

**AURORA FORUM AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY  
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**DEMOCRACY MATTERS**

**CORNEL WEST  
UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR OF RELIGION  
AT PRINCETON UNIVERSITY**

**Mark Gonnerman:** Good evening, and welcome to the Aurora Forum at Stanford University. I'm Mark Gonnerman, the Forum's director, and it is a great honor for me to introduce our speaker tonight, the Class of 1943 University Professor of Religion at Princeton University, Dr. Cornel West. I myself labor in the field of religious studies, and Dr. West has for years inspired me and countless others to find ways to bring knowledge won through the solitary work of scholarship into the swirling domain of social and political life on this campus and elsewhere. My achievement in this regard has perhaps generated what may be equivalent to the light at the tip of a stick of burning incense, if even that. But Dr. West's accomplishment as a scholar and public teacher beginning at such a young age is as brilliant and far-reaching as the noonday sun. In my own scholarship, I aim to demonstrate that the category of religious intellectual is not an oxymoron. Dr. West is for me a prime example of what it means to love goodness and work in this world with one's heart and soul and mind fully engaged. Others in this category include Dorothy Day, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Howard Thurman, William Sloane Coffin, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahmoud Mohammad Taha, Thich Nhat Hanh, the fourteenth Dalai Lama, and many lesser-known individuals who use the gift of intellect in ways that keep alive the hope that we can get to the other shore and create a world that befits a creature that, as Dr. West's tradition teaches, is made in the image of God.

As I say in the program notes for tonight, it is fitting that Dr. West will address us from the very stage where Dr. King spoke when at Stanford in the spring of 1964 and again in April 1967. There is now a plaque at the entrance to Memorial Auditorium commemorating these visits, and I urge you to visit it. Dr. King has long served as a touchstone for Dr. West, and they both represent and extend a prophetic religious and democratic tradition that urges each of us to remember that the future is open-ended and that what we do now can contribute to a positive outcome.

To say Dr. West's voice is prophetic is not to say he is able to foretell our future, which remains always uncertain and full of surprise, but that he is able to help us get perspective on the present because he is so deeply rooted in knowledge of our past. Cornel West is a deep-sea diver in the domain of the mind, and he knows well the long story of that deep democratic tradition that resists improper use of state power. He sees all too well the workings of those primitive forces of social stagnation Dr. King spoke about from this

stage; and, like King, he calls upon us to organize and mobilize to bring people power and pressure to bear on the status quo.

Cornel West is a radical Christian and a radical Democrat, and this means, as the word “radical” truly indicates, that he gets to the root of the matter. His extraordinary life and work are part of a remarkable human journey, a quest for liberation, an effort to throw off chains, leave shadows behind, turn toward and share the light. This is the fruit of a liberal arts education taken seriously, and it is the consequence of the kind of humanistic inquiry that sparks the fires of intellectual exploration and imagination and prepares minds, young and old, for engaged and productive participation in our great democratic experiment.

As Dr. West intones in “The Journey,” the first track of his *Sketches of My Culture* CD, “The struggle for freedom is still alive and the story of that struggle is still being told.” “Keep keepin’ on” is this professor’s theme. “Democracy matters. Keep keepin’ on” [“The Journey” plays as Dr. West enters Memorial Auditorium]:

Let the word go forth here and now that the struggle for freedom is still alive and the story of that struggle is still being told. We begin with guttural cries and wrenching moans and visceral groans and weary lament and silent tears, and how this grand people of African descent could transfigure such misery into joy and a sense of sustaining themselves against overwhelming odds. What a story. What a drama.

Vicious theft from Africa, pernicious passage to the New World America. Atrocious enslavement on ugly plantations. Yet in wooden churches on godforsaken creeks, in makeshift churches, they would forge a connection with the biblical story.

The first great art created in America: The spirituals proclaiming the good news in bad news situations, connecting a sense of self against a society that told them they were nobody and no one. “Keep keepin’ on” was the theme....

**Cornel West:** It’s a privilege and an honor and a blessing to be back home in California. It’s always a source of inspiration. I’d like to thank my dear brother Mark Gonnerman for those kind and generous remarks. I’m not sure I believe all of them, but it sounded very good and I appreciate it. But in all seriousness, each time I have the opportunity to come back to Stanford and to just recall the precious memories.... I have some very dear persons who have come this way. My dear friend Glen Jordan from Sacramento, California—we literally grew up together in high school—attended this place, and he studied with the late, great Sinclair Drake. Let’s give Drake a hand. [Applause] Kenneth Jones and Penny Jones from Sacramento now live here. When I stepped out of the car after my three events in Berkeley, I looked up and I said, “That looks like brother Arnold Rampersad and Malvina, my old friends from Princeton.” Of course, we anxiously await his magisterial biography of the great Ralph Waldo Ellison that he’s been

working on here. And then there was Professor Claude Steele and sister Dorothy. I said, “My God, Stanford’s still on the cutting edge of things.” And then of course you’ve got Lawrence Bobo and Marcie Morgan on the way here, owing to misjudgments on behalf of a particular [university] president. And I walked into the room and I saw my dear friend and mentor. It was 31 years ago when I first stepped into his office. He was so kind to me, so supportive at Princeton University; his name is Richard Rorty. He set the world on fire in those 31 years. And his beloved wife Mary...and all of the memories. I said to myself, “Maybe I ought to keep my distance from the [presidential] debate tonight. I want high quality. I want to keep my focus on high quality.” And I thought of all the graduate students who’ve come from Yale and Union Seminary and Princeton and Harvard that I’ve been blessed to send here to Stanford. And I’m told even Professor Patricia Rose and Professor Andre Willis of UC-Santa Cruz and San Jose State University are actually here, and I said, “We’re going to have a good time, a very good time. I’m going to stay here until the last question is asked.”

Critical exchange is what this Aurora Forum is all about, and I know historically you’ve actually had a number of different voices in conversation, so I’ll try to be polyphonic in my presentation so we can stay true to that dialogical tradition in this grand place. But I come to Stanford tonight to try to say something that thoroughly unsettles you, unnerves you, maybe even for a moment un-houses you. I’m thoroughly convinced that we’re in a dark moment, a very, very difficult moment, and in such moments we need more than simply remarks that remind us of how dark things are. We need to be very clear about what has been bequeathed to us from the best of those that came before us. We have something to build on. We have wind at our back, as it were. It reminds you in some ways of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* in 1807 when he has to tell a story, a set of narratives about what it is that constitutes who we are and what is the best that defines who we are. What do we look like at our best?

So I begin on a Socratic note tonight, talking about democracy matters. For me, you’ve got to begin with the Athenian brother with his pot belly and huge neck and bare feet—a topos unclassifiable, going about, doing what? Asking very difficult questions, trying to get us to deal with very painful challenges and interrogations. Turn to that line 38a of Plato’s *Apologia*: “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Of course, the flip side is: The examined life is painful.

Can we begin to wrestle with that in such an anti-intellectual, market-driven civilization preoccupied with comforts, convenience, and contentment? I say this especially to the young people because you must have the courage to think for yourself. Of course, the Greek actually said, “The unexamined life is not a life for the human”—for the human. We know “human” derives from the Latin *humando*. The great Vico reminds us in the twelfth paragraph of *The New Science*: *humando*. What does *humando* mean? Burying. It’s very important for those scholars in humanistic studies trying to keep track of featherless, two-legged, linguistically conscious creatures born between urine and feces—us, who often bury our dead—to connect the three dimensions of time past, present, and future, to force us to raise the most fundamental questions of what does it really mean to be human.

Who are you really when you take off the mask and quit playing the social role? What kind of trace do you want to leave? What legacy do you want to bequeath those who come after you? What is your relation to those who came before? What happens when you lose connection with the best of your past? Every step forward is some recasting of the past. No relation to the past. The future can only be a repetition of the present. And a repetition of the present means no alternatives, no options, that can lead toward change, let alone fundamental change of the present. It's no accident that the market culture loves to erase the past and even eliminate a vital and vibrant connection to those whose bodies are now the culinary delight of terrestrial worms—and that's where we are headed. What do we do in the interim in our move from womb to tomb? I don't want to get too dark tonight on you, but....

