

## Understanding of the Prophetic in the Critical Thinking of Cornel West

Yuki Shimada

Cornel West (1953- ) is one of the most influential and provocative intellectuals, and probably *the* most influential and provocative *Christian* intellectual, in America today. It is known that his books always become big sellers at university bookstores across the country, arousing passionate debates among young students. The range of his activities is enormous and his influence is widely perceived among, and even beyond, the academic and the Christian circles. As a scholar, he was deeply influenced by Richard Rorty during his undergraduate and graduate years at Harvard and Princeton and started his academic career with a focus on pragmatism in the American philosophical tradition. At the same time, he has attempted to combine his philosophical endeavors with a Christian insight that is derived from his background as a son of a minister of the African-American Baptist Church. His intent is to tackle the deeply-rooted problems of America: the gap between the haves and the have-nots, the deep despair among people, and so on. He has been engaged in research and education at renowned divinity schools and universities, such as Yale, Harvard, and

Princeton, among others. Since 2011, he has taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York, where he worked as a young scholar/teacher over three decades ago. He reportedly took a severe pay cut when deciding to move from Princeton University to Union Seminary. Still, “as a prophetic Christian,” he wanted to “be able to do precisely what [he was] called to do,” knowing his remaining time was limited.<sup>(1)</sup>

Although he has worked as a university/seminary professor, his concern and engagement has never been confined to university classrooms and his own office. West contends that his probing views stem from his “democratic experiences of weaving a web of interconnections between the academy, mass media, prisons, churches, and the street,” criticizing a “technocratic” view of academia.<sup>(2)</sup> He believes academic engagement should and can serve the betterment of society while, simultaneously, learning from the lives and social activities of ordinary people. During his period of professorship at Harvard, he had a serious dispute with Lawrence Summers, then President of Harvard University. Summers appeared to question the quality of West’s academic work and made public the dispute between the two in a scandalous way. It was, in West’s judgment, their differing views of the goal and service of academic work, and Summers’ fundamental lack of courtesy, that was the driving factor behind West’s decision to leave Harvard. He consequently took a position that was offered by Princeton.<sup>(3)</sup> Among many of his interdisciplinary, cross-racial, cross-class, and cross-border social activities, he has participated in the recent protests on Wall Street since the 2008 economic crisis. His vigorous

protest activities have attracted ardent support and attention from students. Adding a further religious and cultural dimension to his life, he is also a charismatic Christian preacher and a singer himself.

As George Yancy notes, there is “no single or final approach to Cornel West.”<sup>(4)</sup> Some scholars argue about the relevance of West’s employment of pragmatism; others attempt to elucidate upon his understanding of philosophy of religion; and still others focus on cultural aspects of his thought. Mass media and critics spotlight his political statements and manner of social engagement. Among many dimensions of West’s work and life, this paper explores Cornel West’s understanding of the prophetic, a key idea in his thinking. While he has distanced himself from theological discourses in a narrow sense, the impact of his thought is considerable in the academic fields of religious studies and Christian ethics as well as on those who work in faith-based people’s organizations.<sup>(5)</sup> West’s understanding of the prophetic is essential in both the theory and the content of his thinking, integrating both. This paper examines how his understanding of the prophetic forms his theoretical backbones inter-relatedly with other methodologies that he employs, and how he develops and deepens it in terms of content.

### The Prophetic as West’s Theoretical/ Methodological Backbone

Three theoretical backbones in his critical thinking inter-relatedly set forth the locus of West’s argument; (“progressive Marxist”) socio-economic analysis, American pragmatism, and the prophetic

perspective.<sup>(6)</sup> Among these, the first two have ceased to be directly mentioned in his recent writings. Still, they have continued to methodologically operate within his thinking from the early days until today. Engagement with “progressive Marxism” was at the forefront of his works in the 1980s. In his early work, he claims that prophetic Christianity (that is, the African-American Christian tradition, in his early writings) and progressive Marxism share a movement of “*commitment to the negation of what is and the transformation of prevailing realities.*” To note, he is never ignorant of fundamental differences between the two; namely Marxism’s optimistic views of human nature and of history and the Marxist exclusive emphasis on the socio-economic and political dimensions of human life. He is also well aware of Marxism’s negation of religion and God. Despite such differences, however, he suggests in his early work that prophetic Christianity can learn a perspective of social analysis from progressive Marxism; African-American Christian works lacked such a perspective until the 1970s when confronting the reality of American life, sometimes resulting in mere repetition of condemning of domestic racist experiences. Knowing the deficiencies of Marxism in both theory and reality, West in the 1980s claimed the socio-analytical perspective should help African American Christians not only better comprehend the socio-economic/political backdrops of their own realities in America and have a clearer vision of what a liberating society would be like; but also should help them to have an international perspective through understanding the violence affiliated with America’s political and economic power.<sup>(7)</sup> In short, West suggests that with a socio-

analytical viewpoint, the African-American Christian community can establish a more autonomous and responsible self-identity in both domestic and international contexts, without being simply responsive to tragic experiences. Although he has ceased to directly mention progressive, or any form of Marxism after the early 1990s, he continues to highlight in his later writings the importance of “socio-political analysis” of power, government, and other institutions in approaching America’s social problems. Analyses of political, economic, and social situations of America and Black America are crucial backgrounds against which West demonstrates his moral arguments in major works such as *Race Matters* and *Democracy Matters*, and *Hope on a Tightrope*, a rather non-academic piece for the general public.<sup>(8)</sup>

