Cornel West

BILL MOYERS: [voice-over] Cornel West is a scholar who has never let the ivy grow around his tower. His life in the academy is busy. He teaches religion at Princeton University, and directs the program of Afro-American studies there. He's also taught philosophy at Yale and at Union Theological Seminary. He's an author, too. Prophecy Deliverance traces the roots of liberation theology in the Afro-American church. The American Evasion of Philosophy explores the democratic ideal in the works of intellectuals like John Dewey.

But Cornel West moves in many worlds. He writes about everything from postmodern architecture and rap music to teenage suicide and black politicians. You will find him often speaking to community groups and to kids in public schools and, as a lay preacher, in the pulpits of various denominations. We caught up with him at New York's historic Riverside Church.

[interviewing] For an intellectual, you've been sighted in some very unusual places, the storefronts and streets of Harlem, the shantytowns of Africa, one of the worst high schools in one of the worst districts in Brooklyn. How come? Those are so far from the ivory tower?

WEST: Yes, well, I understand the vocation of the intellectual as trying to turn easy answers into critical questions, and ask these critical questions to those with power. The quest for truth, the quest for the good, the quest for the beautiful, for me, presupposes allowing suffering to speak, allowing victims to be visible and allowing social misery to be put on the agenda of those with power. And so my own sense of pursuing the life of the mind is inextricably linked with struggle for those who have been dehumanized, for those who have been marginalized.

MOYERS: What do you find when you go out there? Because there is this idea, this image in America at large, of a substantial portion of the black community in the inner cities simply saying yes now to death, violence and hate. What do you find when you go there?

WEST: I think I find, on the one hand, indeed, a lot of meaningless and hopelessness. But at the same time, I find those who are struggling, those who are trying to survive and thrive under excruciating conditions. And so the question becomes how does one attempt to turn, transform that meaninglessness and hopelessness into a more effective kind of struggle, a more efficacious form of resistance. It's a very, very difficult task, but there are a host of highly courageous people, working people, ordinary people who are trying to hold on to meaning and value in a society that evolves more and more around market activity.

MOYERS: Market activity?

WEST: Market activity. A market culture, a market mentality, a market ethos permeates most every sphere of this society.

MOYERS: What do you think that means? What does it do to a community?

WEST: I think market makes it very difficult because the market, especially market these days, is a preoccupation with the now, with the immediate. And what that means, then, is that people feel that they no longer have to work or sacrifice, you see. Why? Because the big money can be achieved right now. I'll give you an example, in the black community, in which market activity is at its most pernicious and vicious form, and that is the drug industry. You see, when young people engage in market activity, wanting to make the easy buck now, in many ways mirroring what they see in larger society — it's what they see on Wall Street, you see. And it makes it very difficult for them to take, not only commitment and caring and sacrificing, but ultimately human life itself seriously. Profits become much more important than human life, and this again mirrors our society. So what we see is a very coldhearted, mean spiritedness throughout these communities, and I think, again, it reflects so much of our own culture and civilization. It's quite frightening, it seems to me.

MOYERS: What do you say to these young people? I know you've been making a lot of speeches to young people in the high schools, like those in Brooklyn, where the situation is fairly miserable.

WEST: I say that we live in a society that suffers from historical amnesia, that finds it very difficult to preserve the memory of those who have resisted and struggled over time for the ideals of freedom and democracy and equality. And then I pose the question to them, you see.

MOYERS: To the kids.

WEST: To the kids. Are you going to be part of this tradition, you see. What's going to happen to this tradition? How do you keep it alive? How do you keep it vital and vibrant, you see. It ends on a query to them, you see.

MOYERS: But you're saying to them, suggesting to them, that each one of them can signify, each one of them can matter.

WEST: That's right. And of course, that's what hope is all about, you see. That's what hope is all about, that you have to hold on to some notion that the future can be different by means of you sacrificing, by means of you fighting, by means of you struggling. And this is an old message, I mean, I learned this message in the black church years ago.

MOYERS: But is that relevant to these kids whose imaginations, as you talk, must sometimes wander to Prince and Michael Jackson and what's the latest rap group that's so popular—

WEST: Public Enemy, Stetsasonic, yes.

MOYERS: Yes.