You can't talk about democracy, for me, without trying to keep track of the best that has been transmitted to us. But of course tradition, as T. S. Eliot says in his 1919 essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," is not something you inherit. If you want it, you've got to fight for it. You've got to labor, sacrifice, for it. And it may indeed be the case that our democratic experiment, so precious in so many ways, is waning, weakening, in part because the rich democratic tradition in which the Socratic dimension is so indispensable, is waning. Who really believes a Socratic figure like Emerson when he says, "Whoso would be a man"—and we'll add, "a woman"—"must be a nonconformist" in an attempt to shatter the cake of custom, conformity, complacency, and, most importantly, cowardice. It's very difficult, especially when nonconformity itself becomes a market fashion that changes over time and whose substance is eviscerated and content radically emptied.

What a dark and difficult moment. Now, I'm not talking about the election. I think it was dark and difficult before Bush became president, but that's another lecture. But it means we have to examine very closely dogma, forms of parochialism, forms of provincialism, forms of fundamentalism, interrogate the sources of our false security and even false illusions. Of course it's very much what the Greeks called *paidea*, right? It's what education is all about, this formation of attention from the frivolous to the serious. It's the cultivation of a self in the face of one's finitude and the maturation of the soul in the face of one being an instant in a longer tradition. Of course, I'm sure many of the students here at Stanford recall those magnificent moments when you left a classroom and recognized that your worldview rested on pudding. You're in the process of being educated, falling back on those prejudices and presuppositions that you actually thought constituted a convincing argument. You have to question yourself and enter the ontological dizziness and existential vertigo that goes with Socratic questioning. This is a fundamental feature of what it means to be both human and a citizen at our best. And the degree to which Socratic questioning is pushed to the margins is the degree to which the quality of any democratic project wanes.... I didn't see the [presidential] debate, but my hunch is that it fell short of Socratic questioning. But I would have to look at the debate myself, because I am an empiricist enough to want to adduce evidence. But I can imagine what happens when a democracy begins to lose the very art of dialogue. The sleaze of Madison Avenue triumphs over the substantive dialogical content connected to

Pennsylvania Avenue. Media salesmanship more and more moves to the center. Packaged entities with spinmeisters and pollsters. In the face of Socratic questioning, fundamental dogmas....

Let's go back to the 1860s where we had major dogma. We had statesmen like Mr. Abe Lincoln with one year of formal education. He carried his Shakespeare and his King James translation of the Hebrew Bible and the Koiné Greek New Testament with him at all times. Self-made lawyer, debating about what dogma? The dogma that nearly brought down the curtain on the precious democratic experiment called the USA—the dogma of white supremacy, dogmas of male supremacy, dogmas of homophobia.

This is not PC chitchat now. Political correctness in part was coined by a slice of our intelligentsia in order to trivialize other people's suffering. But when their wounded victimization comes to the center stage, and other folk are wounded: "Oh, you're just saying that to be politically correct." No, there's a history here, a rich history. Socratic questioning forces us, ought to compel us, to examine these dogmas. We know that every democratic experiment in the history of humankind is predicated in part on anti-democratic realities. Indigenous people's land and bodies and enslavement of African peoples—preconditions for the American democratic experiment. Well, sooner or later you're going to reap what you sow. Sooner or later, the chickens are going to come home to roost. You're either going to expand your democracy and deal with your anti-democratic dogmas and realities operative in your democracy, or you will lose it.

Every democracy is fragile, contingent. Every generation has to revitalize and regenerate the best of what has been bequeathed to them. And if this generation doesn't do it, we're going to lose the democratic experiment, maybe in the name of democracy. We've got some clever Orwellian spin here.

The 1890s: Corporate America emerges, robber barons, wealthy elites, [Leland] Stanford and Stanford [University], corporate elites, wonderful charitable proclivities, just like Bill Gates today. His charity is unbelievable. I appreciate it, I admire it. Charity is not justice. They're two very different things, two *very* different things. To be visionary enough on the death of a son to say: I want to leave an institution of higher learning for the most talented in not just the country, but the world. Harvard, Yale, Princeton have nothing on California. And who would think that that grand vision of that corporate elite would be used for so many wonderful things like the students here? But the preconditions are what? Workers on the railroad, deferential to bosses, economically exploited, wealth inequality bursting out all over. And imperial expansion: Samoa, Philippines, Hawaii. The American empire abroad after its internal imperial expansion within the continent itself vis-à-vis indigenous peoples. And moving borders for Mexican brothers and sisters—California, Texas, New Mexico become the USA.

Who is willing to tell the story in a Socratic manner that keeps track of the best of the American democratic experiment—those willing to raise those deep questions, to examine the dogmas—and to keep track of the worst, usually the realities that are denied and avoided and evaded by a mainstream American civilization that somehow believes

that it's always on the right track, that it's a grand city on a hill exemplifying morality at its highest level? A Peter Pan mentality; young, never growing old. A Disneyworld sensibility, not having to deal with the darkness and the underside of the democratic experiment. Another way of putting it is that we are afraid of wrestling with forms of death. The social death—slavery, indigenous peoples near annihilation. The civic death—Jim Crow, Jane Crow, lynching, American terrorism—quite relevant these days in the war against terrorism.

It's quite interesting to me when I think about it. I was in New York campaigning for brother Fernando Ferrer, who aimed to become the first Latino mayor of the Big Apple. September 11 was election day, as some of you remember, three years ago. The 31<sup>st</sup> floor of the Marriott Hotel. I got a call on the phone: "Somebody's crashed into the World Trade Center." I said, "No, you must be on crack or something." It couldn't be true. New York is wild, but it's not that wild. Couldn't be true. I looked out the window and saw the second one crash. My God, innocent human beings killed by seeming gangsters, terrorists. We discovered they were, and are, gangsters and terrorists. The first thing that came to my mind just instinctively, along with the sadness and the sorrow: For the first time in the history of the nation, all Americans feel unsafe, unprotected, subject to arbitrary violence, and hated. I thought, to be a nigger in America for 350 years is to feel unsafe, unprotected, subject to arbitrary violence, and hated. I said, "Hmm. I know the analogy is not perfect, there are some radical dissimilarities, but the *feeling* of relative helplessness, the feeling of having to live one's life with forces outside of one's control disproportionately shaping what you can do and how you define yourself and how you attempt to raise your children...."

I said to myself, "How have black people at their best dealt with niggerization? Dealt with terrorism?" And I thought of Emmett Till's mother in August of 1955, her child killed by American terrorists in Mississippi. It was under the Talahatchie Bridge. She brought the body back to Chicago. I'm sure students here have read the history. That was the first massive civil rights demonstration. Fifty thousand people passed through that little black church on the south side of Chicago to see his body. The authorities told her to close the coffin and she said, "No, I'm going to keep it open." Let's see what American terrorism does to some of its non-citizens. What did she say when she stepped up to the lectern and looked at her baby, whose head was five times the size of his ordinary head? She said, "I don't have a minute to hate. I'll pursue justice for the rest of my life." The level of moral strength and spiritual maturity that goes into that kind of response to terrorism, niggerization.... I thought of brother Martin King when he spoke at the funeral of the four young sisters in Birmingham, September, 1963, one of the few times he ever wept in public. He looked in the eyes of the family of those four young beautiful black girls and he said, "Somehow we've got to muster the armor of love and justice in the face of such terror." What a standard to set.

Now if the nation has the blues, can it learn from a blues people how you deal with, respond to, being niggerized, being terrorized? What have the dominant responses been to American terrorism? Want to talk about revenge and justice, long-range strategies, demonizing the other? Believing that somehow we're pure and innocent, free of any

corruption or crimes against others and therefore caught in some sentimental narrative, some trite melodrama in which the axis of good characterizes us and an axis of evil characterizes someone else, which gives one the right to conquer, dominate, invade.... Echoes of Melville's Ahab, the greatest novel [*Moby Dick*] ever written by an American, a 32-year-old anti-imperialist and anti-racist named Herman Melville.