In addition to the direct outcome of methodological employment, traits of West’s serious dialogue with the progressive Marxist perspective may also be observed when, for example, he argues about the failure of both “structuralist” and “behaviorist” approaches towards the various afflictions of black people.<sup>(9)</sup> West points out that the (politically liberal) structuralist approach almost exclusively highlights improvement of economic and political settings for black people, whereas the (politically conservative and religious-rightist) behaviorist approach condemns the moral character of black people. According to West, the first approach is deficient in that it subordinates human life to political and economic structures, as political liberals tend to avoid arguments about value, morality, and culture; and the latter also is mistaken in that it imposes a moral responsibility for political, economic, and social suffering of black

people solely on those people themselves, neglecting the deficiencies of political, economic, and social institutions. The insight into the importance of both politico-economic *and* cultural perspectives is what West has learned in his comparative study of progressive Marxism and African-American Christianity in his early years.<sup>(10)</sup> Without clinging to, but through learning from, Marxism, West in his recent works spotlights political, economic, social, cultural, religious, and existential spheres of human life - in both individual and collective forms.<sup>(11)</sup>

The second important methodology West employs is derived from his study of American pragmatism. As with progressive Marxism, he displays detailed clarification of how pragmatism is integral to his thinking in his early works, but he ceases to mention it directly in his later works. Yet, that which he has learned from the pragmatic approach is operative and fundamental to his methodology. He emphasizes that American pragmatism underscores that “philosophy is inextricably bound to culture, society, and history” and that knowledge is a matter of “public testing and open evaluation of consequences” by a community of inquirers, who understand such inquiry as “a set of social practices.”<sup>(12)</sup> Philosophically, his employment of the pragmatic approach is intertwined with his repudiation of the modern Cartesian philosophical way of thinking. West calls the Cartesian approach “individualism,” or the “purely mental activity of an individual subject.”<sup>(13)</sup> He considers a communal and social approach towards knowledge as absolutely necessary, especially if ethics is to be taken seriously. He argues that one of the merits of pragmatism

was that it “dethroned epistemology as the highest priority of modern thought in favor of ethics,”<sup>(14)</sup> assuming epistemological philosophical orientation leaves little space for communal and social ethical consideration (as in the case of Kant, who was able to think about ethically capable rational beings and the kingdom of ends, which they compose, but paid little attention to communal and mutual ethical engagement of the members of the kingdom<sup>(15)</sup>). In contrast, West maintains, pragmatism philosophically prepares a way toward such an engagement. He repeatedly highlights such social issues as preservation and restoration of community and culture, which can give identity to young people and nurture the personality to commit oneself to one’s own live; all the while illuminating both inter-racial and inter-religious tensions as well as positive interactions in today’s America, and democratic endeavors of grass-roots organizations. He argues:

Radical empiricism tries to stay in tune with the complex plurality and fluid multiplicity of experience on the individual and corporate levels. Open-ended pragmatism accentuates the various problems motivating logical inquiry and reflective intelligence. Ethical activism links human responsibility and action to the purposeful solving of problems in the personal, cultural, ideological, political, economic and ecological spheres of human and natural activities.<sup>(16)</sup>

Pragmatism offers a philosophical channel to West’s communal tackling of ethical/moral issues.<sup>(17)</sup>

Prophetic perspective is the third and most important

pillar of methodology in West's thinking. Unlike the first two, that is, the socio-analytical and pragmatic approaches, which he learned theoretically and philosophically, he learned the prophetic empirically.<sup>(18)</sup> He derived his insight into the prophetic from his experience of growing up in an African-American church during the late Jim Crow and early civil rights movement era. In this sense, his acceptance of what constitutes the prophetic is deeply existential, religious, and cultural from the beginning, and he keeps a vivid contact with the prophetic Christian tradition, an actual source which continuously presents and teaches what the prophetic is. When he employs the prophetic methodologically, he attempts to provide it with more consistency, developing it into a vital pillar that sustains the whole structure of his thinking.