WEST: You know, I think it can be relevant, but it has to be couched in such a way that they see its relevance. Now these figures are, in fact, their heroes, and oftentimes they are their heroes for the wrong reasons. They're the heroes because of what they possess and the visibility they have, but they overlook the sacrifice and talent and work in becoming a Michael Jackson and a Prince. And then try to use that example as a way of linking it much more to struggles for social justice and struggles for freedom and equality. But these two figures, I think, in many ways are exemplary of the kind of sacrifice and discipline needed for them to be the towering figures that they are in our popular culture.

MOYERS: Once upon a time, as you indicated in your own life, the church did provide that space. It did provide that model, it did provide that community. But I saw a poll just recently that said in the black community, the church is increasingly not a part of the ambitions or the life of young people. Do you find that so?

WEST: Well, yes. I mean, one, I think it's important to note that the black church, especially, has had a disproportionate amount of influence on the black community, but the black church has always been a minority movement. But its influence is tremendous.

MOYERS: It's turned out teachers and preachers and political leaders—
“Read it,” people turned to Christianity—large numbers of black people turned to and value. Black people arriving here 371 years ago had to come to terms with Christianity for three basic reasons. The first had to do with issues of meaning and character, namely white supremacist ideology. But this message spoke very exploited, a god who accents and affirms one’s own humanity in a society that is deep on the— at the level of meaning and value. But institutionally it’s very

WEST: America as Egypt, America as a place of enslavement. At the level of both leadership and followership could be accented.

WEST: The Baptists, my old—MOVERS: So that image of the Exodus, of slaves freeing themselves—WEST: A god of history who cares and who sides with the oppressed and the exploited, a god who accent and affirms one’s own humanity in a society that is attacking and assaulting black intelligence and black beauty and black moral character, namely white supremacist ideology. But this message spoke very deeply on the— at the level of meaning and value. But institutionally it’s very important, because you see black people appropriated primarily the left wing of the Reformation, the Baptists.

MOYERS: The Baptists, my old—WEST: The Methodists, you see. I’m Baptist myself. And the polity is a much more democratic polity than that of my Catholic friends, you see. And by democratic what I mean is, of course, that the preachers are accountable immediately to the congregations.

MOYERS: And the pew has access to positions of leadership.

WEST: And the pew has access to issues of leadership, so that black humanity at the level of both leadership and followership could be accented.

MOYERS: And you were trained— you were trained in the public arts. Remember Bible drill, where the teacher would call out the Scripture and you would have to step forward and say— “Read it,” and you find it in the Bible very quickly.

WEST: That’s precisely [crosstalk].

MOYERS: You were trained instinctively there to take a public position.

WEST: That’s right, that’s right. And then I think politically there was also a reason, and that had to do with the fact that black people could indeed not only identify with an oppressed people, but that they could engage in a form of critique of slavery, critique of Jim Crowism, critique of second-class citizenship, while holding on to the humanity of those who they opposed. I mean, this is the great lesson of Martin Luther King, Jr., and King, Jr. is a product of this tradition.

MOYERS: We have opponents, but not enemies.

WEST: Precisely right. You see, so what religion can do at its best is provide us with the vision and the values, but what we need also are analytical tools. One doesn’t look to the Bible to understand the complexities of modern industrial and postindustrial society. We learn certain insights into the human condition. We have certain visions of what we should hope for, what should motivate us to act, but we need analytical tools. And the analytical tool that is needed is found outside of religious texts, it’s found outside of religious sensibility. We move to the social sciences, we move to the humanities, to try to get a handle on understanding maldistribution of resources and wealth and income and prestige and influence in our society, you see. And so all forms of prophetic religion must be linked in some sense with a set of analytical tools.

MOYERS: You used a compelling term on another occasion. You talked about combative spirituality. Combative spirituality. What do you mean by that?

WEST: Yes. By combative spirituality, I mean a form of spirituality which is to say a form of community and communion that preserves meaning by fighting against the bombardments of inferiority claims, the bombardments of deficiency claims against peoples of color, you see. So a combative spirituality is a mode of community that sustains persons in their humanity but also transcending solely the political. It embraces a political, but it also deals with issues of death, of dread, of despair, of disappointment, of disease. These are the ultimate facts of existence and they’re filtered through our social and political existence. But ultimately all of us as individuals must confront these, and a combative spirituality accents a political struggle but goes beyond it by looking death and dread and despair and disappointment and disease in the face.

