

CORNEL WEST'S CHALLENGE TO THE CATHOLIC EVASION OF BLACK THEOLOGY

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[The author contends that the thought of Cornel West is an underutilized resource for overcoming the marginalization of Black and womanist theology. His multidisciplinary and pragmatic approach to the question of what it means to be human challenges us to take seriously the interrelationship of various forms of oppression as a theological problem. Instead of countercultural, liberationist, post-modern, or public theologies, we need to combine these insights in the development of a more integral theology, an approach in which the perspectives of Black theologians must be central.]

CATHOLIC THEOLOGIANS in the 21st century continue to join other theologians and scholars of religion in the ongoing task of addressing the sociopolitical dimensions of Christian faith.¹ God has been proclaimed a practical idea to be interpreted and enacted contextually; there is widespread agreement therefore that the meaning and truth of Christian beliefs cannot be adequately investigated without consideration of the relation between those beliefs and the specific social structures, power relations, and political interests at stake in the situations in which those beliefs are held.² Yet the racism so deeply entrenched in the social structures and power relations in the United States remains a surprisingly marginal issue in U.S. Catholic theology, even in our political and liberationist theologies,

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¹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented in 2000 at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion and at the University of Notre Dame's Erasmus Institute. I thank the participants of the Black Theology Group and of the Erasmus Institute for their thoughtful responses, as well as Professors Jean Porter and Theodore Burgh for their helpful comments on earlier drafts.

² For an emphatic and influential statement of the practical nature of belief in God, see Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury, 1980) esp. 51.

as a recent thematic issue of *Theological Studies* has reminded us. Why, as Jamie Phelps asks, are U.S. Catholic theologians so much more likely to address Latin American liberation theology and the U.S. role in the oppression of the Third World than to engage Black liberation theology and the racism (especially against African-Americans) within their own communities and churches?³

To be sure, contemporary liberation theologians largely agree, as Peter Phan has recently noted, that oppressions “are often interlocked with each other and mutually reinforcing, so that any genuine liberation theology anywhere must fight against all forms of oppression.”⁴ Racism is commonly identified as one of these major forms of oppression, and White feminist theologians especially have acknowledged the importance of the perspectives on racism and other injustices that are being articulated by womanist theologians and other people of color. Still, it seems undeniable that racism as a theological topic, and the Black and womanist theologies that address it, remain marginal even in liberationist Catholic theologies in the United States.

It is my contention here that whatever bias and discomfort may be involved in this evasion of American racism, the marginalization of Black theology is also assisted by the methodological limitations of our current political theologies in the United States. Further, I will argue that the work of Cornel West, professor of Afro-American studies and of the philosophy of religion at Harvard University, can helpfully guide our efforts to overcome these limitations. With good reason, there has been a proliferation recently both in the specific injustices considered theologically, and in the methods of analyses used to address them, a proliferation that is an appropriate, necessary, and fertile part of the field of contemporary theology. Yet with so many facets of an interlocking oppression to address, there is also a risk that we will focus on those topics that are least threatening (to ourselves, to our society, and to our Church), while perhaps paying polite lip service to the importance of (someone else) addressing the very injustices in which we are most directly implicated. I will argue here that the unity of West’s intellectual work, especially as rooted in the experience of his struggle to live meaningfully as a late modern American, suggests possibilities for the development of a similarly rooted and unified U.S. political theology, one that is not less multifaceted or interdisciplinary but that is

³ See the thematic issue of *Theological Studies* 61, no. 4 (2000) 603–747 on “The Catholic Reception of Black Theology,” especially the article by Jamie T. Phelps, “Communion Ecclesiology and Black Liberation Theology,” *ibid.* 672–99.

⁴ Peter C. Phan, “Method in Liberation Theologies,” *Theological Studies* 61 (2000) 40–63, at 41.

more conscious of and committed to its location in the United States and so less able to marginalize Black theology and discussions of racism.

My argument here is developed in three steps. First, I briefly describe what I take to be the four major and largely distinct forms of politically-engaged theologies in the United States today. This description serves to clarify the theological discussions that provide the context for my reading of West and for which I appropriate his insights. Second, I analyze West's work, highlighting the unity of his project and the method that integrates his diverse writings. Finally, I develop the implications of his thought for the four theological approaches previously identified, with specific attention to the manner in which West's insights confirm as well as challenge some of the presuppositions of these four approaches. His work, I argue, points to the possibility of more productive collaboration among these different theologies and ultimately to a more truly liberating and less racist Catholic theology.

CURRENT U.S. POLITICAL THEOLOGIES

While the plurivocal situation of contemporary theology defies any strict categorization, nevertheless I believe it is possible to distinguish four major forms of politically engaged Christian theology in the United States today, each of which has had some influence on developments in Catholic theology. Most obviously political and most common in Catholic theology are perhaps the "liberationist" theologies, which focus on one or more particular issue(s) of injustice, such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, poverty, and environmental degradation. These liberationist theologies attempt to uncover the ways in which Christian beliefs have contributed to the legitimization of injustice; they also seek to reformulate Christian faith so that it supports a liberating rather than an oppressive ethos. Rosemary Ruether's feminist theology and James Cone's Black theology are well-known representatives of this approach and are especially interesting since both engage multiple issues in their liberationist theologies.⁵ A second major form of political theology is "poststructuralist" theology, such as that de-