Is that how you deal with terrorism? You reinforce the same cycle? Emmett Till's mother and Martin King said, "I'm not going to get in the gutter with the terrorists and the gangsters." Justice, yes; revenge, no. Demonize, no; criticize, yes. Such actions can never, ever be justified, but you still have to raise the question, What is the source of that kind of hatred? Black folk have been raising that question for 350 years. What is it about so many white brothers and sisters in the past that they seem to be so pathologically tied to this construct called whiteness that somehow is positively valued while blackness is negatively trashed? What's going on here? Does it have something to do with the labor force? Does it have something to do with their bodies? Does it have something to do with psychosexual activity? We don't know. Nobody knows the answer. It has much to do with some economic competition, but it's not just that. They castrated the black brothers for over 81 years. That's not tied to just economic competition. Something else is going on. Insecurities, anxieties, maybe even resentment and envy. Who knows?

This is precisely what the humanists and social scientists have been wrestling with in terms of the complexity of white supremacy. But whatever the reason, the response of Emmett Till's mother, Mamie Till Mobley, and Martin King was, "It's unjustified and we're going to sustain our discourse at the level of justice." And what they were saying implicitly was, "You can't sustain a democratic project by reducing public discourse about one of the most crucial issues, explosive issues, in the history of that project to revenge and demonize the other." In that sense, in some ways they went beyond Socrates. They actually out-Socratized Socrates.

As most of you know, Socrates never wrote a word. If not for Plato and Xenophon and Aeschines, we wouldn't know anything about Socrates. But even given the renditions of Socrates as an agent in the profound corpus of Plato and the didactic works of Xenophon and those seven fragments of Aeschines, Socrates never, ever cries or sheds a tear—never. And you say to yourself, Is something wrong here? Is there a defect in the Socratic questioning in its quest for wisdom? Leo Strauss and others wrestled with this question. Some of you remember Thomas More and the Tower of London in 1535. There were great tribulations. In his dialogue on tribulations, he said, "Why is it that Socrates never cries?" (He wrestled with why Jesus never laughs, but that's another lecture.) Why is it he [Socrates] never cries? Something's missing. When you go back to Emmett Till's mother and when you go back to Martin King, you recognize that they are rooted in the Jewish invention of the prophetic, which begins with the cries of a hated and despised people in the face of an imperial Egypt. This Jewish invention of the prophetic fundamentally informs what Emmett Till's mother means when she talks about justice, but not hating, or what Martin King means when he talks about love and justice and not abhorring. A particular way of viewing the world in which tears and cries are

wedded to Socratic questioning results in a view of the world which is indispensable for any democratic experiment.

This is not just about some petty discourse about government and the Constitution. We're talking about the raw stuff of any democratic project. With Socrates, you must have *parrhesia*, you must have frank and fearless speech, and you must have some ways in which you encourage citizens to muster the courage to care, and that's what the Jewish invention of the prophetic is all about. To be human is to be kind to the stranger and the widow. To be human is to attempt to be compassionate. To be human is to be in solidarity with the agony and anguish of oppressed people. Socrates's profound but insufficient rationalism never allowed him to be in heartfelt solidarity with the agony and anguish of oppressed people. But Amos was, Michael was, Isaiah was, and of course they mutually correct one another, and the prophetic can be dogmatic; they need Socratic questioning.

Socratic questioning can become almost like foliage and not actually bear fruit. This is a real challenge, I think, for our present-day academy where oftentimes it's so easy to produce foliage that's highly attractive but can't sustain anybody; it doesn't bear fruit at all, in part because we've got little secular pockets in such a deeply religious nation. 96 percent of the populace believes in God, 80 percent view themselves as Christians, 72 percent believe in a second coming of Christ, and 49 percent believe that they are on intimate terms with the Christian God at least twice every three days. In such a civilization, you need some secular pockets like universities, but it's so easy to isolate yourself, to distance yourself, or even to think you're so superior to your fellow citizens that when you produce something, it ought to be an object of both appreciation and attention, and they just keep walking. And you figure, My God, what am I doing? I've spent the last 18 years working on this text and I've got 45 readers. What is the nature of my calling here? Waiting for prosperity, I mean for the future to catch up with me? And I don't say that to be facetious. Melville's text only sold 500 copies in the first twelve years or so and *Moby Dick* didn't come back until the 1920s, so you just never know.

But the point is that even a democratic experiment has its own cultural specificity, and one of the cultural specificities of the USA is that the struggle for the soul of American democracy is in part the struggle for the soul of American Christianity. That is profoundly depressing for many of us, and I speak as a Christian. But there's no way around it. There's no way around it. Every major social movement, with the exception of second-wave feminism, and beginning with the Stonewall Revolt of gay brothers and lesbian sisters asserting their sense of humanity in 1969 in New York City, every major movement has been led by prophetic religious people. We don't like to be reminded of that. Or I'll put it in a sharper way: If the American democratic experiment had to wait for college students and professors to be on the cutting edge of social justice movements, we would be in deep trouble. Abolitionism, women's suffrage, trade union movements, civil rights movement—we had to bring the colleges and universities kicking and screaming. The anti-war movement in the 1960s is a grand exception. What form it takes in 2004, there's some question. We can talk about that.

I have a chapter in the book [*Democracy Matters*] on youth culture and the role of young folk beginning in November 1999 in Seattle. And of course we just had 1800 people arrested, the largest mass arrest in the history of New York City. Henry Hudson in 1609; it became New York in 1664 after New Amsterdam, after the Dutch went under vis-à-vis the British. New York has been around a long time. Disproportionately young people. But the Constantinian Christianity is what is so dangerous, and that stands in stark contrast to prophetic Christianity.

What do I mean by Constantinian Christianity? You all know the story of Constantine. In 312, he converts to Christianity; in 313, he decriminalizes Christianity with the Edict of Milan, and then his successor Theodosius I actually makes Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, but the Roman Empire put Jesus to death. Four hundred years later, the movement that flows around that particular Jewish brother coming out of prophetic Judaism—the Jesus movement—persecuted, its followers thrown to the lion's den. It becomes the official religion of the empire. And then Constantine goes on to persecute Gnostics, followers of Judaism, and so forth, and for so long that fusion of state and religious authority would constitute a form of authoritarianism that ought to frighten every democrat, small *d*. And we are living in a moment in which organized Constantinian Christians are a fundamental component of a deeply conservative bloc that is the social base of our president, whom you've just witnessed in the debate. They understand that very, very well. And without a serious discussion with Socratic questioning on the one hand but also prophetic witness on the other, there's no way to convince our fellow citizens of this radical distinction between this Constantinian Christian project and the prophetic Christian project, and that includes acknowledging—and brother Mark mentioned some of those—the William Sloane Coffins, and the Dorothy Days, and the Daniel Berrigans and the Phil Berrigans. This, of course, applies to other religions as well. We've got Constantinian Judaism, we've got Constantinian Jewish brothers and sisters now. You would think with all of the hatred and vicious programs and attempted annihilation they would always have a deep suspicion of all forms of authority. But no; now, third and fourth generation Jewish brothers and sisters believe maybe America *is* the promised land.

So maybe we ought to defer to the empire. Maybe we ought to actually cut back on our prophetic fervor and cut back on the Socratic questioning and become comfortable at the imperial table. Is it not the case that the American empire is the only major power that is fundamentally committed to the security of Israel itself? Why ought we not worry about being allies of the Mel Gibsons of this world? Constantinian Christians: They're concerned about the security of Israel; they believe all Jews must come together before Christ comes back and sends them to a place that Dante described. Boy, that's desperation, but that's part of the conservative bloc. Constantinian Christians on the one hand, deeply conservative Constantinian Jews on the other, and the fundamental core, which are the corporate elites, most of whom are fundamentally concerned with shaping the nation and the world in their interests and in their image. And where is the public discussion? Where is the *parrhesia* and the fearless speech about this? At a moment in which slowly it seems we're sliding down a slope with more and more division,

polarization, balkanization, and yet so very little discussion on so many of these crucial issues.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Is it possible to conceive of the security of the Israeli state, which is so very precious, and also respond to the cry for justice of Palestinians? Is it ever possible that any peoples or nation can secure stability as they occupy and subjugate another people? How long does one think that situation can last without it becoming even more explosive? Where's the conversation here? Why is it so difficult to be pro-justice and support the security of the Israeli state and justice for the Palestinians simultaneously? You don't have to be a rocket scientist. And we can go on and on. There's a whole host of issues.

