RELIGION

ON THE LIMITS AND POSSIBLITIES OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: A STUDY OF THE PROPHETIC PRAGMATISM OF CORNEL WEST, THE CHRISTIAN REALISM OF REINHOLD NIEBUHR AND THE THEOLOGICAL LEGACY OF BENJAMIN ELIJAH MAYS

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Dissertation under the direction of Professor Victor Anderson

This dissertation is concerned with the social impact, and meaning of political conservatism for secular and theological political projects that seek to empower the disenfranchised and address ongoing social inequality along the lines of race, class, and gender. My thesis is that progressive political projects, both secular and theological, have been eclipsed by political conservatism and, if they are to remain viable, they must undergo internal criticism and reformulation. This dissertation addresses these concerns on three levels: first, it treats the eclipse of progressive politics by political conservatism; second, it offers a theological interpretation of this eclipse; and lastly, it identifies a theological resource for the reconstruction of progressive politics and political theology in the 21st century. Prominent in this dissertation is the social impact of political conservatism, over that last two decades, and the movement to end affirmative action in the United States. In my estimation, these forces symbolize the eclipse of progressive politics in America.

In identifying the kind of progressive politics that has been eclipsed by political conservatism, I turn to the political philosophy of Cornel West. In my view, West's political philosophy, prophetic pragmatism, represents the kind of progressive politics that is no longer influential in the United States. In making sense of why progressive politics is no longer influential, I turn to the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr's reflections on history, liberalism and radicalism are insightful for interpreting the eclipse of progressive politics. In an effort to reform progressive politics and political theology, I turn to the theological legacy Benjamin Elijah Mays. Mays was a mid-twentieth century African American public theologian, who forwarded a theological perspective that placed a premium on democratic theological and political discourse and promoted education, as a strategy for social transformation. His theological legacy is a resource for progressive politics and political theology today. In the end, I build on the concerns drawn from my treatment of West, and the insights drawn from my treatment of Niebuhr and Mays, and make recommendations for the reconstruction of progressive politics and political theology in the 21st century.

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CHAPTER I

POLITICAL CONSERVATISM AND THE ECLIPSE OF PROGRESSIVE POLITICS IN THE UNITED STATES

In January of 2003, the cover story for the weekly edition of *Newsweek Magazine*, dated January 27, 2003, signaled what I consider a sign of changed times.[1] The title of the cover story was posed in the form of a question: "Do We Still Need Affirmative Action?" It was published in the aftermath of President George W. Bush's public criticism of the practice of affirmative action at the University of Michigan. At the time of his criticism, the legality of Michigan's affirmative action policies, in relation to its undergraduate and law school programs, was being contested and awaited hearing in the United States Supreme Court. The *Newsweek* story and the criticisms of George W. Bush reflected a shift in the political mood of the United States. In my estimation, it reflected the eclipse of progressive politics in the United States.

The response of George W. Bush reflected the impact of a decade-long movement to eliminate affirmative action policies in higher education.[2] The movement against affirmative action in higher education stems back to the 1970s when many public and

[1] *Newsweek Magazine*, 27 January 2003, dedicated a series of articles to the affirmative action debate in the United States. The articles were primarily concerned with affirmative action and higher education and its opposition by political conservatives. See "Spinning Race" by Howard Fineman and Tamara Lipper and "What's At Stake" by Barbara Kantrowitz and Pat Wingert.

[2] There is a wide body of literature on the affirmative action debate in the United States. One exhaustive treatment of the affirmative action debate, particularly where higher education is concerned, is a recent text by legal scholar Carol Swain, *The New White Nationalism In America: Its Challenge to Integration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Also, see Lydia Chavez's *The Color Bind: California's Battle to End Affirmative Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). In recent years the state of California has led the crusade against affirmative action. It was the first state to eliminate affirmative action in its public university system, thus inspiring states such as Florida and Texas to follow suit.

private universities, receiving federal funding, incorporated the practice into their admissions procedures. Yet it was not until the early 1990s that the movement made serious inroads into the public sphere. Its first victory was scored in 1996 when California voted in support of a proposition (206) that called for the elimination racial preferences in admission to state universities and in employment in state supported institutions. Shortly thereafter, both the states of Texas (Where George W. Bush once served as Governor) and Florida (Where the brother of the George W. Bush serves as Governor) followed suit in eliminating race as consideration for admission to state universities. Based on the successes of this movement, the intensifying debate surrounding Affirmative Action, and the impact of political conservatism in America, I contend that we have witnessed the eclipse of progressive politics in the United States. The dominance political conservatism in American life and the intensifying debate over affirmative action is one major symbol of this eclipse.