⁵ I use the term "liberationist theologians" rather than "liberation theologians" in order to stress that I am concerned here with the liberation theologians only in the United States (and hence not in Latin America). Also I am broadening the term to include many who may not describe their work as "liberation theology." For examples of U.S. liberationist theologies, see Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury, 1974) as well as her *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983); also James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1970), and his *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984).

veloped by Mark C. Taylor and, more recently, by Catherine Keller: these theologians undertake rhetorical analyses in order to reveal the closure, indeed the repression and exclusion that constitutes theological discourse. They focus on this rhetorical closure (rather than on any structural injustice) in order to make possible more open and more playful discourse as the basis for greater personal and social freedom.⁶ A third distinct approach is being developed by “public” theologians (of both the left and the right politically) who seek the inclusion of theological perspectives in national debates and who are interested in the quality of public life and democratic institutions in the United States today. These public theologians (e.g., David Tracy, Richard John Neuhaus, and William Dean) differ from liberationist theologians in that they pay most attention to delineating the public role of religion and to assessing the quality of our national discourse and our democratic institutions rather than to widespread and deeply rooted social injustices.⁷ Finally, there are various “countercultural” theologians who share a belief that society most needs the countercultural witness of a Church that challenges the presuppositions of liberal society and who therefore emphasize the role of the Church as an alternative community.⁸

While this is a potentially fecund situation, it is also one of multiplicity, dividedness, and even more importantly, one suspects, a creeping sense of futility. There is much to debate, both substantively and methodologically, and, fortunately, many theologians are involved in more than one of these approaches. There have been especially rich cross-fertilizations between the liberationists and the poststructuralists, since the study of racial and gender oppressions is furthered by poststructural analyses of rhetorical

⁶ See for example Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984) and Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon, 1996).

⁷ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); and William Dean, *The Religious Critic in American Culture* (New York: SUNY, 1994).

⁸ This approach is perhaps most associated with Protestant thinkers such as Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank, but they have influenced counterculturalist Catholic theologians. See the Catholic contributions to *The Church As Counterculture*, ed. Michael L. Budde and Robert W. Brimlow (Albany: SUNY, 2000) especially those by Michael Warren, Curt Cadorette, and Michael Baxter. See also William T. Cavanaugh’s “The City: Beyond Secular Politics” in *Radical Orthodoxy*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999). For a development of a thoroughly Catholic counterculturalism on the basis of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theology, see David Schindler, *Heart of the World, Center of the Church: Communio Ecclesiology, Liberalism, and Liberation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

exclusions.⁹ However, the concerns of public theologians are rarely engaged by either of these first two groups, and the counterculturalists resist the basic methodological presuppositions of the other three groups. That is, while all four are concerned with the political implications of Christian faith, the first three are usually involved in some form of “mutually-critical correlation” between Christian faith and the insights of contemporary society, while the counterculturalists largely reject such a correlational theology as a threat to the distinctly Christian (and hence the only truly liberating) perspective of judgment on society. Not surprisingly, then, there is considerable ghettoization of these approaches, with those involved developing complex analyses on the topics important to each group and seldom positively engaging the insights of more than one of the other approaches.

If these different political theologies have not always had much influence on each other, their impact beyond the academy, on either Church or society, is even more questionable.¹⁰ As the pendulum remains on a rightward swing in religious and political life in the United States, one wonders if either the medium or the message able to engender a liberating praxis in society has yet been found by our political theologies. Christian faith has been reformulated, destabilized, defended as public, and articulated as an alternative social vision—but to what avail? Richard Rorty, among others, has argued that the academic “new left” has a truncated sense of politics and a vagueness such that, although it has made us less inclined to humiliate our fellow-citizens, it exhibits a deplorable lack of specificity with regard to policies in support of the working and non-working poor.¹¹ Surely our politically engaged theologies are vulnerable to this charge as well. Is there not more than a little risk here that work heralded as a contribution to a more just and free society will instead turn out to be simply another exercise in the carving out of academic terrain and the advancement of professional careers (notwithstanding the considerable talk about praxis)?

Given this situation, it would seem that politically engaged theologies

⁹ Catherine Keller is a good example of a feminist using poststructuralist theories to reveal gender biases. See her *Apocalypse Now* (see n. 6 above). For an excellent discussion of the role of poststructuralist theories in Black theology, see Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999).

¹⁰ I am here borrowing David Tracy’s definition of the three publics of theology as developed in his *Analogical Imagination*. I should perhaps reiterate that I am concerned here only with recent and contemporary political theologies in the United States; I am making no claims about the public impact of political theologies in economically developing countries or in Germany.

