Review article

The scholar of religion as public intellectual:
Some recent works by Cornel West

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*Atlantic Monthly*, *The New Republic*, and the *Village Voice* all have recently published front-page articles focussed solely or in part on Cornel West (Boyn-nton 1995; Wieseltier 1995; Reed 1995). Earlier this year West was profiled in *The New Yorker* (Bérubé 1995), and since the 1993 publication of his best-selling *Race Matters* many other popular journals have discussed him (e.g., Anderson 1994; White 1993). It is difficult to think of any contemporary North American intellectual with major interests in religion who commands wider public attention – neither a scholar who speaks from the stand-point of religious faith nor an external analyst of religion. Moreover, West blends both roles. Thus his blend of neo-pragmatist philosophy and neo-Gramscian cultural analysis is an extremely important bridge between religious studies and inter-disciplinary cultural studies, and between both of these wings of the academy and the public. West is among a handful of scholars regularly cited in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* as well as inter-disciplinary forums such as *Social Text* and *Critical Inquiry*. In addition, as
the New Yorker put it, he can “leap from Kierkegaard to KRS-One in a single bound” (Bérubé 1995:78) depending on whether he is writing a specialized essay on Marxist literary theorist Fredric Jameson, debating Pat Robertson on national television, or filming a documentary on religion and rap. No one interested in the role of religion in the U.S. public sphere can ignore him.

Readers of this journal who are unfamiliar with West should begin either with Race Matters and Keeping Faith, or with older statements in Prophetic Fragments (a collection with many essays on religion) and American Evasion of Philosophy, his history of pragmatism from Emerson through Dewey and Rorty (West 1988; 1989). There is no ideal approach to his writings on religion because American Evasion and the recent texts touch lightly on the subject, while Prophetic Fragments does not fully reflect West’s recent thinking. It would be most useful to have a single volume bringing together his essays on religion.

Until this happens, Race Matters is the best brief introduction. It is a polished example of West in his pundit voice, giving wide-ranging and acute analyses of the cultural politics of race in North America today. It is exemplary in its graceful prose, nuanced treatment of authors from across the ideological spectrum, and broad vision. It is notable for its powerful critiques of conservative ideas on race and its stress on overcoming what West calls “black nihilism”. By this he primarily means hopelessness and despair. Secondarily (and controversially for black nationalists and various other critics) he also means the lack of political purpose channelled toward agenda that West judges constructive – coalition politics in a multi-culturalist and democratic socialist key. Unfortunately for readers of this journal, Race Matters is his least interesting book on method and theory in religion. His theories of culture inform Race Matters but are better approached elsewhere.

Keeping Faith represents (along with American Evasion) West’s most sustained scholarship. Despite some repetition and unevenness, this is an outstanding collection. It centres on works from the early 1990s and includes some of West’s most sophisticated earlier work in philosophy and cultural criticism. Among other things, it includes important articles on the history of civil rights and black power, race and social theory, and the work of Fredric Jameson; short essays summarizing issues treated more expansively in American Evasion and Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought (West 1991); and his much-cited articles “The dilemma of the black intellectual” (also included in Breaking Bread) and “The new cultural politics of difference”.

Like any scholarly project, West’s has strengths and weaknesses. His greatest weakness is being spread too thinly. No matter what he is discussing, if you are a specialist in this field you will want him to dwell longer on the subject and explore it more deeply. For example, since I am writing a history of the rise of liberation theologies, I had special interest in the chapter of Keep-