One of the reasons why I spent so much time with Ralph Nader and others was the issue of the criminal justice system and the prison industrial complex. Angela Davis has done magnificent work in making these connections. But it gets worse and worse. And we end up with a very, very emaciated and eviscerated public conversation with our elected officials.

I want to bring this to a close to save time for questions. I started out by talking about what I think we look like at our best, in addition to the Greek invention of the Socratic, its high-quality questioning, its willingness to pursue painful modes of scrutiny, beginning with ourselves individually and in society and the world and with the Jewish invention of the prophetic, which is always a standard that we fail and get at the same time and we ought to still pursue.

There is a third pillar of what I call the black invention of the blues, and it has to do with the tragicomic hope which is qualitatively different from mainstream American optimism. And I'm thoroughly convinced that there's no way that we are going to deal with these post-9/11 blues without a blues sensibility that the days of America being on automatic regarding its optimistic future are over. And in fact, in some ways they've always been over for certain people. The question is, as the American democratic experiment has grown old, the challenge is for that experiment to really grow up. James Baldwin used to say that innocence itself is the crime prior to the committing of the concrete crime. And optimism. George Santayana put it so well in his essay on William James. He said, "Americans believe they're always already on the right track," so even if they fear they may have done something wrong, like the prison in Iraq, it's just an abnormal, aberrational thing that couldn't have anything to do with who we fundamentally are.

He says, "Well, you've got to check yourself." That wonderful moment in Melville's *Pierre* where he says, "Look at that Christian gentleman dressed so sharp and beautifully, and yet just a few weeks ago he kicked his slave in the head, and three years ago he shot down an Indian." So you get an Indian annihilator and a slaveholder dressed so smoothly, speaks with such eloquence, hiding and concealing his dark side. You see that in the vanilla suburbs, hiding and concealing the decrepit school systems in chocolate cities, hiding and concealing the inadequate childcare, unavailable health care, shortage

of jobs of any quality, and yet still the sugar-coating. That sugar-coating is associated with the optimism.

Well, when you look at the American democratic experiment through the lens of empire and race, you don't end up trashing the American democratic experiment because you begin to keep track of those heroic citizens, past and present, who wrestle with the anti-democratic dogmas and realities. But you also begin to see that maybe the optimism is childish. Maybe that white literary blues man, Tennessee Williams, in his first collection of plays called *American Blues*, the American Hamlet, Blanche in the *Streetcar Named Desire*, has something to teach us. Maybe the greatest American playwright, Eugene O'Neill, in *The Iceman Cometh*, the land of pipe dreams that hides and conceals nightmares, has something to tell us. It's no accident that it is primarily the artists and the activists and the intellectuals who have been willing to engage in the *parrhesia* and the truth-telling, who have been willing to bear the prophetic witness and who have a tragicomic hope like Robert Johnson and Ma Rainey. Like John Coltrane. His *A Love Supreme* is in no way optimistic; he's in profound pain wrestling with darkness. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is in no way optimistic at all, but it's full of hope. James Baldwin's masterful essays are in no way optimistic, but they're full of hope. Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On?" is in no way optimistic, but full of hope.

Do we have what it takes to mature as a civilization? It's an open question, but one of the ways we attempt to do that is to have these kinds of forums like the Aurora Forum, to have conversations, to try to make it contagious so that Socratic questioning and prophetic witness and a tragicomic hope begin to make sense to more people as we wrestle with this darkness in the tunnel, and if we don't make it out of the tunnel.... It reminds me in some ways of Henry Hollins Garnett and the first time black people ever organized in Philadelphia in 1835. He stepped up to the lectern as one of the first speakers and he said, "I don't want any of you to confuse the situation of black people with those of the Israelites in the Old Testament; for black people, Pharaoh is on both sides of the bloody Red Sea. So I might sing a song." That's the raw stuff of the blues. A song of despair like the mumbling words of Beckett's clowns in *Waiting for Godot*. As long as you can mumble a thing, absolute despair has not overtaken you. There's still some distance, some transcendence from the darkness, and most Americans are ill-equipped and unacquainted with that kind of darkness, but it's not a function of skin pigmentation. Faulkner knows what I'm talking about. George Gershwin knows what I'm talking about. Stephen Sondheim knows what I'm talking about. These are artists in the American democratic tradition who are willing to be both deep-sea divers and come up full of not optimism but hope, and they recognize that if in the end the democratic project goes under, as it well might if we don't muster the courage to think critically and to care and to hope, then we go down swinging like Ella Fitzgerald and Mohammad Ali with grace, style, and a smile, and hope that the seeds that we've planted will somewhere sprout. But we're not at that point yet. Thank you all so very much.

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**Gonnerman:** Thank you, Dr. West. To think critically, to care, and to hope...  
The Aurora Forum is about public conversation, so let's open up the microphones.

**Question from the Audience:** One thing I thought would be helpful as a solution is if we could get a group of people to identify the the faceless people we don't know about who seem to be able to control the media and are the reason why we can't see you on television, the reason why we have to come to an intellectual forum to see you. If we could get groups of departments in the university to do market research and to expose these people who have power or responsibility and present these findings, and say, "Hey, why can't we have dialogue on television like this and expose this stuff?" I think people would really catch on fire. That's why they like Michael Moore, because even though he might be biased, he still has these research findings, and the masses of people are hungry for the truth. That's one way to be contagious: To do market research and expose these faceless people who are working to support things that aren't real.

**West:** I appreciate your comments. In my own case, I'm probably on television too much because I'm so visible, and I always tell them to try to get other voices, and so forth. But if we're talking about institutionalizing the kind of discourse you're talking about—critical disclosure of powers often behind closed curtains, shadow governmental activities, and so on—and making that public, then that is a very positive thing. I think of someone like Jon Stewart now, who is actually becoming more and more influential. He moves in that direction. That's very important. Amy Goodman's another. I wish Amy Goodman were on regular TV. But we need more doing of this kind of thing. The problem in part is that we're in a system now where if the corporate elite felt they could make big, big dollars putting progressives on television, they would do it because their fundamental loyalty is to profit. But they feel as if they don't have a large enough market out there. Too many fellow Americans sleepwalking, distracted. We've got wonderful books out there; we've got some very important texts out there, but it's hard to make them as visible and salient as they ought to be because so many folks are sleepwalking and distracted.

And of course I think we also have to recognize that we live in a celebrity-driven, entertainment-saturated culture, and conservative fellow citizens tend to be much more entertaining. From the Fox Channel to brother Rush and so forth. It's not just politics. There's a certain histrionic dimension that brings people in. I was just talking to Al Franken about this. The liberals and progressives are trying to wake up and say, "How do we fashion a rhetoric and a style that makes it appealing?" And the same is true right now in youth culture with hip-hop. For so long, Constantinian hip-hop rather than prophetic hip-hop. Hegemonic, right? Defer to the empire. The paraphernalia of the empire is what? Money, status, size—just like Constantinian Christianity. Mega-churches, size, status, no serious talk about justice. Prosperity quest—that's true for Constantinian Christianity, it's true for Constantinian hip-hop, it's true for Constantinian Judaism, it's true for Constantinian Buddhism, it's true for Constantinian scholarship.

Intellectuals have played a fundamental role in making imperialism attractive. It's not just neo-conservatives; it cuts across the board. Centuries. "Well, maybe we should

reconsider whether in fact something like imperialism contributed to the Philippines in the 1890s and their uplift.” Well, you killed a quarter of a million of ‘em; start with that. You see what I mean? But no, they downplay that, and we go on and on in this regard.