¹¹ See Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1998). Russell Jacoby makes similar and stronger claims in his *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

might take considerable interest in the example of a thinker who eschews neither the theoretical challenges that call us to re-think the presuppositions of our thought nor the specificity of public policy proposals, and who has managed to address both Church and society to such an extent that he has become a truly public intellectual with a voice in national discussions. If a philosopher of religion such as Cornel West can succeed as a public intellectual, maintaining a public voice with intellectual rigor and political specificity, than surely theologians, whose discipline provides an inherent connection to non-academic church audiences and develops a field of inquiry the basic terms of which are widely recognized (and even nominally accepted by the majority in the United States), should be able to do so as well. Further, West's own public discourse as a Christian "organic intellectual" is important for the purposes of my argument here particularly because it is thoroughly religious, interdisciplinary, and public, and includes both a utopian vision and specific policy recommendations.¹² Insofar as West's project is successful, I will argue, it suggests that our political theologies must also become more public, more specific, more interdisciplinary, and more collaborative if they are to "lay bare the richness of the Christian gospel for our time."¹³

WEST'S PHILOSOPHY OF RADICAL DEMOCRACY

Cornel West has a wide range of interests and an amazingly versatile intellect: while his *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (1982) was widely received as a major contribution to the then emerging Black theology, he has since written not only on racism and other social injustices, but also on pragmatism, poststructural theories, and the arts (particularly literature and music). He describes this intellectual approach as a "blues" or a "jazz" sensibility intended as a creative engagement with multiple intellectual disciplines and theories in response to the tragedies of American life. As the recently published *Cornel West Reader* makes evident, however, this breadth is no mere diletantism but rather is

¹² My claim that West's method has implications, and is a resource, for contemporary theology is not intended as a claim that West is a theologian or that one must accept all of West's philosophical and religious positions in order to benefit from his work. Indeed, West chose not to become a theologian because he had "little interest in systematizing the dogmas and doctrines." I will not here evaluate the adequacy of his pragmatism. See *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999) 14. There are theological moments in his work, insofar as he proffers interpretations and critiques of Christian faith, as well as a defense of Christian faith as a compelling and reasonable way to live, and these will be given some attention below. However, my study focuses more on West's method than on his specific claims.

¹³ *Ibid.* 399.

necessitated by the single intellectual question that underlies and unifies all of his work: How can one live a meaningful life in the United States at this point in history? Since West is convinced that any insight into the human condition must be developed not as a timeless abstraction but in connection with the specific circumstances in which one finds oneself (as is explicated in his writings on pragmatism), this one question is pursued through the three related questions which he says guides all of his intellectual work: “What is it to be human?” “What is it to be modern?” and “What is it to be American?”¹⁴ Philosophy, as he envisions and enacts it, thus becomes not the elaboration of abstract truth, theoretical anthropology, or universal ethics, but a form of cultural criticism, an inherently political and practical line of inquiry that draws on a variety of resources to understand and respond to the challenge of living a truly human life in this “late modern” American context.¹⁵

In his search for this contextual and provisional wisdom, West argues not only against a foundationalist or ahistorical objectivism but also against the overly ironic or nihilistic attitude that can result from relativizing all possibilities. We must, he insists, “steer between the Scylla of transcendental objectivism and the Charybdis of subjectivist nihilism.”¹⁶ To avoid these unhelpful extremes, West proposes that we draw upon the ethical norms and moral visions of our “best” secular and religious traditions while also submitting these norms and traditions to continual critique in light of their mutual insights, their ability to account for the complexities of our experiences, and their capacity to motivate action in response to the injustices we face. Following his mentor, Richard Rorty, in eschewing foundationalism and maintaining instead a sense of historical contingency such that our fallible perspectives develop through the widest possible democratic conversation, West does not, however, reject specifically religious answers (as Rorty does) but rather seeks to include them in the debate. We cannot escape our historical location and influences, but we can and must appropriate and correct our inherited traditions (including religious ones) through a process of continual experimentation, self-criticism, and the dialogue of mutual criticism and correction that, for West, is the ongoing and

¹⁴ See West, *Reader* esp. xv–xx. West describes his work as motivated by these three fundamental questions. Although he does not explicitly reduce them to a single question as I have done, he does acknowledge that they are related. Further, the logic of the questions as he explains them clarifies that they do indeed form a single project.

¹⁵ The concept of philosophy as cultural criticism is developed by West in his *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin, 1989) esp. 211–39. It is also included in his *Reader*, esp. 168. See *ibid.* 30 for his definition of our time as “late modern.”

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 368.

communal task of learning to live more humanely and compassionately in our complex situation.¹⁷

Such a critique of traditions and a mutually transformative dialogue must, of course, make use of values or norms as standards by which the various possibilities can be judged “better” or “worse,” even while, as West has argued, the values themselves must be open to critique and dialogical transformation. Rather than being paralyzed by this lack of a foundationalist starting point, West identifies the values of *individuality* and *democracy* as the ones that guide his thought because they are the most compelling values he has yet discovered in his formation and experiences as a Christian in the United States. (“Individuality,” it should be noted, is here understood not as individualism but as the dignity and worth of each human being always formed by and responsible to particular communities; “democracy” refers to structures insofar as they empower ordinary people to determine the conditions of their lives.)¹⁸ West links the value of individuality to the teachings of Christianity, which he understands as proclaiming the dignity and worth of all, especially of those victimized or denied their dignity, through its call to follow Jesus and to “see the world through the lens of the Cross—and thereby see our relative victimizing and relative victimization.”¹⁹ He also embraces the tradition of American democracy, despite its considerable failures (most notably with regard to African-Americans and Native Americans), because it can nevertheless be seen as a “monument to the genius of ordinary men and women” whose lack of power and privilege does not in principle disqualify them from having an equal voice in the governance of society.²⁰

It should be evident that West is here interpreting Christian faith and American democracy, each in light of the other. Christian commitment to the dignity of all, especially those deemed insignificant and powerless, is appropriated with a democratic sensibility so that it inspires not paternalistic care (the arguably more prevalent interpretation historically), but rather a recognition of the right of all to equality, respect, and self-determination (the right to be, as J. B. Metz has argued, “subjects before God”).²¹ Similarly, the American democratic value (in principle) of the

¹⁷ Ibid. 368, xvii. I am especially indebted to Jean Porter for the suggestion that I clarify the connection between Rorty’s pragmatism and that of West.

