

# **What W.E.B. Du Bois Demands of Stanford University<sup>1</sup>**

**Emily Geigh Nichols**

**B.A., Stanford University  
Graduate Student, University of Southern California**

We believe strongly in the mission of higher education – to create and share knowledge and to prepare students to be curious, to think critically, and to contribute to the world  
*Stanford University Mission statement*

I do believe that the generation of young folk before me and the world-at-large have some clear and definite ideas of what religion calls for  
*W.E.B. Du Bois  
Lecture to Students at Wilberforce University*

---

<sup>1</sup> Dedicated to Professor Ken Taylor, in whose course this essay first began.

## Abstract

W. E. B. Du Bois offers a richer cultural account of education than the institutional secular language favored by elite universities. While institutions such as Stanford emphasize knowledge, leadership, and professional preparation, Du Bois insists that higher education also forms character, judgment, and moral purpose. Drawing on Du Bois's writings on religion, the Black church, higher education, and Black freedom, this essay shows that he understood faith as both a resource for moral formation and a force requiring critical scrutiny. Du Bois ultimately challenges Stanford to acknowledge that questions of character, moral inheritance, and meaning are central, not peripheral, to university life.

## Introduction

Stanford's public language for education focuses on active verbs: create, share, think, contribute, lead. It says less about what W. E. B. Du Bois called the "chief duty of character building" and the university's obligation to shape the kind of people it sends into the world. Yet Du Bois's work insists that this question is central to education. Universities do not only transmit knowledge and award credentials. They also form judgment, ambition, endurance, self-respect, and habits of moral response. For Black students especially, that formative work carries unusual weight, because education may either strengthen the capacities needed for freedom and leadership or train adaptation to a world still

structured by inequality. This essay argues that Du Bois treats religion and higher education as intimately related in the development of students. Across his career, he asks whether institutions can cultivate the moral strength, judgment, and self-possession required for Black freedom. His answer changes in tone as he grows more critical of churches and universities alike, but the central demand remains: education must do more than prepare students to succeed within the world as it is. It must help form people capable of judging that world and resisting its injustices.

## Literature Review

Recent scholarship suggests that while higher education aspires to developing students' characters alongside all their other intellectual and professional capacities, it tends to avoid the word "character" and religious and moral virtue traditions it implies. Instead, most secular institutions prefer a more publicly neutral vocabulary for doing so. Arthur (2024) argues that although character remains integral to university education, the term can feel awkward in secular settings. Contemporary institutions, he notes, often prefer language such as "fulfilling potential," "flourishing," "thriving," "well-being," "graduate attributes," and "21st-century skills" (p. 332), because direct efforts to "cultivate virtue" may seem "antithetical" to a liberal university ethos organized around "intellectual autonomy, open enquiry and constructive disagreement" (p. 337). Arthur nevertheless insists that universities "shape the character of their students whether they

realise it or not” and that “good higher education is good character education” (pp. 333–334). Burleson’s study of Black women in counselor education at predominantly White institutions shows this shift in practice. Rather than speaking of character, Burleson describes colleges as sites of “professional identity development,” “sense of belonging,” mentorship, and institutional climate. In her account, professional identity development involves internalizing the “values, norms, and practices” of a profession, while inclusive environments and culturally responsive support structures help students persist and develop a stronger sense of self (pp. 5, 62–63, 105–106). Stewart (2002) also identifies an institutional separation between public-facing attributes students should develop and private ones like faith. Although religion offers a mode of meaning-making and identity integration that helps students become “at home” within themselves, their communities, and the world (pp. 1–4), that vocabulary rarely enters secular university mission discourse. A similar pattern appears in student-development scholarship. In their study of African American students, Weddle-West et al. (2013) argue that neglecting spirituality “ignores an important part of students’ identity development” (p. 300) and describe colleges in terms of “holistic student development,” the construction of knowledge and truth, and the building of community through values such as “faith, hope, and love” (p. 300). Drawing on Love and Talbot (2000), they define spiritual development through the language of “authenticity,” “wholeness,”

“connectedness,” and “meaning” rather than through the older language of character (pp. 300–301). Such twenty-first century queasiness about the concept and language of character differs greatly from Nelson’s 1936 essay, which speaks in a now uncommon register, stating plainly that “character is both an aim and a by-product of all functional education” (p. 5) and that education seeks to help students achieve “the ‘good life’” (p. 8). As secular universities encourage their students to undertake profound formative work, they require a thicker language of character.

