

Cornel West

## Empire, Pragmatism, and War A Conversation with Cornel West

with  
Eduardo Mendieta

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*Q: Is the United States a republic or an empire?*

A: It's both. We're in the moment where the American empire is devouring American democracy and we have to fight it. But it's both. The United States has 650 military facilities in 132 countries, a ship in every major ocean, a presence on every major continent other than Antarctica, and 1,450,000 soldiers around the globe. It is *the* uncontested military power and *the* cultural mover in terms of shaping people's utopian desires and ideals and so on. Starbucks and Wal-Mart and McDonalds, you go right across the board because the dollar is the currency other nations invest their financial resources in for security. It is an uncontested empire and yet, at the same time, domestically, there are democratic procedures and processes that are not dead. They've been deeply assaulted, but they're not dead. And so we've got this simultaneity: Democratic practices constituting still a kind of republic representative government and at the same time this empire. And they're in *deep* tension—both creative and destructive tension—right now the Bush administration of course is the deep imperialist strain that is claiming to be the defender of democracy.

*Q: Do you think that the present Bush administration is an example of very bad political luck, or is it indicative of something much more endemic to America?*

A: Oh, no, it's endemic because America has always had this deep battle between imperialist strands and democratic strands. America was born as an empire on indigenous people's lands and on indigenous people's backs, with the use of African labor constituting a slave, not just class, but a slave

foundation—an economic foundation of the nation. The same would be true for Mexican laborers with the moving border. There is the American manifest destiny, which is nothing but imperialist ideology to justify expansionism for resources and for land and so forth. The same would be true for Asian workers being brought in and ordered to perform certain kinds of cheap labor and then sent out. So you have this long history of American imperial expansion and alongside that you have what I call a deep democratic tradition.

*Q: But don't you think that the hard power is going to overwhelm the so-called soft power, when you have an annual 400 billion dollar investment in the world's largest military-industrial complex?*

A: Here I think Sheldon Wolin is very important. Democracy is always a matter of ordinary people taking back their powers and targeting consolidated elite power. And no matter how much money and how many cannons or missiles the elites might have, they still have to, in the end, deal with the incorporation of the *demos*, of we plebeians, as it were. And so in an ironic way, what appears to be weak can turn out to be very strong, which has to do with democratic energy from below. The question is how long it can be contained. How long it can be amused and mischanneled and so forth. And that deep democratic tradition, really, that goes all the way from both the founding fathers who had a revolutionary energy that was quite impressive against the British as just as many were fearful of unruly demos once they pushed the British out. But that's part of a deep tradition. And I think when you look at Emerson, when you look at Melville, when you look at Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, when you look at the best of the populace, the best of the progressivist movement, the best of the feminist movement, and, most importantly for me, the struggles against white supremacy.

*Q: Is there a relationship between pragmatism as a philosophical spirit of the United States and U.S. imperialism?*

A: Well, again, pragmatism here, I think, is a very complicated intellectual tradition because there is no one-to-one correspondence between pragmatist views on truth, knowledge, and so forth, and pragmatist politics. You can be left, center, or right and that's very important. One has to be very Gramscian

about this in terms of what the context is, in terms of what the temperament is of the particular pragmatic philosopher. But *pragmatism*, I think, is on the one hand very much a part of the democratic spirit in terms of its deep suspicion of authority, in terms of its preoccupation with preserving individuality—very different than “possessive individualism,” now—but which is a democratic individuality, self-interrogation, self-scrutiny, and so on. The problem with pragmatism has always been that it has no significant understanding of the role of structures and institutions, not just within nations but across nations. So that even William James’s exemplary anti-imperialist critiques were moralistic critiques, you see. There’s nothing wrong with moralism; we want to be certain kinds of persons. *Paidea* does matter. But there’s no understanding of the structural, institutional practices linked to these imperial projects. Especially of *his* day. Especially of *our* day. So that pragmatism can actually end up being used by elites to contain democratic energies, even though it does embody in its own views of the world deeply democratic sensibilities. It’s a fascinating kind of juxtaposition there and I’ve always felt that about pragmatism—years ago and I see that now.