In this dissertation, I argue that in these early days of the 21st century America, political conservatism limits politically progressive efforts toward social transformation. The politically progressive efforts I have in mind are those that are represented by progressive liberals and the political left who seek to overcome social inequities along the lines of race, class and gender.[3] In this dissertation, I seek to map out the manner in which this occurs and maintain that the ongoing debate regarding affirmative action is symbolic of the limits that are now placed upon progressive politics in the United States. In the end, I argue that political conservatism is a politics of merit and privilege, which

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Chavez's text is illuminating regarding affirmative action in California and insightful for understanding the affirmative action debate during the 1990s.

[3] Throughout this dissertation, I use the term, "progressive politics," as an umbrella term for political liberals and leftists.

evades the challenge of realizing a pluralistic democracy in the United States. In this regard, it is a challenge to progressive democratic social transformation. In dealing with political conservatism, it is important to understand both the dimensions of conservative thought as well as the rise of conservatism in contemporary America. Furthermore, it is important to note the far reaching effects of political conservatism. In this vein, it is important to note that political conservatism is not limited to one particular racial or ethnic group. In the United States today, political conservatism is found among African Americans, Latino/a's, women and white males.

My study of political conservatism in America begins with an investigation of the rise and influence of political conservatism in the United States. The concerns of this chapter provide a platform for discussing the diminished influence of progressive politics, particularly post-1960s liberal progressivism and left-wing radicalism.[4] In chapter two, I turn to the political philosophy of Cornel West. In my estimation, West's political philosophy, prophetic pragmatism, represents the brand of progressive politics that has been eclipsed in the United States. In chapter three, I turn to Reinhold Niebuhr, whose Christian realism is insightful for interpreting the eclipse of progressive politics in America. In this regard, there are striking parallels between the dilemmas faced by progressives of Niebuhr's era and the dilemmas faced by liberal progressives and left-wing radicals in ours. In chapters four and five, I turn to the theological legacy of Benjamin Elijah Mays. Mays is a neglected figure in American theological and social thought whose career as a public theologian, college administrator and social activist is insightful for our conservative age. With a theological and political outlook that takes

[4] Of equal concern to me is the viability of theologies of liberation, whose social goals are indicted by the social agenda of political conservatism.

democracy seriously and a commendation of education as the practice of democracy, Mays's legacy offers insights for our conservative age. In chapter six, I conclude this dissertation by offering recommendations for the reconstruction of progressive politics and political theology in our time. Having stated the ends of this dissertation, I will now attend to the stronghold of conservatism in the United States.

The Impact of Political Conservatism in Contemporary America

The movement against affirmative action and its successes is just one facet of the impact of conservative political ideology in the United States in the last two decades.[5] Since the early 1980s conservative political ideology has impacted an entire spectrum of public policy issues ranging from welfare spending and crime and punishment to healthcare and income taxes. Conservative political ideology has unsettled the social and political liberalism that formed the New Deal/Great Society policies that spanned four decades. The political liberalism of the New Deal/ Great society era helped give birth to social security, the G.I. Bill, social legislation to fight poverty, the civil rights establishment, feminism and the counter-culture movements of the 1970s that sought to redefine the social and political landscape of the United States. Before outlining the impact of conservative ideology, it is important to define conservatism.

[5] For an exhaustive treatment of the impact of political conservatism on public policy over the last twenty years see Y. H. Clarence and Michael Shwartz's *Social Policy and the Conservative Agenda* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1998). Also see Lee Edwards' *The Conservative Revolution: The Movement that Remade America* (New York, New York: The Free Press, 1999).

The Idea of Conservatism

For a definition of conservatism I turn conservative historian and theorist Russell Kirk, whose two-volume work on conservatism, *The Conservative Mind*, is held in conservative circles as the bible of conservative thought. Here a definition of conservatism is provided as well as a delineation of six tenets of conservatism. According to Kirk, "the essence of social conservatism is preservation of the ancient moral traditions of humanity. Conservatives respect the wisdom of their ancestors." He goes on to say about conservatives, "They think society is a spiritual reality, possessing an eternal life but a delicate constitution: it cannot be scrapped and recast as if it were a machine." [6]

Following his working definition of conservatism, is what Kirk terms six canons of conservative thought. The first canon is the conviction that political problems are essentially religious and moral problems. This canon maintains that society should be ordered and governed by a divine and eternal understanding of right and duty. The second canon is an affirmation of traditional life. This canon maintains that egalitarianism and utilitarianism, in regard to social arrangements, are more harmful than beneficial to society. The third canon is the "Conviction that civilized society requires orders and classes. The only true equality is moral equality; all attempts at leveling lead to despair, if enforced by positive legislation." The fourth canon is the conviction that economic leveling is not economic progress. This canon maintains that freedom is connected to property ownership, that once private property is erased so too is liberty. The fifth canon is concerned with anthropology. This canon maintains that human