Du Bois offers a thicker account of character than the language of flourishing, belonging, or professional development can usually supply. As the literature on Du Bois and religion makes clear, he understood religion as moral formation, communal life, and institutional responsibility. The debate over his reception demonstrates the importance of Du Bois’ work on institutions and his interrogation of their purpose and the kinds of people they shape. The literature presents Du Bois as a thinker who treated religion as a serious social force, one capable of moral formation, communal organization, and political agency, but also prone to dogma, institutional failure, and complicity in inequality.

Zuckerman (2002) argues that Du Bois should be recognized as “the first American sociologist of religion” and emphasizing three features of his work: methodological rigor, sustained attention to Black religious life, and a distinctive interest in the “this-worldly, communal, specifically social rewards” of religious affiliation (pp. 239–240). In Zuckerman’s account, Du

Bois's attention to religion allows him to study how communities conserve morals, organize social life, and cultivate practical capacities. Describing Du Bois's 1940 Wilberforce address Aptheker (2001) shows how Du Bois approached religion critically in institutions of higher education. In this context Du Bois also proves unafraid to question the shortcomings of religious education. These criticisms have also opened him to correction among later scholars. Savage (2000) places Du Bois in a broader early twentieth-century African American debate about the political role of the Black church and argues that his overall stance "remained far from celebratory" (p. 236). Even when he recognized the centrality of the church to Black life, Du Bois often treated that centrality "not as a strength but as an impediment to be overcome or managed" (p. 236). Emphasizing his frustration with emotionalism, his dissatisfaction with church leadership, and his concern that the church had not fully become the "mighty social power" and "most powerful agency in the moral development and social reform" that it might have been (pp. 237–238), Savage questions whether Du Bois best read as a critic of the Black church's failures, or as a thinker who nonetheless preserved a deep account of religion's social and moral potential. *Darkwater*, meanwhile, reaches for excesses Du Bois criticizes elsewhere, defying social science writing ethos with the affective, prophetic, and spiritual musings (Hughey, 2020).

Even where his work proved novel for the sociology of religion in its insistence on local, concrete studies of Black religious

communities, Du Bois never fully resolved the tension between his commitment to particularity and his tendency to speak of "the Negro Church" as a singular institution with race-wide responsibilities. Nor did he resolve his ambivalence toward the institution (Savage, 2000, pp. 276–287). Evans calls attention to Du Bois' negative judgments, especially when he worried about whether churches were functioning as genuine moral centers (p. 275). For all his criticism of Black churches, Du Bois understood them as part of a larger process of advancement for Black people. Edwards (2023) argues that Du Bois understood religion as central to the production and contestation of social inequality. Religion, in her account, can function both as "a tool to exclude and subordinate human beings" and as "a source of refuge" (p. 4). Edwards therefore situates Du Bois both within the history of Black religion and a larger sociology of power. Reading Du Bois alongside William James and emphasizing Du Bois's role in creating "new religious ideals," Knight (2023) demonstrates how Du Bois tied liberation to the destruction of racist "second-hand" formulations and to the cultivation of alternative ways of seeing the self and the world. In this account, religion helps imagine a better life under oppressive conditions. Du Bois valued religion as essential both in early life and in higher education and criticized religious institutions when he thought they failed to advantage the belonging of Black people in America. A Du Boisian question for secular higher education is how to enable universities to embrace an equally serious language for the formation of honesty, unselfishness,

sympathy, sacrifice, moral judgment, and developed ability.

