

1

Reading West

Despite the praise West's work has received, its eclecticism has been condemned. He has turned his attention to a myriad of topics, from architecture and Marvin Gaye to Marxism and pragmatic philosophy – themes that at first glance appear unrelated. West also has a tendency to compile lengthy lists of diverse influences and then situate himself in proximity to those figures. Indeed, in his appropriation of a selection of themes from the work of Dewey, Foucault, and Nietzsche he has a propensity to act as an intellectual magpie, and consequently his work is dismissed by critics such as Adolph Reed and Leon Wieseltier as a thousand miles wide but two inches deep. Less hostile critics have also struggled to make sense of West's career, suspecting intellectual opportunism in his shift from philosopher to cultural critic and celebrity academic. Perhaps more problematic is the fact that once sympathetic readers of West are bothered by his perceived shift in emphasis from revolutionary to reformist politics and a new reluctance to attack "the system" of capitalism. Many have struggled to see how the style and focus of *Prophesy Deliverance* can be equated with that found in *The War Against Parents*. In *Prophesy Deliverance* West wanted to build a counter-hegemonic working-class movement to challenge global capitalism, yet his recent works accept capitalism as the framework within which to advance the struggle for democracy and seem preoccupied with rebuilding America. At face value this appears to be a radical shift, but is it? Is this simply the maturation of his perspective or is the mainstreaming of the critic an inevitable consequence of the quest for status?

This chapter will assess whether there is a coherent way to read West's assemblage of Christianity, pragmatism, and Marxist analysis. Is his thought simply a hotchpotch of unrelated ideas or is there a connecting thread that runs throughout his work? It is my contention that there are principled reasons why West's work covers so many divergent themes. His eclecticism is prompted by the inherently broad nature of his project to secure black liberation and surmount social fragmentation through the revitalization of American democracy, rather than some form of intellectual opportunism. Understanding West is not aided by his self-designation as a "cultural critic." I find this label to be too narrow, and its inability to explain his divergent interests gives credence to his critics' charge that his eclecticism spawns incoherence. Thus I replace the "cultural critic" label with the descriptions of "multicontextual public intellectual" and "liberation theologian." We shall see that while West embraces the former of these descriptions he rejects the latter. This chapter will probe why West disassociates himself from theology and why I see liberation theology as the most helpful hermeneutical approach to West's work.

Public intellectual and political theologian

A succession of articles in 1995 celebrated the development of the black public intellectual tradition, and articles by Michael Bérubé and Robert Boynton highlighted West as the tradition's shining star. Although West's "vocation" as a public intellectual will be considered in chapter 6, some preliminary remarks can be made here. West believes that intellectual work is not an end in itself; rather, intellectual debate must be linked to some form of political practice. Through his intellectual work West seeks to galvanize the oppressed to work for their liberation. In order to inspire this political activity West's work must be intelligible to a wide range of people; unless people understand *why* change is needed in American democracy there will be no sense of urgency concerning transformation. This prompts flexibility concerning the medium and specific content of his message so that it can be targeted to different groups. In his conscious attempt to address a variety of publics – those who inhabit the diverse realms of the academy, the church, prisons, grassroots political organizations, popular television talk-shows, and so on – West can be identified as a *multicontextual* public intellectual. His work attempts to explore radical democracy and

racial healing at as broad a level as possible in order to touch as many people as possible, and he is eager to address the particular interests of each of these publics. While some are drawn to his project of rejuvenating the Left, others are more interested in his discussion of rap music. Crucially, however, West frames his remarks to specific groups within the project of black emancipation. West wishes to create new space for intellectual work outside the academy where citizens can debate issues such as race and he associates the public intellectual enterprise with the attempt to reconstitute the public sphere in America.