¹⁸ Ibid. esp. 7.

¹⁹ Ibid. 370.

²⁰ Ibid. xix. In addition to Part 6 of his *Reader* and Chapter 6 of his *American Evasion*, see also West’s *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982) and his *Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations of the Crisis in American Religion and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) for detailed discussions of Christianity and its importance in his thought.

²¹ That West interprets Christian faith through the lens of a democratic sensibil-

right of all to have a say in society is affirmed not in a majoritarian sense but as a demand for attention to those most vulnerable to exclusion and with least control over the conditions of their lives. For West, then, the question “what does the public interest have to do with the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in society?” can be understood not only as a Christian concern but also as *the democratic question*.²²

Although the traditions of Christian faith and of the culture and history of the United States are the sources from which West draws the values of individuality and democracy, he acknowledges that neither tradition has been consistently faithful to these ideals. Not only retrieval, then, but also considerable critique of these traditions is in order. Christian faith, for example, needs correction not only so that its rather general and utopian ethic can be rendered applicable to particular circumstances, but also because there is much within the tradition that is in fact deeply distorted, needing radical reformulation if it is not to warrant rejection. West’s writings resist an undemocratic or paternalistic Christianity through his democratic reformulation of Christian faith (as discussed above); he is also critical of the racism, patriarchy, homophobia, and complacency that have been and are evident in Christian communities.²³ Acknowledging that much of Christianity in the United States today demonstrates an addiction to personal comfort without courageous compassion, West continues nevertheless to advocate the example of “the love and compassion of Jesus as the most absurd and alluring mode of being” and to present it as a challenge to contemporary understandings of Christianity as well as to the rest of society.²⁴

The practice of democracy in the United States is also deeply distorted, not only by the historical outrages of slavery and legal discrimination, but also by continuing cultures of discrimination and by an undemocratic economy. Marxist economic analysis is helpful for understanding the extent of our economic inequality and disenfranchisement, but historical, cultural, and political analyses, along with poststructural theories that highlight marginality and difference, are also necessary to uncover the depth of oppres-

ity is made explicit when he argues that “democratic participation of people in the decision-making processes of institutions that regulate and govern their lives is a precondition for actualizing the Christian principle of the self-realization of human individuality in community” (*Prophesy* 18–19; see also, Metz, *Faith*, esp. 60–70).

²² West, *Reader* xix.

²³ *Ibid.* 170–71, 373.

²⁴ *Ibid.* xvi. “For too much of American Christianity, to follow Jesus is to seek comfort devoid of courageous compassion for the ‘least of these’ ” (*ibid.* 355). See also *ibid.* 410 for a description of Jesus’ mission as one of overturning hierarchical divisions and the failure of many to recognize this.

sion and inequality in this putative democracy.²⁵ West uses these various theories to reveal that the United States is deeply divided by race and class and distorted by a capitalistic market culture that undermines participation in public life and encourages addiction to personal pleasure. This multifaceted critique is necessary because the forms of injustice against which we must struggle are also multiple: “[y]ou can’t talk about the vicious legacy of white supremacy without talking about the legacies of economic inequality, class inequality, and the pernicious practices of male supremacy, and heterosexism, homophobia, ecological abuse, losing sight of the humanity of disabled people, and so forth,” West insists.²⁶ Each of these issues must, then, be pursued as part of an overall agenda seeking democratic empowerment and a reinvigorated public life.

The unity in West’s thought, especially as evident in his *Reader*, can thus be found not only in the question he asks (“How does one live meaningfully in America today?”) but in the multifaceted but nevertheless coherent answer he constructs on the basis of these interweaving traditions and analyses: a truly human life in our late modern, American context is one lived in commitment to what he calls “radical democracy.” This is the idea of a society that has realized the values of individuality and democracy as specified above: it is one wherein the hierarchical structures that are obstacles to just human relations are replaced with relations of equality and mutual service, wherein cultures of exclusion and disrespect are replaced by cultures affirming the worth of all, and wherein we govern our lives together in a respectful search for a common good, in protection of the least advantaged.²⁷ West’s goal is a society in which *all* are able to live lives of decency and dignity and are empowered to stand “in public space, without humiliation, to put forward our best visions and views for the sake of the public interest . . . in an atmosphere of mutual respect and civic trust.”²⁸ To live meaningfully here-and-now, according to West, is to work with others for greater realization of that ideal of human freedom to the extent possible in our circumstances.

I believe that this ideal of “radical democracy” can be fairly said to function as a utopian ideal in West’s work in that it provides both an image in terms of which to critique our current society and a goal to strive for

²⁵ Ibid. 252.

²⁶ Ibid. 30.

²⁷ This vision of radical democracy is developed throughout Part 5 of the *Reader*; it is succinctly described in West’s discussion of the possibility of African-American and Latino alliances, where he explains, “I think it’s issue by issue in light of a broad vision . . . [of] substantive radical democracy in which you are actually highlighting the empowering of everyday people in the workplace and the voting booth so that they can live lives of decency and dignity” (ibid. 512).