So that what you’re pointing to in part is that I want to encourage you and say, we do have fellow citizens already doing what you said. They just haven’t surfaced with enough power. From youth to scholarship, and so forth, but the dominant tendency is still going the other way. In that sense, I think we’re still living in an ice age. I think since Reagan, it’s been an ice age. Anytime it’s fashionable to be indifferent to other people’s suffering, that’s an ice age. Something’s wrong with that. Anytime it’s possible to turn your back on your most vulnerable.... For instance, 20 percent of America’s children live in poverty in the richest nation in the history of the world. It’s a disgrace. 40 percent of black and brown; 45 percent of red children live in poverty in the richest nation in the world, richest empire in the world. That’s the most vulnerable. You say, “My God, what’s going on?” By the time you get to your workers, commodities, dispensable commodities, just a moment in the profit margin measure, and so forth and so on, and you say, “There’s a spiritual vacuity in this civilization.” And they try to respond with charity more than anything else. Privatized giving, that’s a beautiful thing. I’m a Christian myself. I can appreciate people wanting to give, but what about the structural inequality? The Bush administration is trying to privatize and deregulate the major programs right across the board, and the Constantinian Christians are trying to get in on the goodies. More and more black churches, which have been the source of so much of prophetic, Socratic, tragicomic engagement in America.... I won’t go into the crisis of black churches right now, but it’s important because you get a crisis in the black church and it leads to a crisis of black leadership. A crisis of black leadership means the progressive voices are diminished. When progressive voices are diminished, people begin to think that, lo and behold, there’s no major alternative at all, because historically the dogma of white supremacy has lent itself to certain voices to highlight that dogma and end up talking about what? Wealth and equality, male supremacy....

**Question from the Audience:** Do you see the union of those possibilities as a solution for freeing the human spirit? Is this a strategy that you are suggesting that we implement? And how can we utilize that concept to free the human spirit?

**West:** I appreciate the question. I would suggest in part that there ought to be a convergence. I don’t think that the Socratic and the prophetic are ever identical, partly because of what I mentioned before. I think the Socratic for the most part has to do with preserving intellectual integrity and moral consistency. But it does not deal with the visceral. It doesn’t deal with the silent lament and the heartbreak and heartache of what it means to be demonized, subjugated, and so forth. Socrates did not have that. He may not have had the capacity. Leo Strauss and others suggest that he did not know how to love concrete others. That’s a very powerful move. We know in the *Symposium* he doesn’t love concrete others. In Plato’s rendering, he loves the ideals, the abstractions, the perfect versions of, rather than the persons right there in all of their incompleteness and all of their brokenness, what Emerson calls one’s “halfness” that gives one a sense of the comic, the incongruity shot through all of us. Socrates shied away from that. Now

we raise the question, was Socrates married? You would think he would have had some training ground for wrestling with some of this stuff. Yes, he was. He had kids, and Xanthippe was a challenge to him. When he was on his deathbed, she cried, and what did Socrates say? “Get her out of here. I can’t deal with that. I’m about noble self-mastery, and her tears are overflowing. She’s out of control.” You don’t say, Socrates. She loves you, brother. She’s watching you die. People tend to cry when they see their loved ones going. It’s unclear that he fully grasped it, but these are all speculations.

So the prophetic is going to start there, and the overlap has to do with what the great Josiah Royce—a California philosopher from Grass Valley who taught at Berkeley for about twelve years and then taught at Harvard for about forty years—said, “The spirituality of genuine doubting must be connected with the spirituality of genuine compassion.” I think that does free the human spirit in its multidimensional sense. It’s not anti-intellectual, but it doesn’t make the intellect a kind of idol detached from heart and soul. And it doesn’t become just soupy heart and soul talk because you’ve got Socratic questioning also connected. And I mentioned that something like *A Love Supreme* by John Coltrane actually enacts the spirituality of genuine doubting with the spirituality of genuine compassion. This is raising some very frightening questions. Yeats is right when he says it takes more courage to dig deep in the dark soul of one’s own heart than it does for a soldier to fight on the battlefield. That’s why great artists are more courageous than most of us because they’re willing to dig, whereas the soldier just takes orders—“Go do it! Go do it!” That’s not the same kind of courage. No, not the same kind of courage at all.

Socrates, Emerson, and the others—these are courageous folk because they’re soul questioners. In the prophetic tradition, Jacob, in the thirty-second chapter of Genesis, wrestles with the angel of death and comes up with a new name, and the new name means what? Israel means “God wrestler.” He’s wrestling with something that’s greater than he is that pulls out of him something that surprises him, and he then has to be reborn, as it were, with a new name and a new way of being and so forth and so on. That’s the beginning of an answer to your question.

I’m not sure this is really a strategy or a tactic. It’s more of what I’m calling the raw stuff of a democratic experiment, and I believe in a family of democracies. I have a whole chapter [in *Democracy Matters*] on Islam and democracy and the wonderful movement of Islamic intellectuals who are trying to understand democracy in Islamic terms so that popular sovereignty, the consent of the governed, is compatible with divine sovereignty. It reminds you in some ways of the early Christian thinkers trying to wrestle with these notions given the fact that one billion of our brothers and sisters on the globe are of Islamic faith and Islam is here to stay. The question is, How do you Socratize Islam? How do you make democratic ideals part and parcel of the Islamic tradition in ways in which Christianity and Judaism are wrestling and have wrestled with how to make democratic practices, if not consistent, at least able to coexist with Christian conceptions of the world and Judaic conceptions of the world, and so on? And of course they have much, much to learn from our radically secular brothers and sisters who don’t have that kind of baggage, don’t have the cognitive commitments to God-talk and a whole host of

other things. And in some ways they're freed up, but there might be some dogma waiting for them in a secular form.

Professor Rorty and I wrestled with this for over 30 years in terms of his radical secularity, which I am very much attracted to, and at the same time, I say, "Well, does that itself become idolatrous?" I use the prophetic language here, "idolatrous," which is to say, blinding. If you have a sense of the comic, then you know that this is incomplete, it's always unfinished, it always has cracks in it even if it's radically secular. I know I've got cracks in my Christian faith; I've read too much Kierkegaard not to know that. So I proceed...I start with that. In that sense, Montaigne and Kierkegaard have already prepared Christians for the big cracks in their tradition and faith. But the challenge of secular brothers and sisters, of course, is to wrestle with that. But we've got some other questions.

**Question from the Audience:** All over the world, people are going through hell to come to America. Even the poorest American seems to live a better life than most of the rest of the world. If America isn't on the right track, then what place is on the right track and why aren't people trying to get there?

**West:** I appreciate the question. People wanted to get to the Roman Empire because it had most of the resources and it had most of the innovations, and so forth. People have one life to live. The average age of death in Ethiopia is 44, and you say, "My God, it would be nice to live in Palo Alto." That's not an affirmation of how magnificent America is. That's simply acknowledgment that America has unbelievable levels of prosperity. But having unbelievable levels of prosperity doesn't necessarily mean that you're on the right track. It doesn't mean you're on the wrong track either, but it doesn't mean you're on the right track. The question is, how is it that America has been able to preserve its *parrhesia*, its rights and liberties? The U.S. Patriotic Act I, Patriotic Act II, Patriotic Act III—well, they made our rights and liberties become more tenuous, and so forth.

Let's look at it this way, too: There are other places in the world that have magnificent things to offer. I have some friends who say that if Bush wins, they're going other places. There are other places to be. I'm not going other places because I believe America has much to offer, but I say that in a spirit of humility. What did Eugene O'Neill say? Eugene O'Neill said he would not live any other place in the world; but for him, America was the most tragic of all social experiments only because its conception of itself was so high and its performance fell so short. And that's very different, because what it says about itself is so unbelievable, but what the practice.... Now, of course, he was writing *The Iceman Cometh* in 1939 in California—the greatest play ever written in America, written in California. I remind folks in New York of that, especially on Broadway. But it's not a putdown of America. People will continually come to the richest nation in the world because they want access to housing, shelter, and so forth, but how is that prosperity actually approved? How is it distributed? They would rather be in the richest empire in the world in which one percent of the population owns 48 percent of the net financial wealth—that's oligarchy and plutocratic—but there's still enough wealth

and prosperity around so that you're right: Even the poor Americans can live better than their poor brothers and sisters in Guatemala, or in Sudan, or in pockets of India. You're absolutely right. But we understand why they want to make the move.

