Religion and the New African American Intellectuals

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Today certain African American intellectuals are in great demand in academia and popular culture. Some have been featured on major radio and television talk shows and in major magazines. This article will focus on several of these religiously oriented African American intellectuals and examine how their religious beliefs have influenced their thinking–for better or worse.

Two of the most influential and well-known religiously oriented intellectuals are Cornel West and Bell Hooks. For many years they had a close friendship and personal relationship, although they have reportedly grown apart in recent years. West–a Christian–and Hooks–a Buddhist–are strongly motivated by deep religious feelings. They were both heavily influenced by Black Christian church services in their youth, and they believe that spirituality is inexplicably linked to the mental and emotional strength of the individual and his or her community. They have been deeply moved by Black religious music and view it as a vital force in strengthening the notion of community and the understanding of Black life, culture, and political experience.

West and Hooks are deeply immersed in the culture and political life of Blacks in America, and they have discoursed learnedly on such diverse topics as rap music, hip-hop culture, jazz, rhythm and blues, gospel, spirituals, popular films, white supremacy, capitalism, sexism, patriarchy, homophobia, Black

intellectualism, history, Marxism, postmodernism, and numerous other subjects. Indeed, some commentators have opined that perhaps West is spreading himself thin by trying to cover so much material in so little time. Hooks and West do have, however, a deep and broad understanding of the complex and multidimensional Black experience.

In their collection of dialogues and conversations, *Breaking Bread*, West states, "Historically, academic intellectuals have been viewed, to varying degrees, as elitist, arrogant, and haughty" (Hooks and West 1991, 4). In contrast, West and Hooks transcend class divisions with the ability to relate to people from all classes—from the homeless to academics.

Hooks and West are enthusiastic advocates of what they call "Black critical thinking," or an attempt to understand Black agency and experience from diverse viewpoints. West explains in *Breaking Bread*:

> That our conversation has principally Black points of reference must be accented. We are looking at the predicament of Black people from the vantage point of all that Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and Europe have to offer. We are rooted in the Black tradition and we are struggling with that Black predicament. This does not mean that we subscribe to an exclusive Afro-centricity, though we are centered on the African American situation. Nor does it mean that we valorize, that we promote a Euro-centric perspective, though we recognize that so much of the academy remains under the sway of a very narrow Euro-centrism. Instead we recognize Black humanity and attempt to promote the love, affirmation, and critique of Black humanity, and in that sense, we attempt to escape the prevailing mode of intellectual bondage that has held captive so many Black intellectuals of the past. (1991, 6)

Indeed, West is at his best when he painstakingly critiques ideas and strategies that have, ironically, exacerbated the plight of African Americans. In his collection of essays *Race Matters*, he applies Black critical thinking to many issues. In the introduction he writes:

> What happened in Los Angeles in April of 1992 was nei-
> ther a race riot nor a class rebellion. Rather, this
> monumental upheaval was a multiracial, trans-class, and
> largely male display of justified social rage. For all its
> ugly, xenophobic resentment, its air of adolescent carni-
> val, and its downright barbaric behavior, it signified the
> sense of powerlessness in American society. Glib attempts
> to reduce its meaning to the pathologies of the black
> underclass, the criminal actions of hoodlums, or the politi-
> cal revolt of the oppressed urban masses miss the mark.
> (1993, 1)

West argues that many people lack the intellectual where-
withal and honesty to assess accurately current events as they
relate to relations between Blacks and whites. West has no toler-
ance for hypocrisy, double standards, and sophistry used

> in the narrow framework of the dominant liberal and
> conservative views of race in America, which with its
> worn-out vocabulary leaves us intellectually debilitated,
> morally disempowered, and personally depressed. (63)

Though West is equally critical of dogmatic Black nationalist
ideologies, he realizes that they do not exist in a vacuum, but
have come about as a reaction to white supremacy. Furthermore,
he asserts that as long as whites continue to embrace white big-
ots while hypocritically condemning Black bigotry, Black
nationalism will continue to grow in popularity.

Perhaps West's most brilliant and most important contribu-
tion to current discourses on race is his notion of "racial
reasoning." In *Race Matters* he notes that many Blacks
capitulated to the pervasive Black nationalist mind-set during the
hearings involving Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill. Thomas
shrewdly and successfully "played the race card" by claiming to
be victimized by a "high-tech lynching." Furthermore, West
profoundly observes how Minister Louis Farrakhan's Nation of
Islam supported Thomas's Supreme Court nomination despite
Farrakhan's vitriolic attacks against Republican Party politics.
Often to their own detriment, Blacks support even those
bourgeois Blacks who are working with powerful reactionary

whites to thwart Black progress. In the name of Black unity, even the most unsavory Black character can garner widespread support throughout the Black community. Thus, racial reasoning is not reasoning at all, but rather an appeal to raw emotion, and many Blacks place a desperate need for unity and a fear of white supremacy above high ethical principles and enlightened self-interest. In this way, when the Nation of Islam and other authoritarian thinkers rushed to the defense of Thomas, cultural conservatism and reactionary Black nationalism converged to the detriment of Black advancement. As West eloquently writes in *Race Matters*,

> In black America, cultural conservatism takes the form of an inchoate xenophobia (e.g., against whites, Jews and Asians), systemic sexism, and homophobia. Like all conservatisms rooted in a quest for order, the pervasive disorder in white, and, especially, black America fans and fuels the channeling of rage toward the most vulnerable and degraded members of the community. For white America, this means primarily scapegoating black people, women, gay men, and lesbians. For black America, this means, principally attacking black women and black gay men and lesbians. In this way black nationalist and black male-centered claims to black authenticity reinforce black cultural conservatism. (1993, 27)

Rather than having a clear moral vision and a serious commitment to a single standard of social, political, and economic justice, those who indulge in racial reasoning exacerbate tensions that have long existed among various segments of the U.S. population. West, on the other hand, advocates ideals like those embraced by Myles Horton, Ella Baker, Emma Goldman, Wendell Phillips, Sojourner Truth, A. Philip Randolph, Martin Luther King Jr., "and many anonymous others who championed the struggle for freedom and justice in a prophetic framework of moral reasoning" (1993, 32).