*Q: A parallel question: Do you think pragmatism was, is, a nationalistic philosophy in the ways that Hegel and Kant and in the 20th century Scheler and Heidegger’s philosophies were nationalistic? Was Dewey nationalistic? Was James nationalistic?*

A: Well, you know it’s interesting. I think that in the great pragmatists Pierce, James, Dewey, you have a cosmopolitanism there. Now, it is a cosmopolitanism that often times is Eurocentric. It’s like Goethe, it’s like Matthew Arnold, it’s like Wieland, who were the creators of a notion of this world literature. And by world literature they still meant the best of Europe across national boundaries in Europe, for the most part—with a few exceptions of maybe Persia, and one or two poets in the East or something, you know what I mean. But what’s fascinating about James and Dewey is that James’s preoccupation with the democratic individuality and Dewey’s preoccupation with democratic community led them to an allegiance to democratic ideals that could easily have taken them beyond national boundaries. That’s what I love about them. That’s part of my own internationalism as a democrat—that you can tease that out of there. And in some ways, it goes back to Emerson, really.

I think Stanley Cavell is probably right that Emerson is American in terms of his *roots*, but he's international in terms of his *routes*. They take him out, you see. And I think Dewey and James, especially in their essays on Emerson, had this sense of democracy, of individuality. That cuts across. And so, again, there is an ambivalence there, I think, when it comes to the national character.

*Q: Do you think that a judicial pragmatism, of the kind espoused by Richard Posner and Justice Stephen Breyer, is a liability or an asset in the Supreme Court?*

A: In the Supreme Court itself?

*Q: Yeah.*

A: Well, I think Breyer is a very brave man, a very decent man. I thank God he's on the court, but that's a relative judgment. You measure him against Scalia and you want to have a party, right? [laughter] At the same time, I think that when it comes to the *larger* issues regarding the philosophy of law and so on and so forth, I've always viewed pragmatism in its relation to the law, going all the way back to Holmes, as [on the one hand] liberating—in terms of getting beyond certain narrow forms of legal positivism, and trying to take history and experience seriously, and the dynamism of the law I like. But [on the other hand] I always thought there was a certain parochialism to pragmatic thinkers reflecting on the law, because, you see, [when it comes to] the relation of the law to economic structures, the relation of the law to power dynamics in the nation-state, in foreign policy as well as domestic policy—there is very little talk about that when it comes to pragmatism and law. They carve out their little domestic space, criticize their positivist interlocutors, and so forth, and you get the feeling “thank God they're doing that kind of thing,” but in the end it's just *so* limited. When I think of people who think seriously about the law, in that broader sense of Roberto Unger—people who have a vision of the complex relation between legal practices and economic structures, and foreign policy as it's linked to the nation-state and it's bureaucracy (State Department, Pentagon, and CIA). These are very important kinds of issues that we ought not leave to journalists and there's a sense in which a lot of philosophers of law left it to journalists to tell those stories.

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*Q: Do you think there is anything worth preserving in patriotism?*

A: Oh sure!

*Q: Is patriotism a form of virtue?*

A: Absolutely. I believe that piety is an appropriate virtue.

*Q: So patriotism is a form of piety?*

A: Oh absolutely, absolutely. We have to pay debt to the sources of our being. That includes mom and dad. That includes the community that shaped you. That includes the nation that both protects you as well as gives you some sense of possibility. And for religious folk, of course, it includes God. Now, the problem is there has to be some Socratic energy in one's piety. Piety ought to be inseparable from critical thinking, but the critical thinking is parasitic on who one is and where one starts. And who one is and where one starts has to do with what has shaped you from womb to tomb. Part of the hollowness and shallowness of some of modern thinking is to think that somehow one gives birth to oneself and therefore one has no debt to anybody who came before—as if you can have a language all by itself, as if you could actually raise yourself from zero to five, and so forth and so on. So that I look at my beautiful daughter and I give her all the love that I can and as she gets older, she is going to feel a certain kind of relation to me. In the end, she may characterize that as a debt that she feels to me because of the love that I gave her. I think that's appropriate. I don't do it for that reason, but I think that's appropriate. I certainly feel that with my parents and I feel that with my neighborhood. I feel that with my Black church. I feel that with the nation and I also feel that with my intellectual ancestors. I think I have a deep debt to Chekhov and a deep debt to Coltrane. I have a deep debt to Hilary Putnam and Stanley Cavell, and these people who were so very kind to me. That doesn't mean I uncritically accept what they have to say. I wrestle with them, but I'm thinking of a kind of critical, Socratic patriotism. Let's call it that.