²⁸ Ibid. 97.

(though surely one not completely realizable in history). West would probably reject the term “utopian” as descriptive of this goal since he tends to use “utopian” as a pejorative term describing an abstract and unrealizable ideal; he might, with good reason, argue that his ideal of radical democracy is not utopian since it arises out of a multifaceted, contextual analysis of society’s problems and is intended as a goal to be approximated through concrete political praxis.²⁹ Granting this, I nevertheless believe “utopian” can be appropriately descriptive of West’s thought if it is used in a non-pejorative sense, as referring not to an unrealistic and unrealizable ideal but rather to precisely the kind of image of hope and critique for the whole of society that West provides in his discussion of radical democracy. It should be further noted that, rather than agreeing with poststructural or even neo-pragmatic rejections of metanarratives and holistic visions, West instead affirms the importance of a “total” vision that can function as a non-homogenizing hope for the whole. He argues that “we need to posit totalities with all of the openness and flexibility that one can muster, but we must posit totalities in order to look at the dynamic relation between parts.” Radical democracy, I believe, serves precisely as such an image of holistic social hope in West’s thought.³⁰

In light of this ideal of radical democracy, the devastation of public life in the United States today is more readily apparent. This is an important topic for West because he is concerned not only with specific injustices but also with pursuing the larger ideal of self-governance as part of a truly human life of mutual respect and responsibility and as a means of overcoming specific injustices. Thus, the conditions of public life and the possibility of genuine self-governance are of central importance in our society; yet, as West observes, the last twenty years have left us with a “barren and vacuous” public life, and “a populace that is suspicious of the common good and addicted to narrow pleasures.” Indeed, West goes further: ours is not merely a privatized but in fact a “balkanized” society, in which “name-calling and finger pointing” have replaced mutual respect; this balkanization, West argues, has resulted (at least in part) from the success of conservative elites in “associating the public sphere with the faults of black people.” (“Is it not the case,” he asks, “that the very mention of public provisions—not tax breaks or subsidies for corporate America, but subsistence support—evokes images of lazy black men and welfare queens?”) If we are to reclaim and rebuild a democratic public life, then, we cannot merely exhort people to recover public spiritedness but rather must attend

²⁹ For West’s pejorative use of utopia, see *ibid.* 373, 227.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 229. He argues even more strongly: “Without ‘totality,’ our politics become emaciated, our politics become dispersed, our politics become nothing but existential rebellion” (*ibid.* 279).

to the specific ways in which power, discursive and otherwise, distorts access to the public conversation. In particular, we must grapple with the developments that have so racialized the public sphere that, as West argues, “any entry of black people in a public dialogue often means that they . . . are on the defensive.”³¹

West’s intent, of course, is not solely to play the role of a prophet of condemnation, witnessing to the flaws in our society. His utopian image of radical democracy is intended to motivate positive action and he thus employs various and complex social analyses in order better to understand what should be done and which particular policies are most likely to move society in the direction of radical democracy. For example, working with Roberto Unger, West proposes the development of neighborhood organizations and the public financing of political campaigns as means of empowering people and revitalizing public life. He also suggests a new scheme of taxation, one in which taxes are based on spending (beyond basic necessities) rather than on income, because such a system is less regressive than our current one yet might conceivably receive sufficient public support to be feasible. Families, he argues in a work with Sylvia Ann Hewlett, desperately need more family-friendly governmental policies, including financial assistance to minimize the extraordinary financial costs of raising children (and thus lift out of poverty 1/3 of all children in the United States) as well as regulation of the decidedly unfamily-oriented entertainment media.³² An analysis of the details of these and other of West’s proposals is, of course, beyond the scope of this paper; my purpose here is simply to point to West’s efforts not only to envision an ideal but to specify the multiple but feasible steps we might take to move us closer to that radically democratic society. These two aspects, a utopian vision and specific policy proposals, can and must go together, as West insists, if we are to live compassionately in this late modern American world of tragedy, injustice, and suffering.

WEST’S CHALLENGES FOR OUR FOUR TYPES OF POLITICAL THEOLOGY

To consider the relevance of West’s work for contemporary theology, we would do well to begin with the question that unifies his project, the question of what it is to live a meaningful human life. As we have seen, West

³¹ Ibid. 346, 486–7.

³² See Cornel West and Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *The Future of American Progressivism: An Initiative for Political and Economic Reform* (Boston: Beacon, 1998) and Cornel West and Sylvia Ann Hewlett, *The War Against Parents: What We Can Do For America’s Beleaguered Moms and Dads* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

draws on the resources of Christian faith (at least in part) to answer this question: he repeatedly affirms that Christ's example of love lived on behalf of those suffering is the inspiration for his own commitment to radical democracy as the most worthwhile way to live that he has found. However, this ought to be of interest to theologians not only because West's answer involves an interpretation of Christianity, but also because the question he asks is an inherently religious question, or at least one the answer to which has ineluctably religious implications. As Franklin I. Gamwell has argued, insofar as religions propose a comprehensive purpose for human life, any answer to the question of that purpose (even the denial of such a purpose) at least implicitly takes a stand on the validity of religious beliefs.³³ One need not be religious to ask (and answer) the question of what a worthwhile life is, but it is difficult to imagine an understanding of Christianity or of any religion that fails to answer this question, at least implicitly.