West has attracted the interest of secular humanists as well as religionists because of his attempts to link what he considers to be the best of secular thought with the best of traditional

religious thought. At times West sounds remarkably profound. In the introduction to his 1988 book *Prophetic Fragments*, he writes:

> It is no accident that the moralistic, anti-intellectualistic forms of American religion thoroughly trash modernity and secularity yet revel in the wonders of technology and the comfortable living of modern prosperity. This flagrant hypocrisy . . . is overcome only when one adopts a principled prophetism; that is, a prophetic religion that incorporates the best of modernity and secularity (tolerance, fallibilism, criticism), yet brings prophetic critique to bear upon the idols of modernity and secularity (science, technology, and wealth). (x)

Indeed, West has been strongly influenced by such secular thinkers and groups as Karl Marx, John Dewey, C. L. R. James, and the Black Panthers. Yet many are skeptical of attempts to mix secular thought with religion, contending that the two are diametrically opposed. Right-wing religionists–a frequent target of West and secularists–often make the charge that Dewey and other secularists were responsible for the deterioration of public schools. Moreover, many right-wing religionists blame all of society's ills on modernity and secularism. Conversely, many scientists and secular philosophers feel threatened by what they view as misology, intolerance, irrationality, and antiscientific bias emanating from many religionists who experience an existential vacuum as the rapid spread of information challenges, upsets, and contradicts their worldview.

As a result of trying to reconcile such conflicting viewpoints, West experiences much conceptual confusion and cognitive dissonance. While he sees much of value in modernity and secular thought, he writes disparagingly of "humanists" and "humanistic scholarship." And in "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual," reprinted in *Breaking Bread*, he relates:

> My own Christian skepticism regarding human totalistic schemes for change chasten my deep socialistic sentiments regarding radically democratic and libertarian

> socio-economic and cultural arrangements. (Hooks and West 1991, 137)

This is quite a predicament in which the socialist-turned-social-democrat West finds himself. He seems to have forced himself into an intellectual cul-de-sac. Yet he writes in *Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, "I believe the alliance of prophetic Christianity and progressive Marxism provides a last humane hope for humankind" (1982, 95).

Although West, like many other Black progressive religious intellectuals, frequently uses biblical imagery and symbolism to make a point, he rarely quotes from the Bible. He wisely observes that spiritual rhetorical devices reach the masses more effectively than does the dry prose that is often found among the secular Left. West seems to be influenced not so much by "sacred" texts as by the Black prophetic tradition and its historical role in the quest for Black liberation. Black progressive religious intellectuals are not likely to be visibly disturbed by the numerous atrocities, absurdities, contradictions, and inconsistencies in their religious texts—if they acknowledge these problems at all. Nor are they likely to be bothered by biblical passages that run counter to their progressive worldview, e.g., Romans 13:1–2, which reads:

> Let every person be in subjection to the authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.

The progressive Black religious intellectual would probably respond to this passage with a contradictory passage that could be used to advance progressive notions—while ignoring the fact that a contradiction exists—or simply pretend that a disagreeable passage was merely ripped from its proper biblical and historical contexts. Thus the success and influence of progressive Black religious intellectuals depend ironically, to a very large extent, on the biblical illiteracy of those to whom their message is directed. The progressive Black religious intellectual delivers a

message of hope, liberation, and human redemption that is often at odds with many biblical passages, a fact that conservative religionists eagerly and inconveniently acknowledge.

The progressive approach to spirituality is aptly and succinctly expressed by the Reverend Cecil Williams, a beloved progressive clergyman from the Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco, during an interview with *Psychology Today*:

> The important thing is that people wrote [great poetry in the Old Testament and the New Testament]. Those were inspirational stories and you['ve] got to see them that way. If you don't you'll get in trouble. So I'm not going to spend time trying to find out whether or not Mary was a virgin. What do I care about Mary being a virgin? (1995, 28)

It is clear from this passage that Williams is now downplaying the importance of religious dogma in his progressive worldview. Indeed, not only is it unimportant to make a literal belief in religious miracles central to progressive politics, but the acceptance of such beliefs could be very problematic, perhaps even detrimental to progressive causes.

But despite the many theoretical problems one encounters with progressive religious Black intellectuals, they can point with pride to some successes that have come from the prophetic tradition. David Walker, Nat Turner, Ella Baker, Martin Luther King Jr., and many others were a part of this tradition, and many positive reforms have come about as a result of their ideas and activism. And it is likely that the prophetic tradition will be an integral part of the Black experience for years to come.

But there is much more to Black religious intellectual life than progressive theory and politics. Many religious Black intellectuals believe that God is conservative or moderate. Two of the leading Black conservative religious intellectuals are Glenn C. Loury, University Professor (a rank of distinction) and professor of economics at Boston University, and Stephen L. Carter, William Nelson Cromwell Professor of Law at Yale University.

Aside from a strong emphasis on spirituality, Black religious conservatives do not differ much from their secular counterparts.

Generally, Black conservatives favor self-help, school prayer, business development, high military spending, "traditional family values," tuition tax credits for private schools, an end to race-based quotas and affirmative action, a limited (or abolished) role for government in the elimination of problems afflicting the poor, including "an end to welfare as we know it," etc.

