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“The Least of These”:
Black Club Women and the Social Gospel

By

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Introduction

Defined by a focus on social reform and Christian ethics, the social gospel emerged immediately after the Civil War when Christian leaders and organizations promulgated a religious ethic concerned with groups bearing low social standings, especially the working class. White male pastors led and influenced the direction of the movement, preaching against the horrible working conditions laborers in the iron and steel industries endured in the newly formed industrial America. In the late nineteenth century, the social gospel was reflected in homilies delivered by male members of the prominent Beecher family, including Henry Ward Beecher and Edward Beecher; as well as Horace Buschnell, Washington Gladden, and Samuel Harris. Other white men sustained the gospel well into the twentieth century, with Walter Rauschenbusch leading the charge.¹ Identified as an exclusively Protestant endeavor, the social gospel pointed to the life and humanity of Jesus Christ as an exemplar of social justice, and social gospellers argued that attention to “the least of these” was a necessary component of Christianity. In *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, Rauschenbusch used the phrase, derived from Matthew 25:40, to describe society’s marginalized populations.² Covering a wide-range of Christian doctrines, Rauschenbusch argued for a theology that restored the imprisoned to an acceptable social status and elevated the working class to an equal social standing. The Lord’s Prayer found in Matthew 6:10 was also foundational to the gospel with early religious leaders emphasizing God’s kingdom as an earthly pursuit, rather than the heavenly one achieved through spiritual salvation. Rauschenbusch and other white male Christian public figures, such as Josiah Strong, interpreted Jesus’s petition to God for the execution of divine will “on earth, as it is in

¹ Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism 1865-1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940), 19-20; Paul A. Carter, *The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1956), 10-11.

² Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1917), 215.

heaven” as a charge to overturn the status quo, but they focused overwhelmingly on issues exclusive to white working class men, such as those associated with the labor movement.³

Since Rauschenbusch’s publication the term, social gospel, has been used to define the theology and the practice of this largely Protestant late nineteenth-century reform movement. In consequence, scholars have advanced different and sometimes conflicting theological, pietistic, political, and historical explanations of the social gospel and of the reform activities that shaped and inspired the term. Concurrent with the rise of the movement was the founding of the National Association of Colored Women, an organization of black club women committed to improving black communities. Formed in 1896, the NACW sought to counter negative portrayals of blacks in the public sphere. Several local black women clubs committed to a similar goal emerged from this organization. Central to the NACW’s leadership were several black women including Josephine Ruffin, Mary Church Terrell, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Ida B. Wells Barnett. Collectively, these and other black club women provided free or subsidized education to “the least of these,” and developed programs that trained African Americans in skills marketable for employment. Mostly from middle class backgrounds, black club women stressed racial uplifting both to neutralize the public perception of African Americans as socially inept and to improve their socio-economic status. Religious and class politics were two tenets of the NACW’s activism. This study provides a more nuanced and comprehensive depiction of American religious reform in the nineteenth century by focusing on black club women’s activism as an expansion of the social gospel. I argue that black club women functioned similarly to ordained clergy and Christian missionaries: as social reformers with pious convictions and, when fully examined, black club women’s activism shifts the definition of the social gospel from an

³ Carter, 14-5.

exclusive focus on labor issues to a type of religious reform that also centralized sexual violence against black women, racial discrimination, and emphasized the tactics black club women promoted to for improving race relations. Thus, the broadest historiographic contribution of this essay is to use an original exploration of black club women to force a rethinking of the historiographical definition of the social gospel, the specific roles of black club women in a new understanding of the social gospel, and the social politics that animated black club women's activism.

Approach and Methodology

Composed of three sections, this study first demonstrates how existing literature on the social gospel movement lacks a critical analysis of black club women's religious activism. Black club women's documentation of their piety and faith, in addition to their confutations of racist and sexist ideas from white Christian leaders, positions them as American religious reformers. Not all together omitted from the historiography, however, black women narratives are often subsumed under an analysis exclusive to racial or gender issues in the movement. Seldom are the two elements merged, necessary for an examination specific to black women navigating nineteenth-century United States in their multi-layered identity. An example of the gap is reflected in two essays in *Gender and the Social Gospel* and Ralph Luker's *Social Gospel in Black & White*. Both works produced a substantial account of black women's role in American religious reform, which I examine for their contribution to studying black women in the context of the social gospel. However, both historical accounts also neglected to consider the complexity of black women's religious experiences informed simultaneously by race, gender, and class. To accurately portray black club women's distinct contribution to American religious reform, historians must work with a wide-range of sources to illustrate their importance. Thus, the first

section of this study also identifies those sources, which include secondary literature on black club women's work in poor black communities, biographical sketches, primary sources, and interdisciplinary historical accounts that explore black club women's social politics in the nineteenth century.

The second section of this study provides an introduction to the four black women identified at the outset of this paper. I point to their middle class status as an important variable in black club women's capacity to organize a national collective committed to improving black communities. Understanding black club women's distinctly affluent upbringings with relation to their poor-counterparts provides context for measuring their reliance on class to advance a theology in alignment with the initial aims of the social gospel. What follows in this section is the employment of primary sources to construct a counter-narrative to the traditional social gospel. Speeches, autobiographies, magazine editorials, and other original works from black club women display their piety and the people they engaged to contend against racism and sexism in the nineteenth century. More importantly, however, these sources illuminate how black club women's religious admonitions and use of Christian language in their private and public reflections facilitate a more expansive view of nineteenth century American religious reform that centralizes black women's issues. Black club women embodied a new meaning of "Christian" that informed their pursuit of racial uplifting and gender equality. With their religious activism came a developing view of God and Christianity that challenged the theology espoused by mostly white religious figures.

The third and final section of this study analyzes class privilege and the social politics of black club women. Historians using a black feminist critique emphasize class status as a leading variable in the pursuit of racial solidarity and uplifting, which helps to underscore the

relationship between black club women's social politics and what amounted to their just and benevolent piety.⁴ Along those lines, I argue for a redefinition of social gospel that considers black club women's unique blending of piety and charity to improve black communities, thus placing a new definition of the social gospel in the context of black club women's faith and politics. This new concept of the social gospel requires an examination of privilege as one factor that dictated black club women's Christianity. Many women in the black club movement appreciated a distinct lifestyle atypical of black women in the nineteenth century. They were formally educated, married, and held relatively prominent careers. Drawing first on this reality in the second section of this study, the third section engages a critical review of black club women's privilege and their related class politics under their consignment to an inferior social status by whites. Faith translated into a renewal of fortune, and command for respect in the public space, only thought by black club women to be achieved through strict adherence to certain social standards. Racial uplift insisted on acquiescence to a social code black club women considered valuable in pushing through social structures that barred black economic prosperity and precluded an honorable reputation among the white population. A charge to better the race meant the responsibility to make learners out of the illiterate, and depended on respectability politics to function.

As one strategy used by blacks in the nineteenth century to negate claims of incivility and degeneration leveled against them by whites, respectability politics is appropriate for explaining black club women's religious activism. But the term has been altered as historians locate its

⁴ Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womahood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880—1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); E. Frances White, *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); and Martha Jones, *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

relevance for understanding black resistance and assimilation in American society. In one example, Patrick Rael argues that, because of its diverse use and appeal in the nineteenth-century, a “narrow and static” definition of respectability “would miss its primary function, which was to serve as a discursive arena for debating the desired qualities of ideal men and women.”⁵ On these grounds, Rael suggests that “respectability tended to connote a set of values closely linked with the qualities required for material and moral success in an expanding market economy. Success in achieving these qualities was premised on the absolute centrality of individual character.” In other words, respectability politics demanded that each individual bore the responsibility for his or her own auspiciousness, ideally possessing the utmost civility in the public sphere. Racism, sexism, or classism aside, blacks in the nineteenth century were obligated to present themselves as capable and deserving if given the opportunity.⁶ Here, I turn to respectability politics as defined and adopted by historians of black women’s experiences, suggesting that it buttresses the demand for a new definition of the social gospel. Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham first defined and placed the term in the context of black women’s experiences, describing it as a value system “that equated public behavior with individual self-respect and with the advancement of African Americans as a group.”⁷ Her definition reveals how black club women formulated a type of class politics that coalesced resistance with racial uplifting, thereby producing a carefully crafted social gospel aimed at the forgoing identified evils (sexual violence, lynching, anti-suffrage) associated with the widely accepted defamation of blacks in the public sphere. When reconstructed using the religious activism and respectability politics of black club women, nineteenth century American religious reform and a redefinition of the social

⁵ Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 130.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁷ Brooks Higgenbotham, 14-15.

gospel stand in contrast to American social regeneration strictly favored by white Christians. Moreover, black women remain obscure as active agents of American religious reform. In this regard, “the least of these” refer to both black club women as objects of a social gospel dismissive of their humanity and the beneficiaries of their pursuits in expanding the boundaries of the social gospel.

Constructing a Social Gospel History with Black Club Women in Mind

Until the publication of Charles Howard Hopkins’s *The Rise of the Social Gospel Movement in American Protestantism*, historians had not produced a substantial overview of the movement. Hopkins traced the social gospel’s development from its inchoate stages immediately after the Civil War to the publication of Walter Rauschenbusch’s *A Theology for the Social Gospel* in 1917.⁸ The chief argument guiding Hopkins’s investigation is that the social gospel emerged from Protestants concerned with the plight of the working class during the labor movement. Unrecognized for several decades after its inception, the social gospel movement did not gain public notice until 1900, argues Hopkins, with Rauschenbusch helping to forge its official status. But the campaign waned twenty years into the twentieth century only to later reanimate, a central argument of Paul Carter’s *The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel: Social and Political Liberalism in American Protestant Churches, 1920-1940*. In the second major historical examination of the movement, Carter suggested that secularism and an active pursuit of prohibition in the 1920s derailed the Protestant emphasis on the socially marginalized, but that this focus regained traction in the thirties as WWII approached.⁹ Although

⁸ Hopkins, 78.