The more interesting challenge, of course, is whether the question of a meaningful life can be asked and answered in the abstract, or whether it must be answered in explicit connection to specific social and historical locations. One need not ascribe to a pragmatist philosophical position as West does to agree with him that a meaningful life is not lived in general but only in specific circumstances. Indeed, despite their differences, all four types of political theology described above share a common commitment to specifying the meaning and truth of Christian beliefs in relation to particular social and political circumstances. However, of these four, only public theology has identified the United States as its primary context (and this theology has not as yet developed much beyond general methodological discussions of religion in public life); the other three have tended to choose particular issues or injustices as the basis of their focus and concreteness. Insofar as these political theologies are in fact undertaken within the context of the United States, much could be gained from following West and clarifying that we address our various theoretical and practical issues as theologians in the United States. This need not limit our concern to American problems; as human beings and as members of a universal Church (if not indeed as Americans, members of a superpower in an increasingly interrelated world), our concerns are properly universal. Nevertheless, specifying that we address these various problems as American Catholics draws attention to and privileges those injustices that are most immediate to and most distorting of our own perspectives (while also clarifying the concrete situation and structures in and through which we can most directly pursue political transformation). Racism would less easily

³³ Franklin I. Gamwell, "Religion and Reason in American Politics," in *Religion and American Public Life: Interpretations and Explorations*, ed. Robin W. Lovin (New York: Paulist 1986) 88–112.

recede into the background as one among many issues we might (eventually) address, then, since it has a privileged claim to our attention as an American “original sin” and one that continues to distort our perspectives on any other issue, domestic or international.³⁴

We could also, I think, learn much from West’s interdisciplinary approach. The problems do not become simpler when we emphasize the American context; we should, then, emulate West in seeking unity and specificity without curtailing analyses. As described above, West is engaged in a truly interdisciplinary endeavor in which he uses analyses of economics, race, and gender, poststructuralist theories, Christian faith, philosophy, and the arts (which help us to maintain hope in the face of tragedy) as resources for understanding our social context and for envisioning and sustaining meaningful ways of responding to it. Insofar as one agrees with West that ours is indeed a complex situation, with interrelated forms of oppression and injustice, then it follows that politically engaged and contextual theologians should join West in this interdisciplinary conversation.

To be sure, each of the four theological approaches discussed above is interdisciplinary, and most are so to a considerable extent. Liberation theologians, especially Black, feminist, Latino/a, and womanist theologians, use a variety of historical, cultural, and linguistic analyses to understand the extent of racial, gender, class, and even ecological injustices. Poststructuralist theologians engage literary theories in order to destabilize claims to absolute truth and to develop more liberating theological discourses. Public theologians work with political theories of democracy and hermeneutical theories of argumentation. Even the counterculturalists, while espousing a Christian integrity that can mitigate against an interdisciplinary theology, make use of various non-theological disciplines in their arguments for the distinctness of Christian faith, such analyses being helpful for demonstrating the differences between the presuppositions of liberal society and those of Christianity. Also, despite the not inconsiderable differences between them, it is perhaps worth noting that aspects of each of these four theological approaches appear in West’s work: the liberationist concern for specific injustices, the poststructuralist rejection of an ahistorical and foundationalist truth, the public project of extending democracy, and even the countercultural recovery of particular religious traditions as alternatives to the status quo, are all part of his project.

From the perspective of West’s intellectual project, however, it becomes evident that this interdisciplinarity in theology is truncated, especially in-

³⁴ James H. Cone makes this point in “Black Liberation Theology and Black Catholics: A Critical Conversation,” *Theological Studies* 61 (2000) 731–47, at 732. I would argue that the genocide committed against Native Americans is also a foundational American sin.

sofar as these four approaches to political theology remain relatively distinct approaches. As we have seen, a truly liberating project in his view must combine these insights and analyses, understanding them as interrelated to each other and to our efforts to live a meaningful life in the United States today. His work thus provides implicit (and at times explicit) criticisms of each of these four theological approaches as currently developed. If taken seriously, West's work suggests, for example, the need for greater collaboration among liberationists and poststructuralists so that liberationists might gain greater theoretical sophistication and rhetorical sensitivity and the poststructuralists become more responsive to material and social injustices that are not entirely discursive and that must be resisted with concrete political action.³⁵ Both would be encouraged to become more politically specific and to attend (as West and public theologians do) to the reconstruction of a public life able to respond to these various oppressions. Public theologians, however, are so narrowly focused that they often fail to critique the distortions of public life and the conditions that generate those distortions; they can also seem relatively unconcerned about the specific injustices that public life ought to resolve. As West has argued, we cannot simply call for a greater involvement in public life without addressing the race and class inequalities that so deeply distort access to and participation in that public discourse. Finally, the countercultural approach, in dialogue with the others, could contribute to the development of a distinctly Catholic response; on its own, however, it is likely to fail to realize that injustices are often complex phenomena demanding structural change and that these injustices are embedded even within our Church and our theologies.