Though the Black religious intellectuals of both the Left and the Right are mostly Christians, their faith in the same omniscient, perfectly benevolent God has brought them neither unity nor unanimity in their endless quest for Black liberation. Most Black religious intellectuals of the Left strongly opposed Clarence Thomas's nomination, appointment, and decisions as a Supreme Court justice. But not only has Thomas won the support of Black conservatives, he is convinced that he is on a mission for God. According to *Jet* magazine, Thomas told his close friend Armstrong Williams that "God's law" led him to rule against affirmative action, asserting that affirmative action amounts to "hatred," "racism," and "revenge" against whites. He told Williams that "Jesus said 'Sin no more!' That is what I have to do" (1995, 8). Thomas gained support from Minister Farrakhan–whom, like Malcolm X, Thomas admires, as do most Black conservatives.

Conversely, most religious Blacks on the Left believe that Thomas represents ungodly interests, or at least interests that are not conducive to Black liberation. Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker, Reverend Al Sharpton, and other religious leaders held a prayer vigil on 12 September 1995 in front of Thomas's home to protest Thomas's opposition to affirmative action. Sharpton said that Thomas's views were not consistent with Christ's concern for the poor and downtrodden.

Black progressive religious intellectuals have strongly criticized Black conservatives. According to West, Black conservatives are driven largely by the desire to be accepted by their white middle-class peers. But ironically, West argues, affirmative action policies were put in place in response to the refusal of many white Americans to judge Blacks by the content of their character. West states that Black conservatives assume that many white Americans will deal with Blacks on the basis of merit, a view not shared by most Blacks. West writes:

> The pertinent question is never "merit vs. race" regarding
> black employment but rather merit and race-bias against
> blacks OR merit and race-bias with consideration for
> blacks. Within the practical world of U.S. employment
> practices, the new black conservative rhetoric about race-
> free meritorious criteri[a] (usually coupled with a disman-
> tling enforcement mechanism) does no more than justify
> actual practices of racial discrimination against blacks.
> And their claims about self-respect should not obscure this
> fact. Nor should such claims be separated from the normal
> self-doubts, insecurities, and anxieties of new arrivals in
> the American middle class. It is worth noting that most of
> the new black conservatives are first-generation middle-
> class persons–offering themselves as examples of how
> well the system works for those willing to sacrifice and
> work hard. Yet, in familiar American fashion, genuine
> white peer acceptance still seems to escape them. And
> their conservatism still fails to provide this human accep-
> tance. In this way, white racism still operates against
> them. (1988, 57)

Indeed, Stephen Carter–an Episcopalian who identifies himself as a liberal–has written about his need for white approval in his *Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby* (1991), as has Black conservative Shelby Steele in his collection of essays titled *The Content of Our Character* (1990). But as West correctly points out, Black conservatives have yet to be accepted by their white counterparts, many of whom are staunch racists.

Religious conservative Dinesh D'Souza, a thirty-three-year old immigrant from India, is one of many non-Black conserva-tives who believe that most Blacks simply cannot compete effectively with whites and have not earned the right to be respected by whites. In an article in the *American Spectator* entitled "Black America's Moment of Truth," adapted from his controversial book titled *The End of Racism*, D'Souza writes about the rage felt by many middle-class Blacks who believe that they have not been judged by the content of their character:

> This rage is not so difficult to comprehend. It represents
> post-affirmative action angst, the frustration of pursuing

unearned privileges and then bristling when they do not bring something that has to be earned—the respect of one's peers. (38)

It is sad—indeed pathetic—that many Black conservatives crave acceptance from whites and other non-Blacks who apparently despise them. Many white conservatives have consistently and openly expressed the idea that Blacks are inherently inferior to whites. White conservatives Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray delivered the most provocative attack in the name of science with the publication of their book *The Bell Curve* (1994). Although most Black conservatives rejected the Herrnstein-Murray thesis, no righteous indignation was expressed by most Black conservatives, many of whom include Murray among their friends or associates. Although Black conservative Thomas Sowell took exception to the authors' contention that whites are genetically superior to Blacks in intelligence, he defended much of the authors' work in an *American Spectator* review, excoriating its "more shrill critics," and arguing that *The Bell Curve* deserves critical attention, not public smearing" (1995a, 36).

Similarly, the publication of *The End of Racism* embarrassed many Black conservatives. According to a story by Gary Fields in *USA Today*:

> *The End of Racism* maintains that slavery was not racist, segregation was designed to protect blacks, that the civil rights movement was not a triumph of justice and that many people are racist for good reason. (1975)

Black conservatives Robert Woodson and Glenn Loury—a Black religious conservative who disapproved of *The Bell Curve*—resigned from the American Enterprise Institute where D'Souza works as a resident scholar. Woodson declared in *Jet* magazine that "Dinesh D'Souza is the Mark Fuhrman of public policy" (1995, 15). And although Black religious conservative Armstrong Williams is quoted in the *USA Today* story as calling D'Souza "brilliant, earnest and sincere," he was pained by D'Souza's ideas, and said the book "didn't end racism. . . . It's going to inflame and give ammunition to racists" (Fields 1975). Thomas Sowell—a secular thinker—was one of the few Black

conservatives to publicly defend D'Souza.

Surprisingly, most Black religious intellectuals have not relied upon religious rhetoric to argue against the current stream of racist scholarship. One would expect Black religionists to promote the idea of a perfectly loving God in whose image all human beings were created, with divine favoritism shown toward no particular "race." But most Black religious intellectuals who combat today's racist scholarship do so with modern methods of argumentation, drawing upon the social sciences, biology, modern philosophy, and so forth. It seems that a theocentric perspective does not have much credibility with either opponents or proponents of racist theories advanced under the banner of science.

Conversely, bigotry in the name of religion has been repeatedly and effectively discredited by secular scientists, historians, philosophers, and others. While secular thinkers are not dependent upon religious beliefs, religious intellectuals are obviously dependent upon secular thought to combat racism in today's world.