*Q: What's the difference between patriotism and nationalism?*

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A: I think patriotism works at that psychic, existential level in terms of debt. I think nationalism is a particular ideology that was forged as the European empires began disintegrating. You needed different units to be constituted to deal with the dynamics of power, so you ended up with these nation-states with their institutions of administration and their control over the instrumentalities of violence. And it has become the most powerful modern ideology in some ways. As the empires underwent metamorphosis, some of them collapsed, some of them reconstituted and so on. A very powerful ideology.

*Q: Is there a link between Black Nationalism and U.S. nationalism?*

A: Absolutely. Absolutely. It's ironic because nationalism itself is a European construct, and we get Black folk—who are victimized mainly by Europeans tied to vicious notions and practices of white supremacy—using a European ideology to counter. I can understand that; we have to use any weapon we can, but we have to be cognizant of its limitations, how tainted it is, and especially how morally tainted it is in terms of not allowing our internationalism and universalism to become more pronounced. But, of course, the problem has always been that the Black Nationalist movement has no land, no territory, and so it becomes symbolic. A way of trying to organize...

*Q: Cultural?*

A: A cultural nationalism or a kind of psychic nationalism. A control over community in terms of the flow of capital, as opposed to having one's own nation-state that you can control the boundaries and borders and so forth. People like Elijah Mohammed—I have great respect for him in terms of his willingness to live and die for Black people. I have a devastating critique of him in terms of the limitedness of his vision: the xenophobia, the uncritical appropriation of a nationalist ideology that has wreaked havoc on so many other peoples. And similarly with Louis Farrakhan—I have a great love for him in terms of his love for Black people and his willingness to live and die for Black people and yet at the same time—and he's still alive, thank God, so we can argue about these things, about my critiques of his nationalist projects and the patriarchy and the homophobia that often go with nationalist ideology: You need

some other human to be, if not demeaned, then certainly to be defined over against. You see, as a radical democrat I am very suspicious of it.

*Q: Are you suggesting that Black Nationalism has become historically obsolete?*

A: No.

*Q: Is there a role for it still?*

A: Absolutely. As long as white supremacy is around, there will be Black Nationalism—and progressive Black Nationalism will be more common. I think that's true for any kind of nationalism. I'm critical of a Zionist project because it is a form of nationalism of oppressed people just like Black Nationalism is a form of nationalism of oppressed people. But progressive Zionists are my comrades, because as long as racist forms of anti-Semitism are around, then you're going to have nationalist responses to it. Zionist responses *vis-à-vis* anti-Semitism, Black Nationalist responses *vis-à-vis* white supremacy, and so forth and so on. When I said "progressive" what I mean is those particular nationalists who accent the democratic dimensions of their projects—and there are significant democratic dimensions of the Zionist project, of the Black Nationalist project, of the American nationalist project. Ralph Ellison, I'm going to lecture on him today. This man is a thoroughgoing American nationalist—patriot to the core. You know, one of the great geniuses of the American literary tradition—much too nationalist for me. But the democratic dimension of his American nationalism is very rich.

*Q: Do you think that the African-American reaction to 9/11 was different from that of Anglo-Americans, or does it make any sense to talk about this split?*

A: It was very different. It was *very* different. To be a nigger in America meant to be unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence, and *hated*. America experienced that as a nation for the first time on 9/11, so the whole nation was niggerized. Black people began to say "you beginning to get the sense now what it is I have to deal with"—this terrorized condition, you see. And I think that

Black folk, therefore, were less likely to engage in an adolescent lust for revenge, because they've got long traditions of overcoming that kind of spiritual immaturity. Well, you say, revenge is an instinct when you're terrorized. But when you come out of a people who have been terrorized, over time you recognize that your survival will not be procured by revenge. If we had the voice of a Martin King or the voice of a [?], as the dominant responses to American terrorism, you wouldn't get the Lone Ranger, cowboy-like attitude of George Bush and others.