We might also want to consider, along with the specificity of West's question and the interdisciplinarity of his approach, whether we might learn something from his pointing to radical democracy as an American and Christian answer, as the ideal the struggle for which constitutes a worthwhile and meaningful life in the conditions in which we find ourselves today. At the very least, we should ask whether this ideal is broad enough to capture the imagination yet specific enough to motivate. We might further consider whether a commitment to radical democracy, when understood with all of the nuance, joy, and compassion that West invests it, is an accurate and adequate interpretation of Christian faith. Most would

³⁵ My application of West's thought to contemporary political theologies is based on the logic of his insights and not, in most cases, on specific criticisms of these theologies in his work. He does, however, argue that "what is needed is a rapprochement of the philosophical historicism of Rorty and Bernstein and the moral vision, social analysis, and political engagement of the liberation perspectives of Gutiérrez, Daly, and Cone" (West, *Reader* 367). He is also in many places critical of the lack of political specificity and commitment to action of poststructuralists (see *ibid.* esp. 132, 164).

agree that Christianity mandates a commitment to society's victims and to the possibility of all living lives of decency and dignity, but many theologians would also argue that Christian faith requires more than this: the Christian commitment to overcoming suffering within history depends upon a hope in a God beyond history as well. For example, Johann Metz's claim that we cannot maintain a hope for justice for those living today without a hope for justice for history's victims may be right or wrong, but in any case it is not irrelevant to West's efforts to understand how to live meaningfully in our late modern context.³⁶ While a detailed discussion of this is beyond the scope of this paper, it warrants mention here as indicative of the mutual significance of these theological debates and of West's project.

TOWARD A LIBERATING PUBLIC THEOLOGY

It would follow, then, that what we need are not countercultural, post-structuralist, liberationist, and public theologies, but rather a countercultural, poststructural, and liberating public theology. While there is already some considerable theological work that combines liberationist and post-structuralist approaches, public theology has unfortunately developed thus far as a project that is at best tangentially rather than integrally related to these other approaches. This is where I believe West provides perhaps his most helpful corrective to contemporary political theology, since his work suggests that the reconstruction of a democratic public realm is a crucial part of the struggle for greater freedom and justice. As we have seen, West is concerned not only with rectifying particular injustices but also with creating the conditions for the possibility of a more just and free society. He seeks to move us closer to a radically democratic society in which people are empowered to work with dignity and as much freedom as possible in pursuit of a greater good and against all of the forms of injustice that diminish human life. The strengthening of institutions of democracy can and should be undertaken and appreciated as a liberationist project, one that values difference and seeks to bring our plural perspectives into a dialogue in pursuit of a common good. Our public institutions and practices require not merely reinvigoration, then, but also radical reconstruction, as West continually reminds us, if our society is to embody the values of individuality and democracy.

It is also important to note that West's work is public in form as well as

³⁶ See Metz, *Faith* esp. 73–77. For a succinct yet excellent discussion of the 20th century reaction against the loss of transcendence in 19th century eschatological hope in Christian theology, see Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Christian Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) esp. 131–52.

in content. He describes his approach as that of an “organic intellectual” because his intellectual positions are developed in public conversations and through involvement in organizations committed to acting for social and political change. (He accepts approximately 150 public speaking engagements per year and appears on radio, TV, and in a variety of publications.)³⁷ The public nature of West’s work is not only revealed in this wide range of audiences but also in the publicly shared praxis, the involvement in political organizations and social movements that informs and is served by his thought. This thoroughly public commitment to praxis is central to his work because, as West argues, “without some form of ecclesiastical and political praxis, critical consciousness becomes as sounding brass and theological reflection a tinkling cymbal.”³⁸

While there has been no lack in recent years of arguments that theology must become both more public and more clearly related to praxis, the United States has not had many examples of theologians successful at doing either. It would seem then that closer attention to West’s example of development as an organic and public intellectual could be instructive for political theologians. The purpose of politically engaged theologies is, after all, at least in part to reformulate Christian beliefs in order to engender a more liberating Christian praxis, and remaining within the confines of the academy compromises the achievement of this purpose. Any “trickle-down” effect through students will often reach a society that has by then moved on to new issues and crises, and political recommendations formulated at such a remove are likely to be vague and unrealistic without the “reality check” of involvement in social organizations and political movements. Even if most political theologians retain a primary location in the academy, West has shown that the walls of the academy need not become an enclosure: academic theologians too can become involved in political and church organizations or write for popular journals or newspapers, as West has done, and in doing so give voice to both the visionary and the practical implications of Christian faith.

There is yet a further aspect of West’s public form of intellectual engagement that must be noted. He consistently demonstrates in his own writing and speaking the intellectual humility and openness to criticism necessary for a successful public conversation. This is significant because, especially when positions are informed by religious beliefs, a close-minded adherence to one’s own position is easily mistaken for a passionate com-

³⁷ Ibid. 172, 32.

