

Introduction

In his 1972 *New York Times* article, George Dugan gives a fitting description of the new pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church of Harlem, Dr. Samuel DeWitt Proctor. Dugan states, “Rugged looking in his black doctoral robe, close to 6 feet tall and weighing 210 pounds, the 51-year-old preacher was an imposing figure in the pulpit.”¹ Proctor was a grand presence indeed. Yet there was more to this presence than his physical stature. He was an impressive thinker and an accomplished man. He rose from the depths of a southern racist society in the mid-twentieth century to become a celebrated educator, administrator, Baptist pastor, and author. He served in different government capacities during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, including stints as an associate director of the Peace Corps and Office of Economic Opportunity. His academic career included presidential posts at Virginia Union University and North Carolina A&T State University, administrative leadership at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, teaching duties at Rutgers University, and lectures at various colleges and seminaries following his retirement. He was the successor to Adam Clayton Powell Jr. at the prominent Abyssinian Baptist Church. Proctor’s public ministry spanned six decades. His tale was truly American. He came out of Depression-era Norfolk, Virginia, to the grand stage of the New York church. He was a black youth in the Jim Crow South who became an envoy for presidents. His narrative presents the best and the ugliest of this nation’s culture.

Samuel DeWitt Proctor sought to affirm the place of the divine in humanity. M. Shawn Copeland writes, “White racist supremacy seeks to undermine spirituality, to subvert the place of the Divine, the Transcendent in lived human life.”² Proctor discerned this much and contested it. His Christian faith informed his view of and response to the ethical dilemma of race relations in America. Believing that racism was a primary source of the many problems in the black community, he countered this systemic evil with his faith. His response reflects the historical context in which he situated himself. Racism dominated the social interaction of white and black persons in the United States during Proctor’s lifetime. As a Christian preacher, he surmised that God must have something to say about that sad reality. For Proctor, then, the fundamental starting point for constructing a just society in the United States of America was his faith in a simple principle: *all* persons are a part of the human family

and, thus, are children of God. The moral attitudes of people and the laws and institutions in society should reflect that equality. Any other response than one that affirms the innate personhood of all humanity would not suffice for Proctor. Such was the message that one could hear from him Sunday after Sunday and in the classroom.

Students and scholars of black Christianity in the twentieth century find in Samuel DeWitt Proctor a deliberate proponent and defender of black humanity as constructed by a black social gospel tradition. He was a well-educated and respected leader. He was a “race man,” a member of Du Bois’s talented tenth. He is among a group of African American religious figures that is rarely recognized in “scholarly” literature. But research on Samuel DeWitt Proctor and other neglected persons in African American religious history can only benefit scholars and other interested persons. Except for a few texts that list notable leaders and organizations, the academy lacks a comprehensive understanding of the black social gospel. We are more certain of what it looked like than we are of what it said. We are still filling in the spaces in the puzzle of the contexts and content of African American Christianity. This is, therefore, the first major attempt to investigate Proctor’s life and thought.

Proctor was a public theologian who attempted to influence policy conversations about racism in America. As a national preacher and public servant, he made it his mission to serve the interests of American life by fighting against racism. Drawing from his social and religious upbringing and theological education—formal and informal—he understood that every human being matters equally to God. His earliest lessons on the inherent dignity of each person came from his family and a black Baptist Christian experience. He received formal language for a black public faith and theology at Virginia Union University, Crozer Theological Seminary, Yale University, and the Boston University School of Theology. As a public theologian, he committed himself to proclaiming a black social gospel faith through changing times and ideological innovation that saw as its goal a genuine community, an inclusive and racially pluralistic global society that confronted racism as the social crisis of its time. He believed that genuine community celebrates the parenthood of God and the kinship of humanity as the basis of human equality and freedom, and the preacher through sermon as literature and theological practice heralds this community by moral suasion.

Proctor understood the sermon to be an effective device for making one’s faith claims public and accessible. But the sermon and its message of community had to move beyond the narrow confines of the Christian community to a larger public. Proctor anticipated Linell Cady’s ideas about theology and public

argumentation. He moved away from “technical, jargon-filled discourse” and held up his experience—his American experience—as an authoritative source for religious truth.³

This study argues that Proctor is a type of religious and theological barometer for the black Christian community of the mid- to late twentieth century. He was a participant in black public faith conversations. That is, he had a notion of faith, nurtured within black Christendom, which presented an alternative reality to the pervasive racism in the United States. That notion lived out and articulated in the public sphere honors the inherent dignity of all humanity. I examine the way in which he emphasized his faith in a vision for a racially pluralistic moral-spiritual community in the United States. He did this in spite of the displays of racism from a large segment of the white population and the militancy of a budding black power and black separatist movement in the 1960s and '70s. Yet his upbringing, formal education, and professional experience provided him with a worldview that celebrated the universality of the human experience and championed integration and racial pluralism. His sermons, writings, and talks display a public faith informed by a black church ethic of racial harmony, black social gospel themes, and black middle-class notions of civil society.