Now let me end with this, though. I have been produced, in part, by a tradition in which the largest mass movement of black people ever led by a black leader, its aim was to leave America. Marcus Garvey. America was Egypt, not the promised land. It's true that the Ku Klux Klan wanted to cooperate with Garvey, get rid of the Negro, send 'em out, and so forth and so on, and Garvey did in fact create an alliance at the end with the Ku Klux Klan. It got him in deep trouble and DuBois was very upset about it. But I say that, saying what? That there are some folk who have actually helped build America. There are some folk whose blood, sweat, and tears have contributed to the prosperity and they have decided to stay. And yet in deciding to stay, they are not necessarily saying that America is always on the right track. They're saying that America is still open to some change and reform, and that's precisely what I think is what's one of the most precious things about any democratic experiment. It is subject to revision. It can, in fact, be changed if citizens are courageous enough to do it.

That's a long answer to your question, but you see the point that I'm making. It's not just a question of where people are going at all. If I see people moving to New York City rather than to Boise, Idaho, that doesn't mean they have anything against Idaho. People want to be in New York City for excitement; people want to be in New York City because it offers a whole host of different things. It doesn't necessarily mean that New York City is on the right track at all. It could be a rather decadent place; people could be attracted to decadence. Idaho could be on the cutting edge spiritually, and so forth and so on. I'm open to that possibility. The *demos* can be wrong about this, or they can be right.

**Question from the Audience:** I am wondering about your thoughts on the economic system. For example, in a sense, polarization creates opportunities in our economic system. For example, wars create opportunities that we can capitalize on in all senses of the word. What kind of changes can we make to convert corporate power into a more positive force?

**West:** I appreciate the question. I think it's very important to keep in mind who is that "we" that you have in mind when you say, "We can capitalize on..." I mean, Halliburton Company has been able to capitalize very well on the war. When I go into black churches and ask, "How many of you have relatives in the army?" 75 percent of them raise their hands, because I know the army of the American empire is disproportionately lower-middle class, working class, and black and brown. They are not capitalizing on that war; they're dying, you see. There's that moment in Michael Moore's movie [*Fahrenheit 9/11*] where he talks about how many of the members of Congress have children in the army. They had one in the House; it's eight as a whole. Well, if I'm going into black churches and I'm seeing 75 percent—I've got cousins myself over there—I'm concerned about soldiers; they're human beings. But they're disproportionately black, brown, and working-class and lower middle class. So they're

not able to capitalize the same way Halliburton capitalizes. The “we” is going to be floating here. We want to be very specific as to who the “we” is or how we define the “we,” as it were.

Corporate power. I have two quick things to say about that. One is that when I talk about corporate elites, I’m primarily talking about ways in which they’re able to exercise power and clout. Now corporate elites are human beings, and the CEO of Microsoft is not the same as the CEO of American Express, and so on, which means that there’s a diversity and a variety even among corporate elites. They are human beings and they’re trying to bend market forces that are greater than they are to their own advantage to sustain their enterprises. So that there’s no doubt that they can be used for good in a certain sense. It’s just that the profit motive is so overriding that if doing good does not allow them to sustain their high levels of profits, they can’t do it because the profits themselves are going to trump. If they’re able to do both, and capitalism at its best has attempted to allow corporate elites to do both...but the tilt is always toward the profit motive, and the profit motive is one that has cast working people’s status as a secondary motive.

And as a democrat, small *d*, here one can actually learn from Marx, and of course it’s almost blasphemy to talk about Karl Marx in 2004. Karl Marx for me is an extension of Socratic questioning and the Jewish invention of prophetic witness. He’s talking about injustice the way Hosea did in a very analytically sophisticated language. Sometimes he’s wrong, sometimes he’s right, but he’s keeping track of the social misery and he says, “You know what? You’re going to end up with a system with oligopolies and monopolies. You’re going to end up with elites at the top, distancing themselves from the workers. You’re going to end up with those elites having very little accountability vis-à-vis those workers.” You say, “Karl, you died in 1883 but you’ve got a point. 2004! You’ve got a point!” We can cast aside the outdated and anachronistic aspects, but when you really get at the core of what his vision is, it’s still a challenge, and in some ways, it’s even more of a challenge because we don’t have strong workers but we have a fascinating anti-sweat shop movement at work in India and Italy and Argentina and Los Angeles, Las Vegas. You’ve got workers going on strike in San Francisco right now, right? Three hotels. If I have time, I’m going to march with them while I’m here just to keep things real.

**Question from the Audience:** You spoke about Socratic questioning as a foliage that often doesn’t bear fruit, and connected that to the university. To what extent do you see the institution thriving on the fact that its Socratic foliage doesn’t bear fruit? Does the dogma sometimes waiting for the intellectual at the institution inform the character of that institution, perhaps even this institution in particular?

**West:** That’s a very deep question. I think that you have to look at two things. First, you look at the political economy of the institution. We know, since the 1960s, that the varying processes of rationalization and bureaucratization have been moving at a very fast rate in the institutions. You look at the professional staff, you look at all the various bureaucrats in the university; more and more now it’s tied to commercialization and

commodification, the money-raising, to make sure in fact that the endowment is in place, connected to Wall Street, playing hedge funds, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah. That's how these institutions are able to reproduce themselves in addition to alumni giving. Now these particular realities are not imposing severe constraints because the universities are broad enough to have a dialogue. Sometimes it's a robust dialogue that goes beyond the dialogue on television—conservative vs. neo-liberal. Universities have radical democrats, conservative liberals, and so forth and so on. Students get exposed to it. Those students who are bred and disciplined like yourself, who gain access to the Stanfords of the world, are a very, very small slice, a very small slice. You're blessed to be here; Stanford's blessed that you're here. But I think at the same time there are still going to be some significant limitations and silences and blindnesses in the frameworks in which people talk about a variety of different issues. I'll give you one quick example and then I'll stop.

If you were to look in the curricula of Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, or what have you, and look at all the courses on modernity—just look at it, modernity. And they'll talk about the nation-state, they'll talk about capitalism, they'll talk about bureaucracy, they'll talk about objectification, and they'll talk about normalization. But how many will talk about white supremacy in that course on modernity? And yet racialization is fundamental in the shaping of the modern world, be it laborers in the New World—you have five Africans who came to the New World for every European between 1492 and 1820—and yet the discovery of the New World went hand in hand with the reconstitution of an institution called slavery that had died since the twelfth century in Europe. Now David Brion Davis and other towering figures have been trying to get us to say that we talk about modernity and modernism and postmodernism and all these little fancy buzzwords, and yet no serious engagement of—I'm not talking about Stanford; I'm talking about other institutions—but generally speaking, there's a downplaying. And that's just one example. Gender could be another, but actually there's more discourse on gender than there is on race and modernity. And it shouldn't be raised solely by black intellectuals and brown intellectuals; it should be raised by any intellectual concerned about truth with a small *t*, knowledge with a small *k*. How are you going to understand the fact that a whole democratic experiment called America has been shaped by Jim Crow practices with some folk going to the front of the bus and others going to the back? Where did that come from? How can you be a European and step off the boat and go to the front of a Jim Crow train, and black folk who have been there seven generations are still going to the back? It is not the fault of the immigrants; they didn't even know they were white. They had to be taught that they were white. They didn't even know what whiteness is. It's true. The Italians come; "I'm Sicilian. I've been fighting the northern Italians all my life. Don't call me a white so-and-so." Then they look at black people; "Oh, I'm getting the point." That's called Americanization. And that's just one example. We can talk about other parts. Brazil. We can talk about India, we can talk about the modern world in that broad sense.