Delving into the heritage from which he derives his prophetic insight, West finds many prophetic voices throughout the history of the African-American Christian tradition. For example, he mentions as prophetic: several black leaders of the desperate physical and intellectual revolts against slavery; Martin Luther King Jr. during the segregation era; and several African American theologians who started penning their theological ponderings on black experiences at integrated higher academic institutions in the 1970s.<sup>(19)</sup> He underscores the underlying quality of their resistance; unconditional commitment to critique and negation of "what is", that is, overwhelming suffering and struggles in the circumstances in which black people in America have been placed. However, his acceptance of the black tradition is never a nostalgic admiration of the past, nor is it an uncritical support of black nationalism, both of which he



criticizes as undermining a sense of history that is sustained by a sound sense of community.<sup>(20)</sup>

West argues that the basic contribution of prophetic Christianity is its focus on the “*self-realization of individuality within community*”; and that its basic feature is observed in its “*commitment to the negation of what is and the transformation of prevailing realities in the light of the norms of individuality and democracy.*”<sup>(21)</sup> He explains “individuality” as the fulfillment of every individual’s potentialities regardless of class, country, caste, race, or sex. The emphasis on individuality of prophetic Christianity must be distinguished from prevalent (quasi-utilitarian and market-driven) forms of individualism which consider persons as “enjoyers and agents of their uniquely human capacities” or as “maximizers of pleasure and appropriators of unlimited resources.”<sup>(22)</sup> In West’s thinking, the prophetic Christian focus on individuality is essentially connected to its attention to community.

Methodologically, the prophetic perspective is crucial as it supplements the other two methodologies, progressive Marxism and pragmatism. First, it highlights non-political/non-economic social dimensions of human life, namely religious/cultural/existential ones. Community is a place where religious/cultural/existential aspects of life are experienced and sustained. In this regard, community in prophetic Christian understanding is distinct from social groups of shared political purposes and economic interests, which Marxism may assume as crucial for social change. West states “cultural and religious attitudes, values, and sensibilities have a life and logic of their own, not fully accountable in terms of a class analysis.”<sup>(23)</sup>

Such cultural and religious human dimensions that are embedded in a community can also help its participants “resist oppression,” and have the “potential for fostering structural social change.”<sup>(24)</sup> Community, with religion and culture, promotes understanding of what is the common good and advances harmonious development of personality.<sup>(25)</sup>

The second methodological significance of the prophetic perspective is observed in its capacity to offer “moral visions and ethical norms that regulate the social analysis and cultural criticism.”<sup>(26)</sup> West often mentions the danger of blind optimism concerning so-called scientific methods; sometimes they are used merely to serve the concerns of the scientific circle and are misused for purposes to degrade humanity. Social analysis, as a rational method, is an integral part of West’s critical thinking but it does not operate on its own; it requires critical examination based on moral visions and ethical norms. West mentions this function of examination in relation to the tasks of philosophy of religion, not to the prophetic perspective per se. However, he confesses that he has derived the idea of regulative moral visions and ethical norms from the prophetic Christian tradition.<sup>(27)</sup> West underscores that philosophy of religion attempts to “take seriously the human dimensions of ultimacy, intimacy, and sociality” and in this attempt, “it usually incorporates elements from religious traditions.” He continues:

Secular traditions are indispensable, yet they have had neither the time nor the maturity to bequeath to us potent cultural forms of ultimacy, intimacy, and sociality comparable to older and richer

religious traditions. Acceptable modes of social analysis and cultural criticisms are guided by moral visions and ethical norms that flow from synoptic worldviews, including such crucial matters as the ideal of what it is to be human, the good society, loving relationships and other precious conceptions.<sup>(28)</sup>

In West's thought, the methodologically polished prophetic perspective, derived from the actual prophetic Christian tradition, is comparable to philosophy of religion and can serve better than secular traditions in systematic moral/ethical examination of social analysis and cultural criticisms. As a theoretical/methodological perspective, the prophetic moves forward to critically examine its own "set of presuppositions, prejudgments and prejudices" and enables people to "resist against life-denying forces, be they biological, ecological, political, cultural or economic forces."<sup>(29)</sup>

### Development of West's Prophetic Perspective in Content

West's understanding of the prophetic perspective is not simply empirically informed; it is a "principled prophetism," as explored above, bringing a light upon "the plight of the poor, the predicament of the powerless and the quality of life for all" with the tools of historical analysis of politic, economy, and society.<sup>(30)</sup> His "principled prophetism" is not static but contains, from the outset, a potentiality to allow him to engage in social issues with a scope beyond the African-America community. His prophetic perspective has been deepened, widened, and clarified through confrontation with

complex social issues, and serious dialogues with those both of shared or different social agendas.