Religious Black conservatives have been influenced by the much-ballyhooed Protestant work ethic and the white Religious Right to the extent that some of them practically deny the existence of white supremacy or downplay its impact on society. They are obsessed with eradicating Black pathologies and lay most of the blame for these problems at the feet of liberals and big government.

Many Black religious intellectuals of both the Left and the Right have something in common–an interest in furthering the legacy of Malcolm X and claiming him as one of their own. Malcolm's conservative admirers view him as a sort of Horatio Alger from the 'hood, who, through patience, dedication, hard work, self-control, self-reliance, good study habits, and piety, became one of the great success stories in African American history. He advocated the establishment and patronage of Black businesses; abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs; and sexual abstinence before marriage and marital fidelity afterward. And like Black conservatives, he was not reluctant to acknowledge that many Blacks contribute to their own

oppression and that they are often apathetic to their own plight. He advocated enlightened self-interest but also maintained that Black resistance to white supremacy was too weak.

To many Black religious progressives, Malcolm was the living embodiment of strong Black resistance to white supremacy. He was a fiery orator who learned to direct his well-focused rage at richly deserving targets (e.g, warmongers, white supremacists, U.S. imperialism, hypocritical politicians, corrupt police officials.) He came to realize that people were divided by class throughout the world, and he was very sympathetic to socialism, deploring the fact that much of the world's wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy elites. He began to support many class struggles throughout the world, transcending the very narrow Black nationalism he once advocated.

Michael Eric Dyson, Director of the Institute of African American Research and Professor of Communications Studies at the University of North Carolina, is another Black progressive redline intellectual who has much in common with Cornel West. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* has called Dyson "one of America's leading public intellectuals." He, like West, has appeared on "Our Voices," a talk show on Black Entertainment Television hosted by Bev Smith. He has also appeared on a PBS presentation on Richard Wright. His writings have appeared in *Vibe*, *Emerge*, the *Nation*, and *Rolling Stone* magazines, as well as in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. His books include *Reflecting Black: African-American Cultural Criticism* (1993), *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X* (1995), and *Between God and Gangsta Rap* (1996). On the jacket of *Making Malcolm*, West calls the book "the most sophisticated and accessible analysis of Malcolm we have." Indeed, *Making Malcolm* is an excellent example of what West and Hooks call Black critical thinking.

Dyson, an ordained Baptist minister, demonstrates profoundly that Malcolm's worldview was complex and always changing, and that Malcolm cannot be pigeonholed easily or claimed exclusively by any one particular group. Though Malcolm has been claimed by Muslims, radicals, liberals,

humanists, socialists, Afrocentrists, progressives, Black conservatives, reactionary Black nationalists, and others, Dyson writes:

> Malcolm was indeed improvising from the chords of an expanded black nationalist rhetoric and an embryonic socialist criticism of capitalist civilization. . . . Although Malcolm consistently denounced capitalism, he did not live long enough to embrace socialism. (1995, 71–2)

Unlike Malcolm's more obsequious admirers and followers. Dyson is not reluctant to identify Malcolm's weaknesses and blind spots, and is especially trenchant in his criticism of Malcolm's misogyny:

> Unfortunately, as was the case with most of his black nationalist compatriots and civil rights advocates, Malcolm cast black liberation in terms of masculine self-realization. Malcolm's zealous trumpeting of the social costs of black male cultural emasculation went hand in hand with his often aggressive, occasionally vicious, put downs of black women. These slights of black women reflected the demonology of the Nation of Islam, which not only viewed racism as an ill from outside its group, but argued that women were a lethal source of deception and seduction from within. Hence, Nation of Islam women were virtually desexualized through "modest" dress, kept under the strict supervision of men, and relegated to the background while their men took center stage. Such beliefs reinforced the already inferior position of black women in black culture. These views, ironically, placed Malcolm and the Nation of Islam squarely within the misogynist traditions of white and black Christianity. It is this aspect, especially, of Malcolm's public ministry that has been adopted by contemporary black urban youth, including rappers and filmmakers. Although Malcolm would near the end of his life renounce his sometimes vitriolic denunciations of black women, his contemporary followers have not often followed suit. (1995, 10–1)

More importantly, Dyson acknowledges Malcolm's penchant

for self-criticism and his honest search for truth. In Malcolm's words:

> Until our people are able to . . . analyze ourselves and dis-
> cover our own liabilities as well as our assets, we never
> will be able to win any struggle that we become involved
> in. As long as the black community and the leaders of the
> black community are afraid of criticism and want to clas-
> sify all criticism, collective criticism, as a stereotype, no
> one will ever be able to pull our coat. (1995, 36)

In his last days, Malcolm admitted that he and other Black nationalists were dogmatic in many ways, including their blanket condemnation and demonization of whites, and he apologized for his naïveté. Malcolm, who once paraphrased a passage from the Qur'an (Koran) when he stated that "the closest thing to a woman is a devil," later spoke in favor of equality for women (Dyson 1995, 97). He was willing to concede that good points were sometimes made by those with whom he disagreed, and he no longer made allegiance to his evolving Black nationalist worldview the major criterion for determining Black loyalty and authenticity. He advocated and consistently practiced critical thinking, deeming it essential in bringing about Black liberation.