MOYERS: And saying?

WEST: And saying that there is, in fact, hope beyond these. When you talk about hope, you have to be a long-distance runner, you see. And this is again— it’s very difficult in our culture, because the quick fix, the overnight solution, mitigates against being a long-distance runner in the moral sense, in the deep ethical sense, of fighting sometimes despite the consequences of winning immediately, but because it’s right, because it’s moral, because it’s just, you see. That kind of hope linked to combative spirituality is what I have in mind.

MOYERS: So combative spirituality is that sense of— subversive joy you once called it, subversive joy.

WEST: Yes, yes.

MOYERS: What is that?

WEST: Subversive joy is the ability to transform tears into laughter, a laughter that allows one to acknowledge just how difficult the journey is, but to also acknowledge one’s own sense of humanity and folly and humor in the midst of this very serious struggle. So it’s a joy that allows one both a space, a distance from the absurd, but also empowers one to engage back in the struggle when the time is necessary.

MOYERS: Some of that has come, has it not, from black music, from gospel and jazz and blues, with a slightly different emphasis. What about rap? Does rap have any of that spiritual energy in it?

WEST: Oh, very much so. I mean, black rap music, I think the most important development in the last 10 years is a profound extension of the improvisational character of what I call the Afro-American spiritual blues impulse. What I mean by that is an attempt to hold at bay the demons and devils with blues, spirituals and others. Hold at bay. And then, by means of a technical virtuosity and rhetoric, by means of an appropriation of certain rhythmic, syncopating antiphonal call-and-response forms, which are so central for black music, what rap has done is to allow a kind of marriage between the rhetorical and the musical, and I do think that part of the challenge of rap music is trying to remain
linked to some notion of transcendence. And by transcendence I don’t mean the transcendent, but I mean some critical distance so that some kind of evaluation and judgment can be made on the present, you see.

MOYERS: What is the judgment being made? Because you said somewhere that rap music is part and parcel of the subversive energies of the youthful black underclass. What do you mean, subversive energies?

WEST: Yes. They respond to their sense of being rejected by the society at large, of being invisible by the society at large, by their own critique, a subversive critique, of the society. And that subversive critique has to do with both a description and depiction of the conditions under which they’re forced to live, as well as a description and depiction of the humanity preserved by those living in such excruciating conditions. It then goes beyond to a larger critique of the power structure as a whole, you see, it’s international in terms of its link to the struggles in South Africa. So that in that sense, it’s part of a prophetic tradition. But I should say that what is lacking in rap music is vision and analysis. Now, of course, none of us require from music analysis, but vision.

MOYERS: It is just fun, often.

WEST: You see, it’s fun, it’s entertaining, it helps sustain the rituals of partygoing on the weekends, but it still lacks vision. And this is where, again, the church plays an important role, you see. Because it’s quite easy, you see, to channel these energies into very narrow and chauvinistic and xenophobic forms. Such forms lack vision, you see. They don’t have moral content. They don’t have any ethical substance, you see. And at times you do see this kind of vision being put forward, this narrow vision.

MOYERS: And even though there may be an intended or unintended political commentary in it, I don’t see it making any difference politically. Almost every analyst I know says nothing is helping, neither black rap music, neither the black church, neither social programs, neither capitalist economics, nothing is helping this black underclass. And yet you still—you still trumpet hope.

WEST: Yes, I do. I mean, this condition of the black underclass is tragic, but they are still human beings who are getting about. Many are still making sense of the world, in terms of holding on to their sense of self and holding on to their sense of vitality and vibrancy. Now, that in no way excuses the structural and institutional forces that are at work, which is to say the structural unemployment, the failed educational systems, you see, the consumer culture that bombards them, highly sexualized consumer culture that evolves around orgasmic preoccupation, that tilts in hedonistic directions and so forth, you see. That black underclass has to contend with all of these in addition to, of course, the larger racist legacy. But it’s not only about race. I mean, there are these other factors as well. So that certainly, the description of their conditions must include these others.