West's deepening and widening of the prophetic perspective can be observed in his two major works, *Race Matters* and *Democracy Matters*. This development should be considered in terms of content, not of methodology, because the fundamental principle of the prophetic perspective has already been demonstrated in the earlier works and has remained essentially unchanged. In addition, unlike with the prophetic, West does not further elaborate the other two methodologies, the (Marxist) socio-political analytical viewpoint and pragmatism, once the two are theoretically integrated into his thought. The two major works above were published in response to grave crises in America; the Los Angeles riots in 1992 and 9. 11. 2001, respectively. The Los Angeles riots were first triggered by the rage of black people against white police brutality and perceived the unfair court judgment, which soon led to anarchic mass destruction of the town, targeting local businesses, including Korean-American ones.<sup>(31)</sup> In *Race Matters* (1993), instead of simply accusing the violent behavior of the masses, West tries to locate a fundamental crisis underlying their act: a nihilism that is brought on the deterioration of nurturing cultural power of community due to a massive expansion of market-centered materialistic culture. He argues that this phenomenon is deeply intertwined with a decline in quality of black leadership. West condemns the "racial reasoning" of several African-American conservative politicians and career-obsessed professionals, who often use the "racial card." He criticizes these black leaders for using the support from black community in

order to make their presence accepted in a white-majority society but not truly caring about the status of black people. The prophetic perspective, which was directed mainly towards white supremacy in the earlier works, is now utilized to examine problems within the black community, especially to evaluate the quality of leadership within the black community. West clarifies that the prophetic framework is never identical with racial reasoning. He calls for a serious black leader who is a “race-transcending prophet,” devoting him/herself to “all who suffer from socially induced misery.”<sup>(32)</sup> According to West, such a prophetic quality was witnessed in such past leaders as Martin Luther King Jr. and Abraham Joshua Heschel (a Warsaw-born Jewish thinker who escaped World War Two Jewish annihilation in Europe but saw his family perish in Auschwitz, and later became a vigorous supporter for King’s civil rights movement in America), to name but a few. (To note, dialogue with Jewish leaders is one of West’s life-long works, which he considered to be urgently needed when the Jewish-black relationship deteriorated after the civil rights movement era.<sup>(33)</sup>) These leaders struggled “for freedom and justice in a prophetic moral reasoning.”<sup>(34)</sup> So committed were they to freedom and justice that they could not help but be deeply angry about the realities that denied these values to certain groups of people and dared to tell all the “inconvenient truth” of what they saw and perceived. (West asserts that in order to tell the truth to people, one has to love and respect them enough.<sup>(35)</sup>) Unlike many status-hungry black leaders, whose anger is often a performance to attract attention to themselves, West observes, the prophetic leaders showed an anger

with true urgency and an attitude of genuine humility, owing to their sincere commitment to freedom and justice for all.<sup>(36)</sup>

Furthermore, West emphasizes that a prophetic leader does not emerge out of nowhere. Instead, creation of such a figure requires a solid community. He states: “Quality leadership is neither the product of one great individual nor the result of odd historical accidents. Rather, it comes from deeply bred traditions and communities that shape and mold talented and gifted persons.”<sup>(37)</sup> To commit oneself to leadership, one needs a vital community that sustains “precious ethical and religious ideals,” creating, and giving praise for, collective moral commitment. Without such a community, a struggle for freedom will not be sustained for the long-term and only individual ambitions and interests will be prioritized.<sup>(38)</sup> The prophetic moral approach is maintained and acquired in such a community.<sup>(39)</sup>

West’s other important work *Democracy Matters* was written in response to another national crisis: 9.11. The terrorist attack spawned a pronounced strand of public opinion that asserted adversarial relationships between America and the Islamic world and between Christianity and Islam. West’s principled prophetic served as a key function for his critique of social discourses in this context, too, coming in opposition to the dichotomous view, which demonizes Islam, Muslims, and Arabic people. It advances “commitment to justice—for *all peoples*”<sup>(40)</sup> and advises people to consider, from the viewpoint of justice for all, discourses and behaviors of politicians, religious leaders, intellectuals, and fellow citizens.

In previous works, West's main source for the idea of the prophetic was the African-American Christian tradition of a struggle for freedom, although he occasionally mentioned the biblical tradition and often refers to prophetic leaders in the Jewish tradition as well. Now he intensifies his focus on the biblical origin of the prophetic and clarifies it from the biblical point of view. He explains that "the prophetic, to be found in the scriptural teachings of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, and Habakkuk, not only put justice at the center of what it means to be chosen as a Jewish people but also made compassion to human suffering and kindness to the stranger the fundamental features of the most noble human calling." He continues:

At the heart of the prophetic in the Hebrew scripture is an indictment of those who worship the idol of human power. According to the scripture, since human beings cannot be divine—and often act quite devilishly—prophetic voices must remind Israel of what God requires of them: "To do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8) ... The prophetic figures in Israelite history—Jeremiah, Micah, Amos, Isaiah, and others—give voice to *divine* compassion and justice in order to awaken *human* compassion and justice.<sup>(41)</sup>

West further states:

Prophetic witness consists of human deeds of justice and kindness that attend to the unjust sources of human hurt and misery. It calls attention to the causes of unjustified suffering and unnecessary social

misery and highlights personal and institutional evil, including the evil of being indifferent to personal and institutional evil. The especial aim of prophetic utterance is to shatter deliberate ignorance and willful blindness to the suffering of others and to expose the clever forms of evasion and escape we devise in order to hide and conceal injustice.<sup>(42)</sup>