The second label I ascribe to West's work is that of liberation theology. This is considerably more contentious than the public intellectual label as West explicitly disavows the description of his work as any form of theology. However, an understanding of West's work as liberation theology actually imbues it with more coherence than the public intellectual label does. Central to West's work is the "prophetic Christianity" he espouses and the political ideas that follow from that faith. West's "love ethic" emanates from his Christian perspective and provides a key normative standard by which he judges American society and condemns its polarization. Before turning to consider the grounds upon which I base my conclusion that West's fusion of Christianity and politics fits best into the tradition of liberation theology, it should be noted that there is a close association between the identification of West as a public intellectual and as a theologian; for instance, as political theology is also public theology, it is a form of public intellectual work. More significant, however, is the intellectual legacy of liberal theologians such as Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Martin Luther King, who exerted profound influence on American intellectual life. Rauschenbusch's *Social Gospel*, which asserted that "where religion and intellect combine, the foundation is laid for political democracy," had strong ties to the political progressivism of the early twentieth century.¹ Niebuhr fused politics and spirituality in a very public manner and attempted to shape public discourse on themes such as the immorality of American isolationism in the face of Nazism. King, like his two predecessors, co-joined intellectual, moral, and Christian commitment to public affairs. West suggests that King's struggle for democracy, freedom, and equality "embodies the best of American Christianity" and "exemplifies the best of the life of the mind involved in public affairs."² Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr, and King demonstrate that a religiously inspired social and political concern can contribute to serious

intellectual engagement, not simply at the personal level but at a broad and “public” level. In viewing religion as a source of moral inspiration that can inspire civic discourse and political action in the pursuit of the revitalization of democracy, West is part of their intellectual tradition. While West’s theological and intellectual concerns with the state of American democracy overlap, it is Christianity that provides the normative standard by which West is rendered dissatisfied with the present state of American democracy. In this sense, Christianity motivates his sense of intellectual engagement.

Political and liberation theologies

Within the landscape of twentieth-century theology a significant place is occupied by political theologies. Contemporary political theology emerged in the 1960s in a context of technological growth, welfare expansion, the questioning of traditional values (such as religion, but also a general scrutiny of liberal capitalism), and the growth of social protest movements challenging injustice. While classical political theology was an Enlightenment theology which supported the status quo, the political theology of figures such as Johann Metz marked a radical break from Constantinian assumptions which linked Christianity to the dominatory practices of the state, as well as from the individualistic and apolitical Christianity popularized by Karl Rahner and Rudolf Bultmann. Metzian political theology does not attempt to merely politicize theology or develop a theology of politics, but rather analyze and implement the practical, radical political implications of Christianity, and thereby transform society; as such it does not look for the revelation of God in a metaphysical sphere beyond history, but rather in history itself. This theology constitutes the most significant theological development of the last 35 years. It has produced a paradigm shift in theology from transcendentalist idealism to liberationism, and the two main schools of thought in debates over biblical hermeneutics have become the liberationists and their opponents.

“Political theology” operates as an umbrella category encompassing the multiplicity of contextual liberation theologies (Latin American, South African, Palestinian) and feminist, black, womanist, and poststructuralist theologies. Although any attempt to generalize about the parallels between these contextual theologies is an

enterprise fraught with difficulty, certain broad themes do emerge making it possible to discern six central tenets of liberation theology. First, liberation theology is often referred to as “a new way of doing theology”; it places less of an emphasis on theology as imparted by clerics and more on dialogue and collective interpretation of the Bible. It has a strong democratic impulse that takes seriously the equal status of all individuals and seeks to open up the theological endeavor to all sections of the community, asserting that “minority” interpretations of the Bible must be given equal voice as the dominant white, male interpretations. It is thus a flexible form of theology that is open to dialogue and negotiation. Second, liberation theology develops a critique of both church and society. It constitutes a critical theory that attempts to demystify and uncover clichés and hidden truth; for instance it exposes the way in which capitalism appropriates religion in its quest to rule society. This criticism does not exist in a vacuum and strong visions of an alternative society are presented. Third, because liberation theologians believe theology must be practically lived rather than purely theoretical, action on behalf of the oppressed takes precedence over theologizing and theorizing. The fourth point is that liberation theologians view God as an active force who constantly identifies with his people in their sufferings. Humans must be agents of their own liberation and work with God to change their situation by becoming part of the revolutionary process if necessary. Fifth, liberation theology rises from the specific historical, cultural, social, and political circumstances of a particular country or cultural grouping. As the specific context in which theology is done determines its nature, one form of liberation theology cannot simply be lifted to another context; there can be no neutral or universal liberationist theology.