#### Du Bois on Religion and Character in Education

Du Bois's early empirical work clearly identifies the centrality of institutions of faith to character development, knowledge, and social advancement. In *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899/1996) Du Bois provided detailed information on the religious life of the black community in Philadelphia, and produced one of the first in-depth studies of Black congregations in an urban setting. There, Du Bois declares "all movements for social betterment are apt to centre in the churches," (Du Bois, [1899] 1996, p. 205) and in 1903 in *The Negro Church*, the young Du Bois valued the Negro church because it was one of the few Black institutions that joined communal life, leadership, moral language, and practical struggle. In his "Two Addresses delivered by Alumni of Fisk University, 1898" to alma mater Fisk University, Du Bois presents higher education as the formation of a self shaped by "the law of work, the law of sacrifice, the law of service," and he describes social life itself as held together by "faith and skill." He judges the church by whether it functions as a "teacher of morals and inspirer to the high ideals of Christianity," and he insists that both teaching and ministry demand "the very best in character," (Foner, 1970, p. 97). At this early point the church offers a template for what the university could offer Black people, and Du Bois suggests that it has already accomplished much. In a sentence that begins with faith and connects it to their

college liberal education, Du Bois describes a birthright of character-building faith that Black people bring to higher education:

Cherish unwavering faith in the blood of your fathers, and make sure this last triumph of humanity. Remember next, that you are gentlemen and ladies, trained in the liberal arts and subjects in that vast kingdom of culture that has lighted the world from its infancy and guided it through bigotry and falsehood and sin. (Foner, 1970, p. 101)

Equipped with a proud tradition of faith and good character, these students promise to build a new generation from a new kind of institution, "Fisk University, that venerable mother who rose out of the blood and dust of battle to work the triumphs of the Prince of Peace," (Foner, 1970, p. 101). Given all the sacrifices of their Black ancestors, the university will help them shine under divine protection. Whatever social and racial hardships these students will face in the twentieth century, they should take comfort in their preparation and their characters guided by a benevolent God who recognizes the faithful. "And behind the dim unknown Standeth God within the shadow, Keeping watch above his own," (Foner, 1970, p. 101).

Imagining such a spiritual experience in higher education, Du Bois defended his vision over the more practical minded vocational program of Booker T. Washington. When education is narrowed to economic adaptation, which Du Bois imagines neglects investment in the soul and character, he believes Black people lose

footing in the world as equal citizens. Asserting that Washington asks Black Americans to give up “political power,” “insistence on civil rights,” and “higher education of Negro youth,” Du Bois claims industrial training and wealth accumulation alone remain insufficient. Such education sacrifices an opportunity to build civic agency, public equality, and the cultivation of the most gifted minds. Du Bois answers Washington’s program with a blunt question: can a people “deprived of political rights, made a servile caste, and allowed only the most meagre chance for developing their exceptional men” make real progress? His answer, “an emphatic No,” rejecting the fantasy that economic skill can substitute for rights, leadership, and higher cultivation (Du Bois, 1903/2005, ch. 3, para. 20). He strengthens the point by arguing that “thrift and self-respect” cannot coexist with “silent submission to civic inferiority,” because such submission will “sap the manhood of any race in the long run,” (para. 30). Here Du Bois’s defense of higher education becomes a defense of character: without institutions that form teachers, professionals, and leaders, and without an education that sustains self-respect rather than trained subordination, a people may acquire skills while losing the moral and civic capacities needed to remain free.

Du Bois’s chapter on Washington defends higher education as a principle of equality: he argues a people denied liberal education, civic rights, and cultivated leadership cannot remain free. In “Of Alexander Crummell,” he turns from argument to embodiment. The question now becomes what kind of person such an

education must help form. Crummell allows Du Bois to imagine higher learning and religion working together at their best beyond credentialing to shape a soul capable of resisting hatred, despair, and doubt. If the Washington chapter insists that industrial schooling alone cannot secure self-respect or civic equality, the Crummell chapter shows what a more demanding ideal of formation looks like: education joined to vocation, moral discipline, and spiritual endurance.

Du Bois introduces his Crummell chapter as “the story of a human heart” (Du Bois, 1903/2005, ch. 12, para. 1) and organizes Crummell’s life around three temptations, “Hate,” “Despair,” and “Doubt,” suggesting moral development becomes a form of spiritual combat against all the social and historical obstacles to freedom and inclusion. At Oneida, “a revelation of thought and longing beneath one black skin” gives both Crummell and those around him a “new dawn of sympathy and inspiration,” suggesting that schooling can momentarily lift the veil of caste. Yet the chapter quickly shows the limits of liberal uplift when the Episcopal seminary refuses to admit him. Crummell’s vocation nevertheless survives: called to be “a priest,—a seer to lead the uncalled out of the house of bondage,” (para. 7) he comes to believe that the race’s “great shortcoming” is a “dearth of strong moral character, of unbending righteousness,” and “here he would begin,” (para 11). By the end of the chapter, Du Bois describes the virtues that racial trial has forged: “that rare courtesy which is the armor of pure souls” and “that unbending righteousness which is the sword of the just,” (para 20) The story becomes in

the end an account of character as disciplined self-command, vocation, and fidelity under conditions of exclusion.