*Q: Do you think, notwithstanding that difference, that African-American intellectuals and spokespersons have been cowered into silence and acquiescence for fear that they might be called unpatriotic?*

A: Early on that was the case, absolutely. Barbara Lee, my dear sister, stood up—all by herself and under death threats for weeks—before congress to vote against Bush pushing that through immediately after 9/11. Part of the problem is that the market-driven media is just not interested in some of the more significant truth-tellers coming out of the Black community. So if you actually look at the Black press, the Black radio, or even Tavis Smiley's C-SPAN show on the Black response to 9/11: You probably had more truth-telling on that show about America than you had on any other show. And it's mainly because Black people been dealing with American terrorism for hundreds of years. So we could trash, call into question, all forms of terrorists—be they American, be they Islamic, be they Christian, be they Jewish, be they whatever. Whereas America became so obsessed with this particular terrorist attack, which was vicious and wrong and cowardly, but didn't want to look at itself, and therefore fell into that typically adolescent pure victim/impure victimizer, us versus them—the Manichean vision that we hear Bush articulating day-in and day-out.

*Q: We'll come back to that Manicheanism later on. Do you think there's a continuum between the slave plantation, Jim Crow the ghetto, the ethno-racial prison and the present use of the death penalty as a form of "legalized lynching," as Jesse Jackson calls it?*

A: Yeah, I think Angela Davis and others have been quite brilliant on this issue. What we're talking about is the excessive use of repression and violence to contain and control significant slices of the Black community, especially, more and more these days, the poor Black community. And that Black encounter with the violent face, with the repressive face of the American state has played a crucial role in shaping Black people's perception of America. And it goes from the whip on the plantation, to the lynching of the lynching tree, to the trigger-happy policing, on to the death penalty and the criminal justice system and the prison-industrial complex. Absolutely. Absolutely. A number of mediations: shifts in space from rural to urban, shifts in class location from pre-industrial labor to industrial labor to post-industrial labor, shifts in educational sites and so on. But the progress goes hand in hand with the underside of the progress, which is what you're actually...

*Q: Right. Now you might know these lectures from 1976, which I think you actually anticipated in *Prophecy and Deliverance*, on the genealogy of racism: Foucault's lectures of 1976, which are called *Society Must Be Defended*. There he talked about racism for the first time very explicitly. He talks about racism as a racial war against a biological or social threat. That's why society must be defended. Now, if we keep that in mind, can we say that in fact if we look at these institutions—the plantation, the ghetto, the lynching, Jim Crow, and today the death penalty—what we're facing is a racial war against African-Americans?*

A: The problem with the metaphor of war, and this goes back to Clausewitz, is that it tends to put a premium on the point at which contestation is accented, whereas Black people's labor, Black people's bodies, Black people's styles are preconditioned for the American project. So the given impression that is first and foremost of war is that they want to annihilate Black people. They can't annihilate Black people. If they had annihilated 22% of the inhabitants of the 13 colonies who are keeping the thing economically afloat, they would've undermined themselves. If they had annihilated Black people during Jim Crow, who was going to do the labor? And if they had annihilated Black people in the 1960s? We're in too many crucial places. So, you see, there is a war-like dimension, but there are these other dimensions that those, from Clausewitz to Foucault, that invoke these kinds of metaphors might easily downplay. Now, I

do believe that in the end we are on a battlefield, but the battlefield is not one in which you're at that point of contention primarily or exclusively. You've got a life to live, labor to render, songs to sing, people to love, and that's *as* important and *as* much a part of our talk about living a life in which white supremacy, male supremacy, and others are coming at us. So it's like Lefebvre, my dear brother, I don't want everyday life to be slighted by these metaphors of war, though in the end there is certainly a war-like quality to what we're dealing with.

*Q: If we include all the people in the prison system and those under the control of the penitentiary and correctional institutions, which is almost 4 million people, and we know that one of the largest industries in the United States is the prison-industrial complex—California's largest industry, for instance—don't you think we have become a carceral society, a nation of prisons?*

A: Well, look at your question here in terms of industry. The biggest industry in California is the entertainment industry. I think that's bigger than the prison industry.

