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15 May 2017

Constructive Theology

Professor David Scott

Theologian Profile – Cornel West

Born in 1953 in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Cornel West grew up around Sacramento, California, in the segregated neighborhood of Glen Elder.[[1]](#footnote-1) He was rebellious and enraged in his early years, despite having a supportive family and community life, getting into many fights and being expelled from school in the third grade for hitting a pregnant teacher. He had a significant transformation at the age of eight when he became a Christian and from there excelled in school. He began to explore philosophy as an early teenager, specifically the work of Søren Kierkegaard, and this led to his desire to study the subject at university. Entering Harvard in 1970, just as they were beginning to open to African-American students, West graduated *magna cum laude* in 1973 and from there got his MA and Ph.D. in Philosophy at Princeton. He has taught at Union Theological, Williams College, Yale Divinity, the University of Paris, Princeton, Harvard, and is currently on the faculty at Princeton once again.

One of the best terms to use to describe Cornel West’s career is “public theologian.” His theological and academic endeavors have focused on social and political issues, creating spaces for him to engage in much public dialogue and, harkening back to his elementary school days, some very public spats with people like President Obama, former Harvard President and U.S. Treasury Secretary Larry Summers, and academic Michael Eric Dyson. Before addressing the spats and challenges of his career though, one must have an appreciation for his contributions to theological, philosophical, and political discourse.

West can be described as an eclectic intellectual, whose interests and influences range from liberation theology to Karl Marx to existential questions around theodicy to Malcolm X and MLK. His mentee and former friend Michael Eric Dyson has stated that “West is…the most exciting black American scholar ever,” citing his fluency and grasp of multiple disciplines and his ability to make his academic work accessible for a mainstream audience.[[2]](#footnote-2) His most well-known and most highly acclaimed work is *Race Matters*, which was first published in 1993, about which Dyson has said, “It isn’t a scholarly book, per se, although its pages carry the weight of his formidable intellect as he traces the cultural dynamics of race with exquisite and uncharacteristic—for the time—lucidity…*Race Matters* changed how we speak of black identity in the United States.”[[3]](#footnote-3) M. Shawn Copeland remarks that, “He tells us the most cauterizing and, therefore, potentially most healing truth about ourselves and our country: ours is a house built on race, and we have colluded in and profited from its construction.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Rosemary Cowen argues that West can best be understood as a liberation theologian, whose philosophical questions about suffering and theodicy, political questions around economics and social structures, and theological underpinnings of all of his thought, point toward a central theme of liberation for African-Americans in the United States.[[5]](#footnote-5)

West has come under significant critique in the last two decades, starting in the early 2000s, with then Harvard President Larry Summers challenging West for his lack of academic publishing and his participation in political campaigns.[[6]](#footnote-6) After leaving Harvard for Princeton because of this scuffle, West continued to hold powerful cultural prominence, making his next feud even more noticeable, as it was with the first black man to become president. He initially complained about Obama announcing his candidacy in Illinois instead of at Tavis Smiley’s State of the Black Union event in Virginia, but then embraced Obama the candidate. This embrace fell apart after Obama was elected and West vocally criticized the President for not being progressive enough, claiming that his shift to the center after election was racial betrayal. Following that, West has been critiqued by fellow academics, and even friends, for being too focused on public notoriety rather than academic and professional work. His former mentee and personal friend, Michael Eric Dyson, wrote a scathing article about West in the *New Republic*, saying, “West is still a Man of Ideas, but those ideas today are a vain and unimaginative repackaging of his earlier hits.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

West’s contributions to theological and social thought cannot be dismissed, but it does seem as if his work has grown lackluster and fraught with controversy. There is no doubt that he continues to have influence in the public eye, but whether he is doing that as a theologian or a celebrity is up for debate. While he claims for himself the title of prophet in the vein of Martin Luther King, Jr., only time and those who come after him will be able to properly bestow that title upon him if his work proves meaningful in the fight for liberation.

Works Cited

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1. Rosemary Cowen, *Cornel West: The Politics of Redemption* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2003), 2. All biographical information is taken from this book, unless otherwise cited. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Michael Eric Dyson, “The Ghost of Cornel West,” *New Republic*, April 19, 2015, accessed May 13, 2017, https://newrepublic.com/article/121550/cornel-wests-rise-fall-our-most-exciting-black-scholar-ghost. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. M. Shawn Copeland, “Cornel West’s Improvisational Philosophy of Religion,” in *Cornel West: A Critical Reader*, ed. George Yancy (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cowen, 12-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “Seeing Crimson,” *The Economist*, January 3, 2002, accessed on May 16, 2017, http://www.economist.com/node/923104. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Dyson. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)