The book places Proctor in his historical context. I examine the relationship between his biography and faith claims, arguing that his biography influences his religious outlook. His family, education, and the formative years in an African American community and black religious settings shaped his identity and theology. He also found insights for his ministry in the American liberal theological tradition. He was the product of the black Baptist and liberal Protestant theological traditions. His politically oriented black liberal social gospel responded to the claims of the Religious Right, Protestant fundamentalism, and black liberation strands in theology. At the same time, his black middle-class understanding of American life contributed to his social commentary and ideals of American-ness. He considered himself *black*, *Christian*, and *American*, sometimes placing more emphasis on American. These are important ideas within the black public faith that he embodied and proclaimed.

While many American religious historians and historians of the African American religious experience have focused on a few mainstream black Christian thinkers from the twentieth century, they have neglected to examine Proctor and his voice on matters of race and religion. His voice, however, is important. His commitment to a vanishing black social gospel placed him in the middle of the spectrum of black public faith. Proctor also preached

and lectured to white audiences extensively during the 1960s and beyond. He had a type of “crossover” appeal that functioned well among white and black audiences. Timothy Tyson’s *Blood Done Sign My Name* (the book more than the movie) suggests as much. Proctor’s social theology provides some contrasts with the prevailing paradigms of race-conscious theology and social change in his era. He was not a marching activist, social conservative, or black militant. But his ideas embraced or nuanced all of those social postures. He is a celebrated preacher among members of the preaching guild. Yet these authors look at him merely as a model for preaching. Proctor receives no attention in general histories of Christianity in America or in works on African American Christianity in particular. One finds a substantial amount of work on those persons who were *visible* during the civil rights era (c. 1950–1970). Many of these scholars pay attention to only a small group of notable African American religious leaders in histories or anthologies on African American religion. Proctor, who for several years was a black celebrity in the nation’s African American newspapers and served one of the most prominent churches in America, barely appears in the representative texts of American and African American religious history.⁴

Another issue related to Proctor’s absence from these texts is the use of sermons as sources of religious research—especially sermons in the black religious community. Few historians examine sermons as sources of theology or the ideas of the preachers who preach them. To be sure, not all of the sermons preached will merit the attention of leading scholars. But some preachers’ sermons are important documents for historical research. Harry Stout’s work on the influence of preaching on colonial New England displays a precedent for the importance of preaching to a community. Stout argues that the theologies in the preachers’ sermons display New Englanders’ notion of their identity.⁵ A study of Proctor’s preaching, and the theology in that preaching, will contribute to our understanding of the themes and concerns that shaped dialogues in African American religious life (if only for a sample of African American Baptists). A tacit consensus in modern scholarship holds that preachers in the pulpits do theology until the early to mid-nineteenth century. With the rise of the theological schools in America in the 1800s, some historians examine only the ideas from professional theologians. This point is implicit in the scholarly neglect of persons such as Proctor. His preaching and teaching contained faith claims that yield themes and concepts from a significant tradition within the African American religious experience. Different denominational publishers produce several volumes of sermons each year. Yet these texts lack historical and theological analysis in most cases. This crucial element prevents most preachers’

texts from “crossing over” from the seminary classroom into the graduate school. This is unfortunate.

You will discover in this book that Proctor’s life experiences and faith claims led him to an inevitable intellectual construct: genuine community. His social locations provided him with a formative home to develop his public faith. This public faith celebrates humanity and presents an alternative to the racist realities of his lifetime. His biography is eerily similar to that of Martin Luther King Jr. But the two men are different. Proctor’s intellectual and spiritual path modeled numerous black religious intellectuals whose names may never reach print. To be sure, he fought for an integrated community of persons who embraced love and justice. He made this plain in churches, during commencement addresses, and in closed-door sessions with national and civic leaders. Proctor’s legacy measures up to that of any other black preacher, ethicist, and theologian of his generation.

Proctor interrogated racism in American life and fought with an activism of persuasion. He preached at some of the finest universities and walked among “royalty,” and his message did not change. He proclaimed a social Christianity that put the ethics of Jesus ahead of notions of respectability and political expediency. He preached with his pen in numerous articles and books. He preached from the Bible, his experience, and American democratic principles. These sources were not mutually exclusive in his mind. In this light, Proctor shows his relationship to prominent African American religious leaders and to the black church. He was a preacher, the rhetorical protégé of a black Christian tradition that affirmed the equality of all persons. He could not address that theme enough throughout his public ministry. But he saw himself as a model for black preachers. He preached and taught the value of a public theology and public ministry. The preacher, he insisted, has the charge and the authority to preach a new world into existence. That is merely a portion of Proctor’s legacy.⁶

Notes

1. George Dugan, “An Imposing Preacher: Samuel DeWitt Proctor,” *Man in the News*, *New York Times*, July 24, 1972, p. 53.
2. M. Shawn Copeland, “Racism and the Vocation of the Theologian,” *Spiritus* 2 (2002): 17.
3. Linell Cady, *Religion, Theology, and American Public Life* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993).
4. See Peter J. Paris, *Black Religious Leaders: Conflict in Unity*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991); James H. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992); Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002); Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of*

African Americans (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Milton C. Sernett, *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, C. Eric Lincoln Series on the Black Experience (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); and Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude Jr., eds., *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

5. See Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

6. Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teachings of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 10-11; and Samuel D. Proctor, *The Certain Sound of the Trumpet: Crafting a Sermon of Authority* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1994).