But remarkably, Malcolm never lost his well-articulated rage or his ability to connect with the ghetto masses. In his last days, "he learned, finally, to make his rage work for the best interests of black folk" (Dyson 1995, 176). Most people, however, seem unable or unwilling to distinguish between justifiable rage and senseless hatemongering. As Dyson wisely observes:

> Since Malcolm's death in 1965, black Americans have
> witnessed the arrival of pretenders and wannabes to his
> throne of rage. There have been many lesser incarnations
> of Malcolm's prophetic spirit and rhetorical passion, men
> and women who believed that all that was in Malcolm's
> bag of tricks was loud speech and hateful harangue.
> (Khal[l]id Abdul Muhammad's ad hominem attacks on
> black leaders and Jews is only the most recent example).
> (176)

It is this kind of "charismatic but corrupt leadership" that resonates so loudly among many Blacks today (176). While reactionary Black nationalists like those of the Nation of Islam have advocated self-help, Black pride, Black unity, personal responsibility, economic development, and abstinence from drugs, they have also fostered sexism, intolerance, pseudoscience, homophobia, xenophobia, irrationality, antiwhite and anti-Jewish bigotry, dogmatic historical revisionism, Black-on-Black violence (including the assassination of Malcolm X) and a host of other evils—all in the name of Black liberation, of course. Many Blacks, however, have become so cynical and disillusioned that they are easy marks for charismatic leaders who are full of hope, bluster, big promises, macho posturing, and hate disguised as courage and an undying love for Black people.

Ironically, despite the continuing quest for freedom, justice, and equality for Blacks, some major schools of Black activism and intellectualism have often blindly accepted reactionary elements without challenge. Examples include the Universal Negro Improvement Association under Marcus Garvey, Maulana Karengga's United Slaves organization, and narrow forms of Afrocentrism. It seems to take an extraordinarily honest individual with remarkably keen critical thinking skills to become the kind of person Malcolm became in his last days. And such individual fire and brilliance have never been carried to the organizational level of any major Black movement.

Dyson has the usual progressive slant on the uglier aspects of Black popular culture, e.g., "gangsta rap." While being mildly critical of the musical genre's misogyny, homophobia, glorification of murder, etc., he saves his wrath for its harsher critics. While issuing the standard defense of gangsta rap's harsh depictions of "reality" and emphasizing the importance of oral traditions in Black culture, Dyson strongly criticizes such gangsta rap critics as singer-"psychic" Dionne Warwick and C. Delores Tucker, about whom he understandably wonders:

> Like most critics, Tucker and Warwick don't mention the homophobia of gangsta rap; is it because like many mainstream critics, they are not disturbed by sentiments they hold in common with gangsta rappers? (1996, 94)

But Dyson is much more forceful in his denunciations of the negative depictions of Black males in the mainstream media and among the powerful:

> From the plantation to the postindustrial city, black males have been seen as brutishly behaved, morally flawed, uniquely ugly, and fatally oversexed. The creation of negative black male images through the organs of popular culture–especially in theological tracts, novels, and more recently, film and television–simply reinforced stereotypes of black males as undisciplined social pariahs, citizens of a corrupt subculture of crime, or imbeciles. Add to that the influence of scholarly portrayals of black males, particularly those contained in ethnographic studies that have both aided and undermined the cultural status of black men, and one gets a hint of the forces challenging a balanced presentation of their condition. (1996, 168–9)

Ironically, the "easy target" of gangsta rap fits neatly within this historical framework. Indeed, the most degrading and dangerous Black stereotypes ever concocted are glamorized by gangsta rappers. Alcohol abuse, drunk driving, sexual irresponsibility, gang violence, murder, illicit drug use and sales, mistreatment and degradation of women, the willful adoption of the term "nigger" as an authentic Black identity, and so forth are all glorified in gangsta rap. Moreover, gangsta rap is probably far more influential among many youths than the negative images emanating from the white mainstream media.

Unlike liberals and progressives, Malcolm directed his rage at the Blacks he loved. He held his people to very high ethical and intellectual standards and did not excuse or rationalize their faults, although he understood the root causes of those faults. This is what progressive critiques of Malcolm's thought usually–and conveniently–ignore. And this is one of the major reasons why many Black religious conservative intellectuals and reactionary Black nationalists find much of Malcolm's message so attractive. The simplistic liberal-progressive dichotomy of victim versus victimizer is both false and unrealistic. Many Blacks, like many people from all other groups, often cause and

exacerbate their own problems, sometimes even becoming victimizers themselves (e.g., Black-on-Black crime.) The reluctance to acknowledge this fact and to demand individual accountability makes it more difficult to understand the complexity of problems afflicting people of African descent.

Indeed, increasing numbers of progressives have come to realize this unpopular truth. As West rightly notes:

> The notion that racial discrimination is the sole cause of the prevailing predicament of the black working poor and underclass is specious. . . . White racism indeed is pernicious and potent–yet it cannot fully explain the socioeconomic position of the majority of Black Americans. (1988, 59)

Sociologist Orlando Patterson, Washington Congressional delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, sociologist William Julius Wilson, Manning Marable, and many others have expressed similar views. But they have been attacked by progressives for "blaming the victim."

In part two of a brilliant article on Farrakhan in the *Nation,* Adolph Reed accused such thinkers of "spreading pathology among the poor" (1991, 90). And writer Joe Wood stated in the *Village Voice,* "The 'responsibility' rap pushes Black politics into a hopeless discussion about the morality of black people and dodge[s] real issues black folk want sorted out" (1994, 26).

Similarly, many of those rappers who have positive messages of self-help in their music have been attacked by progressives. For example, in the late 1980s when East Coast rappers released the hit "Self-destruction," they were criticized by some progressives for having the audacity to demand that Blacks take it upon themselves to stop Black-on-Black violence. Moreover, they were accused of not being sufficiently critical of classism and the many factors circumscribing such behavior.

It is curious that progressives never suggest that Malcolm was ever guilty of blaming the victim, although he raised the same issues being raised by today's alleged victim-blamers. This classic either-or logical fallacy that we are all either victims or victimizers must be combated by thinkers from all backgrounds. To suggest that Blacks are incapable of significantly improving

their plight is insulting and self-defeating. Simply because self-help messages mesh neatly with right-wing rhetoric does not mean that those messages are worthless, or that the messengers are attempting to scapegoat or demonize Black people. It is this kind of fear of self-examination and self-criticism that Malcolm spent so much time battling during his last days. Simply ignoring uncomfortable and inconvenient truths will not make them go away.