Yet such characters meet unending trials. If the Crummell chapter represents a hard-won model of moral and spiritual formation under racial trial, “Of the Coming of John” presents the dangers of an elite education that fails to prepare one for the awful reality that a liberal university education can divorce a Black person from their community while also leaving them defenseless in an unchanged racist world, where the elites only pretend to tolerate Black people. The Coming of John chapter presents a grim tale where education awakens a self that neither church nor society can sustain. In Crummell, religion still helps anchor vocation and character even amid exclusion. In John’s story, by contrast, higher education enlarges perception and desire faster than any institution can translate them into belonging. John experiences both intellectual disappointment and moral and spiritual estrangement: He returns with greater consciousness, but without a community, a religious language, or a public world able to receive what his education has made of him.

John’s schooling deepens his powers of thought and perception, but it also teaches him to see both his home and the white world differently. After college, he feels “for the first time the Veil that lay between him and the white world,” (Du Bois, 1903/2005, ch. 13, para. 11) and the concert hall scene intensifies this split: Lohengrin lifts him imaginatively “out of the dirt and dust of that low life that held him prisoned and befouled,” (para. 14). He’s so enraptured

he’s failed to notice that the usher has been tapping on his shoulder:

A little surprised, he arose quickly at the last tap, and, turning to leave his seat, looked full into the face of the fair-haired young man. For the first time the young man recognized his dark boyhood playmate, and John knew that it was the Judge’s son (para. 15)

John is only so “surprised” he will be ejected from the theater because he feels so greatly transported by the German opera that he has momentarily forgotten the racist reality of his world. He may be educated, but this world denies full participation in the culture his higher education taught him to appreciate. The dramatic irony remains powerful because the audience knows John’s erstwhile childhood friend, White John, the son of the man who will condemn him, has already asked for him to be expelled. Perhaps the two Johns enjoyed an interracial friendship as children in the South, but inclusion among elite adults in the North is impossible. Rejected by the world he embraced, John returns to Altamaha, a misfit who speaks in “an unknown tongue,” unable to translate his education into terms his community can receive, and he wounds what the town “held sacred.” (para. 21).

The awful reality that American higher education failed to prepare an educated Black person for survival gradually leads Du Bois to pessimism. In his 1920 collection, *Darkwater* reflects on the institutional failures of the educated both in the church and in American life. In “Jesus

Christ in Texas,” Christian symbolism now condemns these institutions. Christ appears as racially marked, welcomed only while unrecognized, and finally identified with a hunted Black convict. The story culminates in the image of a lynching transformed into a “great crimson cross,” while the voice of Christ addresses the condemned thief: “This day thou shalt be with me in Paradise!” Here Du Bois radicalizes religion. All the institutionally empowered characters, the rector, the judge, or the genteel white household fail in the lessons of Christ and American education. Read alongside the Fisk speeches, the story suggests a later Du Bois who has lost confidence that established institutions will carry out the work of moral formation they claim to serve.

By *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois’s account of religion has grown more suspicious and less promising for education. He no longer treats the church simply as a possible site of uplift or moral leadership. He also shows how moral language can be bent toward submission. Looking back on the defeat of Reconstruction, he writes that Black efforts toward “manly self-assertion” were weakened by “the powerful propaganda of a religion which taught meekness, sacrifice, and humility”(pp. 692–93). Adopting a critical position of Christian ethics of meekness, Du Bois warns Black people against Christians who misuse the faith to secure obedience. While he retreats from religious language he persists in demanding formation of character as part of education so that his early focus on character building and faith continues to reflect even his early prayers he wrote in 1910:

The prayer of our souls this night is a petition for persistence; not for the one good deed, or single thought, but deed on deed, and thought on thoughts til day calling unto day shall make a life worth living. We want these young people to grow the grim grit of men who never know they’re beaten, never own defeat, but snatch success and victory out of the teeth of failure by keeping everlastingly at work and never giving up. Give us, O God, to walk with him who “never faltered but marched forward, never dreamed the right were vanquished, wrong would triumph, held we fall to rise, and baffled to fight better – sleep to wake,” (Du Bois, 1980, p. 71).