⁹ Carter, 18.

groundbreaking, these two studies largely overlooked gender, and orchestrators of the movement are overwhelmingly white men in their analysis.¹⁰

Corrective measures to the historiography emerged with Janet Forsythe Fishburn's *The Fatherhood of God and the Victorian Family: The Social Gospel in America*, Ralph Luker's *The Social Gospel in Black and White*, and the collection of essays, *Gender and the Social Gospel*, edited by Wendy Deichmann Edwards and Carolyn De Swarte Gifford. In the former, Fishburn offered a "broad" definition of "Victorian" as "a world-view—an interpretation of history, nature, the self, and society—that began to coalesce during the mid-Victorian years and gradually permeated middle-class culture during the late Victorian years between 1870 and 1900." She critiqued Rauschenbusch and other white male theologians, Strong included, for their dependency on traditional gender roles to institute their concept of the social gospel.¹¹ Accordingly, "the social gospel was a theology written by men and for men," bound up in Victorian ideals that identified "Christian gentlemen" as divinely preordained bearers of a morality aimed at social good.¹² During the United States' transition from an agrarian society—in which men worked alongside their wives in the home—to an industrialist society that provided opportunities for labor outside of a domestic setting, the Victorianism embodied by white men facilitated American religious reform by rejecting unconventional notions of gender in

¹⁰ In a second edition to his work, Carter recognized the Civil Rights Movement and the influence of Martin Luther King as critical factors in the ongoing development of the social gospel movement. However, he only provided scant mention of racial reform and gender. See Paul A Carter, *The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel 2nd Edition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971). Immediately after Hopkins work, Adam Abell published *The Urban Impact on American Protestantism: 1865-1900*, in which he enumerated and assessed the many organizations that emanated from the social gospel movement, such as the Young Men Christian Association and the Salvation Army. See Adam Abell, *The Urban Impact on American Protestantism: 1865-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1943).

¹¹ Janet Forsythe Fishburn, *The Fatherhood of God and the Victorian Family: The Social Gospel in America* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 18. William D. Lindsey disputes her claims and offers an alternative interpretation of Rauschenbusch as well as Shailer Mathews. He also points to other works that observe the dismissal of women's issues from the social gospel movement, but their assessments appear scant in comparison to Fishburn. See William D. Lindsey, "Social Gospel and Feminism," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 13 (1992): 195-210.

¹² Forsythe Fishburn, 32-6.

Christianity. Husbands ensured the role of their wives as solely homemakers by propping up family and marriage as institutions central to the promise of American prosperity and piety. White male social gospellers, namely Francis Greenwood Peabody, William Newton Clarke and Rauschenbusch, feared that the Industrial Revolution carried the prospects of increased employment for women, thus threatening female independence from the traditional family unit and mainline Protestantism.¹³ Exposing the narrow units of this social gospel, Forsythe Fishburn argues that Rauschenbusch “wanted an economic revolution without a change in the family unit. Against socialist and feminist demands on behalf of freedom for women Rauschenbusch never changed his basic conviction that a woman belonged at home.”¹⁴ Forsythe Fishburn depicts the social gospel movement as a campaign that fostered Victorianism and refuted more radical and progression notions of gender.

She also unmasked the racist thinking behind white men’s definition of the social gospel. Focusing on Lyman Abbott and Washington Gladden, she notes that “both... had doubts about the equality of the “negro” with white men, but both were willing to give the “negro” the opportunity to rise out of the state of animalism.” At best, their commitment to racial equality was limited, advocating for partial civil rights for black men. Most pressing, rather, for these men was the threat of miscegenation on white heterosexual families. Granting full citizenship to black men threatened white women’s loyalty to white men alone. The logic of a social gospel situated in Victorianism followed and informed their approach to racial equality, and underscored the white supremacist quality of their religious activism. For as long as black men stayed to themselves (i.e., away from white women) and proved their humanity through formal

¹³ Ibid, 18-23.

¹⁴ Ibid, 122.

education, they deserved full equality.¹⁵ Little else is mentioned regarding the role of African Americans in Forsythe Fishburn's account of the social gospel. Such paucity of information regarding black religious activism, however, does not altogether diminish the importance of *The Fatherhood of God*. Historians of the social gospel are indebted to Fishburn because her monograph unveiled the patriarchal and racist nature of the social gospel as it developed under white Christian men concerned with the working class. Obsessed with a sense of morality, masculinity, and whiteness these religious figures created a theology that reinforced images of blacks as uncivilized and women as unprotected, both parties in need of morally grounded paternalism. Missing from Fishburn's examination, however, is an explanation of how blacks and women responded to and reinvented the social gospel. For such accounts, we should turn to a study of the social gospel as American racial reform by Luker; and the more recent collection of essays edited by Deichmann Edwards and De Swarte Giffords.

In *The Social Gospel in Black & White*, Luker traced the origins of the movement to Harlan Paul Douglass, a pastor-turned-advocate for racial justice who "was among the first to use the term" in the late nineteenth century. Luker suggests that Douglass's desire for the social gospel to serve as a vehicle for racial equality has eluded historians in their investigations. Seeking to revise the historical narrative and reclaim Douglass's original intent for the social gospel, Luker focused on historical figures that challenged American Christianity and reformed race relations using a religious trajectory, among them black club women.¹⁶ For instance, he points to Wells's efforts in arousing public sympathy for black victims of lynching, her and Church Terrell's role in the founding of the National Association for Colored People, and the

¹⁵ Ibid, 73-5.

¹⁶ Ralph E. Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black & White: American Racial Reform, 1885-1912* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 2-3.

NACW's assailment of Francis Willard, a white woman self-professed Christian activist, and the Women's Christian Temperance Union for their lack of support in anti-lynching efforts.¹⁷ On the whole, Luker provides the most inclusive account of black club women's participation in social gospel historiography to date, which is unfortunate due to its scarcity in addressing gender and class issues. *The Social Gospel in Black & White* treats black club women's gender and class politics as peripheral components, granting the most attention to their race despite evidence that they worked against and alongside individuals who often questioned their competency and urged their subordination based on their gender identification as well. For Luker, black club women's religious activism and role in the social gospel hinged overwhelmingly on their racial make-up, resulting in a fragmented depiction of their complex social politics as Christians.

As editors of *Gender and the Social Gospel*, Deichmann Edwards and De Swarte Gifford outlined their goals as an attempt "to reverse the longstanding trend of omitting women and gender from mainstream social gospel historiography."¹⁸ Thus, several essays on significant women leaders and organizations, such as Willard and the WCTU, depict a more gender inclusive and complicated frontline in the Protestant fight for American social regeneration. Some of the issues examined in Fishburn's study are present as well. In her essay, "The Woman's Cause is Man's?": Francis Willard and the Social Gospel," De Swarte Giffords investigated historical revisions that argued for an acknowledgement of Willard's leadership in the Women Christian Temperance Union as an embodiment of Rauschenbusch's theology. A more appropriate assessment, argued De Swarte Giffords, inverts the lens and instead measures the social gospel to determine if it withstands Willard's ideal and vision for gender equality. She

¹⁷ See in order of reference: Ibid, 91-112; 262; 137.

¹⁸ Wendy J. Deichmann Edwards and Carolyn De Swarte Giffords, eds., *Gender and the Social Gospel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 2.

concludes that the movement ultimately falls short in this regard, but she applauds Willard for her incessant efforts to rail against the traditional gender values promoted by her white male counter-parts.¹⁹ Many of the essays read similarly, but some challenge a reading of the social gospel devised by white male theologians as an enterprise exclusively interested in preserving male dominance. These works portray the movement as a campaign indisputably dominated by men, but fluid and evolving on issues of gender equality. According to Deichmann Edwards, Josiah Strong raised suffrage as a public concern, marching with his wife, Alice, and carrying a banner in support of women's right at the annual New York Parade of 1912. Strong's support for women was not unadulterated, but "developing," argues Deichmann Edwards. Strong even endured scorn from those who "faulted him for not being overtly prophetic on some of the more controversial women's issues, especially the one that many see as the most symbolically important—women's ordination."²⁰

Combined, these essays present a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the social gospel using an intentional framework that displays women's contributions to the movement. However, with the exception of Ingrid Overacker's essay "True to Our God: African American Women as Christian Activists in Rochester, New York," and Michael Dwayne Blackwell's "In the Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Social Gospel of Faye Wattleton and Marian Wright Edleman," the account mostly covers white women's contentions and contributions in American

¹⁹ De Swarte Giffords, "The Woman's Cause is Man's?": Francis Willard and the Social Gospel," in *Gender and the Social Gospel*, 22-3; 33.

²⁰ See Deichmann Edwards, "Women and Social Betterment in the Social Gospel Work of Josiah Strong," in *Gender and the Social Gospel*, 35-6; 41. Other essays in the work include Canadian women contributors to the social gospel movement, such as Beatrice Brigden and Nellie McClung, local chapters of the Women's Christian Temperance Union such as Dale Soden's essay "The Women's Christian Temperance Union in the Pacific Northwest: A Different Side of the Social Gospel," and the pioneering efforts of Mary Richmond as a social worker. See Eleanor J. Stebner, "More Than Maternal Feminists and Good Samaritan." In *Gender and the Social Gospel*, 53-70; Dale E. Soden, "The Women's Christian Temperance Union in the Pacific Northwest: A Different Side of the Social Gospel." In *Gender and the Social Gospel*, 103-115; Elizabeth N. Agnew, "Shaping a Civic Profession: Mary Richmond, the Social Gospel, and Social Work." In *Gender and the Social Gospel*, 116-138.

religious reform. Overacker locates the experiences of black women Christian activists in New York as an extension of the African American church's social gospel.²¹ By contrast, Blackwell expands an analysis of black women's contribution to the social gospel outside of African American sacred institutions by focusing on the lives of Faye Wattleton and Marian Wright Edelman.²² But investigations into black women's religious experiences compel an introduction to structural frameworks that provides nuance to understanding black women's politics in the public space, of which these analyses are devoid. Overacker's account is compensatory with little social critique to guide its development and Blackwell ignores a black feminist framework to examine the activism of Wattleton and Wright Edelman. In sum, while the foundations of *Gender and the Social Gospel* are ripe for discourse related to black women's issues, the focus on white women organizing and absence of a black feminist critique provides a limited portrayal of black women religious politics despite their efforts as factors in pushing the conceptual framework and boundaries of the social gospel to new frontiers.