³⁸ Ibid. 398. West has been a long-standing member of the Democratic Socialists of America and engages in public debate of specific policies as well as providing metacritique, as the many selections in his *Reader* remind us (see *ibid.* esp. Parts 5 and 7).

mitment to justice. We often evince a self-righteousness that turns the mutually transformative possibilities of conversation into verbal manipulation to attain our own ends. Yet this is surely self-defeating if we share West's ideal of a radical democracy that is concerned not only with goals but also with means, that seeks not simply the achievement of re-structured political and economic institutions, but also the development of community bonds of mutual respect and trust wherein all can share their views without fear of humiliation. As West argues, "one sign of commitment . . . is always the degree to which one is willing to be self-critical and self-questioning, because that's a sign that you're serious about generating the conditions for the possibility of overcoming the suffering that you're after."³⁹

Church position papers and pastoral statements are not, then, the model for a liberating public theology to follow, no matter how specific the positions outlined may be. A public theology that is serious about contributing to the conditions necessary for a just society cannot enter into the public dialogue only to proclaim its truth for others to hear (a danger in unnuanced counterculturalist theologies). Rather public theology must join the conversation with the same openness to criticism and to the possibility of a change of mind that it asks of those it invites to dialogue. As David Tracy's work (especially in *Plurality and Ambiguity*) has shown, this openness to learning from others need not be seen as contrary to a Catholic commitment to the truth of a revealed tradition, provided that we are willing to acknowledge that our understanding of that revelation remains necessarily incomplete.⁴⁰ Further, such an acknowledgment of the need for correction from others could further our efforts to overcome the failure of the Catholic Church and of White theologians to take Black people and Black theologians seriously as subjects to be listened to, a failure astutely identified recently by Bryan Massingale.⁴¹

This openness to criticism also enables West to model a public speech and action that is explicitly faith-informed without, I believe, threatening the freedom of religion of people of other faiths (or of no faith). Too often our public discussions recently have presumed either that we must have a thoroughly secular, a-religious dialogue (leaving the implications of faith to our private lives) or that we must proceed on the basis of common religious beliefs. Certainly some public theologians, in their zeal against the first, secular option, have supported the second option, insisting that certain

³⁹ Ibid. 409.

⁴⁰ David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987).

⁴¹ Bryan N. Massingale, "James Cone and Recent Catholic Episcopal Teaching on Racism," *Theological Studies* 61 (2000) 700–30.

(albeit general) religious beliefs be legally privileged.⁴² West's contribution is, in my judgment, even more helpful for this situation than that of those who have theoretically clarified the grounds for the possibility of religiously based political positions within a pluralistic public life, important as such theoretical clarifications are.⁴³ West shows in practice rather than merely in theory that religious pluralism is a real possibility since his faith commitments and their relation to his political positions are clear, public, and passionate, yet are held neither as incorrigible nor as the only acceptable basis for public action. He articulates and defends his own perspective while respectfully remaining open to considering others' views, along with the beliefs that ground them. If public theologians join West in developing not only the theory but also the practice of such respectful and self-critical dialogue, we will have done much to move beyond our current impasse on the role of religion in public life, an impasse that has recently exercised not only theologians and scholars of religion but also sociologists, political theorists, legal scholars, and historians.⁴⁴

Thus, taking West's work seriously reveals that politicized, contextualized, and interdisciplinary theologies are in no way peripheral to the basic task of theology (insofar as theology examines the meaning of Christian beliefs about the purpose of human life), nor can our various theological conversations be successfully pursued in isolation from each other. The various issues of race, class, sex/gender, and ecology, require analyses that must be included in any theology that wants to address the meaning of living as a responsible human being in the United States today. Indeed, liberationist, poststructural, and public theologies, with their various critiques, must inform one another if we are seriously to reform both the world and theology. This theology must also be based in a public praxis in order fully to develop both an inspiring vision of what we hope to become as well as concrete policy proposals to render that vision socially effective. It seems, in short, that as theologians we must be engaged in the variety of

⁴² Neuhaus tends toward this position, as is evident from his regular column in *First Things*. See his references to "Christian America" in his "Continuing Survey of Public Religion," *First Things*, no. 107 (November 2000) esp. 73–76. John Courtney Murray can also be interpreted as an advocate of a theistic America, as Franklin I. Gamwell argues in his *The Meaning of Religious Freedom: Modern Politics and the Democratic Resolution* (Albany: SUNY, 1995) 77–95.

⁴³ For examples of such theoretical contributions, see especially Tracy, *Analogical Imagination* and Gamwell, *Meaning of Religious Freedom*.

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Gerald V. Bradley, *Church-State Relationships in America* (New York: Greenwood, 1987); Stephen Carter, *A Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Richard P. McBrien, *Caesar's Coin: Religion and Politics in America* (New York: Macmillan, 1987); and Ronald F. Thiemann, *Religion in Public Life: A Dilemma for Democracy* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1996).

conversations that West has been involved in and which he has shown can make profound contributions to our task of understanding what it is to be human.

This is certainly a daunting challenge, and for most of us this will require much collaboration, as West's capacity to be at home in these multiple discourses is rare. Some will argue that such an interdisciplinary approach is not only difficult but dangerous in that it will distract us from our focus on classic religious texts or endanger the specificity of our Christian viewpoint. To be sure, care must be taken to avoid an uncritical reductionism in developing contemporary interpretations of religious traditions, but West is surely right that we must nevertheless read these traditions "through modern lens," for those are "the only ones we moderns have."⁴⁵ Theologians can and must continue to read our beloved Christian classics with varying specialties and interests, but as part of, and not in isolation from, the concern with how to live well in these troubling times. Cornel West suggests that this can be done with intellectual integrity and public accountability, as well as with faith, hope, and love; a theological engagement with his work might yet lead to the development of a liberating, public, and truly Catholic theology.

⁴⁵ West, *Reader* 171.