

### ***W.E.B. Du Bois and the Black Preacher***

*“ The Preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American Soil. A leader, a politician, and orator, a “boss,” and intriguer, an idealist, --all these he is, and ever, too, the centre of a group of men, now twenty, now a thousand in number. The combination of a certain adroitness with deep-seated earnestness, of tact with consummate ability, gave him his preeminence, and helps him maintain it. The type, of course, varies according to time and place, from the West Indies in the sixteenth century to New England in the nineteenth, and from the Mississippi bottoms to cities like New Orleans and New York.”* (Chapter X., “Of the Faith of the Fathers,” in *The Souls of Black Folk*)

If Du Bois were alive today, Tavis Smiley would certainly have invited him to participate in his televised all-day symposium, “The State of the Black Church,” held in Detroit in February 2003. As I watched the panelists debate the relevance and viability of the Black Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, I realized that Du Bois’ observation and fascination with the “unique personality” of the black preacher continues to ring “true” now a century later. I wondered, whether Du Bois would have endorsed Reverend-politicians Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton as effective models of black leadership? Today black clergy continue to be called upon to pray and preach at presidential inaugurations, to provide a moral voice in America’s cultural landscape, and to represent simultaneously their race and their religion. In fact, it was the black preacher Bishop T.D. Jakes, who in recent years graced the cover of *Time* magazine as the heir-apparent to America’s preacher Billy Graham. Indeed it is difficult to deny the public attraction to black preachers.

Over the course of the last 100 years black preachers have persistently captured the attention of America, either for ire or admiration, with claims to leadership on behalf of their people. Often the lines between “leader... politician, and ‘boss,’” have been blurred by such popular figures as Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. The

varieties along “time and space” have made us witnesses to a range of orators and crowd movers: from the black power theology of Albert Cleage and the Shrine of the Black Madonna to the prosperity messages preached at Fred Price’s megachurch “Faithdome;” from Vashtie Murphy McKenzie’s consecration as the first female bishop in the historic African Methodist Episcopal Church to Johnnie Coleman’s prosperity and health ministry at Chicago’s Christ Universal Temple; and from the Duke Divinity School-trained Hip Hop generation cleric, The Reverend Jamal Harrison Bryant, to the former Bad Boy-label rap artist turned preacher, Minister Mase [Mason Betha]. Lastly, and perhaps especially, I wondered what Du Bois would make of our black academic preachers, Michael Eric Dyson and Cornel West, not to mention the numbers of Womanist and black theologians throughout the Academy? In all their variations, for Du Bois, these preachers are “orator(s)...intriguer(s)...and idealist(s)” all at once, still struggling to offer a prophetic word on the problem of race and religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.