Do you see what I mean by certain silences? That's a dogma. You can pick up a 500-page book on postmodernism; there's no reference to slave trade, no reference to slavery, no reference to racially discriminating practices, and so forth. And it's not as if people

should talk about these issues in order to be psychologically sensitive. You see, that's the American attempt to personalize it. "Oh, you're feeling bad? I want you to feel better. I'm going to include two pages on you." No, no, no, no, no, no. This is a quest for truth and knowledge, and that's what institutions of higher learning in part are all about. I'm sorry to have gone on about that, but it's a very important question.

**Question from the Audience:** I have a question about religion and politics. I think there's an understanding that liberals, particularly intellectuals, tend to be a little bit apologetic or distanced from their religious convictions. President Bush, I think, has made it more mainstream in the time he's been in office where it's acceptable to make more references to your convictions and your beliefs. It seems like a change in the public sphere. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about where you think this is headed. Do you think that—and I know it may depend on the way the election turns out—but in the next ten years do you see that happening more so that we are increasingly different from the average European, or do you think there will be a change from that going forward so there will be less leveraging of religion for political gain or political purpose?

**West:** Unfortunately, I think it's actually going to increase. In some ways, it goes back to Jimmy Carter. And I think it's very important to keep in mind. I tell this story in the book that organized Constantinian Christianity was a direct response to Martin Luther King's attempt to bring together prophetic religious folk to break the back of American apartheid. The big difference was that the corporate elites saw that if they financed and funded in a significant way Constantinian Christians—deeply right-wing Christians—that it would actually hide and conceal a whole host of other policies taking place: disinvestment from cities, and so on and so forth. And they also saw that it was a race-coded discourse. One of the crucial components of organized Constantinian Christianity was the movement against busing, the movement against welfare, the movement against affirmative action. These are all racially coded discourses in American politics. And it's located in the South, so you get the southernization of American politics, which resulted in a realignment of American politics with that bloc of the South that had been tied to a white supremacist Democratic Party, more and more now making a shift to the Republican Party. And the Republicans saw this very clearly in 1968 when George Wallace got 12.8 percent of the votes as a Democrat, appealing explicitly to race-coded issues. And so organized Constantinian Christianity—Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and others—directly connected to the white backlash against Martin's movement, in which Martin made it possible to talk about one's religious convictions in a public context linked to democratic aims.

I think it's getting worse and worse, and the notion of there being equal treatment under the law, be one agnostic, atheist, Latitudinarian, Unitarian, Jewish, Buddhist, and so forth, is something that prophetic Christians have to fight for because the coercive character of a nation that is disproportionately Christian can easily spill over into a practice in which there is not equal treatment under the law. And of course it lends itself to political manipulation, I think. In some ways, whether Bush is sincere or not—he may be very sincere, Constantine could have been very sincere—I don't know.... As a Christian, I don't like to get inside other people's souls. I just look at their behavior.

Constantine's behavior was not Christian to me in terms of concern with the weak and so forth. He was a conqueror; he was an imperial emperor. George Bush's behavior flies in the face of Proverbs 14:31: "He who oppresses and overlooks the poor insults the Maker; he who is in solidarity with the poor elevates the Maker." Is he in solidarity with the poor? It doesn't look like it, but if that is the case, then he and his Maker have some tension, deep tension, and that's just the Hebrew scripture. That's just one verse. I speak to a lot of fundamentalist Christians all the time. I say, "Well, if you're going to be fundamentalist, let me pick out some verses for you: 'Love thy neighbor.' Start with that. Not, love thy neighbor, but gay brothers or lesbian sisters or Jews or so on and so forth. Just 'Love thy neighbor.'" Just let the fundamentalists and literalists start with that one right there. Start with that one. Just stay stuck on that for about five years: Proverbs 14:31 and Micah 6:8, and so forth and so on. "Well, brother West, you're going to be meddling with that," and I say, "Exactly. That's why I'm here, to unsettle."

**Question from the Audience:** I'm a Palestinian. At the age of nine and ten, I was actually one of these kids who held stones in their hands and simply threw them at the Israelis. I don't remember if I knew what I was doing, but I thought this was what life was all about. Even though at the age of nine I don't think I had any idea about the growth of Socratism, but I think I had so many questions. I asked my parents why my grandfather was in prison, and at the same time I asked my grandmother why she lied to me about how beautiful my country was when all that I saw was rundown neighborhoods and violence. I grew to understand that much of how I lived and much of how my people live today is actually decided thousands of miles away, here in America. It took me thirteen hours to come here and tonight I watched the most important debate, and even though the two gentlemen, the president and the candidate, talked about many important topics, I did not feel that my life is worth a second in their speeches and their debate. Can you explain that to me?

**West:** I appreciate that. First, I want to say it's good to have you in the country, very much so. I think we're living at a moment where the debate and the critical exchange on the very delicate and difficult set of issues tied to the Israeli-Palestinian predicament and situation is beginning to shift in a significant way. I like to spend a lot of time in the American Jewish context, because I think that one of the ways in which we can get a serious debate on this issue is to show the various ways in which prophetic voices in the American Jewish community have been marginalized for so long and are slowly beginning to surface now. Not just the intellectual ones—the Chomskys, the Rabbi Lerner, the Susanna Heschels—but everyday, ordinary, sharp, courageous American Jews who are fed up with their establishmentarian institutions that support repressive policies of a Sharon. And yet they're also distrustful of critics of Israel and they're looking for some space so that their prophetic witness can actually take hold and have impact. And this is especially true, I think, for young Jewish brothers and sisters. I spend a significant amount of time in those contexts. Why is that so? It's very important because one of the ways in which we get a robust discussion about what you're talking about—Palestinian cries for justice, dealing with what it is to be an occupied people, a subjugated people—in the United States is to allow for the discussion both in the American Jewish community and outside that spills over into the mainstream press,

and so on and so forth. And I think that it's slowly beginning to tilt. It's not going to tilt for the politicians. Both Bush and Kerry are deeply conservative on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. By "deeply conservative," what I mean is they're closely attuned to security for Israel, and I agree with that. But when it comes to Palestinian suffering, it's almost invisible. And there are more and more young Jewish folks, and middle-aged Jewish folks, and I don't like a policy that in the end says that a Palestinian baby's life has less value than an Israeli baby's life in the name of the Jewish tradition itself. I don't like that. There's got to be an alternative.

Now, as you know, Gandhi's grandson [Arun Gandhi] just marched in the Middle East. That is to say, we are beginning now to see a nonviolent movement among the Palestinians. Why? Because it's very clear that it makes it more difficult for there to be any kind of dialogue coming together across the lines as long as the violence is on both sides; state terrorism on the one hand and the attacks on innocent Israeli brothers and sisters on the other, with suicide bombers and so forth. People are exploring other ways to ensure that the dialogue can broaden and deepen, and I think that one of the things we have to point out is that when you were a young brother, when you were about nine years old throwing stones, there were many young Jewish brothers who were throwing stones at British occupiers prior to 1948. That's a human thing to do in some ways. All don't do it, but many would. When you're living under occupation and you're nine years old and your grandfather is in jail—you could be Jewish, Palestinian, Sudanese, American—you're probably going to throw some stones. I'm sure I'd probably throw some stones myself in the name of Jesus. I mean, I would try to work it out, rationalize it; but look, you're messing with my granddad. It's unjust; I can't take it. But even pointing that out is very important. Why? Because people begin to see that the very folk who are occupying were once themselves using similar tactics. Sharon himself killed innocent folk in 1951 and 1952—Arab villagers. Now he's upset that other folk are killing innocent Jews. He did the same thing with Arabs. They're both wrong. Unjustifiable. Inexcusable. But very human, as wrong and ugly as it is. Now you've reached the point where you feel as if throwing stones is not enough. Is that right? Do you agree with that? Absolutely. That's right. So the question becomes that even given the rage, how do we re-channel it in such a way that dignity and justice for Palestinians become fundamental issues on the table alongside that need for security of Jews, given their history.