Like West, who believes that the Black church is the only organic institution in Black America and an extremely important vehicle for Black liberation, Dyson sees a need for spirituality and secular ideals in public life. He writes:

> Black religionists (Christian and Muslim) are suspicious of secular ideologies that deny the validity of religious experience. Conversely, the strength of radical democratic philosophy and practice has been its unblinking description of the ills associated with forms of thought and political practice shaped by unjust forces, some of which were maintained by religious belief. (1995, 164–5)

This seems to be the greatest challenge confronting Black religious progressives–the merging of the spiritual with the secular. But the goal continues to be elusive, and its prospects are not bright.

Many Black conservatives are grappling with the same problem, as does Stephen Carter in his book *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (1993), which is a favorite among religious liberals and conservatives alike. Carter believes that religious belief and practice are unfairly excluded from public discourse, and that much of U.S. society is based on the assumption that religious devotion does not matter in determining how people should live. He argues that although religious believers constitute the vast majority of people in the United States, they are treated with contempt by the media. Religious individuals and organizations, Carter acknowledges, can be hostile, oppressive, intolerant, and tyrannical; religions as such, he maintains, particularly mainstream religions, are not so. He writes:

> To do battle against the death sentence for Salman Rushdie–to battle against the Ayatollah–one should properly fight against official censorship and intimidation, not against religion. We err when we presume that religious motives are likely to be illiberal, and we compound the error when we insist that the devout should keep their religious ideas–whether good or bad–to themselves. (1993, 10)

Like most religious intellectuals, Carter conveniently denies the fact that "sacred" texts routinely condone ignorance, dogmatism, and intolerance. In his book *Why I Am Not a Muslim*, Ibn Warraq correctly notes that after Khomeni's *Fatwa* against Rushdie, Western apologists for Islam wrote numerous books and articles demonstrating that the idea of punishing blasphemers is consistent with Qur'anic teachings (1995). Indeed, throughout history, countless millions of lives have been ruined by religious fanatics insistent upon forcing "God's will" on others. Today religious fanatics in France, Egypt, Iran, Sudan, Bosnia, Algeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and numerous other nations are accurately quoting their sacred texts as they try to force their religious worldview on as many people as possible. While Carter does not want to separate apparently benevolent ideas of religious people from their religions, he *does* want to distance ugly and disturbing religious ideas from their ultimate sources, religious texts. In this way, religious intellectuals often render themselves incapable of fully understanding and combating the problems they seek to eliminate.

Carter shoots himself in the foot when trying to defend the putative moral right of Jehovah's Witnesses to deny their children lifesaving treatment. The Witnesses believe, for example, that it is a violation of God's law to accept a blood transfusion. But the state places the child's physical welfare above the welfare of his or her supposed soul. Carter, however, makes a distinction between "factual knowledge" and "moral knowledge," between "moral truth" and "empirical truth," between statements of "fact" and statements of "value," etc. He argues that although many religious claims cannot be tested

against hypotheses of the natural world, they may be testable in other ways. Not surprisingly, he does not reveal exactly how this testing might be done. Still, Carter resents the fact that the claim of the Witnesses is treated by the state as though it is simply false.

Like many religious intellectuals, Carter is unable and/or unwilling to deal with ethical dilemmas, real or apparent. When a Witness's child's life is on the line, he gives no compelling reasons why faith in an afterlife should have greater importance than saving and improving the individual's life on earth. Would not the parents of the child in a very real sense be "playing God" by withholding lifesaving medical treatment? And should not human beings take into consideration the probability and improbability of the truth of religious claims? Should the parents' freedom of religion mean the "freedom" to force religious views on their children that will harm or kill those children in this world? And most important, there is a real possibility that the children might grow up to leave their religion altogether, i.e., to convert, or, God forbid, embrace atheism. Should the state assume that such would not or could not be the case? Should the children be denied life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness because their parents deem it spiritually correct? Should there be any limits imposed by the state upon religious believers? For example, what if a new religion arises in which human sacrifices are required? And if it is wrong to sacrifice human beings, why is it not wrong for Jehovah's Witnesses to sacrifice their children by denying them lifesaving medical treatment? Should there be no limit to what the state allows in the name of God or gods?

Atheist writer Greg Erwin profoundly demonstrates the absurdity of state laws that allow parents to rely solely on "spiritual treatment" for their children:

> If an atheist were to refuse to provide insulin for a diabetic child, it would be a crime. If a Christian Scientist does the same, it is an expression of faith. How can a failure to provide modern medical treatment for a sick child be anything but a failure to provide adequate care? (1995, 3)

Carter writes:

> I strongly defend the separation of church and state, but insist that it is possible to maintain that crucial separation while treating religious beliefs with respect, and treating religious believers as something other than irrational. (1993, 16)

While this is certainly possible, polemical attacks against religion have, ironically, contributed greatly to freedom of religion and freedom from religion, at least since the eighteenth century. Moreover, many, if not most, religious beliefs are irrational. Why should one feel intellectually or ethically obligated to pretend otherwise?

Carter believes that religion should be a part of public discourse, whether it comes from the Left or the Right. But he writes:

> The sense that the religiously devout hold principles that they will not surrender to societal demand is one reason that so many contemporary theorists of liberal democracy either omit religion from their theories or assign it a subsidiary role. Today's political philosophers see public dialogue as essentially secular, bounded by requirements of rationality and reason. It is not easy to fit religion into that universe, which is why some religiously devout people find themselves at war with the dominant trends in contemporary philosophy. (1993, 42)

This is the crux of Carter's thesis. If "rationality and reason" do not serve as the primary arbiters in public discourse, what will? What better way to test truth claims than through critical analysis? Moreover, many religious claims (such as faith healing) *can* be tested against hypotheses of the natural world. And those religious claims that cannot be tested in this manner might simply be anecdotes, subjective experiences, or unexplained mysteries. Why should they be given value equal to objective claims supported by strong evidence? As philosopher Paul Kurtz wisely observes, it is quite possible (although not necessarily easy) for people to go through life without religion, spirituality, superstition, paranormal beliefs, etc. But everyone needs to use reason

throughout life to solve problems and pursue happiness. What separates human beings from the lower animals is not a belief in God, or any other belief, but the level of development of the neocortex, which makes human reason possible.