In *Democracy Matters*, West cites the biblical prophets at length. They believed in a God who condemned worship of “the idol of human power,” sympathized with those who suffer for unjustified causes, and raged at people’s “deliberate ignorance and willful blindness” toward injustice. This perspective offers a chance to people to carefully ask themselves who is idolatrously misusing power, who is suffering unnecessarily, what causes lie behind such suffering, and whether or not they themselves try to remain indifferent to afflictions of others, at the time following the 9.11 attack and America’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Importantly, in *Democracy Matters* (2004), West repeatedly underlines how the prophetic is a “Jewish invention.” Furthermore, he points out, by being recorded in the Hebrew scriptures and preserved in Israeli history, the prophetic echoes in the “foundational teachings of Christianity and Islam.”<sup>(43)</sup> He highlights the shared heritage of the three different religious traditions that are now seemingly in serious conflict. In the midst of polarizing public opinion in America, he endeavors to remind the reader that the national/racial/religious border *is not, cannot be, and should not be* a criterion for determining good or evil; rather, prophetic moral engagement should serve as the criterion. Empowerment of



individuality in the community by way of resistance to oppressing political/economic/social/cultural realities has been the central principle of West's prophetic perspective since his earliest work. West further clarified the trans-racial nature of the prophetic after the 1992 Los Angeles riots. After 9.11, he again emphasizes that the prophetic principle transcends nationality, race, and religion. His prophetic vision has had an international scope from the outset; this is revealed when West urged black theology in the early 1980s to employ the socio-analytical perspective, breaking through the confinement to lamentation of domestic black misery and turning toward miseries in the third world countries. After 9.11, the content of West's prophetic vision has become more concrete. In addition to his repeated criticism of the US government, he argues in detail about the leadership of Israel and of some parts of the Islamic world (and the US support for Israel). He accuses the respective leaders of harboring militaristic and imperialistic attitudes towards neighboring peoples<sup>(44)</sup> and suggests that both the Israeli and the Islamic leaders should be able to draw a more democratic and humane identity from the rich prophetic tradition that they already have.<sup>(45)</sup>

In *Democracy Matters*, West repeatedly emphasizes "three moral pillars of Socratic questioning, prophetic witness, and tragicomic hope."<sup>(46)</sup> Along with the prophetic, the other two themes are also present and important in West's earlier works, although the three are first formulated together in *Democracy Matters*. Emphasis on Socratic dialogue is present in his earliest academic work *Prophecy Deliverance!* in that he attempts to

prophetic Christianity and progressive Marxism in dialogue. In *Race Matters*, meanwhile, he encourages dialogue which happens in such institutions as families, schools, churches, synagogues, mosques, and communication industries, in order to foster cultural ideals that resist oppressive political/economic powers and market-driven culture<sup>(47)</sup>; moreover, he himself has been engaged in earnest dialogues with several Jewish leaders, in addition to activities at prisons, schools, and community forums. Socratic dialogue is a social activity with concrete interlocutors. It is a foundation for accountability, which tests acceptable or unacceptable claims.<sup>(48)</sup> In *Democracy Matters*, West now leads the reader towards Socratic *questioning*. It remains a social venture in partnership, as each individual is vulnerable before the mighty powers of governments, terrorists, and, sometimes, even major public discourses. In West's thinking, however, the Socratic may lack compassion. West states:

[I]t has always bothered me that Socrates never cries—he never sheds a tear. His profound yet insufficient rationalism refuses to connect noble self-mastery to a heartfelt solidarity with the agony and anguish of oppressed peoples.<sup>(49)</sup>

West suggests, “our Socratic questioning must go beyond Socrates.” He insists that the “rich Socratic legacy of Athens” may require the “deep prophetic legacy of Jerusalem” and that the “rigorous questioning and quest for wisdom of the Socratic” may need to be infused with the “passionate fervor and quest for justice of the prophetic.”<sup>(50)</sup> For West, the prophetic vitalizes the Socratic.

The third moral pillar in West's thinking, called "tragicomic hope" in *Democracy Matters*, is explained as follows:

The tragicomic is the ability to laugh and retain a sense of life's joy—to preserve hope even while staring in the face of hate and hypocrisy—as against falling into the nihilism of paralyzing despair.<sup>(51)</sup>

The theme of the tragicomic is also discernable in his earlier works. Even in *Prophecy Deliverance*, which is strongly theoretically-oriented, he mentions musical and literary pieces that are preserved in the African-American tradition, including spirituals, gospels, blues, jazz, and novels.<sup>(52)</sup> They enable black people to express sorrow and joy, "without having to prove to others that this heritage is worth considering, or that it is superior to any other."<sup>(53)</sup> These cultural expressions offer an "unflinching introspection," which is neither self-gratifying nor self-pitying.<sup>(54)</sup> They represent the most humane, self-respecting but non-reactionary, "humanist" form of identity in the African-American community. As West argues, in the poor developing world, "identity is a matter of life and death. Identity has to do with who one is and how one moves from womb to tomb—the elemental desires for protection, recognition, and association in a cold and cruel world."<sup>(55)</sup> The cultural inventions of the black community offer such forms of protection, recognition, and association for black people, equipping them with a "cultural armor" to beat the black nihilism of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness.<sup>(56)</sup> The tragicomic is found not only in the black community but in every culture. West mentions European and