But certainly, I hold up hope. I’m talking about my cousins and friends and relatives who are seemingly locked in to this condition, and change can indeed come about.

MOYERS: The conundrum is that if you are morally outraged today, you’re relegated to the margins of society. You’re almost—it’s almost considered a form of lunacy to be concerned about social milieu—lunacy in the sense of acting out of the character of the times, out of the norm. To be mature today means you’re supposed to say, “We can’t ameliorate certain circumstances in life.”

WEST: But I think the important point there, though, Bill is that we have to understand why this is so, why has cynicism become so pervasive over the past 10 years for those who accented social misery, wanted to focus on social misery? I see that cynicism more and more on the wane. I think eastern Europe is providing us with a very different lesson. See, up until the last few months, people did not believe that ordinary human beings, organized, could fundamentally change society. We had scholars around the world saying that the very notion of revolution was outdated and antiquated. So all of those assumptions and presuppositions are now being called into question, which means then that the focus of ordinary people organizing, mobilizing, having impact on powers-that-be, once again moves to the center of the agenda. It’s a question of sustaining ways of life in which care is manifest by means of bringing power and pressure to bear on status quo, but power and pressure to bear brought in such a way that we see some changes coming through and how people can see it themselves, namely people believing they make a difference, you see. And lectures don’t do that as much as ordinary, on-the-ground, grassroots organizations.

MOYERS: You said recently that there’s a crisis in black leadership in this country. What kind of crisis?

WEST: Well, one is that so much of the energy and talent of black leaders has been channeled through electoral politics. Now, on the one hand, this is a salutary development, because of course, to have a black governor in Virginia, black mayor in New York and Los Angeles and Atlanta and what have you is a sign of progress. One should in no way deny this, one should in no way downplay this. But at the same time, given the way American society is structured, the disproportional amount of influence of the business community, the degree to which politicians as a whole must in some way if not cater to, then at least negotiate and compromise with, this business community, it’s still very clear then that the black politicians have highly circumscribed powers. And this is true for any politician, you see. And therefore their inability to actually enhance the plight or predicament of black working people and black poor people, working people and poor people as a whole.

MOYERS: In fact, women and blacks have achieved mayoralty positions and other positions like that just as the powers have become more circumscribed.

WEST: That’s exactly right. With the tax base eroding and what have you. So that symbolically, catharchically and, in some ways, politically, black politicians play an important role, but it’s highly limited. They know it, we know it, and their constituencies know it. But the problem has been, you see, the black leadership has been focused on electoral politics, so we no longer have the Kings and the Malcolm Xes and the Fannie Lou Hamers and the Ella Bakers, namely those who stood on grassroots organizations and brought their prophetic critiques to bear, you see.

In fact, what we need, in addition to the black politicians, are black prophetic figures who are less interested in winning office and more interested in speaking the truth with love to power, and to organizing and mobilizing black people and other people as well as to what the realities are.

MOYERS: Don’t you sometimes wish there were leaders and intellectuals who transcended race?

WEST: Sure. I mean, there has to be. There has to be. But I think it’s important that when we talk about transcending race, we don’t forget about it, you see. That is to say that I think that we can best understand the whole by acknowledging the various parts. And it’s true, the whole is more than the sum of its parts, but the various parts. One part is race; gender, ecology, labor and so forth. Certainly it would have to be a figure—it would have to be a movement that
would speak to all of these. But you see, what often happens, though, Bill, is that precisely because black people and black intellectuals have been so thoroughly ghettoized and marginalized and confined to the racial terrain, that many want to prematurely escape. And that's just as bad as those who want to remain ghettoized, it seems to me.

**MOYERS:** And if you remain with contacts to the black community, you are irrelevant to the larger white community. If you move into the larger white community, you are impotent back in the community, right, in the ghetto?

**WEST:** That's right. That's exactly right. We need to be able to move back and forth in such a way that you're neither ashamed of talking about the race issue and all of its implications and you also are willing to, and in fact, you insist on talking about the larger situation in light of other elements as well as race, you see. And I think that's what we need in the 1990s.

**MOYERS:** [voice-over] From Riverside Church in New York, this has been a conversation with Cornel West. I'm Bill Moyers.

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