Finally, it is theology that draws upon extra-theological sources to reach conclusions about society. Its disregard for traditional intellectual disciplinary boundaries is evident in its appropriation of social and political theory, cultural studies, and theological ethics. Most notably, its socio-economic analysis is often, but not necessarily, Marxist in inspiration – for instance, in *A Theology of Liberation* Gustavo Gutiérrez asserted that true Christianity involves the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by socialism. So, while Arthur McGovern asserts that liberation theology is not essentially *by nature* Marxist, he admits he has yet to find any liberation theologians who do not embrace some form of socialism that emanates from their Christian convictions.³ Another recent emphasis of

liberation theology has been participatory democracy. From the outset liberation theology was both a protest against capitalist domination and a demand for “true” populist democracy. In *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads*, Paul Sigmund suggests that in the late 1980s the radicalism of populist democracy became the dominant of the two strands in Latin America. This change was partly dictated by political events, but also by growing awareness of non-economic sources of oppression (race or gender), to which Marxism is often blind. An emphasis on democracy encouraged broader consideration of excesses of economic power as well as fresh consideration of issues such as government corruption.

West as liberation theologian

There are very strong continuities between West’s thought and these central tenets of liberation theology. His democratic and non-dogmatic interpretation of Christianity persistently adopts a critical and questioning manner toward hierarchies in society and the church. Second, West repeatedly argues that American democracy is in a desperate state of crisis, characterized by racial oppression and the erosion of systems of care for others. He is thus critical of inadequate forms of democracy that fail to challenge racial stereotyping and dualistic and individualistic expressions of Christianity that fail to address this crisis. Third, West locates God on the side of society’s victims and he stresses that the lens through which Christians should examine society is the perspective of the oppressed. He recognizes the urgency of the quest for African-American liberation from an oppressive location of second-class citizenship and asserts that emancipatory action must take precedence over the development of systematic theories about oppression. The fourth area of continuity concerns emphasis on history as open-ended and on humans working with God to change their circumstances. While West remains uncertain about how human action and divine action correspond, and believes that God cannot be limited by the actions of humans, his work actively encourages the oppressed to work for their own liberation. Fifth, contextualism is crucial to the historicism of West’s spirituality. His work is experiential and concerned with the real life experiences of particular people (African Americans), in a particular place (the United States), at a particular time (the beginning of the twenty-first century). He draws on the insights of Latin American theologians

concerning class oppression, and on African perspectives concerning racial oppression and the value of one's cultural heritage, in order to build a theology that is centered on the lives and experiences of black Americans in terms of its specific context and visions. Finally, in terms of extra-theological sources, Christianity provides the impetus for West's political engagement by providing existential empowerment and prompting him to critically accept elements of Marxism. As we shall see, his revisionist Marxism is essentially New Leftist and thus places an emphasis on radical participatory democracy. West regards himself as a radical democrat who questions hierarchies, being concerned with the interaction of power and oppression in democratic systems, and seeks the expansion of democracy.

Christianity occupies a pivotal position in West's thought. Given his overarching concern for the liberation of African Americans and his broader liberatory vision encompassed in the call for a "healing" of relationships across gender, class, and racial lines, it would seem easy to conclude that he is a liberation theologian. However, West resists easy assumptions and argues that while he has been *influenced* by political theology, he is not a theologian. He finished his paper at the 1998 "Black Theology as Public Discourse" conference at the University of Chicago by saying, "if you really want to see how this relates to Jesus, read some theology, read some James Cone – you can't read anything I've got!" Similarly, he was astonished at his inclusion in the *New Handbook of Christian Theologians* alongside Barth and Brummer, asserting, "I really don't belong in there . . . I'm no theologian *at all*."⁴ Instead, he describes himself as "a cultural critic with philosophic training who works out of the Christian tradition."⁵ West's rejection of the description of his work as "theological" stems from suspicion about the construct "theology"; it relates to his historicism and uncertainty about how God acts and his assertion that there are human limits to interpreting and understanding divine action. He views theology as "an attempt to engage in a constructive work that renders consistent and coherent its viewpoint." However, although he tries to "make sense of the narratives and the myths and the rituals of the community of the faithful," he concludes "I don't think they can be rendered consistent or coherent."⁶ While Christians ought to *attempt* to make their faith credible to the outside world through lifestyle and argumentation, West believes that such an attempt can never be fully realized. For instance, if a person states that they "understand" God and find his actions coherent, that person's attempt to limit God within the confines of

human understanding demonstrates just how little of God they actually understand. Not only does West maintain that church doctrines cannot be rendered consistent or coherent, but “if they were coherent and consistent I think it would be so empty because the faith is really about the tensions and frictions.”⁷