Carter claims that in their zeal to forbid the endorsement of religion in the public sector, secularists have made it difficult, if not impossible, to teach about religion objectively in public schools, or even to mention it. He writes, "A number of studies have concluded that the public school curriculum is actually biased against religion" (1993, 206).

To his credit, Carter states that the negative side of religion should be taught as well. But he clearly does not mean that negative ideas from sacred texts should be discussed. While he discusses the putative necessity of learning about "Christianity, Judaism, and many of the nation's other religious traditions" (209), he certainly does not suggest that students also learn about the critiques of religion made by such historical figures as Thomas Paine, Robert G. Ingersoll, Clarence Darrow, Hubert H. Harrison, or Joel Augustus Rogers. Furthermore, he does not suggest that students learn about the large body of biblical scholarship that casts doubt on the historicity of the Old and New Testaments, i.e., knowledge that challenges comfortably held and deeply cherished religious assumptions.

Carter, however, does acknowledge the many problems that teaching about religion can present. He writes that Richard Baer of Cornell University "worries that a requirement of 'objectivity' would make it illegitimate for teachers to criticize any religions, including fanatical apocalyticism, or snake handling." Carter also notes that children ask tough questions:

> Sooner or later, teachers using the new books and other programs will be asked questions like, "But is it true?" or "What happens when we die?" or "Who made God?" The only safe answers will be those that so frustrated school children searching for certainty: "Well, many people believe that . . . and on the other hand, many others think . . . ." Few teachers are likely to enjoy picking their way through this particular minefield. (1993, 209)

Carter, again, shoots himself in the foot here. The most he can say on these crucial points is that denying children a knowledge of their religious culture and past is dangerous. As usual, he offers no real solutions to the problems he acknowledges. It seems as if he expects, or simply hopes, that the problems will miraculously correct themselves.

Carter argues against sexism, but will not deal with its sanction in the Bible or other religious texts. He goes so far as to say that the Bible cannot be said to contain sexist teachings because the term "sexist" did not exist in biblical times–a retreat into cultural and historical relativism. Moreover, he writes, "I do not believe that the revealed word of God, Holy Scripture, creates any explicit ban [against the ordination of women]" (1993, 75). Carter happily disregards the numerous biblical passages (Genesis 3:16, for example) that denigrate women as inferior to men. He would rather argue that the "true battle" is not with the male chauvinist messages of the Bible, but with male chauvinist Christians inspired by those messages. Carter deals with slavery, anti-Semitism, and other "isms" condoned in the Bible in similar fashion.

The biggest difference between Black religious conservative intellectuals and their radical counterparts is that the latter advocate structural changes that increase the role of government in efforts to improve society. While Black religious conservatives focus mainly on values, individualism, individual behavior, and a reduction in government largesse to improve conditions afflicting the poor, Black religious radicals focus mainly on a major redistribution of wealth and increased government spending to cure societal ills. Black religious radicals assert that power and wealth are largely controlled by small numbers of wealthy capitalist white males. The presidency, the Congress, the world's wealthiest banks and corporations, the legal system, the media, institutions of higher learning, the Federal Reserve System, etc. are controlled to a large degree by white males. Black religious radicals argue that this is not due to white genetic superiority, but to a patriarchal, heterosexist, white-supremacist power structure that dates back to the early days of Western colonialism. Moreover, they assert that human behavior is circumscribed by the

powerful institutions and influences that control people's lives, and that individual initiative, if it matters at all, can only take people so far.

Cornel West's "Christocentric perspective" has led him to incorporate Marxism, liberalism, pragmatism, and postmodernism into his prophetic vision for society. His concern is mainly with the poor and disfranchised. But although he advocates socialism and a salary cap for all citizens, he believes that people are greatly motivated by the desire for money and material objects, and that they should be able to make a great deal of money.

In an editorial in the October 1995 issue of *First Things*, West is taken to task for his supposed hypocrisy. Quoting from a scathing attack on West by Leon Wieseltier in the *New Republic*, the editorial relates:

> Wieseltier notes that West complains that nine taxis refused to take him to East Harlem where he was to be photographed among the masses for the dust cover of his latest book. West is indignant at the Manhattan cabbies although he tells us, "I left my car–a rather elegant one–in a safe parking lot." Wieseltier observes "So the taxis would not take him where he would not take his car! This is not precisely what Gramsci had in mind." (82)

West is famous, owns expensive suits, an expensive car, and is paid extremely well within the capitalist system he spends so much time critiquing. For these reasons and others, West appears to many to be quite bourgeois.

West, Hooks, and Dyson advocate federally funded business development in U.S. cities, bemoaning the abandonment of the inner cities by businesses for suburban business development and relocation to and exploitation of foreign markets. The critiques by these intellectuals are devoid of the jingoism and xenophobia that often accompany conservative attacks on U.S. investment in foreign nations.

While many progressive religious intellectuals argue that rapidly improving technology and the information age have left many poor people and minorities jobless, they have not devised

strategies for providing good jobs for the masses. Today a college degree is often required to perform some of the easiest and most mundane tasks. But as long as the cost of higher education continues to soar, and government aid continues to dwindle, millions will be left uneducated, unemployed, and underemployed, especially those from among the poor and from the lower middle-class who have traditionally relied heavily upon industry for their livelihoods. If those who can get into college are to be the only ones with opportunities to live reasonably well, class and racial warfare will become a very real possibility.