I seek a more complex reconstruction than afforded by *Gender and the Social Gospel*, and greater nuance than accessible in *The Social Gospel in Black & White*, contributing to the historiography by applying a black feminist framework to assess black club women's activity and their contribution to American religious reform. In using this theoretical lens, I examine the factors that led to a theology favorable to the poor, and the major religious leaders advocating for such sacred principles. As previously noted, historians initially cited the labor movement and the ideas of white clergymen such as Rauschenbusch and Strong to satisfy these inquiries, a focus Luker appropriately attributes to an imperceptive reliance on historian "Arthur Schlesinger's

²¹ See Ingrid Overacker, "African American Women as Christian Activists in Rochester, New York," in *Gender and the Social Gospel*.

²² Michael Dwayne Blackwell, "In the Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Social Gospel of Faye Wattleton and Marian Wright Edelman," in *Gender and the Social Gospel*.

treatment of the social gospel as the response of reform-minded churchmen to the urban-industrial crises of the late nineteenth century.”²³ Forsythe Fishburn, Luker, De Swarte Giffords and Deichmann Edwards exposed the biases and assumptions of these earlier approaches, but with only scant attention to the intricacy inherent to black women experiences. Still, the most valuable contribution to the historiography stemming from these works was the capacity to foster a new definition of “social gospel,” for which scholars can be grateful. When viewed as the main factor to the social gospel’s rise, the labor movement diminishes the influence of individuals with a similar religious ethic, but discriminated against in nineteenth and twentieth century labor markets. These works outlined new boundaries for social gospel interpretation, in which issues of gender and race were identified as factors in the movement. Specifically, Overacker, Blackwell, and Luker implanted black women’s benevolent activities into the narrative; however by omitting class politics, a central element of black club women’s religious activism, these historians left important questions unanswered and historical territory uncharted. Thus, an expansion of the definition is yet again necessary, best achieved by focusing on the socio-political dynamics of black club women’s activity and their ideological framework in engaging in racial uplifting.

One point of entry into this discussion involves the four elements identified by historian Barbara Welter as foundational to the idea of “true womanhood” in her now classic essay, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1966.” According to Welter “the attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.”²⁴ Persuaded by the efficacy of these social rites and restricted by their race and

²³ Luker, 2.

²⁴ Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860” *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 152.

gender, the NACW launched their campaign with a different type of true womanhood tailored to black women's issues. Therefore, Welter's formulation is appropriate to initiate an investigation into black club women's social politics. But it is also extremely limited due to Welter's lack of discussion around black women's experiences. Alternatively, the works of historians Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham, E. Francis White and Martha Jones enable a more exhaustive analysis of black club women's class politics, which involved dependence on respectability politics in aiding (by their definition) the less fortunate. To revisit Brooks Higgenbotham's definition stated at the outset of this study, respectability politics contextualized in black women's experiences promoted a system of self-affirming behavior required to obtain honor and ensure black women's safety among whites in the public sphere.²⁵ White applied Higgenbotham's analysis to black club women and black feminist discourse in her work *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability*. In *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830-1900*, Jones demonstrated how black women in the nineteenth century threatened traditional gender roles as they occupied new territory to fashion a new public identity.²⁶ Collectively, these historians of black women's experiences and black feminism offer the most adequate discourse necessary to redefine the social gospel from the perspective of black club women's religious activism.

For black club women, the social gospel meant crafting a theology consistent with their charitable pursuits, but tethered to racial uplift and gender equality as a means of contesting their negative portrayal in the public sphere. Incorporating the works of black feminist historians enable a more well-rounded historical examination of the social gospel, and advances our

²⁵ Brooks Higgenbotham, 14-15.

²⁶ See White, 35-7; and Jones, 44-56. Jones also has a brief biographical sketch of Frances Harper useful in the development of the second section. See Jones, 1-3.

knowledge of the movement as a campaign dismissive of black women's humanity in its origin. Black women emerge as American religious reformers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, working as *challengers to, reformers in and proponents of* the social gospel movement. Moreover, however, black women's issues takes precedent over those valued in a more traditional social gospel crusade and newer questions help to augment a definition of "social gospel." We understand how the movement displayed black club women's view of God, salvation, creation, and pious charity; the opposition they experienced in pushing these views; and black club women as largely a middle class collective that favored respectability politics but despised racial and gender inequality to embody and promote a new form of American social regeneration.

As "The Least of These": Black Club Women's Religious Activism and the Social Gospel

"I wish to refute that statement," wrote Maude T. Jenkins in a letter to the editor of the *Women's Review of Books* regarding biographer Linda O. McMurry's claim that Ida B. Wells's anti-lynching crusade primarily led to a meeting that officially resulted in the launching of the National Association of Colored Women. On the contrary, Jenkins argued, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin established the Women's Era Club, a black women's organization modeled after the mostly white New England Women's Club, in which she held membership. Although technically open to all women, Ruffin felt that the New England Women's Club neglected to address issues specific to black women. Her more intentional organization would explore solutions to the race problem, including "a poll to ascertain the need for a national body of black clubwomen."²⁷

Jenkins's letter forces historians to reexamine the origins of the NACW, and trace the early

²⁷ Maude T. Jenkins, "Letter to the Editor," *The Women's Review of Books* 16, no 12 (1999): 5. For McMurray's account see Linda McMurray, *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 177; 247.

formation of some of the women instrumental in creating a national hub for black club women activities. Two distinct characteristics are noticeable in examination of these women. First, they were middle class women, which afforded resources necessary to initiate and sustain such an organizing body. Second, and as is the case with reformers, they were “public” women who exerted influence through their writings, speeches, and publications. Through biographical sketches and primary sources this section explores four key black club women, their middle class status, and the religious nature of their activism to suggest that the NACW was as much about black club women practicing and challenging the Christian faith amid the social gospel movement as it was about their occupation with racial uplift.²⁸

Although McMurry acknowledges Ruffin’s influence over the organization’s emergence, she does not explicitly identify Ruffin as the founder.²⁹ However, Ruffin’s well connected ties to

²⁸ The process for selecting the four women analyzed here was based on the following criteria, in addition to their high public profiles: all of these women served in some leadership capacity in the club movement. As one of the foremost dissenters on lynching, Wells-Barnett influenced the agenda of the club movement by holding American society at large to debunking the narrative urging the practice. Also, the works of these women were widely circulated and accessible in an era that resigned black women to an inferior status. Finally, within these works are religious expressions that directly merge social and political discourse with piety. In sum, these women represent some of the most explicit examples of a possible club challenge to the social gospel envisioned by their white counter-parts, especially in their unique identity as black and middle class women. Along those lines, this study is not an exhaustive history of the black club movement in the United States, which was comprised of many organs and agents. As the governing body for the movement, The National Association of Colored Women could not possibly represent the views of all members at all times. For instance, as is the case with any national movement, the NACW experienced infighting, internal disagreements, public conflicts, and ideological shifts throughout the club movement’s rise. A review of these critical issues will help to advance this examination in the future.

²⁹ See McMurry, 247. For primary sources on Ruffin’s role in the NACW’s launch see Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: G.K. Hall & Company, 1996), 148; Fannie Barrier Williams, “The Club Movement Among Colored Women in America,” in *The New Woman of Color: The Collected Writings of Fannie Barrier Williams 1893-1918*, ed. Mary Jo Deegan (Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002). For secondary sources see Gayle J. Hardy, *American Civil Rights Activists: Biobibliographies of 68 Leaders, 1825-1992* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1992), 331; Paula J. Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2008), 291; “The National Association of Colored Women: Mary Church Terrell and Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin” in *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal: An African American Anthology*, ed. Manning Marable and Leith Mullings (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 173; Maude T. Jenkins, “The History of the Black Woman’s Club Movement in America,” (doctoral dissertation, Columbia University Teachers College, 1984), 50-3. In the classic edited volume on black women’s history, “*We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible*”: *A Reader in Black Women’s History*, Ruffin’s primary reform efforts are identified as contributive to club activity. By contrast, Mary Church Terrell is listed as a reformer

the club movement scene in New England quite possibly prepared her to launch the NACW. The Bostonian possessed years of leadership and experience with local reform initiatives prior to 1896. A member of Boston's elite through her marriage to George Lewis Ruffin, she understood the politics inevitable to club organizing.³⁰ She was only sixteen at the time of their marriage and immediately became immersed in George's prestigious lifestyle, gaining notoriety among some of Boston's most opulent and joining organizations such as the New England Women's Press Association and the Massachusetts Moral Education Association. Perhaps it was her marital status at such an early age, or her apparent "mixed ancestry of black, French, English, and Native American" that afforded much social and economic favor.³¹ In any case, Ruffin's early profile is glaringly devoid of tenets typical of a working class black woman in the nineteenth century. Her parents were not slaves and her educational background consisted of integrated public as well as private schooling. Because of their wealth, Ruffin and George, the first African American graduate of Harvard Law School, accommodated their disdain for America's racist structures by living in Liverpool, England for several years.³²

The youngest of these women, Mary Church Terrell, was born in 1863 to former slaves in Memphis, Tennessee. She received an education from Oberlin College in 1884 with studies focused in Latin and Greek, derived from the generally male dominated classical course. She learned French, German, and Italian linguistics while on a trip with her father in Europe.³³ Former slaves-turned entrepreneurs, Church Terrell's parents raised her and brother Robert

in social work. See Darlene Clark Hine et al., eds. *"We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible": A Reader in Black Women's History* (Brooklyn, New York: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1995), 473.

³⁰ Hardy, *American Civil Rights Activists: Biobibliographies of 68 Leaders, 1825-1992*, 330-1; Rodger Streitmatter, "Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin: Pioneering African American Newspaper Publisher," in *A Living of Words: American Women in Print Culture* ed. Susan Albertine (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 51.