*Q: Okay.*

A: See what I mean? Aerospace is major industry. That is to say that we'd have to examine the scope and scale and breadth and depth, so that the carceral industry, which has been expanding exponentially, every 5 years it seems, but it is not as central as the entertainment industry. Now of course the irony is that many of the top performers in the entertainment industry are the same color as those in the carceral industry, you know what I mean? But one's international, it's global. Hip-hop is one slice and that's billions and billions of dollars, right? We're not even talking about music as a whole, or TV and sports. My God, this country couldn't survive without Negroes and sports. They'd go crazy—wouldn't know what to do on the weekends. So you get the Black presence in all these different instances, but back to your question: the carceral industry certainly *is* an industry. It's a growing industry, but it's primarily one that tries to target the working poor and very poor, given the fact that the society finds it difficult to find spaces for them, some significant value and use for them. And of course many make bad choices and decisions in the context in which they find

themselves. And I think for me, again, the issue of linking struggles in everyday life to the various kinds of industries, structures, institutions, and the economy, especially, looms large here. There is a backlash right now. I mentioned Angela Davis. You can talk about the anti-death penalty movement. You can talk about the courage of the ex-republican governor of Illinois recognizing just how unfair and racist the death penalty was. That kind of movement is significant. I think we are going to see more of it.

*Q: In fact, that is where my next question was going. In light of the Rehnquist Court, which is against the equal application of rights, what should we do about the death penalty, this mechanism for legalized lynching?*

A: We have got to reshape public opinion, and I give a lot of fellow citizens credit for that. They've helped reshape the climate of public opinion. Hugo Bedau, who is my dear friend and a philosophy professor down at Tufts for many years. He has been struggling against the death penalty for almost 30 years. We would have gatherings 20 years ago and there would be seven people. We'd have gatherings 10 years ago and we'd have 70. Now we have a gathering and there are 400. He is the same person, same view, and part of the same movement, but it's expanding. He is one among many and I give a lot of credit for that.

*Q: What do you think of the new abolitionist movement?*

A: You know, I listen carefully and I learn much. I don't think I have fundamentally reached their conclusions yet. I'd love to see more education, rehabilitation, and what I call *Paideia*. I've taught in prisons now for 19 years and some of my best examples of *Paideia*—that kind of formation of attention on crucial issues, cultivation of the self, self-criticism, and maturation of the soul that really comes to terms with reality and history and mortality—I've *seen* in prisons and that's part of the rehabilitation that ought to take place. Whether in fact you end up abolishing is something that I've yet to be fully persuaded on.

*Q: Now shifting to the question of religion. You have been particularly preoccupied with the problem of evil. In fact you think that prophetic*

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*pragmatism is distinctively concerned with questions of evil and the tragic. Do you think that the events of 9/11 should be talked about in terms of evil?*

A: Oh, sure, because evil for me is unjustified suffering. It's unwarranted misery and that's certainly what it was. Now, of course, that also means you have to talk about what's going on in Colombia and Guatemala and El Salvador and Iraq also in terms of unjustified suffering and unnecessary social misery as evil. The question then becomes: What is our response to it? How do we understand where and why it emerges? How do we try to wrestle with it and overcome it? And that's a very complicated process. That has to do with both structures of institutions as well as the choices and decisions that agents make, that particular people make. There's a dialectical interplay between structure and agency here that we must never lose sight of. But to be preoccupied with evil is really, to me, just the attempt to be a decent and compassionate person who is concerned about other people's suffering and also trying to find some joy in the world. In some ways that is the best of a humanist tradition that goes from Amos to Socrates to W.E.B. DuBois, and yet we also know that the same tradition can hide and conceal certain forms of unjustified suffering. There is evil shot through all of our traditions.

*Q: Following up on this question, I know that you have been teaching a freshman seminar called "The Tragic, the Comic and the Political." Now let me ask you, the word evil doesn't form part of the title there, but what is the linkage that you're trying to make between evil and the tragic? If we think of evil in the Augustinian sense, it's about human will—it is the human will that is the cause of evil in the world. Whereas the tragic is about the forces beyond the human will, so you're bringing together two philosophemes, which seem to be anathematic to each other.*

A: That's a very good question. Now, I do believe, following Dewey, that we are acculturated organisms in transaction with our environment and there are natural forces that can be stronger. When the cancer hit me, linked to a genetic inheritance that goes all the way back to whatever, I had to respond to it. There is no way that I can completely extricate it. I might get lucky and control it for a while, but there are forces that are far beyond human will. When a planet

