissertations and comprehensives, we know well the meaning of double-consciousness. We imagine what our colleagues say when we miss deadlines, seem to be forever striving to finish articles and books, and looking for publishers who should be hungry for our scholarly endeavors and yet are not.

And yet DuBois reminds us that those who are born with the veil are blessed with second sight. And I believe that this second sight should always have something to do with the sight that operates in faith and works out in wisdom. As Roman Catholic scholars, scientists, and

academicians, we Catholic students of color both on the African continent and in the diaspora can look around and see more than Balaam saw or what his mule could say. We can see an enormous change in the last century. The Catholic Church is a global church, that is a multi-colored, multi-cultural, universal institution. Its history is a many-layered fabric for a seamless garment. In the next consistory, a week and a half from now, the number of cardinals from Africa, Asia, and Latin America will comprise nearly a third of the entire body of the college of cardinals. Among the Christian churches in Africa today, the Catholic Church is home for the majority. It is an African Catholic Church which now sends its missionaries to Europe and to America. In Africa, monasticism has returned to its ancient home and has begun to turn and to restore monasticism in Europe. In so many Catholic parishes here and abroad the priests that greet us will be from Africa. Here in the United States, not only is the president of the most prestigious society of theologians in this country now a black woman; but there is an Institute of Black Catholic Studies now based in a black university in the Catholic tradition. Our presence here in Atlanta is a witness to the ongoing search for excellence by black Catholic scholars in this country. We are witnesses to our white colleagues that the peoples of Africa and those of African descent have many contributions to make in the Sacred Sciences, whether it is theology, canon law, Scripture, Church History, Liturgical studies, or Ethics. As black Catholics, we might walk to a drummer different than that of our black colleagues and even have a perspective that comes from different lights, yet ours is an ancient path and our piety is from the African saints.