³¹ *Ibid*, 330.

³² *Ibid*, 333.

³³ "Mary Church Terrell" in *The Journal of Negro History* 39 (1954): 335.

comfortably in an upper class area of Tennessee, outside of Memphis.³⁴ By the completion of her college studies, however, they had long divorced. Her father subscribed to traditional gender roles for the family, and thus discouraged his daughter from pursuing paid labor post-graduation. But she defied him and initially accepted a teaching position at Wilberforce University. Historian Nellie McKay suggests that Church Terrell left Wilberforce for the M Street High School because at the former “she was forced to teach subjects of which she knew little and sometimes nothing, and to perform several ancillary duties...”³⁵ After she met and married Robert Terrell, a graduate of Harvard University, her teaching career ended. Church Terrell then turned to writing and activism, delving into public issues such as the Women’s Suffrage Movement and education reform. These interests led to participation in the Colored Women’s League, a club for black women in Washington, D.C. founded in 1892 with a similar platform to the Women’s Era Club in New England.³⁶ For the next several years until her death Church Terrell remained committed to the uplifting of black women through club activity, her election as the first president of the NACW certainly a hallmark of these efforts.

Three years after her birth in 1825, Francis E.W. Harper was orphaned and placed in the care of her uncle, William Watkins, a minister.³⁷ Unlike Church Terrell, Harper possessed no formal education, save for the training she received at his school, the William Watkins Academy for Negro Youth. Curriculum included studies in religion, mathematics, and science, but Harper mostly excelled in composition. She left the school in 1893 for a job as a domestic at the home of Mr. Armstrong, a book merchant who “opened his library to her, thereby encouraging and

³⁴ Nellie McKay, “Introduction,” in *A Colored Woman in a White World*, xix.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

³⁶ McKay notes that “in those days only unmarried women were permitted to teach.” See McKay, xxiii-xxiv.

³⁷ Jones, 1-3.

embellishing her writing.”³⁸ Passionate about literature, Harper embarked on a writing career and composed several poems at this time. She also secured work as an educator and taught at Wilberforce University (then Union Seminary) in 1850. Male teachers resisted Harper’s presence at the school, but she withstood their contention and remained in Ohio until moving to Pennsylvania. When Maryland drafted a law in 1853 that resulted in several of its freed natives being forced into slavery, Harper’s consciousness was aroused to the importance of abolitionism.³⁹ Through a combination of public speeches and published works, she challenged racial inequality and promoted black emancipation. Traditional American values—marriage, propriety, temperance—and human equality served as the foci of her writing.⁴⁰ Certainly, the most pioneering contribution was the publication of *Iola Leroy* in 1892, the first known novel written and published by a black woman. At the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, Harper delivered a speech, “Woman’s Political Future,” and employed the term “the Woman’s Era” to suggest an ideal society concerned with the poor status of black women. Naturally, then, she was instrumental in the establishment of the NACW and elected its vice president one year after its founding.⁴¹

Unlike her counterparts, Ida B. Wells had the least direct administrative role in the NACW’s early development, but her international profile and collaboration with the other founders at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago influenced the ideological formation of the organization.⁴² Three years before the Civil War’s denouement in 1865, Wells was born in

³⁸ Frances Smith Foster, “Introduction,” in *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Reader* (New York: The City Press at the City University of New York, 1990), 6-7. Melba Joyce Boyd, *Discard Legacy: Politics and Poetics in the Life of Frances E. W. Harper 1825-1911* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 38.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Ammons and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, “Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, 1825-1911” *Legacy* 2 (1985): 63.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Melba Joyce Boyd, “Canon Configuration for Ida B. Wells Barnett” in *The Black Scholar* 24 (1994): 8.

Holly Springs, Mississippi to two parents who later died from yellow fever when she was a teenager.⁴³ As the oldest child, she assumed responsibility for her younger siblings, working as a teacher in Memphis. Wells's first exercise of resistance in the public sphere occurred after her transition from Holly Springs to Memphis when she refused orders by a train conductor to relocate to the colored section of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway Line. Eventually forced from the train, she successfully sued the company before the decision was overturned by a higher court.⁴⁴ Formally educated at Shaw University as a teacher, Wells had frequently read the newspaper to her father, which most likely encouraged her curiosity in Memphis Lyceum, a casual reading group where locals—mostly educators—cultivated their passions for literature, drama, and speech-making. Wells took the meetings seriously, and often lamented the other members' poor commitment to the group.⁴⁵ In 1892, the lynching of three black men who owned and operated the People's Grocery Store, two of whom were close friends, spurred Wells aggressive investigative journalism, a feature of her life-long commitment to exposing the flaws and myths associated with the lynching narrative.⁴⁶ Her publication, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*, "was the first study of lynching and Wells's initial attempt to show how this particular form of racial violence said more about the cultural failings of the white South than of blacks."⁴⁷ Ruffin, intrigued by Wells's speech at the fair and ability to question the American public on the issue of lynching, would later invite her to address the newly established Women's Era Club.⁴⁸

⁴³ Ibid. 4-14

⁴⁴ Giddings, 60-68.

⁴⁵ McMurry, 9-14; 34.

⁴⁶ Mildred Thompson, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett: An Exploratory Study of an American Black Woman, 1893-1930* (Brooklyn, New York: Carlson Publishing Inc, 1990), 26-30.

⁴⁷ Giddings, 2.

⁴⁸ McMurry, 247.

All too often, only scant mention and little assessment of black club women's religious rhetoric and ideals are recorded in historical overviews used to reconstruct their biographies. This absence is understandable, if maddening, given that these women primarily organized outside of sacred institutions. They were not ordained clergy and, as the history shows, would have likely experienced hardships within sacred institutions had they sought a more official religious role. Still these women spoke directly of and to Christians in many of their writings, evident in primary sources that document black club women's censure of a Christianity dismissive of issues central to their humanity. Using various means to facilitate a religious critique, black club women questioned the positions of well-known Christian activists (some of whom are identified as social gossellers in the historiography), employed biblical values and Christian ideas to underpin their concerns, and ultimately amended Christianity in a way that expands the narrow boundaries of a social gospel orchestrated to their disbarment. The sources analyzed here include Ruffin's editorials as founder and editor of the *Woman's Era*; Church Terrell's autobiography and unpublished correspondences; Harper's fictional works and public addresses; and Wells's investigative reports. Black club women adopted Christian language and modified Christian ideals to declaim what Wells called the "American church," seemingly a type of racist religious structure that worked in conjunction with the legal system to persuade the most devout follower of Jesus of black inferiority. In a similar vein, black club women redefined the social gospel and suggested a contrasting religious ethic that affirmed black humanity.

Ruffin's place in the church has been reduced to her death bed by historians, most only noting that her memorial service was conducted at Trinity Episcopal Church.⁴⁹ Her legacy, however, reveals a much richer history of resistance. As founder and editor of a magazine, the

⁴⁹ See Floris Barnett Cash, "Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin," in *Black Women in America Volume III, 2nd ed.*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 87-90; Streitmatter, 49-59.

Woman's Era (1894), Ruffin often challenged interpretations of Christianity that contributed to a limited view of race and gender in the nineteenth century. The periodical was produced monthly and, in most cases, included an editorial in which Ruffin explicitly denounced readings of Scripture that endorsed the suffering of blacks. In large part, her method for doing so consisted of diatribes against major religious figures. Several months after the first issue was published, Frances Willard visited Boston and, according to Ruffin, "placed herself on the apologists for lynching," justifying the practice despite her so-called support of black women. Ruffin provided a very short but succinct admonishment to Willard in her editorial stating that "it is well to give due recognition to Miss Willard's splendid work for temperance; it is also well that she should understand that there are several million women in this country who are bitterly disappointed in her."⁵⁰ One year later, Ruffin rebuked Willard again for what she perceived as her meager attention to racial injustice, calling her "a 'temporizer' materially altered" because "we have failed to hear from her or the W. C. T. U. any honest, flatfooted denunciation of lynching and lynchers."⁵¹ The expectation for Willard, then head of the WCTU, was that she placed racial issues on equal footing with the other items on the organization's pious reform agenda. To Ruffin's disillusionment, Willard seemed content with exclusively addressing issues that threatened the liberation of white women.

Willard was not the lone target of Ruffin's criticism. So too was Sutton Griggs, a black Baptist minister who founded *The Virginia Baptist* in the 1890s, a conservative newspaper with a religious bent. Ruffin questioned Griggs when he suggested silence and docility as the most

⁵⁰ Editorial, Miss Willard In Boston, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, July 1894, Abolition, Freedom, and Rights, Women's Advocacy, Emory Women's Writers Resource Project, Robert W. Woodruff Library Emory University. http://womenwriters.library.emory.edu/content.php?level=div&id=era1_04.10.04&document=era1&keyword=god

⁵¹ Editorial, Miss Willard and the Colored People, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, July 1895, Abolition, Freedom, and Rights http://womenwriters.library.emory.edu/content.php?level=div&id=era2_04.15.02&document=era2&keyword=god

appropriate dispositions for women (except in the event of singing and praying); and “that in teaching and preaching she is acting contrary to divine authority and that the exercise of the right of suffrage would be it a deplorable climax to these transgressions.”⁵² Griggs and his peers adopted Scripture selectively, charged Ruffin, interpreting the text to accommodate their conservative and antiquated views of gender. Moreover, argued Ruffin, “it is according to law, gospel, history and common sense that woman’s place is where she is needed and where she fits in and to say that the place will affect her womanliness is bosh...”⁵³ Ruffin deplored Griggs’s conclusions as simplistic religious interpretations, and explained “that while the women of the year A. D. 32 were probably not prepared by training or opportunity to either teach or preach... it is no argument that the woman of A. D. 1900... may not be able to interpret the Scriptures; because Paul told woman what, with their limited opportunities they might do, it is an insult to his and their intelligence to conclude that they must not develop and use future opportunities.”⁵⁴ These statements from Ruffin’s editorial in the first volume of the *Woman’s Era* are some of the strongest religious declarations from black club women from which I construct a more comprehensive social gospel.