clashes with this planet sooner or later, there's not a whole lot human beings can do about that. You know what I mean? When you talk about human suffering being caused by something greater than human beings, we got natural evil. The Lisbon earthquake that Voltaire and Kant and others were so shaken by. That's very real, but on the other hand there are things we can do a hell of a lot about—like trying to understand the comet when it's coming, or trying to get some sense of when the earthquake's coming given that we can't control it and so on. We've done a better job now than we were able to do in Lisbon, no doubt, and you've lived in California, so you understand that better than most people. But there are some other forms of suffering that we can do a hell of a lot about: suffering that has to do with corporate power, that has to do with narrow interests among elites in the nation-states, that has to do with xenophobic citizens attacking other citizens, especially our gay brothers and lesbian sisters these days. Those we can do a lot about, so that you're actually right, the comic tries to understand what it is that we acculturated organisms that transact with our environment can bring to minimize and alleviate the suffering, knowing that we will never have full control over it. The comic allows us to look at those limitations and all the incongruities and hypocrisies of who we are, what our society is, and still smile through the darkness. The tragic fights all it can and then it runs up against the [?], the limits, the constraints, and goes down gloriously, but also recognizing a certain hubris, a certain kind of defective self-knowledge that may have been in part responsible for running up against that limit, the Oedipus, but there are different forms of the tragic and different forms of the comic and as somebody like Chekhov, who other than Shakespeare, I think, has the most profound conception of the tragic-comic. And it's interesting because there is no real philosopher that constitutes an analogue to Chekhov. I think the greatest comic philosopher was David Hume, who was preoccupied with the incongruities and limitations of not just human reason, but human beings and yet still trying to get us to proceed in post-skeptical space, as it were. But his sense of the tragic, I think, was in part underdeveloped. The tragic-comic go hand in hand—some of the deep passion, the willingness to be moved by the difficulty of walking that tightrope. You know, when Hume goes back to play backgammon, you get the sense that he is really suppressing all of this anxiety, which he is, since he is neoclassical figure in that sense: It's about stoic self-mastery and so on. Whereas Chekhov is a bit more—he is *so moved* by the heartbreak and the heartache of humankind that he can't be restrained like

Hume in a neoclassical way. He is the grandson of a slave. Yet he knows he needs to have *some* self-control as the medical doctor that he was and the great liberator figure that he was, reading philosophy all the time but also concerned about science—and agnostic, like Hume. Hume was probably agnostic too. So there is no easy religious solution for Chekhov. For me, you see, that's the real challenge: how do you keep the Socratic, critical energy flowing *and* the prophetic witness linked to compassion *and* the tragic-comic hope all intertwined for radical democracy.

*Q: This is what you're discussing in Democracy Matters...*

A: Yes, in my book, *Democracy Matters*, I lay all this out. Yes, indeed.

*Q: What do you make of President Bush's apocalyptic and messianic rhetoric?*

A: There is a long tradition of such rhetoric in American history and Bush is just an instant in that tradition. He does view America in a Manichean way, as this pure city on the hill. It's an "us against them" stance. He finds it very difficult to ever be critical of America, not just publicly, but I think also in his own private space. He is part of this sense of America as being this land of Edenic innocence, which has very deep roots in the country. There are other roots in the country that are more mature and more critically engaging of the complex reality of America's past and present, but he is part of the Manichean impulse in the tradition of innocence.

*Q: And this messianic role of carrying the banner of democracy even if requires the use of military violence, torture, and repression?*

A: Of Christianity and democracy in the *vulgar* sense of both. Absolutely, but he is *the* exemplar of Constantinian Christianity and imperial America. Constantinian Christianity has deep roots in America and so does imperialism. There is also a prophetic Christianity and a deep democratic tradition in America that cut against both of these, but they have always been in some ways weaker even though they made a difference in the making of the country.

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*Q: Now I don't want to give any credence to Samuel Huntington's idea that we are facing a clash of civilizations, but one could say that there are conflicts today, conflicts of religions. Against this background, what would you say about the role of religious talk today? Does it complicate or does it help when we talk about a confrontation of religions?*