Arabic musical and literary heritages, too. He asserts “tragicomic hope is dangerous” because “[l]ike laughter, dancing and music, it is a form of elemental freedom that cannot be eliminated or snuffed out by any elite power.”<sup>(57)</sup> As such, the sense of the tragicomic revives the spirit of prophetic commitment when it is depressed, because it states that life is both tragic and comic; this understanding of life keeps one from despairing and brings hope to life again and again.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined Cornel West’s understanding of the prophetic in both theory and content. The prophetic is the most important among the three key methodologies in his thought; the socio-analytical, the pragmatic, and the prophetic. His prophetic perspective sheds light upon the human religious/cultural/existential spheres as an essential locus of social transformation, in addition to the political/economic spheres. Helped by the socio-analytical approach, the prophetic approach makes it possible to examine social problems that prevent the fulfillment of individuality in community. In turn, the prophetic perspective provides moral visions and ethical norms to examine social analyses and cultural criticisms, with a view towards considering more concretely what kind of society should be envisioned. The pragmatic approach offers an insight into how critical thinking should be communal, social engagement. It affirms that in its historical form, it always draws on communal engagement in *actual* communities for an insight into

what the prophetic is.

The principled understanding of the prophetic has enabled West to confront difficult social conditions throughout the years. His central idea of the prophetic, that is, commitment to justice for all, remains intact. Simultaneously, his understanding of the prophetic has deepened in content and its actual scope has been widened through his more recent attempts to confront social crises. Most notable is his confrontation of the issues surrounding 9. 11. On the event of 9.11 and the following wars, he proposed the prophetic vision, which now had a clear international perspective, as an alternative standard to the then predominantly powerful dichotomous view, which divided the world into the “Good” of America and its allies and the “Evil” of the terrorists and the Islamic/Arabic world. West asserted that the prophetic principle of “justice for all” should be the criterion to separate good from evil. Moreover, West spotlights the prophetic’s shared heritage of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. The Christian and Jewish traditions struggle to make the prophetic vision of justice prevail. West believes the Islamic/Arabic tradition also faces the same struggle. Along with the ideas of Socratic dialogue/questioning and tragicomic hope, West’s prophetic vision encourages people to participate in, and persist in, justice for all.

#### Endnotes

- ( 1 ) The New York Times, November 16, 2011. See <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/17/nyregion/cornel-west-returning-to-union-theological->

seminary.html?\_r=0.

- (2) Cornel West, *Democracy Matters* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 189.
- (3) West, *Democracy Matters*, pp. 189ff.
- (4) George Yancy, "Cornel West: The Vanguard of Existential and Democratic Hope": in *Cornel West: A Critical Reader*, George Yancy, ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), p. 6.
- (5) Stanley Hauerwas, a notable Christian ethicist who was named "the best theologian" of the day by *Time* magazine in 2001 (to which he responded, stating: "'best' is not a theological category"), comments: "Only Cornel West could write a book that contains essays on Martin Gaye and Hans Frei that serve equally to illuminate our current theological and cultural context." See James H. Cone, "'Let Suffering Speak': The Vocation of a Black Intellectual": in *Cornel West: A Critical Reader*, p. 108.
- (6) In his first major academic work, *Prophecy Deliverance! An African American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: The West Minster Press, 1982), West argues that prophetic Christianity can adopt a socio-economic analytic method of progressive Marxism towards constructing a better America while he names prophetic Christianity and American pragmatism as two major sources for his thinking. In this book, he attempts to offer a theoretical foundation, which, in his judgment, black theology more or less lacked until the 1970s.

Although West names prophetic Christian thought and pragmatism as two main sources for contemporary African-American thinking, several scholars, such as M. Shawn Copeland and Charles W. Mills, observe pragmatism, the prophetic, and Marxism as three major pillars of West's thought. This paper also considers that Marxism composes one of the three pillars along with pragmatism and the prophetic. However, the paper maintains that these three should be explored as West's methodologies, instead of "components" as Mills suggests, because the investigation of the three is not West's ultimate goal but

merely a tool to foster ethical and moral engagement. As this paper later reveals, the “components,” or contents, of West’s thought should be explored elsewhere; namely, commitment to Socratic dialogue/questioning, sustenance of tragicomic hope, and the prophetic, ethical, moral engagement. When pragmatism and Marxism are viewed as the major “components” of West’s thought, then it is difficult to make sense of the centrality of moral commitment in this thought. See Charles W. Mills, “Prophetic Pragmatism as Political Philosophy”: in *Cornel West: A Critical Reader*, p. 201. See also M. Shawn Copeland, “Cornel West’s Improvisational Philosophy of Religion”: in *Cornel West: A Critical Reader*, p. 155.