The Christian likes of Willard and Griggs did not discourage Ruffin from using her publication as an international arm for black women’s rights. In July 1894, she received a letter of gratitude from Father C.N. Field, an Anglican religious minister in Oxford intrigued by a copy of the *Woman’s Era*. Ruffin sent the edition to Field for the purpose of extending her advocacy for black women overseas. Evident by Field’s vow “to explain impartially the position of affairs

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Editorial, *Woman’s Place*, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, September 1894, *Abolition, Freedom, and Rights*, http://womenwriters.library.emory.edu/content.php?level=div&id=era1_06.14.01&document=era1&keyword=god

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

in America,” to his colleagues and “[speak] a word to obtain sympathy for those whom I have learned to love and work for in Christ's Holy Church,” Ruffin’s outreach was successful. So compelling was the *Woman’s Era* that Field wrote eagerly to Ruffin: “upon my arrival in Liverpool I began at once to fulfil my promise to you and to others that I would tell the people in England of the injustice done to the colored citizens of the United States.”⁵⁵ Aside from challenging more mainline Protestantism, Ruffin’s approach also included a rally cry to the international church community, transmitting the need for an anti-lynching campaign by mobilizing more progressive religious allies. Combined with her relentless rebuke of Willard and Griggs, and her international outreach, Ruffin provides the capacity to devise a social gospel concerned with the sum of black women’s issues addressed frequently in the *Woman’s Era*—lynching, suffrage, public defamation, and economic instability. Contrary to the social gospel articulated by white male pastors and theologians, Ruffin charged white Christians with acknowledging the distinct experiences of black women in their dehumanization.

Mary Church Terrell’s religious views developed likewise, underscored by reflections in her autobiography, *A Colored Woman in A White World*, her essays, and her private religious debates. Church Terrell expressed dismay with Christianity’s mishandling of racial injustice in the United States, but ascribed this flaw to the Church, not “God.” In a conversation with several young black Christians who experienced racial discrimination at a church related convention and “who express themselves as being very skeptical about the church’s attitude toward them,” Church Terrell distinguished between the white racist leaders of Christianity, and the nature of God as a deity who equally metes out justice. “I told the young man that ‘God is no respecter of

⁵⁵ Letter, A Strong Helper in England, C.N. Field to Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, August 1894, Abolition, Freedom, and Rights
http://womenwriters.library.emory.edu/content.php?level=div&id=era1_05.10&document=era1&keyword=god

persons,' and that the officials who had excluded colored children from the Sunday School Convention parade and who had refused to seat the colored delegates were not acting according to the principles of the Christian church or of the Christian religion."⁵⁶ Allegiance to Christianity was interpreted as a view of God and the institution at variance with racial inequality, which was also in contrast to white notions of the social gospel. This type of religious fidelity was not without growing pains for Church Terrell, and she recalled the event in her life that momentarily pitted her humanity against her faith. Also close friends with Tom Moss of the People's Grocery Store, Church Terrell could not stomach his brutal lynching. Bereaved and frustrated she wrote "for a time it came near upsetting my faith in the Christian religion. I could not see how a crime like that could be perpetrated in a Christian country, while thousands of Christians sinfully winked at it by making no protest loud enough to be heard nor exerting any earnest effort to redress this terrible wrong."⁵⁷ Behind Church Terrell's lament lies a critique of Christians in pursuit of piety without regard for racial injustice. Her judgement is no less pertinent here because it applies to white social gospellers such as Rauschenbusch and Willard who, differences notwithstanding, firmly practiced a Christianity that relied on the preclusion of blacks as equally created in the *imago dei*.

Similar sentiments are reflected in her essay, "The Justice of Woman Suffrage," when she observes that "for nearly two thousand years mankind has been leveling the various barriers which interposed themselves between creatures... in the image of God and their perfect freedom to exercise the faculties with which they are divinely endowed."⁵⁸ What Church Terrell imagined of the church and, by extension, the country, was impossible with a social gospel

⁵⁶ Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in A White World*, 416.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 106.

⁵⁸ Church Terrell, "The Justice of Woman's Suffrage," in *Unpublished Papers of Mary Church Terrell: 1863-1954* (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2004), 68.

detached from the realities of black women's experiences. Her social gospel would mandate a religious activism in overturning the racial status quo and, ultimately, an all embracing consummate deity who functions without regard for racial hierarchies. The church and the country had to take a stand, only achieved through an active pursuit of racial justice. Contrary to the basis of the social gospel formulated by whites, God was as disillusioned with racism as God was with wage disparities and lack of women's suffrage. The only avenue to affirming black women's humanity in a religious context was for the church and the country to address broader issues related to all three: class, race, and gender.

Church Terrell's reflections in her biography were consistent with an incensed correspondence she had in 1918 with a Miss Coveney. In an attempt to challenge what she perceived as Church Terrell's distorted depiction of the church as a racist institution, Coveney questioned why Church Terrell "made no exception, when [she] referred to the attitude of the Churches toward Colored people." Coveney suggested that racial integration in religious practices in the South were the norm; that blacks could be found "kneeling in the same pews with whites."⁵⁹ Apparently a devout Catholic, Coveney charged Church Terrell with issuing generalized statements about the church's mistreatment of blacks, to which the black club woman countered that "formerly the Catholic Church was very generous and broad in its treatment of Colored people, and I believe it would have continued this attitude toward them, if it had not been so strongly influenced in this particular by the Protestant Church. Now all through the South there are churches established by the Catholics especially for Colored people, because white Catholics will not worship with them any more than will the Protestants." Church Terrell further explained to Coveney that one woman she met while visiting a Catholic Church

⁵⁹ Church Terrell, "Letter from Mary Church Terrell to Miss Covey" in *Unpublished Papers of Mary Church Terrell: 1863-1954*, 108-9.

suggested that black parishioners only use the back door designated for their entry; and “should all be humble” to do so as followers of Jesus, to which she responded by describing the woman’s blatant disregard for black humanity as “unChrist-like race prejudice.”⁶⁰ For Church Terrell, an authentic Jesus intervenes on behalf of marginalized blacks. A radically different concept of the social gospel derived from Church Terrell’s apologetics connotes that all three major components of the Christian faith—the deity, prophet, and institution—embody compassion and seek justice for suffering black people.

If Ruffin mobilized and held accountable Christian communities to what might be identified as a more inclusive social gospel, and Church Terrell attached a personal account of black women’s suffering that indispensably urged such a gospel, then Harper, with an unmitigated religious upbringing and less temporal worldview, couched this new social gospel in explicit spiritual language. From notions of “righteousness” to declarations of “God’s glory,” Harper struck a more intentional note when coalescing faith and activism.⁶¹ In “Woman’s Political Future,” a speech “delivered in 1893 at the World’s Congress of Representative Women at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago” Harper casted a new outlook for women’s autonomy aimed at social equality. She envisioned increased power among women that was inevitable in light of their prominent influence in almost every major sector of society: the home, church, media, and legislative process. Harper was convinced that the near future would bear “the added responsibility of political power.” Coupled with the leverage women held in these institutions, this newfound sway, Harper argued, must function in accordance with devout piety, “preparing

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Of all four women analyzed here, Harper’s religious views are most apparent and explored in the historiography, although her religious views are detached from the social gospel. See Joyce Boyd, *Discarded Legacy*; Corrine T. Field, “Frances E.W. Harper and the Politics of Intellectual Maturity,” in *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women*, ed. Mia Bay, et al. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 110-26.

[women] to use the coming power for the glory of God and the good of mankind; for power without righteousness is one of the most dangerous forces in the world.”⁶² Harper fashions a different meaning of the social gospel by expressing concern for women’s rights as the other black women explored in this study. But she writes out of a soteriological and eschatological concern: the eternal salvation of all humanity mandates that all Christians take up a cross for an expanded social equality not merely focused on class disparities, but also racial and gender inequality. Using spiritual polarities consisting of “evil” and “good,” and “righteousness” and “sin,” Harper provides the conceptual framework for a redefinition of the social gospel. The concentration on these dichotomies was no different than the traditional focus on American social regeneration out of which conventional social gospel leaders, such as Rauschenbusch and others, practiced their Christianity. But Harper affirmed black women’s humanity.⁶³ Should women gain enfranchisement they must

create a healthy public sentiment... demand justice, simple justice, as the right of every race... brand with everlasting infamy the lawless and brutal cowardice that lynches, burns, and torches your own countrymen.” And women would also do well to regard all of these things because “into [their] hands God has pressed one of the sublimest opportunities that ever came into the hands of any race or people.”⁶⁴

By subjecting the prospect of women’s suffrage to a high spiritual standard, it appears that Harper unfairly instituted barriers favored by opponents of limited equal rights for women. Except that she also declares “I do not believe in unrestricted and universal suffrage for either

⁶² Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, “Woman’s Political Future” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 41.

⁶³ Rauschenbusch arranged *A Theology for the Social Gospel* using topics such as “The Kingdom of God,” “The Nature of Man,” “Eschatology,” etc. In so doing, he analyzed traditional Christian concepts and their relevance to the social gospel. See Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*.

⁶⁴ Harper, “Woman’s Political Future,” 42.

men or women.” Harper sought a neutral democratic process in which all participants adhere to the same spiritual rules. Phrased differently, spiritual salvation is compromised through social injustice for Harper. To that end, God is central and “the evils which threaten to undermine the strength of the nation...,” white and male biased social policies, must be confronted.