A: Well, I think that any time you have religious conflict you also have something else going on in addition to the clash of religion. There's always a social dimension, an economic dimension, and a personal dimension going on. I think right now we're experiencing a profound crisis of Christian identity in the country. There has always been a strong fundamentalist evangelical presence in the country that was highly suspicious of modern modes of skepticism, secularism, and criticism. Ironically, since Martin Luther King Jr., the Christian right began to learn lessons in terms of political organization and using their clout to bring power and pressure to bear because they saw the Civil Rights movement doing it on the other side of the ideological line. So they actually learned from brother Martin, the Jerry Farwells, and others and then received, of course, unbelievable economic support from many corporate elites. And it became clear that *if* there was going to be a realignment of American politics—a kind of Southernization of American politics using racially loaded terms, from busing to crime to welfare to prisons and so forth, to realign the American public—*then* the Christian right could be a major organized pillar for this. They were, in fact, brought in in a significant way to do that, and not simply because the elites themselves were Christians. Sometimes it was outright manipulation because you've got Machiavellian calculations going on at the highest levels of certain deeply conservative circles. So you end up with not just Constantinian Christianity, but the Christian Right being a fundamental pillar for *imperial* America. Look at the relation of the Christian Right and conservative Jews in America. This is what is intriguing about the Mel Gibson film, you see, because you get the erosion of that. People know that anti-Semitism has always been part and parcel of the Christian right's perspective and all of a sudden you get an alliance with conservative Jews defending Israel, based almost on blind faith, and now they discover, my god, our allies are anti-Semites! You don't say. I could have told you that a long time ago. Pat Robertson has publicly said things far more Anti-Semitic than most. How is he going to be your ally? Well, because he supports Israel! Well, I thought that coalitions had something more

substantive to them than merely a stance. The same is true with cutting back on domestic policy when it comes to social services, healthcare, jobs, education and so on. No, it's pro-defense, no it's pro-imperial expansion. The Christian Right, right now, is both powerful and dangerous and yet we know—and this is something we don't like talking about in the academy—that if 72% of Americans view themselves as not just Christians, but believe in Jesus Christ son of God, then the fight for democracy in America is partly a fight for democratic possibilities in the American Christian tradition. If you lose the latter, you can forget the former. You can come up with the most sophisticated theories of democracy in the world, but if you're not affecting the climate on the ground in such a way that certain Christians can think *dem-o-cra-tic-ly* and proceed politically under a radical democratic vision, then we're not going to get anywhere. In fact, you end up just giving more and more over to the Christian Right and Christian centrists.

*Q: Many liberal intellectuals have argued that the war on terrorism is a just war—and this relates to the other question because just war theory emerges from Christianity, Augustine, Aquinas—liberals like Jean Bethke Elshtain, Paul Berman, and to a certain extent Michael Walzer. Do you think these wars against Iraq and, of course, Afghanistan were just wars?*

A: No, not at all. They were illegal, unjustified, and I think unnecessary. I think there are ways of trying to gain access, to hunt down gangsters and terrorists, without invading countries. This plundering of the livelihoods of thousands and thousands and thousands of innocent people, with very little regard for their welfare and well-being, has symbolic purposes—getting back to issue of the lust for revenge—letting the country know we're not going to take this; to let the country know we're macho and we're tough and so on. And the result is what? More instability and more insecurity, because that's what that kind of posing and posturing of a macho identity does. It just reinforces the whole cycle of anxiety and insecurity that is tied to all the bigotry and hatred and revenge and resentment that fan and fuel the worst of who we are as human beings. I think on the international front you've got to deal with multilateral institutions and international law: I don't think international law can justify it. Then there is a deeper, moral question in terms of what kinds of costs there are and who is bearing them. When you have an invasion and you're unwilling to even count the

number of innocent civilians you kill—I don't understand how any of these people can conclude that this is a just war. I mean, the Catholic tradition and others always talk about their caution and their preoccupation with not just minimizing, but keeping track of what the costs are, so you can argue *ex post facto* what happened. They don't even want to show the bodies of the American soldiers; that's cost too on the American side. So it pains me to see a lot of fellow philosophers, social theorists, and what have you, caught within the legitimation machine of the larger imperial project. They may not share all of the imperial ambitions, but they can be easily used and deployed by those who are running that machine. That gross kind of seduction, I think, is highly unfortunate. I've seen some very decent and brilliant people who were easily used in that way.

*Q: So do you think terrorism is the largest threat the United States faces in the 21st century or...*

A: No, the largest thing America faces in the 21st century is internal decay and decline, with us turning on each other unable to generate the web of trust requisite to keep the democratic experiment alive. Very much like the communists in the 1940s and 50s, who constituted a kind of external foe to hold America together, I think the Bush people are trying to constitute Islamic terrorists as an external foe to hold us together. But America has always had high levels of violence: from cars, to everyday violence, to domestic violence, to violence against workers, to violence against black people, brown people, and so on. And we're not even talking about genocidal attacks on indigenous people. As important as it is for the United States to do all that it can, in terms of not being attacked externally by gangsters from wherever, we've got *so many everyday attacks* that are taking place in this country that...