Despite West’s aversion to the label “theological,” strong elements of theology can be found in his work. The crux of the matter lies in how one defines “theology.” On the basis of a definition of theology as systematic analysis of Christian doctrine, he is no theologian; West does not examine specific claims about God nor write about doctrines such as sanctification or justification. In this regard liberation theologians such as James Cone and Gustavo Gutiérrez can be seen as more “theological” than West, in the sense that they are concerned with theological method and systematic theology. When we read their work we get a sense of the “nature” of God, yet West says little directly about God. But all this rests upon a narrow definition of theology that privileges doctrine *vis-à-vis* ethics within Christian theology; thinking theologically may entail trying to conceive the nature of God, but equally it may entail ethical thinking about the requirements of God, the latter of which West does. Indeed, we must remember that Reinhold Niebuhr – who is widely regarded as the most influential American theologian of the twentieth century – gave scant attention to questions of theological method, hermeneutics, or exegesis.

It is possible to claim that West is not a theologian in the sense of developing coherent and systematic theories about how God works, yet still does theology. Robert McAfee Brown suggests that theology is simply “God-talk” in which all Christians engage at some point or other. Undoubtedly there are different levels of this God-talk or theologizing; for instance, while someone might call God “the all-cohesive source of reality,” another person might simply say “Jesus is like God, only more so.” While the former may appear more impressive, Brown stresses that both constitute theological statements.⁸ This looser reformulation of the term “theology” enables us to see that West’s call for a general spiritual awakening in America to counter nihilism and materialism is theology in action. This is because it derives from his interpretation of who God is and what he desires of us as humans – for instance, that we treat each other with a certain amount of respect and dignity. However, a difficulty with Brown’s definition of theology is the implication that it is not simply religious believers who engage in “God-talk”; when atheists engage in God-talking are they engaging in theology,

and, if so, how does their "God-talk" differ from the "God-talk" of Christian theology? We might refine Brown's point by suggesting that when *Christians* think as Christians they are thinking theologically, or, as Hendrik Kraemer put it, "Every bit of coherent Christian thinking on the meaning and scope of Christian Revelation and faith is theological."⁹ This loose redefinition of theology is central to liberation theology which stresses that the task of theology should not be left to the professional theologians, namely the clergy and theology professors; in this regard West is not a professional theologian, yet he does theology. The difficulty is that West is familiar with this loose redefinition via the work of John Cobb, yet remains unconvinced by it. He recalls, "Cobb used to say 'a theologian is a Christian thinking.' Now in that sense I'm a theologian – I'm a Christian and I try to think."¹⁰ West continues to believe that there is more to theology than simply thinking about God and although he accepts that political theology is distinct from theology *per se* in that it "is a *certain* kind of theological reflection that has to do with public life, that has to do with dynamics of power," he maintains that because he does not call himself a theologian, he could not then call himself a political theologian.¹¹

However, no matter how much West insists that he is not a liberation theologian, it is impossible to fully understand his work without grounding it in a liberationist theological perspective. What West labels as non-theological "prophetic Christianity" is simply another name for his African-American liberation theology. In his review of Juan Luis Segundo's *Faith and Ideologies*, West suggests that liberation theology has two primary objectives: (i) a reshaping of Christian doctrines in light of current contextual concerns; and (ii) engagement in serious social theory and cultural criticism which is committed to and immersed in social struggle.¹² As this is what West seeks to do in his own work, it is misleading for him to say that he does not do political theology. Moreover, his rejection of the description of his work as liberation theology devalues his work, as liberation theology constitutes the key unifying thread of coherence in it. Returning to the concerns raised at the start of this chapter about West's shift in focus from revolution to reform, we can say that while this may appear incoherent when approached from the perspective of political theory, it is not incoherent when viewed from the perspective of liberation theology. West's politics are explained and guided by his Christianity; both revolution and reform can be consistent with Christianity and can in their own ways further Christian expansion of democratic values.