Similar language of “evil” is found in Harper’s poems and essays in which she identified racial discrimination and gender biases masked as Christianity. In her poem, “Bible Defence of Slavery,” written in 1857, Harper compared the European Christian practice of enslaving Africans as “heathenry” and characterizing a “reverend” as a truth-teller, exposing slavery as a diabolic institution:

A “reverend” man, whose light should be
The guide of age and youth,
Brings to the shrine of Slavery
The sacrifice of truth!
For the direst wrong by man imposed,
Since Sodom’s fearful cry,
The word of life has been unclos’d,
To give your God the lie.
Oh! When ye pray for heathen lands,
And plead for their dark shores,
Remember Slavery’s cruel hands
Make heathens at your doors!⁶⁵

In another poem, “The Resurrection of Jesus,” Harper criticized Christian hypocrisy that allowed white Christians to extol Jesus while enslaving black captives. Composed between 1893 and 1911, the poem entails a series of questions that accentuate Harper’s disdain for the contradiction: “and yet within our favored land, where Christian churches rise, the dark-browed sons of Africa, are hated and despised; can they who speak of Christ as King, and glory in his name, forget that Simon’s countrymen, still bear a cross of shame...; will they erect to God their fanes, and Christ with honor crown, and then with cruel weights of pain, the Africans press

⁶⁵ Harper, “Bible Defence of Slavery,” in *A Brighter Coming Day*, 60; Boyd, *Discarded Legacy*, 70-5.

down...⁶⁶ Within reach of abolition, for which Harper also fought, this set of interrogatives illustrate the historic role European Christians took in mistreating blacks, a comparison Harper draws in order to expose the root evil of Christianity practiced in North America, that is, a denial of black humanity based on white supremacy. Through her poetry, Harper outlined a social gospel that challenged white notions of benevolent piety and the racial injustices, such as slavery, that became hallmarks of conventional Christian practice in the United States.

When Harper penned her essay, “The Women’s Christian Temperance Union and the Colored Women” in 1888, she revisited the question of a Christianity unfavorable to certain groups, in this case black women. Offering mostly a favorable view of the organization, Harper also observed that “in a number of places where there are local Unions in the North the doors have been opened to colored women, but in the South separate State Unions have been formed.”⁶⁷ Racist views of black women in the South and race based social codes prohibited white women in the temperance movement from forging a relationship across racial boundaries. To resolve the issue Harper suggested unity under a more just and accurate Christian umbrella. This collaboration required white women to set aside their opulence and privilege, “to do Christly work, and to help build up the kingdom of Christ amid the sin and misery of the world, under the spiritual leadership of the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁶⁸ Anchored by an unabashed commitment to racial equality and persistent love for God, Harper’s writings and assessments offer a social gospel invested in securing black women’s place in American religious reform, a

⁶⁶ Harper, “Bible Defence of Slavery,” in *A Brighter Coming Day*, 330-1.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 283. Barbara Blair, “Through Justice Sleeps,” in *To Make Our World Anew: Volume II: A History of African Americans Since 1880*, ed. Robin D. G. Kelley and Carl Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 64. In addition to inter-racial conflict between black club women and the leadership of the WCTU, Blair also focuses on intra-racial clashing in the club movement as a product of inter-racial conflict, noting that “Harper’s relatively positive experience in regional chapters of the WCTU contrasted with that of Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin and Ida B. Wells, both of whom found the white leadership of the WCTU intolerably racist.” See Blair, 64.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 283.

process that challenged white Christians for their misguided piety. With colorful references to biblical characters, Harper adopted the Christian narrative again to critique the social status quo. “You white women speak here of rights,” she writes in her speech, “We Are All Bound Up Together,” delivered to the 1866 gathering of the National Women’s Rights Convention. “I speak of wrongs. I, as a colored woman, have had in this country an education which has made me feel as if I were in the situation of Ishmael, my hand against every man, and every man’s hand against me.”⁶⁹

Although well-known for her audacious pursuit of racial injustice in the face of ongoing threats with factually based investigative journalism, Ida B. Wells’s ability to also evaluate American Christianity in her reports is note-worthy. In her most popular publication on lynching, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*, Wells employed Christian language to describe the injustices blacks faced: “somebody must show that the Afro-American race is more sinned against than sinning.”⁷⁰ As a public speaker, Wells was extremely adroit at engrossing her audience through fact-checking. Rhetorician Shirley Wilson Logan examines this element of Wells’s elocution. In “Lynch Law in All Its Phases,” a speech bearing the same name of the forgoing work, Wilson Logan observes that Wells “seemed to transgress gender boundaries” by using objectivity to convince white men that lynching was a national issue, a process that required “blunt language, deductive structure, and authoritative impersonal tone.”⁷¹ According to Wilson Logan’s assessment, Wells eschewed the standard approach to public speaking that involved “frequently employing figurative analogies and an appeal to the Bible’s authority....

⁶⁹ Harper, “We Are All Bound Up” in *Lift Every Voice: African American Oratory, 1787-1900*, ed. Robert James Branham and Phillip S. Foner (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 459.

⁷⁰ Ida B. Wells, “Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases,” in *The Selected Works of Ida B. Wells-Barnett*, ed. Trudier Harris (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 14. In her extensive biography of Wells, Paula Giddings explores Wells’s religious views. See Giddings, *Ida: A Sword Among Us*.

⁷¹ Shirley Wilson Logan, “Ida B. Wells, “Lynch Law in All Its Phases” (13 February 1883),” *Voices of Democracy* 2 (2007): 57.

during the nineteenth century.”⁷² Her use of “sin” as a descriptor for the marginalization of blacks functions as an extension of her faith and a strategy in navigating the audience. By framing actions against blacks as a social ill and spiritual transgression, Wells elevated the commitment to anti-lynching to a spiritual rite and called into question the nature of American Christianity.

Wells approached other issues of American racial injustice in this manner, evident by her publication, *The Reason Why The Colored Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition*, in which she attacked racial discrimination in the penal system. Under the “American Church,” she argued that black lives held no value “in the sight of God...”⁷³ Read alongside *Southern Horrors*, it is no surprise that Wells coupled a critique of the legal system with the church in *The Reason Why*. Her evaluation of the legal and sacred make-up of the United States underlines a central motif in Wells’s reports: where the court is unjust, so too is the church. *The Reason Why* is comprised of lengthy evaluations comparing the two institutions equal effect in

blunting all human sensibilities and perverting the plainest teaching of the religion we have here professed, a system which John Wesley truly characterized as the sum of all villainies... That system was American slavery... In the language of the law: A slave was one in the power of his master to whom he belonged. He could acquire nothing, have nothing, own nothing that did not belong to his master.⁷⁴

Religious and sacred sectors of society functioned interdependently, intersecting in spaces that affirmed white domination over blacks. The mass incarceration of blacks caused Wells to express suspicions of white leadership at the forefront of religious organizations, stating that “the

⁷² Wells, 57.

⁷³ Ibid, 51.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 52-3.

religious, moral, and philanthropic forces of the country—all the agencies which tend to uplift and reclaim the degraded and ignorant, are in the hands of the Anglo-Saxon.” The WCTU and the Young Men Christian’s Association, in addition to other Christian institutions, had intentionally ignored, and in some instances encouraged, unfair convictions of blacks.⁷⁵

Slavery was just the beginning of America’s flawed religious structure, which became pervasive in the penal system during Reconstruction. A more appropriate Christian practice, argued Wells, embraces blacks as humans and calls for equality across racial lines, the foundation from which an alternative social gospel is devised. Denying blacks an equal social standing participates in the fundamental theory upon which slavery, and subsequently black incarceration, was instituted and justified. Along those lines, black issues were deferred under an American religious ethos that worshipped a God desensitized to black people, and a society that left them no other choice but to engage in illegitimate activity for self-validation. The justice system sanctioned black inferiority, creating their status as “the least of these;” and white Christians treated them accordingly.⁷⁶ Wells then concluded that black exclusion from the World’s Columbian Exposition simply represented the expansion of this long standing American tradition.⁷⁷

Not surprisingly, Wells conflicted with Willard and the WCTU alongside other black club women, particularly regarding the lynching narrative, which held that black men were justifiably lynched because they raped white women. To discredit this argument and provide a more accurate account, Wells systematically debunked almost every charge written in white newspapers. Then, she pointed to the historic sexual exploitation of black women by white men,

⁷⁵ Ibid, 68.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 69.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 54.

occurring first under the horrors of slavery mostly in domestic settings where black women found (under)paid labor during Reconstruction. The importance of her distinction lies in its ability to expose lynching as a justification for the ongoing and very “private” sexual assault of black women and “public” criminalization of black men. Equally as important, Wells forced Willard and other prominent white women of the WCTU, namely Rebecca Felton, to confront the lynching narrative for the prevarication that it was. Historian Crystal Feimster observes that “Wells accused Willard of not only failing to speak out against lynching, but also of condoning segregation by allowing for segregated unions in the South.”⁷⁸ Likewise Felton, when confronted by Wells, “disagreed about the fundamental details” of lynching. Essentially, she bought into the narrative, and depicted rape as the result of white men’s inability to shield white women from ravished black men. Sexual assault on women was an important issue, but only when the alleged victim was white and the culprit black.⁷⁹ By pointing to “the rape of slave women and the absence of punishment for white perpetrators,” Wells held culpable these white self-professed Christian women for their short-sighted piety. She also illuminated what is perhaps the most obvious flaw of a social gospel concerned with class suffering or women’s suffrage in isolation of issues important to black women. Working as domestics under the threat of sexual assault by white patriarchs in the quarters of their homes, black women could stake no claim to the social gospel promulgated by white Christian leaders. Perpetually refused legal justice, they were now hidden from the God on whom even the most religiously active Americans depended to change the system. In a Christianity that insisted on addressing black women’s humanity in sundered form, black club women contended against the church and

⁷⁸ Crystal Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 108-9.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 37.

society. They promulgated and embraced what I identify as a holistic social gospel that fully invites black women into sacred communities and forces the public's acknowledgement of their humanity.

A redefined social gospel requires advocacy for the “the least of these” that consists of denouncing sexual violence against black women, lynching, anti-suffrage, and religious views of gender that favored male dominance. Black club women elevated their status *as* “the least of these” during the social gospel movement by pushing the theological boundaries of their counterparts towards a more inclusive worldview. They situated their experiences in the biblical text, called into question traditional theologies, dismantled flawed interpretations, and forced a conversation about black women in the public sphere.⁸⁰ But their religious advocacy was more than an attempt to assert self, subdue opposing Christians, and improve their own social standings. Indeed, black club women's religious reform bears a social gospel that is as much a concept directed *to* the least of these as it was developed under black club women's so-called subordinate status *as* the least of these. Turning to racial uplifting, black club women heeded their own religious admonishments, out of which emerged a fidelity to true womanhood and respectability that guided their religious activism. In the next section, I explore black club women's class politics as they piously ramped up their charity in poor black communities and, privileged, espoused a redefined social gospel to the least of these through social reform.