*Q: Forms of state terrorism, economic terrorism...*

A: Well it's hard to even come up with a category, because there are so many different forms. Just look at the healthcare system. We spend more money than any other country, any other developed country, and yet we've got thousands and thousands of people who die because they don't have access. That's a kind of killing that is taking place. You've got workers who don't have access to

safety who die. There's no talk about them, but that's a kind of killing. That can be avoided just like we would have liked to avoid 9/11. You've got young kids in poor communities whose souls are murdered, who don't have access to *any* quality education, *no* sense of significant safety, and so forth. They're dying all the time. Those are deaths too, and a lot of that stuff can be avoided. So that when I look at the obsession with this particular attack, which was vicious, I see the downplaying of all these other deaths that are taking place. I say something's wrong. I take the tears of George Bush seriously when he cries for the victims of 9/11, as I take my own tears seriously, but then I wonder why he does not cry for Louimo, when he is shot down by police as an innocent civilian? And I say to myself, if you cannot connect the tears for Louimo with the victims of 9/11, then you're missing something. I cried for both. Bush only cried for one. Giuliani cried for one—you know what I mean? Something is wrong. Something is missing there. And then I began to wonder: well wait a minute, are these tears highly circumscribed? Are they forced? And again the Socratic, prophetic tells me if I can't be morally consistent, I need to check myself. I think that's the kind of challenge we need as thinkers, philosophers, citizens, and human beings put forth to each other.

*Q: I have one last question and it's a question that I think we should always be asking. I ask myself this question as a Latino. It's been 101 years since W.E. B. DuBois said that the problem of the 20th century would be the problem of the color line. By 2050, about 25% of U.S. citizens will be Latino. We're talking about the browning of United States: What will happen to the problem of the color line in the 21st century?*

A: That's a good question. That's a very good question.

*Q: It worries me that the so-called "browning" of America might submerge the question of the African-American, the black...*

A: You know, I think that because we deal with the legacy of white supremacy that affects brown and black and yellow and red and, in the end, it actually affects whites—they're all race concepts—as long as we keep the focus on the institutional and personal manifestations of that particular evil, then I'm not so sure that the numbers will make as big a difference. I think when DuBois talked

about the color line he was really taking about this legacy of white supremacy. He goes on to say the way in which it affects Asian and Latin Americans and so forth. You can have a legacy of white supremacy at work with no white people around—just between blacks and browns. If we draw each other through that white supremacy's lens, then that legacy is still very much alive and we can't relate to each other's humanity. So it's not going to be so much a matter of numbers, I think. It's going to be *how* we respond to that legacy in such a way that we can begin to dismantle some of the stereotypes, some of the prejudices, some of the institutional discriminations, some of the xenophobic perceptions, and so forth. I think in the end, though, the major battle of the next 100 years is going to be the battle between the deepening of democracy and the dismantling of empire. The degree to which blacks and browns decide to go, as a large majority, one way as opposed to another—those coalitions will probably be more important than simply how we divide up a particular pie within the domestic context, you see. And I think the brown brothers and sisters bring a depth and wisdom and experience of what it's really like to be colonized—in Texas and California and what is now New Mexico. That history is something that is very rich and that is different than black folk. Black folk being enslaved and Jim Crowed is different than being colonized, having your border moved by soldiers by force, and so on. Coming *from* Mexico, coming *from* El Salvador, coming *from* another country and seeing America *from* the outside, gives one a cosmopolitan view—for Puerto Ricans the same way as for Dominicans. That gives a cosmopolitan view that a lot of Black Americans don't have. From Alabama? Well, that's part of the country... well, most of the time. From Mississippi? Georgia? California? Yes, that's still within continental imperial U.S.A. You look at America *from* Mexico, *from* El Salvador, *from* Puerto Rico—it's like C.R.L. James and Stokely Carmichael, who are supposed to come from the Caribbean: They've got very different views of this country and a lot of Black people in America miss that.

*Q: It's another form of double vision.*

A: Yes! Absolutely, but linked to this battle between the deepening of democracy and the dismantling of empire.

*Cornel West*

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