[6] Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Elliot* (Chicago and Washington, DC: Regenery Books, 1986), 7-8. This text is volume one of a two-volume work on the conservative mind. The second volume is *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana*. These texts were produced in the aftermath of World War II and were quite influential among libertarians who were hostile to the then continuing

impulse and emotion must be regulated by tradition. For the conservative, "Tradition and sound prejudice provide checks upon man's anarchic impulse." The sixth and final canon is an affirmation of gradualism as a means of social change. This canon maintains that "change and reform are not identical, and that innovation is a devouring conflagration more often than it is a torch of progress." If society is to change, change must be congruent with its conservation. Essentially, society must change slowly.[7]

Kirk's definition of conservatism and the six canons of conservative thought outlined above, represent in my view, the backbone of conservative ideology in the United States. To take it a step further, I call it the *Conservative Version of the American dream*. What does this mean? Politically, it means minimal government intervention in the lives of ordinary citizens, in promotion of individual rights. Economically, it means the right to property ownership, free enterprise and unregulated market competition. Religiously, it means the conservation and promotion of America's Christian heritage, which equates to the conservation and promotion of traditional values related to family, sex and work. Overall, its most potent theme is the unrestrained capacity of individuals, rooted in the protestant ethic, to achieve the American dream. Individuals may achieve the American dream beyond the limits of social, historical and biological forces related to race, gender and class background.

Conservatism stands in stark contrast to progressivism or what conservatives such as Kirk call radicalism. For conservatives, progressivism or radicalism is a wholesale alteration of tradition, an opponent of minimal government, resistant to individualism,

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legacy of New Deal liberalism. Along with William F. Buckley, Kirk became one of the leading ideologues of the then emerging conservative movement.

[7] Ibid.

anti-Christian and committed to socialist economics.[8] Progressivism, for conservatives, leads to anarchy and incivility. The social explosions that occurred in the United States between 1960 and the mid 1970s, i.e., the civil rights, peace, women's and counter-cultural movements, represent the vices of progressivism, which conservatives oppose. Contemporary political conservatism upholds the belief that such movements produced anarchic consequences for American society. Political conservatives point to the rise in crime, out of wedlock births, a decadent popular culture and unstable institutions such as the family and public schools during the 1980s and 1990s as the result of the social unrest of prior decades. Hence, conservatives seek to overcome the effects of a progressive era by re-instituting those traditional social arrangements and social beliefs that were unsettled over a generation ago.

For more than a generation, political conservatives and liberal and left-wing progressives have competed for the allegiance of the American public. However, the former is more prominent and influential today than the latter. James Davidson Hunter attests to the struggle between conservatism and progressivism in his book, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*.[9] Here he makes a distinction between what he calls the orthodox, those who want to preserve the tried and tested, or, tradition, and progressives, those who seek to go beyond traditional arrangements. Hunter maintains that the tensions between the two are played out in a plethora of arenas, from politics and education, to debates about the family and debates about the arts. Hunter also maintains

[8] Ibid., Kirk's outline of conservatism is laid out adjacent to an outline of progressivism, which he terms radicalism. For Kirk, Marx inspired socialism is the nemesis of the tenets of the economic and political tenets of conservative thought. It undermines the focus on individuals, tradition and markets that are vital to conservative thought. Overall, Kirk's definition of conservatism is defined against radicalism.

[9] See the chapter entitled "Competing Moral Visions" in James Davidson Hunter's, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York, New York: Basic Books, 1991), 107-132. This chapter gives a historical account of the conservative- progressive divide in the United States.

that the tension between conservatism and progressivism is one that has recurred throughout American history, and that the dichotomy between the two is not always sharp; on each side of the conservative/progressive divide there are those who mediate between the two. However, as general tendencies in American history and society, conservatism and progressivism each seek to define what America ought to be.

The Conservative Takeover: A Brief Historical Sketch

Given the history of struggle between conservatism and progressivism, one must ask the question, How did political conservatism dismantle the impact of liberal and left-wing progressivism in our recent history and become the dominant political ideology of our society? *In A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism*, Jonathan M. Schoenwald, a historian of conservatism in the United States, points to the post WWII era as a marker for tracing the seeds of contemporary conservatism. During the Post WWII America, conservatives sought to redefine an America that continued to feel the effects of New Deal liberalism born under the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and continued under the presidency of Harry Truman. According to Schoenwald, it was the legacy of the New Deal coupled with the Cold War that birthed contemporary conservatism in America.