Liberation theology resuscitates and radicalizes the utopianism and leftist politics of the Social Gospel and chastens this with a Niebuhrian realist perspective grounded in the crisis and despair of ongoing oppression. It is the foundation for West's entire body of work; from it stems his interest in overcoming black oppression, his vision of radical democracy, and his political engagement. West's liberationist response to the crisis in American democracy is a call for a healing of relationships, recognition of the humanity of all, recovery of civility, and reconstitution of the public sphere that will facilitate alliance building. Liberation theology not only provides the theoretical grounding to his Christianity, but to his leftist politics and his sense of vocation as a public intellectual, and thus demonstrates that his eclecticism is not simply intellectual opportunism. Rather, his eclectic multicontextualism is concerned with liberating African Americans from their oppression under the democratic façade that he believes is the United States. It is these themes of crisis, hope, and liberatory redemption that will be developed throughout this book.

Terms of analysis

Political theology reads the Christian story with a hermeneutic that makes the primary horizon emancipatory politics. It thus relies heavily upon the debates of contemporary politics and political theory. While political theology and political theory are two distinct traditions, in *The Political Theory of Liberation Theology* John Pottenger demonstrates that liberation theology offers a political theory as it engages in normative social critique, incorporates Marxist analysis, and its social theories (concerning the legitimate use of violence, for instance) are influenced by political-ethical considerations. An important issue to clarify at this point concerns what difference there is between the work of a political theologian and the work of a political theorist who is a Christian, such as Charles Taylor. Although Taylor's arguments are primarily philosophical and ontological, like West his concerns overlap with themes of political theory such as communitarianism, recognition, and identity. Moreover, in terms of practical political arguments concerning Quebec, he has written on charters of rights, citizen participation in politics, nationalism, and federalism. Unlike many philosophers, Taylor has been engaged in the politics of his country – in the 1960s he was involved in the establishment of the New Democratic Party

in Quebec and stood as a candidate in four federal elections. Since 1971 his concerns have been primarily centered on developing philosophical arguments, but he continues to write about the constitutional politics of Quebec. It could thus be argued that Taylor's engagement in what could be seen as a liberation struggle for Quebecois means that he is a political theologian. However, while his work may match some of the criteria of liberation theology as outlined in this chapter, there are two reasons why he is not a political theologian. First, by definition some form of theological endeavor must lie at the center of a liberation theologian's work. However, Taylor's work is devoid of the explicit Christian references we find in West and his religious concerns are of a privatistic nature. Because he does not attempt to co-join radical expressions of both Christianity and politics in the way that liberation theologians do, we could say that while Taylor's idiom is secular political, West's is Christian. Second, liberation theology places more emphasis upon action than theory; despite Taylor's engagement in the politics of Quebec his more substantial works, such as *Sources of the Self*, remain more theoretical than the work of liberation theologians who relate all their work back to questions of oppression and liberation.

Political theology embraces systems of thought such as communitarianism and socialism, and the concerns of political theology and political theory coalesce in areas such as justice, power, freedom, utopia, and democracy. Thinking specifically of West, the political themes of justice, identity and difference, coalition building, democracy, socialism, and the common good are all important for his liberation theology. He also generalizes about human capacities, attempts to define the nature of their shared obligations, and offers a critique of prevailing forms of unjust power. While his basis for this is Christian rather than secular principles, his work attempts to fulfill the same function as other political theories. However, we must also remember that political theology is multicontextual and committed to breaking traditional disciplinary boundaries. It is just as reliant upon cultural studies and sociology as on political theory, and so to identify it too narrowly with political theory deprives the term of much of its meaning. Therefore, while I will use specific terms of analysis such as political theory and theories of race relations when considering specific elements of West's thought, the primary standard which will be used to analyze West's overall thought is political theology as it is sufficiently broad to embrace his multicontextual concerns.