⁸⁰ Womanist theologian Delores Williams likewise identifies Ida B. Wells and other black club women, namely Harper, as activists who reflect a merger of political and spiritual issues. She notes that Wells' method involved taking to task “corrupt black ministers,” and Harper's use of the biblical character Hagar in her novel *Iola Leroy* is an example of how black women managed their lives using their faith. in a hostile environment See: Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993; 2013), 103; 140-3.

To “The Least of These”: Racial Uplift and Respectability Politics in Black Women’s Social Gospel

Black club women’s unique position as American religious reformers complicated the initial definition of the social gospel as a movement devoted exclusively to the working class. In their roles “as the least of these” the women who eventually participated in the formation of the NACW challenged negligent Christian leaders regarding injustices in black communities. Combined with their collective leadership, black club women retained class equality as a core focus of the social gospel, but towards an amalgamated new social structure that urged gender equality, racial integration, and black assimilation. In part, this new social structure pushed the issue of racial and gender equality as a goal primarily achieved by white Christians’ willingness to endorse black club women’s progressive religious politics. On the other hand, poor black communities bore responsibility to radically alter their circumstances and match black club women’s advocacy with a commitment to self-improvement. Black club women’s religious activism leads to a social gospel not merely aimed at class equality, such as in the case of white social gossellers, but also class improvement.

This section displays how black club women’s reliance on respectability politics and racial uplifting are absolutes in a discussion around American religious reform in the context of the social gospel because it clarifies black club women’s appreciation of their privilege lifestyle as a foundation of their belief in class improvement, and the embodiment of their religious ethic. That these women saw it necessary to liberally flaunt their class privilege in hopes of achieving full inclusion and approval for African Americans in the public sphere is indicative of the social gospel’s flawed original form. When white social gospel leaders targeted the “working class” as the sole benefactors of a pious charity, they excluded three camps from their definition of the

social gospel. These groups included poor African Americans discriminated against in the labor markets; black citizens who held no protection under a racist and sexist legal structure, such as black domestics laboring in hostile work environments; and affluent black women bearing the responsibility of garnering public approval for African Americans that, if not obtained, yielded a less than human status and compromised black women's safety in the public sphere. A new definition of the social gospel illuminates how black club women achieved two goals as nineteenth century American religious reformers. They ensured the stability of black communities through racial uplift, and affirmed the humanity of black communities through respectability.

The type of services offered during the club movement indicates the value black club women placed on respectability and racial uplifting. Two hundred local black women clubs from across the nation gathered to launch the NACW in 1896, Ruffin noting that "this union resulted in one of the largest and most significant organizations of women in the world."⁸¹ What, in part, precipitated the meeting was a defamatory letter written by a white male newspaper editor, James Jacks, that generalized black women as "being 'prostitutes, thieves, and liars' with 'no sense of virtue' or character." Sparked by Wells's anti-lynching efforts in London and the British critique of America's racial inequality that resulted from it, Jacks composed and sent the letter to Miss Balgarnie, an English resident. However, he did so to his harm as Balgarnie forwarded the letter to Ruffin and added a postscript that criticized Jack's characterization of black women as mendacity.⁸² Angered by the accusations, black club women responded by publishing the letter in the *Woman's Era* and creating a platform dedicated to counteracting the fabricated depiction,

⁸¹ Article, *National*, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, August 1896, Abolition, Freedom, and Rights, http://womenwriters.library.emory.edu/content.php?level=div&id=era3_03.02&document=era3&keyword=god

⁸² Jenkins, "The History of the Black Woman's Club Movement in America," 60-2.

merging Ruffin's organization, The Women's Era, with The Colored Women's League and the National Federation of Afro-American Women into one national organizing body.⁸³

Using multiple initiatives to carry out this mission, black club women built schools, senior citizen homes, orphanages, supplementary health care services, and facilitated mothers' meetings. Over the course of several decades, the organization expanded with outreach in black communities ranging from arts education and etiquette training to legal rights advocacy and social work, all in the spirit of self-improvement.⁸⁴ Historian Dorothy Salem notes that "these self-help efforts to uplift and serve the community were best seen in the local club activities in the North... the Alpha Home in Indianapolis, the Cleveland Home for Aged Color People, and similar services in Chicago, Brooklyn, New Bedford, Newark, and Philadelphia emerged from the efforts of individual women joined by organized clubs adopting the projects." As the Great Migration approached, black club women also built multi-service centers that sustained and grew their interventions to develop trainings geared towards preparing blacks for careers in social work and nursing.⁸⁵ During WWI, black club women raised funds to support black soldiers and their families, contributing "goods and services and forming the social foundation for black

⁸³ Appeal, *A Charge to be Refuted*, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, June 1895, Abolition, Freedom, and Rights, http://womenwriters.library.emory.edu/content.php?level=div&id=era2_03.14&document=era2; Appeal, *An Open Appeal to Our Women for Organization*, Victoria Earle Matthews, January 1897, Abolition, Freedom, and Rights, http://womenwriters.library.emory.edu/content.php?level=div&id=era3_05.04&document=era3&keyword=god; Dorothy Salem, "National Association of Colored Women" in *Black Women in America Second Edition*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 430; Beverly Guy-Sheftall, "Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes Toward Black Women," in *Black Women in United States History 16*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1990), 26; 107; Knupfer, 12; Erlene Stetson, "Black Feminism in Indiana, 1893-1933," *Phylon* (1960-) 44, no 4 (1983): 293-4; Mia Bay, "The Battle for Womanhood is the Battle for Race: Black Women and Nineteenth-Century Racial Thought" in *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women*, 90; Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 39; 96. The historiography suggests that the letter was one occasion that propelled the organization's founding. Jenkins, on the other hand, makes the distinction between the letter as a document that "accelerated the timing of the movement" and an incident that served as a "catalyst" to the movement. See Jenkins, "Letter to the Editor," 5; Jenkins, "The History of the Black Woman's Club Movement in America," 60-9.

⁸⁴ Salem, 432-4; Jenkins, "The History of the Black Woman's Club Movement in America," 65-88.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 433; Beverly Jones "Mary Church Terrell and the National Association of Colored Women, 1896-1901," *The Journal of Negro History* 67 (1982): 21; Francesca Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 8-9.

families affected by the loss of a breadwinner,” no less important because black men had enlisted in the war in large masses.⁸⁶

For many black women, involvement in the club movement was the apogee of personal and professional dedication to securing black women’s rights. Reflected in the biographical sketches of Ruffin, Church Terrell, Harper, and Wells black women had long accomplished “public authority as teachers, organizers, public speakers, preachers, deaconesses, and Masonic mistresses.”⁸⁷ Their voices often stifled and restricted in these spaces, black club women created their own enterprise dedicated to social equality. When refused by the church, women such as Eliza Gardner and Victoria Matthews found autonomy in the club movement.⁸⁸ Even while working inside these institutions black women also found value in joining the club movement, such as in the case of Amelia E. Johnson, a nineteenth century Christian novelist and the wife of prominent Baptist minister, Harvey Johnson.⁸⁹ With diverse professional backgrounds, members of the NACW concentrated the activities of black women committed to racial uplifting and black assimilation under one large entity. To stabilize these efforts, black club women turned to practical interventions such as those enumerated here, guided by an ideological framework that reconciled their class status to their concerns for racial and gender equality. Brooks Higgenbotham acknowledges that “middle-class black women came together self-admittedly to vindicate their own respectability and uplift the downtrodden of the race.” Historian Anne Meis Knupfer likewise argues that “...unlike the African American men, who persisted in images of

⁸⁶ Nikki Brown, *Private Politics and Public Voices: Black Women’s Activism from World War I to the New Deal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 4-7.

⁸⁷ Jones, 171.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 184.

⁸⁹ See Alexandria Cornelius, “A Taste of the Lash of Criticism: Racial Progress, Self-Defense, and Christian Intellectual Thought in the Work of Amelia E. Johnson,” in *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women*, 93-109.

true womanhood, the club women were more concerned with respectability, that is a standard of behavior expected of all African Americans, especially for the women.”⁹⁰

At initial glance, respectability politics seems at variance with pious benevolence because of its obvious requirement for social and wealth posturing. Yet black feminists such as Higgenbotham, Jones, and White note that, strutting aside, black club women embodied respectability as a means of reclaiming their identities in a society hostile to their womanhood and blackness. Jones particularly points to minstrelsy as one medium through which black women were publicly degraded. Leading up to the founding of the NACW, whites showcased fabrications of black women’s sexual desires through minstrelsy, placing black women “beyond the bounds of respectability.” Such depictions indispensably contributed to the sanctioning of white male sexual violence against black women during Reconstruction.⁹¹ Allegedly licentious in their interactions with white men, black women could stake no legitimate claims to charges of rape. With public defamation also came an inferior status orchestrated by whites that left black women legally unprotected and socially vulnerable when victims of sexual assault and racial discrimination. The lynching narrative is one example of this social structure, White explaining that “whites lynched black men, women, and children and rampaged through communities torching black-owned property all in the name of ‘white womanhood.’ The image of black men as savage beasts with an uncontrollable urge to rape white women resonated so deeply in the white psyche...”⁹² White men, without question or prosecution, permitted themselves to black women’s bodies in the form of lynching and sexual violence, thereby treating them as property and legitimizing their negative portrayal in the public sphere.

⁹⁰ Brooks Higgenbotham, 152; Ann Meis Knupfer, *Toward A Tenderer Humanity and a Nobler Womanhood* (New York: NYU Press, 1996), 12.

⁹¹ Jones, 99-100.

⁹² White, 31.