- (7) West, *Prophecy Deliverance*, especially pp. 19-23, 99-101, and 106-107.
- (8) Cornel West, *Race Matters: With a New Preface* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); West, *Hope on a Tightrope* (New York: Hay House, 2008).
- (9) West, *Race Matters*, especially pp. 11-14.
- (10) The importance of both vision and values, *and* social, political, and economic analytical tools is underscored in West’s more recent writings, too. See also West, *Hope on a Tightrope* (Carlsbad, CA: Smiley Books, 2008), p. 73.
- (11) Referring to *Race Matters*, Clevis Headley attacks West in three respects: a lack of in-depth analyses of “structural and institutional factors” in inner-city problems; a distorted approach towards the problems with a focus on psychological aspects of black people; and the absence of explanation concerning how West’s emphasis on the individual sustains institutional and communal transformation. (Clevis Headley, “Cornel West on Prophecy, Pragmatism, and Philosophy: A Critical Evaluation of Prophetic Pragmatism,” especially pp. 73-76.) All three points appear to reveal Headley’s misunderstanding of West’s work and life. The first two points are inter-related. It is true that West’s writings lack detailed statistical analyses of, for example, subsidies for inner-city school systems, unemployment, and medical care; instead, he sheds light upon the *socio-political* aspects of the inner-

city black life. Hence, he criticizes, in *Race Matters*, the structuralist and behaviorist approaches alongside poor quality of black leadership as one of the backdrops to despair among black people. West does not discard the analytical viewpoint nor confine all the problems simply in the psychological sphere of ordinary black people, as Headley implies. West's critique of black leadership indicates a possibility to transform the black community from within, without inflicting the guilt upon the psychology of the underprivileged as the behaviorists do, and without forgoing the mental/spiritual deficiencies of the leadership as the structuralists do. Furthermore, Headley's third criticism is also misleading, because West continuously endeavors to build a democratic community by engaging himself in dialogue at schools, prisons, community forums, and so on. West's writings should be considered to be intertwined with his activities.

- (12) West, *Prophecy Deliverance*, pp. 20-21.
- (13) *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- (14) *Ibid.*, p. 21. See also Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), pp. 361ff.
- (15) Immanuel Kant, "Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals": in *Basic Writings of Kant*, Allen W. Wood, trans. and ed. (New York: The Modern Library, 2001).
- (16) West, "The Historicist Turn in Philosophy of Religion," in: *The Cornel West Reader*, p. 362. This chapter was originally published in Leroy S. Rouser, ed., *Knowing Religiously: Boston University Studies in Philosophy and Religion, Volume 7* (The University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).
- (17) The relevance of West's employment of pragmatism in his thought, especially in conjunction with his prophetic perspective, that is, his idea of "prophetic pragmatism," is controversial. Several scholars, including Eduardo Mendieta, believe that West has greatly contributed to American pragmatism by expanding its possibilities towards social application with the help of the prophetic perspective. In contrast, such



scholars as Clevis Headley, Charles W. Mills, and even Richard Rorty, who directly influenced West, are doubtful of the possibility of plausibly combining pragmatism and the prophetic. It is beyond the scope of this paper to closely investigate this debate. However, it should be noted that the elaboration of pragmatism as an academic discipline is not West's final concern; instead, as Mendieta states, West aims at the "reconstitution and reframing of national identity." In this sense, the pragmatic approach is significant in West's thought insofar as it offers, in his own words, "sound human judgment relative to the most rationally acceptable theories and descriptions of the day," making possible social/ethical engagement. Although Headley and Rorty disagree with West's idea of "prophetic pragmatism," Rorty admits that it is possible that philosophy professors cheer "from the sidelines ... to the civil rights movement" and that Martin Luther King Jr. was one of the successful cases to adopt philosophy in social activities. West endeavors to develop the path that King took, from the side of the professional academic. See Eduardo Mendieta, "Which Pragmatism? Whose America?," especially p. 83 and p. 100; Clevis Headley, "Cornel West on Prophecy, Pragmatism, and Philosophy," especially pp. 71-72 and 78; Charles W. Mills, "Prophetic Pragmatism as Political Philosophy," especially p. 205, in: *The Cornel West Reader*.

In the 2000s, pragmatism and Marxism cease to be directly mentioned in West's writings. This might be because of the controversies evoked by the contributors to *Cornel West: A Critical Reader* as mentioned above. However, as displayed in this paper, West's fundamental methodological approaches that are informed by his studies of pragmatism and Marxism remain intact.

