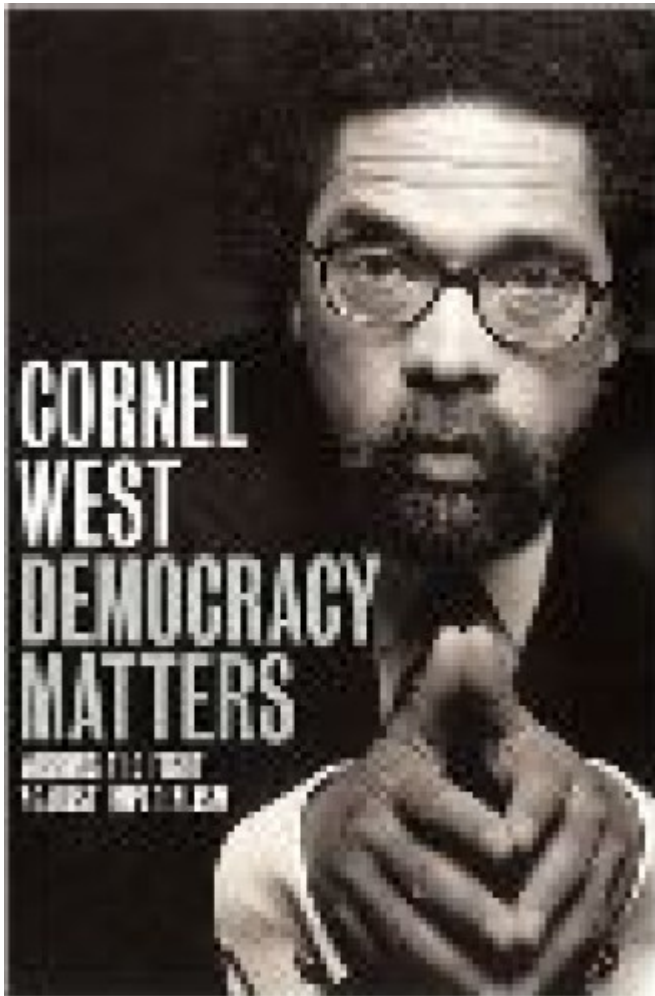


Democracy Matters

reviewed by [Cheryl J. Sanders](#) in the [July 12, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism

Cornel West
Penguin

For more than two decades, my favorite Cornel West book was *Prophesy Deliverance* ! (1982). I liked it because his typology of black intellectual traditions helped me to

organize my thinking about the role of black culture and religion in American life. What I love about his new book, *Democracy Matters*, is how deeply motivated and illuminated I felt when thinking through his formulation of democratic solutions to the problem of American imperialism.

West provides a lexicon and a logic that connect the dots between domestic issues and foreign policy. He begins by defining three antidemocratic dogmas—free-market fundamentalism, aggressive militarism and insidious authoritarianism—then colors in the resulting picture with a bold articulation of the overarching dogma of white supremacy. His forthright analysis of 9/11 and its aftermath, especially the U.S. determination to fight terror with terror, sets in contemporary context a disturbing portrait of the historical evolution and present manifestation of American imperialism. With a tone and gravity reminiscent of W. E. B. DuBois's famous declaration in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line," West proclaims that "the great dramatic battle of the twenty-first century is the dismantling of empire and the deepening of democracy."

West's vision of the deepening of democracy relies on three key components: the Socratic tradition, the Judeo-Christian tradition and the African-American struggle against white supremacy. He engages an exhilarating (and sometimes bewildering) array of philosophers, novelists, artists and activists in support of this vision, citing Socrates and Jesus, Emerson and Baldwin, King and Coltrane. He balances his command of the history and tradition of Western civilization with a serious appropriation of the oppositional discourse of black intellectuals and the artistic vocalizations of black musicians and poets.

West credits the Jews with inventing the prophetic tradition, as expressed in the teachings of the biblical prophets, who "not only put justice at the center of what it means to be chosen as a Jewish people but also made compassion to human suffering and kindness to the stranger the fundamental features of the most noble human calling." However, in his poignant analysis of conflict in the Middle East, he laments the tragic irony that American and Israeli Jews hold such deep faith in the American empire. He envisions a new Jewish democratic identity that draws from the prophetic tradition of Judaism, as well as a new Islamic democratic identity that emerges from the prophetic tradition of Islam.

The essay on the crisis of Christian identity fails to acknowledge that “Christian identity” also refers to a movement comprising groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and the Aryan Nation. We can forgive this oversight on the strength of the powerful distinction West renders between Constantinian Christianity, which is co-opted and corrupted by the state, and prophetic Christianity, which is true to the legacy of love and justice taught by Jesus Christ. He links Constantinian Christians’ rise to prominence in America to the Republican Party’s racist realignment of American politics, beginning with Ronald Reagan’s election in 1980 and culminating in George W. Bush’s “selection” in 2000 (Bush was reelected shortly after the book was released). One would expect a progressive intellectual to offer a politically informed critique of American Christian fundamentalism, but West is surprisingly confessional in his defense of the core values and ethics of the gospel of Jesus Christ in relation to the struggle against imperialism:

I do not want to be numbered among those who sold their souls for a mess of pottage—who surrendered their democratic Christian identity for a comfortable place at the table of the American empire while, like Lazarus, the least of these cried out and I was too intoxicated with worldly power and might to hear, beckon, and heed their cries.

While West celebrates the black church tradition as the major example of prophetic Christianity in America, he warns that as the black church succumbs to the seductions of free-market fundamentalism and loses its prophetic fervor in the age of American empire, the future of American democracy is imperiled.

As a seminary professor who is also pastor of a predominantly black congregation, my response is that this threat is a manifestation of the shortcomings of theological education. Yet West gives me great hope, because his new book is a text that can help black preachers become equipped for informed public ministry as Christian intellectuals with prophetic sensibilities. I heartily endorse his reformulation of the expression “in the world but not of the world” in his defense of Martin Luther King’s legacy of social justice over against the radical imperative of world-denial that he sees embraced by Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank: “To be a prophetic Christian . . . is to be in the world but not of the world’s nihilism, in the name of a loving Christ who proclaims the this-worldly justice of a kingdom to come.”

Finally, I found profound inspiration in West's call for academicians (and pastors by implication) to engage the hip-hop culture in a serious and sustained manner in order to heal the intergenerational alienation that plagues our democracy. Buried deep in his chapter on this necessary engagement with youth culture is a blow-by-blow account of his well-publicized dispute with Harvard president Lawrence Summers, which resulted in West's resigning from Harvard's faculty to accept the position he now holds at Princeton. To hear West's side of the matter is alone worth the price of the book. He condemns the backbiting and spinelessness that ravages the academy, and he uses his personal story to demonstrate that democracy cannot flourish in the absence of academic freedom and integrity.

Notwithstanding my own participation via print, television and radio in the debate on the role of religion in politics during the recent presidential campaign, I remained frustrated by the failure of progressives to articulate a coherent message that can be endorsed and embraced by prophetic Christians. *Democracy Matters* offers such a message and beckons those with progressive minds and prophetic hearts to connect the dots and take courage in the struggle to restore morality to democracy in post-9/11 America.