#### What W.E.B. Du Bois Demands of Stanford University

Du Bois makes clear that no university escapes the work of moral formation. He demands the university ask what kind of people it is forming, and whether Black students are being educated for freedom or merely trained for survival in an unequal order. Early Du Bois valued the Negro church because it was one of the few Black institutions that joined communal life, leadership, moral language, and practical struggle. Early on Du Bois imagines that Black people would need to bring the moral resources of the church with them because secular institutions lacked that culture. He understood that Black people needed spaces

under their own partial control where dignity could be protected, judgment sharpened, leaders trained, and hope sustained. He also wanted the largely public sphere of the universities to continue the work of moral formation. Late Du Bois strengthens this demand. In *Black Reconstruction* and after, he no longer assumes that institutions speaking the language of virtue are on the side of freedom. Religion can offer refuge, but it can also teach subordination; it can sustain agency, but it can also blunt “self-assertion” through a vocabulary of meekness and sacrifice. Stanford can learn from Du Bois that elite education requires more than intellectual ambition and professional preparation. It requires a serious account of character and a willingness to admit that questions of faith, meaning, and moral inheritance are central to university life. Such questions help students judge both the world they are entering and the kind of people they are becoming within it.

#### Reference List

- Aptheker, H. (2001). *W. E. B. Du Bois and religion: A brief reassessment*. *Journal of Religious Thought*.
- Arthur, J. (2024). Character education in universities. *Church, Communication and Culture*, 9(2), 329–344.
- Burleson, D. (2025). *Professional identity development of Black women counselor education and supervision students in predominantly White institutions* (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University).
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (2017). *Black Reconstruction in America: Toward a history of the part which black folk played in the attempt to reconstruct democracy in America, 1860-1880*. Routledge.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (Ed.). (1900). *The College-bred Negro: Report of a Social Study Made Under the Direction of Atlanta University; together with the Proceedings of the Fifth Conference for the Study of the Negro Problems, Held at Atlanta University, May 29-30, 1900* (No. 5). Atlanta University Press.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (2022). *Darkwater*. Simon and Schuster.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (Ed.). (2003). *The negro church: Report of a social study made under the direction of Atlanta university; together with the proceedings of the eighth conference for the study of the negro problems, held at Atlanta university, may 26th, 1903*. Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1899/1996). *The philadelphia Negro*. Cosimo, Inc..
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1980). *Prayers for dark people* (H. Aptheker, Ed.). University of Massachusetts Press.
- Du Bois, W. E. B., & Marable, M. (2015). *The Souls of black folk*. Routledge online.

- Edwards, K. L. (2023). Introduction: W. E. B. Du Bois: Religion and social inequality. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 62(S1), 3–6.
- Evans, C. (2007). W. E. B. Du Bois: Interpreting religion and the problem of the Negro church. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 75(2), 268–297.
- Foner, P. S. (Ed.). (1970). *WEB Du Bois Speaks: Speeches and Addresses, 1890-1919*. Pathfinder Press.
- Hughey, M. W. (2021). Debating Du Bois's Darkwater: from hymn of hate to pathos and power. *Identities*, 28(3), 263–285.
- Knight, K. (2023). William James, W. E. B. Du Bois, and the art of new religious ideals. *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy*, 44(2), 71–95.
- Love, P., & Talbot, D. (2000). Defining spiritual development: A missing consideration for student affairs. *NASPA Journal*, 37(1), 361-375.
- Nelson, T. H. (1936). Character building in the college. *Religious Education*, 31, 5–8.
- Savage, B. D. (2000). W. E. B. Du Bois and "The Negro Church." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 568, 235–248.
- Stewart, D. L. (2002). The role of faith in the development of an integrated identity: A qualitative study of Black students at a White college. *Journal of college student development*, 43(4), 579–597.
- Zuckerman, P. (2002). The sociology of religion of W. E. B. Du Bois. *Sociology of Religion*, 63(2), 239–253.