Many religious progressive intellectuals and many of their conservative counterparts attended or supported the Million Man March in October 1995. Dyson, who was in attendance at the event, remarked:

> Unless the laws of the land are reshaped to bolster political and public policy to attend to those economic and social practices that harm Black men, the inspiration to act better may evaporate under the thick pressure of political resistance. (Cottman 1995, 85)

But Dyson does not believe that human thought and human action will suffice in making Black people whole. He says:

> It was important for us to atone and search ourselves in the presence of God during these difficult times of constant demands on Black men. Prayer is the only way to reclaim the vital center of our lives and our families. We need to pay more attention to the spiritual yearnings and urgings that animate human behavior, that give life to the most poignant moments and clearest meanings, and without prayer, that is impossible. Prayer gives us motivation to exercise those public principles we cherish dearly; prayer is the vital link between what we know we ought to do and we ultimately end up doing. Prayer not only gives us the ability to move mountains, but it changes our attitudes about the mountains we face. (Cottman, 1995, 46)

West, a major organizer and advocate of the march, has expressed similar views. On the other hand, Loury, a critic of

Farrakhan, the march's primary organizer, was more impressed by the marchers' emphasis on traditional family values. Unlike most religious progressive intellectuals, Loury does not believe that white racism is the most serious problem facing African Americans today. Though he found the conservative messages of the march attractive, Loury prefers the Promise Keepers movement, a predominantly white Christian moralistic movement sweeping North America that expresses the view that the human condition, and not the racial condition, should be the focus of attention. When asked for the solution to problems confronting African Americans, Loury says:

> The solution is the Christian faith: I mean the church and the community of believers engaged with these problems, and bringing the moral teachings of the church and the salvation that's available through the faith to those who are in need. . . . I don't believe that tinkering with economic incentives can get us where we need to go. Indeed, I think that the larger society is in some difficulty and that there are various indicators that people are recognizing that the only way to respond effectively to that difficulty is through revival and evangelism in a large sense. (Cromartie 1996, 20)

Loury believes that Blacks might need to look for new allies in their efforts to improve their lot. He believes that the Christian Right would make great allies in this regard. In their defense he relates:

> Class-wise, these people run the whole gamut in terms of education and income. There are going to be many of them who are going to be from their own kind of working-class or regional roots and sympathetic to the underdog. . . . I would much rather argue the poverty and welfare issues in spiritual terms than in terms of incentives and so forth. (Cromartie 1996, 20)

 Advocating the "Christian faith" as the solution to problems afflicting Black people is fraught with problems. First, it implies that non-Christians have little or nothing to contribute in the way

of concrete solutions. Second, there is no monolithic Christian faith. Loury is a conservative Christian, yet most Blacks are very distrustful of the Religious Right, and view its adherents as frighteningly racist and reactionary. Third, giving such short shrift to structural problems will not solve them. Whether prayer and evangelism will make people more generous, hardworking, and conscientious is highly debatable. But they certainly will not suffice in redistributing wealth or empowering poor and working-class people.

Loury has caused much consternation among religious progressive intellectuals by challenging their conceptions of Christianity. For example, he tells of the time he saw Jerry Falwell and the head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Joseph Lowery, on the talk show "Crossfire":

> Now the question of gays came up. Basically, Falwell turned around to Lowery, and he said "Come on now Joe. What do you preach in your pulpit on Sunday about homosexuality? Don't you preach what it says in Deuteronomy?" Joe fidgeted, grumbled, evaded and never answered the question. I thought, "Wow, that's pretty interesting. He's a liberal, and he has to keep to the political line on this issue, yet to do so he's denying what he teaches from the pulpit." (Cromartie 1996, 20)

Here is another example of the conceptual confusion and inevitable hypocrisy encountered by religious progressive intellectuals. They often come face-to-face with biblical teachings that blatantly contradict their worldview, and the cognitive dissonance they experience is often difficult for them to handle.

It is curious that West, Dyson, and other religious progressives joined with Farrakhan and the Reverend Ben Chavis in endorsing the Million Man March. Both Chavis and Farrakhan have thoroughly sexist views of women, and Farrakhan has promoted bigotry, intolerance, authoritarianism, and other antiprogressive views throughout his career. It is understandable that there are times when male-only gatherings are appropriate. But to support a call for a male-only march that was initiated by male chauvinists unwittingly lends credence to

reactionary leaders, ideologues, organizations, and ideas. Possibly due to feelings of desperation and hopelessness, many progressives apparently believe that a show of Black unity under charismatic reactionary leadership will present no serious threat to their progressive vision for society.

Moreover, Farrakhan's claim that his idea for the march was divinely inspired seemed to have gone totally unchallenged, most notably by progressive religious intellectuals. It should strike progressive intellectuals as odd that a call from God for atonement went out only to Black men, and not to all human beings. Indeed, one would have expected a divinely inspired call for all citizens from every country to come together for atonement (with at least a few religious miracles thrown in to persuade the skeptics).

The logical implication of Farrakhan's claim of divine inspiration for the march is that God is a reactionary, authoritarian, male chauvinist deity–at least sometimes. But this is the progressive religious intellectuals' greatest dilemma. They cannot sufficiently attack reactionary religious ideas, because to do so would eventually cause widespread doubts about religion in general.

It is likely that religious intellectuals will always have great influence in public life, particularly among Blacks. And many of the views of religious intellectuals will continue to be vague, muddled, contradictory, utterly baffling, and sometimes inhumane, as are the religions that give birth to them. It will therefore always be important for critical thinkers to step courageously to the forefront and boldly challenge all ideas that impede or threaten genuine human progress.

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