- (18) West, *Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations of the Crisis in American Religion and Culture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), p. x-xi.
- (19) West, *Prophecy Deliverance*, pp. 101-104.
- (20) West, *The Cornel West Reader*, p. 523. In his reliance on the African-

American Christian tradition, West avoids both nostalgia for the past and any idea of black uniqueness and superiority. For example, West finds fault with the early Martin Luther King Jr. while he praises the older King's prophetic life and commitment in many texts. West's criticism of the early King is twofold. First, West denounces King's claim that black people's suffering in segregationist America gave them a uniqueness as God's chosen ones with the capability to love their transgressors, white Americans. West points out that this claim coincides with an African-American exceptionalist attitude, which insists on the ontological or sociological superiority of African Americans due to the uniqueness of their culture and experience. According to West, any claim of racial/ethnic superiority based on a claim of cultural uniqueness reveals unhealthy uncertainty about self-image, although he understands King's attitude reflects the latter's difficult communication with a hostile white America. Second, West accuses the early King of targeting merely black admission to the middle class. West repeats that a scope for political and economic liberation of black people is necessary but not sufficient. See West, *Prophecy Deliverance*, pp. 70 and 75-77.

- (21) *Ibid.*, pp. 16 and 101.
- (22) *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.
- (23) *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- (24) *Ibid.*, pp. 116-117.
- (25) *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- (26) West, *The Cornel West Reader*, p. 368.
- (27) *Ibid.*, p. 370.
- (28) *Ibid.*, p. 369.
- (29) *Ibid.*
- (30) *Ibid.*, pp. 358-359. See also West, "Afterword: Philosophy and the Funk of Life," in *Cornel West: A Critical Reader*, p. 355, where he makes a counter-argument against such contributors to *A Critical Reader* as Levis R. Gordon, Clevis Headley, and John P. Pittman, stating that they

reduce “prophetic witness bearing to mere experience without *critical* reflections or existential identification with those who suffer without *analytical* operations.” See also West, *Hope on a Tightrope*, p. 73.

- (31) Using the social analytical method, West emphatically points out that in contrast to a popular assumption, among those who were arrested, only 36 percent were black and more than a third had full-time jobs. See West, *Race Matters*, p. 1.
- (32) *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- (33) Since the late 1980s, West has worked closely with several Jewish leaders, publishing and giving lectures together at school and community forums. He and his Jewish co-workers hope to re-construct a positive relationship between the black and the Jewish communities, which was lost after the era of the civil rights movement due to mutual prejudice, suspicion, and disrespect. He confesses while his efforts arouse active discussions among young audiences, such efforts were neglected, or even attacked, by major figures and institutions of both communities. West, *Race Matters*, pp. 71ff; “Tensions with Jewish Friends and Foes,” in: *The Cornel West Reader*.
- (34) West, *Race Matters*, p. 32.
- (35) *Ibid.*, x.
- (36) *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- (37) *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- (38) *Ibid.* See also *Hope on a Tightrope*, p. 84.
- (39) Charles W. Mills is perplexed by West’s statements such as: “There is – and should be – no such thing as a prophetic pragmatist movement”; and “[prophetic pragmatism] is a fecund discursive space in which I can put forward many views and viewpoints. It is the philosophical space occupied by my Chekhovian Christian perspective.” (Mills, “Prophetic Pragmatism as Political Philosophy,” in *Cornel West: A Critical Reader*, p. 194.) Mills seems to be confused because he considers prophetic pragmatism to be one of the “components” (see footnote no. 6 above) and thus the objective of West’s thought. However, as this paper has

demonstrated, pragmatism per se merely serves as a methodology to create a “space” in which different ideas are juxtaposed; it does not introduce moral claims by itself. In this sense, despite West’s own terminology of “prophetic pragmatism,” it is important to differentiate pragmatism and the prophetic; the first is methodologically integral in West’s thought, while the latter is essential both as a principle leading West’s thought and as a content that is to be deepened.

- (40) West, *Democracy Matters*, p. 16. Italics added.
- (41) *Ibid.*, pp. 113-114.
- (42) *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- (43) *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- (44) *Ibid.*, pp. 115ff.
- (45) *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- (46) *Ibid.*, p. 21. West also mentions the three pillars in following pages: 16, 62, 172, 213ff, et al.
- (47) West, *Race Matters*, p. 12.
- (48) In this vein, West argues that there is no ultimate “transcendental standard” for determining a “true theory, portrayal, and description” of anything. Our human finitude and fallibility does not allow us to reach such a standard. “Jesus Christ is the Truth, a reality which can only be existentially appropriated (not intellectually grasped) by fallen human beings caught in ever-changing finite descriptions.” See West, *Prophecy Deliverance*, pp. 97-98.
- (49) West, *Democracy Matters*, p. 213.
- (50) *Ibid.*, pp. 213-214.
- (51) *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- (52) West, *Prophecy Deliverance*, pp. 86ff.
- (53) *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- (54) *Ibid.*, p. 87.
- (55) West, *Democracy Matters*, p. 130.
- (56) West, *Race Matters*, p. 15.
- (57) West, *Democracy Matters*, p. 217.