**Question from the Audience (continuation):** With everyone around the table. I could not do it myself. The Palestinians themselves feel weaker; they feel inferior in many ways.

**West:** I think one of the roles of those of us in the American empire is to ensure that when those folk are around the table who are Americans, they're not already so tilted and tendentious. They can say quite explicitly, "We are not ashamed of being tied to the security of a Jewish people who, historically, have been viewed as a people that people are trying to push into the sea." There's no reason to be ashamed of that. At least I'm not. We're also not ashamed to speak candidly about Israeli policies that occupy a people. Both are on the table. Now how do we begin to have a discussion? America has

never, for the most part, made that second move. Never. And yet there are voices trying to push America to do that, and that's one of the aims of what it means to develop a democratic identity in the Middle East.

That's a longer issue, but I appreciate your raising that question because that issue is going to come back with strength, especially given the fact that significant forms of gangster activity on behalf of some of those of Islamic faith have to do with the double standards of America vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian issue. You have to come to terms with that issue if you're going to minimize the mobilizing of Islamic gangsters who will attack innocent people, not just in New York, but all around the world—in Africa, in Pakistan, and so forth and so on. I don't think you ever eliminate gangsters and terrorists, but you can minimize them by hitting the issues that they are using to organize and mobilize their youth. And there's no doubt, especially with the green light that President Bush has given to the settlements.... Now America has actually said that occupation is permissible. And if that logic continues, you're in there with a full-blown apartheid condition of Palestinian peoples in which Jewish people all around the world will find themselves more isolated, more devalued, which contributes to vicious anti-Semitism. Those who are really concerned about anti-Semitism ought to be able to hit the issue and say, "Look, you ought not to be so isolated because you are more and more locking a folk in with no status, no rights, solely refugees. And international opinion will tilt more and more against you not solely because there's anti-Semitism in the world, which there is and it's pervasive, but also because your very actions are contributing to that because you're not being treated fairly by the U.S. empire. You're protected by the empire, and that empire has its own double standards, and you, in fact, are a major beneficiary." One could go on and on. 50 percent of U.S. foreign aid goes to Israel and Egypt. 50 percent. 33 percent just to Israel. That's six million people. Five hundred dollars for every Israeli, a dime for every African. Once that discourse becomes even more and more pervasive, people are going to wonder, What the heck is going on here? What's going on here? There are other regions in the world that are in deep need of foreign aid. And then you've got to tell that story. It becomes more and more challenging, more and more unsettling, and more and more indispensable in terms of facing it in the name of democratic ideals. It's painful across the board.

**Question from the Audience:** I don't understand how the Christian fundamentalism of William Jennings Bryan raving against the cross of gold morphs into the fundamentalism of Falwell and Pat Robertson embracing that gold and that mammon.

**West:** William Jennings Bryan, the Populist candidate in 1896 who then fused with the Democratic party? Well, it's an interesting historical question because there are certain continuities. That is to say, Protestant Christian fundamentalism has always been shot through with a certain anti-Semitism, a certain xenophobia, a certain pro-imperialist orientation for the most part, and yet it has been Populist, which is critical of certain elites, especially in the South. And so there are some continuities there. What has happened is that the Populist component connected to social justice has dropped out and much of the xenophobia is still there, especially geared toward gay brothers and lesbian sisters. The animosity toward black people tends to go subterranean; it goes

underground. Bob Jones gets up and says, “Look, we love black people. We just didn’t want the white sisters going out with the black brothers, but we changed our mind and we’re sorry about that.”

It’s unfashionable to be explicitly against Negroes in that way today, even among the Christian right, but they can be explicitly against gay brothers and lesbian sisters, and so on. It’s very fashionable. In fact, you can gain status and big financial support by trashing gay brothers and lesbian sisters for the Christian right. You can’t get that doing that to black people. So the xenophobia is continuous; it just shifts. The patriarchy, of course, is continuous in terms of women having second-class status, both then and now. So there are some continuities here, but you’re right, there are some discontinuities, too. There was a Populist impulse that had to do with social justice that was very critical of corporate power and what have you, and that is completely lost in Falwell and Robertson and Ralph Reed and others who have been mainstreamed and streamlined into the White House and so forth and so on, and they’re highly influential. And of course this election hangs in part on whether they can continually mobilize Constantinian Christians or whether we can crack that in some way.

**Gonnerman:** Dr. West. It’s nine-thirty. Shall we call it an evening?

**West:** Well, let me see. It’s twelve-thirty in New York. One last question.

**Question from the Audience:** Dr. West, do we have what it takes to mature as a civilization? Does the United States of America have what it takes to realize its own mistakes, to begin to repair its own consciousness, and can we bear the outcome?

**West:** Very good question. I think that the answer to that question is like the conclusion of an Aristotelian syllogism, which is action, praxis. You never know what the future holds because our action is a fundamental variable in what that future is. If we’re able to act courageously in a visionary way, we can produce things that we’d thought maybe we could not, but it depends on what kinds of action, what kinds of courage—intellectual action, moral action, political action, and so forth. Think of *Moby Dick*. He [Melville] ends the novel with the coffin-lid raft, like Ralph Ellison’s raft of hope. “Call me Ishmael.” Son of a slave. He’s shaped by that multi-racial solidarity on that floating factory. That’s Melville. Does Melville end with complete darkness? No, even though it’s modeled on *King Lear*, there’s still a raft of hope, and that raft of hope is some sense of possibility. For me, when I look in the eyes of young children of all colors and say, “You’ve got to live here, and I was once a child and folks looked in my eyes and said, ‘We’re going to do all that we can to make the world better....’” I say, “I’m going to do all that I can to make the world better for them, in their sacred honor and in light of what has produced me and them, we do all that we can do.” In that sense, we are not spectators of history, looking and saying, “Oh, my God, it looks so bad. The darkness is overwhelming. Let’s go to the crack house and have a drink.” No. It’s, “I’m in the mess. I can make a difference in the mess. Let’s see whether in fact some hope can be preserved and some praxis can actually have impact.”

**Gonnerman:** Thank you, Dr. West.

The Aurora Forum will convene next on November 4 for a post-election town hall meeting hosted by Amy Goodman. Thank you for joining us tonight.

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**Dr. Cornel West** is the Class of 1943 University Professor of Religion at Princeton University. In this Aurora Forum program he discussed themes and ideas from his latest book, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*.

Cornel West was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1953 and grew up in Sacramento, California. In just three years he earned his bachelor's degree from Harvard in the Near Eastern Languages and Literature program with a concentration in biblical Hebrew and Aramaic. During these same years he made weekly trips to teach in Norfolk State Prison, was active in Harvard's Black Student Organization, and learned to strike the balance between serious intellectual work and frontline political action that remains a pronounced feature of his extraordinary life.

From Harvard he went to Princeton where he earned a doctorate in philosophy under the guidance of political philosopher Sheldon Wolin. At Princeton he met Richard Rorty, the philosopher whose deep interest in American pragmatism moved West to develop the "prophetic pragmatist" position that serves as the foundation for his highly original contributions to American thought.

Professor West served on the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in New York from 1977-83. He then moved to Yale Divinity School where he taught from 1984-87. He returned to Union Seminary in 1988, and then took up the directorship of the Afro-American Studies Program at Princeton from 1989-94. Then, in 1994, he became Professor of Religion and African-American Studies at Harvard. In 1999 he was appointed the first Alphonse Fletcher Jr. University Professor at Harvard, a position he held until his return in 2002 to what he calls "the great humanistic conversation" at Princeton.

Professor West has authored numerous books, including the American Book Award-winning *Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism*, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, *Race Matters*, *Keeping Faith*, *The Cornel West Reader*, and, as co-editor, *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*. He has also produced two spoken word CDs, *Sketches of My Culture* and the just-released *Street Knowledge*.

### Comments?

We welcome your comments and suggestions via email to [auroraforum@stanford.edu](mailto:auroraforum@stanford.edu) or via the feedback form on our website <http://auroraforum.org>

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