White women also participated in the public defamation of black women. Indeed, Ruffin's initial summon to black club women for a national organizing body for club activity was in response to Jack's letter, but it also emanated from white women's belief in and promotion of the substandard value placed on black women, also linked to exaggerated depictions of black women as hyper-sexual. One year prior to the founding of the NACW Ruffin mobilized black club women, which resulted in the First National Conference of the Colored Women of America. In her monograph, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, Hazel Carby demonstrates how Ruffin used the conference to highlight "issues surrounding and linked to the representation of black female sexuality." Ruffin, noted Carby, pointed to the exclusion of black club women from white women's organizations because of false but widely circulated images of black club women as "immoral."⁹³ Unfortunately, black women found contingent allies in black men, who often questioned if black women's pursuit of women's rights derailed black efforts at racial equality. Most notable among these men were Frederick Douglass, who some forty years prior to the NACW's launch, "concluded... that 'the battle of Woman's Rights should be fought on its own ground...'" in isolation from abolitionism.⁹⁴

Shared by most white Americans, Jacks's characterization of black women as ill-mannered and debauched led to their ultimate public dehumanization, in which crimes against them held no legal merit, their lives no public value. The club movement intercepted the growing myth of black incivility and inferiority that threatened black lives in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and positioned black club women as guardians of their narrative, with

⁹³ Carby, 116.

⁹⁴ Jones, 101.

respectability politics at the core of their initiatives.⁹⁵ Connected to this type of class politics was a dependence on true womanhood in which black women embraced the four conventional qualities that defined a respectable woman in the nineteenth century—submissiveness, domesticity, piety, and purity. Black feminists have argued that black women, although committed to applying these characteristics as foundational elements of their morality, hardly qualified by white women’s standard because of their multi-layered identity and so-called inferior status. Womanist folklorist Glenda Dickerson sums up the dilemma as such:

the ‘cult’ became virtually synonymous with the upper class because only they had the luxury of leisure. Women of color were triply locked out: by class, by race, and by history—they had been made the mule of the world... at one and the same time turn-of-the-century women of color found themselves abhorring the ‘cult’ and aspiring to its tenets.⁹⁶

Some black women vowed adherence to domesticity, but this seemed implausible because most black women did not possess the luxury of working inside *their* homes, forced to seek employment as domestics for white families or in other trades.⁹⁷ One year after the NACW’s founding, in 1897, Victoria Earle Matthews, another black club woman, published and circulated *The Awakening of the Afro-American Woman*. In the pamphlet, she described the role of black women as financial providers in their domestic partnerships, pointing to a major difference in the limited privileges they appreciated and those afforded to white women.⁹⁸ Speaking at the annual

⁹⁵ Carby, 33-4.

⁹⁶ Glenda Dickerson, “The Cult of True Womanhood: Toward a Womanist Attitude in African-American Theatre,” in *Theatre Journal* 40 (1988): 179.

⁹⁷ Jones, 33; for a study of black women domestics in the nineteenth century See Tera Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁹⁸ Carby, 117.

meeting of the Society for Christian Endeavor, Matthews also noted that, aside from their roles as homemakers, black women had provided for

“the State 25,000 educated school teachers, who are to-day the hope and inspiration of the whole race. The black women who came out of slavery in the past thirty years have accomplished these tremendous results as farm-laborers and house servants... In the past few years, the educated daughters of these ex-slave women have aroused themselves to the necessity of systematic organization for their own protection, and for strengthening their race where they find it is weak, and to this end they have in the several states 243 regularly organized and officered clubs in the Afro-American Women’s National Association; there are besides hundreds of social clubs and temperance organizations working in their own way for a strong Christian womanhood.”⁹⁹

For middle and working class black women alike, domesticity had its boundaries. Matthews illustrates the rhetorical methods black club women used in asserting their humanity outside of the traditional expectations of domesticity, thus transforming the idea to fit their circumstances and claim honor in the public space.

Through false depictions of black women in the public as immoral and unprincipled, the appearance of black women’s purity became equally obscured. Jack’s letter and Ruffin’s address at the First National Conference of Colored Women of America are two examples of how black women remained prurient in the eyes of white Americans, despite a paucity of evidence to support the mischaracterization. Finally, black women were also limited with regard to

⁹⁹ Speech, *The Awakening of the Afro-American Woman: An Address Delivered at the Annual Convention of the Society of Christian Endeavor, San Francisco*, Victoria Earle Matthews, July 11th, 1897. New Haven: Yale University Library, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, *Yale Collection of American Literature*, Digital Collection Online, <http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/pdfgen/exportPDF.php?bibid=10171939&solrid=3724630>.

submissiveness. At times forced into a public role because of white antagonism and a need for financial stability, black women could only partially submit. Notwithstanding, black women adjusted and adopted the cult of womanhood with regard to their experiences. Speaking of the Women's Convention, a subsidiary of the National Baptist Convention, Higgenbotham demonstrates the manner in which black women found balance in resistance and respectability, noting that "polite behavior on Jim Crow streetcars and trains did not constitute supine deference to white power."¹⁰⁰

Black club women pursued a costly endeavor when situating their activism in the politics of respectability and true womanhood, often at the expense of working class African Americans.¹⁰¹ Still, the limited application of true womanhood projected onto black women by white woman failed to attenuate black club women's activism, who insisted on self-improvement as one vital way for African Americans to escape their poor public standing. To "the least of these," black club women promoted strict social codes that, contrary to the NACW's belief system, facilitated their own social exclusion as "the least of these." Under this observation, respectability politics provides a framework for understanding the complicated manner in which black club women functioned as American religious reformers in their roles as black, woman, and middle class. Alongside the notion of respectability politics, black club women redefined true womanhood. Class politics was central to this repositioning, identified by Carby as a "black womanhood out of a history in which sisterhood had only rarely existed and most white women had betrayed, abandoned, or excluded most black women from their lives."¹⁰² The ideas of black club women formulate a new social gospel that allowed for the four virtues of womanhood to

¹⁰⁰ Brooks Higgenbotham, 192.

¹⁰¹ White, 35. See also Quintard Taylor, *The Forging of a Black Community: Seattle's Central District from 1870 through the Civil Rights Era* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994).

¹⁰² Carby, 118.

complement their experiences without acquiescing to sexualized exaggerations of their identity. Not only did purity, submissiveness, and domesticity take on new meanings, but so too did piety, evident by black club women's embodiment of a new Christianity, a variant conceptual framework for locating the social gospel in a nineteenth century American context. Whereas piety meant a commitment to temperance and suffrage in white women's religious activism and a pursuit of labor and class equality in white men's social gospel, black club women's piety entailed racial and gender equality with specific attention given to the church's lack of attention to and, in some instances, endorsement of, racial and sexual violence, segregation and discrimination, anti-suffrage and, more specifically, the exigent issue of lynching and sexual assault against black women. Black club women's piety also coalesced these pursuits with their ideas of class improvement.

Conventionally, a lone focus on the working class as benefactors of the social gospel disqualified many African Americans by virtue of their gender, class, and racial categories. When influential black women in the NACW converged all black club women activity under one national forum, employed Christian language to advance their agenda, and summoned Christian communities to a higher social ethic, they provided a framework for transforming the social gospel from a narrow campaign to a complicated crusade in which black women's issues became ineludible. This shift in the concept of the social gospel challenges historians to validate black club women as active agents of American religious reform. In its entirety, a newly defined social gospel requires an assessment of black club women's religious activism, their pious attempts to radicalize the public sphere, and prompts discourse related to black women's full humanity. How black club women navigated the public sphere and practiced righteous benevolence were determined by their adherence to respectability politics and their adoption of true womanhood

even as white Americans resigned them to a substandard social status. From educational initiatives to support during war efforts, black club women ramped up their attempt to improve the socio-economic conditions of the least of these in their communities. Winning public approval seemed the hallmark of these efforts, thus black club women balanced their roles “as the least of these”, challenging and resisting the Christian church and American society for racist and sexist stances, with services “to the least of these,” cultivating a sense of racial uplifting, self-respect, and class improvement.

Conclusion

Towards the *Woman's Era* denouement, Ruffin composed one final editorial in which she defined “winning causes” as a collective possession of “the history of the human race and not to a mere handful of people from a remote corner of the earth...,” a description indictable of the social gospel in its dogmatic form.¹⁰³ Reflecting the ethos of black club women since before the publication's inception, Ruffin's commentary also sums up the purpose of this study. Behind American religious reform in the nineteenth century lied implications for how white Christians viewed black women from privileged quarters, opting for a social order in which black women were either completely ignored or objectified. Their mistreatment legally sanctioned, black women turned to the church and discovered that the God by whom they declared full humanity and citizenry was constructed to the contrary by the dominant group. The church was as circumscriptive to black women as the laws that enabled their subordination. Along these lines, white men such as Rauschenbusch and Strong developed a social gospel lacking the capacity to comprehensively address black women's issues. So too did white women, such as Willard; and

¹⁰³ Editorial, *Winning Causes*, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, June 1896, Abolition, Freedom, and Rights, http://womenwriters.library.emory.edu/content.php?level=div&id=era3_21.09.01&document=era3

even some black men, such as Griggs. En masse black club women responded to these limitations through their public platforms, and eventually channeled their efforts as “the least of these” to “the least these,” organizing schools, day cares, literary clubs, mothers’ meetings, and other establishments for the purpose of self-improvement and to facilitate social resistance. Through a critical lens, black club women’s efforts engender a repositioning of the social gospel movement as a lived experience beyond what was exercised by non-black women religious leaders. Succinctly stated, the new social gospel retains a concern for the working class, but mandates a campaign against sexual violence, racial discrimination as elements of a larger world inherently favoring dominant groups. Embracing this social gospel in the historiography functions best when historians understand and contextualize black women’s intrepid organizing, and account for their multi-layered identity in pursuing an intricate form of class politics seemingly at odds with the overall goal of social equality. For religious organizations, this social gospel requires a conscious interaction with black club women—their narratives and pious zeal for a better American society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Last, but certainly not least, an active engagement with this new definition of the social gospel mandates a validation of black women such that they remain unhidden and without circumscription.

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