> The decade between 1945 and 1955 was a pastiche of events that, when seen by conservatives, comprised a bleak picture: American influence abroad seemed to crumble before policymakers' eyes, and at home "un-American" activities and troubles multiplied with each new controversy. With end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War most Americans hoped to regain stability and predictability in their lives. For the previous sixteen years normalcy had been rare, upstaged by the depression, a new activist government that created a welfare state, and finally entry into World War II, ending a twenty-year period of unwavering isolationism. When the less-than-mythical Harry S. Truman replaced Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1945,

> Americans came to realize that the postwar world would not be joined seamlessly to what had come before.[10]

Dissatisfied with the domestic policy legacy of Roosevelt and Truman, and America's posture toward the Cold War, conservatives began organizing around ideas and issues that would challenge the political liberalism of prior decades. Interestingly, the conservatism of that era fell under the umbrellas of libertarianism, traditionalism and anti-communism. Each represented distinct forms of conservative thinking that up until that time were disconnected. Furthermore, there was no formal conservative ideology that drove a conservative political agenda. In time, however, the various strains of conservatism would join forces, though not without problems, and a formal ideology would be codified that represented the conservative mind in America. As far as ideology was concerned, persons such Russell Kirk and William F. Buckley would lead the ideological development of conservatism. What served conservatives well in their pioneering efforts, was their political organization and their organizing outside of the political arena. Such organizing would be key to their future success. In building an ideology, agenda and public influence, conservatives did not limit their efforts to politics. Journals, newspapers, Christian media foundations, grass-root organizations along with electoral politics were their means of gaining public influence.

Though conservatives pursued a two-pronged approach in building a movement they remained marginal in American politics during the postwar period and throughout most of the 1960s. To be sure, the voice of political conservatism was heard even as the

[10] Jonathan Shoenwald. *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern Conservatism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 22. Beyond Schoenwald there are other histories of modern conservatism that are helpful in understanding the development and political successes of modern conservatism; there is

nation went through the liberal administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. In fact, it was through failed attempts at gaining public office during this period that conservatives would refine their strategies and political message and identify their core audience, which would prove advantageous in the next decade. One significant yet failed conservative attempt at gaining public office was the 1964 presidential campaign of Barry Goldwater. Barry Goldwater's bid for the presidency and defeat in 1964 brought together polarizing forces within the Republican Party enabling far right and liberal conservatives to identify a common agenda as well as ideological differences. Goldwater's candidacy brought together conservatives from different walks of life and different parts of the country. Southern and mid-western blue-collar conservatives joined forces with white-collar conservatives from the west and east coasts. Along these lines, a conservative New York based intellectual such as William F. Buckley rallied behind the far right extremism of Arizona's Goldwater. Interestingly, it was the far right extremism of Goldwater and that within the Republican Party that would not only drive away most American voters but also energize the conservative movement in the United States. Goldwater's defeat allowed conservatives to see, demographically, the appeal of conservative ideology. Also, it allowed moderate and liberal conservatives to see the limits of ideology in gaining public influence. As a result, conservatives would increase their efforts at gaining public influence outside of the political arena.

By the end of the 1960s, the social and political climate of the United States would become political fodder for conservatives against liberals and the New Left, and would set the stage for their greatest successes in the next two decades. The civil rights,

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The Conservative Revolution, mentioned earlier and William C. Berman's *America's Right Turn: From Nixon to Clinton* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1998).

Black Power and the Vietnam War movements, coupled with the tragedy of the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago and riots across America after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., signaled for conservatives, the failure of a liberal social order. For political conservatives, social order in American was being jeopardized due to three decades of political liberalism and the radicalism of the then New Left. Aided by heightened public concerns about social stability and order and diminished confidence in the Democratic Party, conservatives seized the moment making possible the election of Republican candidate Richard Nixon to the presidency in 1968.

By the time Nixon became president in 1968 the conservative movement had expanded significantly and became more sophisticated in articulating its ideology. The extreme tendencies within the movement, represented by the Goldwater campaign, were toned down. By the late 1960s less ideological and more public and media friendly conservatives, like then California Governor Ronald Reagan, represented the future of conservatism in the United States. Richard Nixon also represented this mold and his election to office represented the hope of conservatives. For most conservatives, Nixon's entrance into the White House would bring an end to the New Deal/Great Society liberalism that was influential since the days of Franklin Roosevelt. For many conservatives, Nixon would end political concessions made to African Americans, end protests against the Vietnam War, end welfare and bring order and stability to American life. Interestingly, many within the Republican Party viewed Nixon as a moderate conservative whose commitment to carrying out conservative principles was questionable. Needless to say, Nixon's election represented a major ideological turn in American politics and his re-election four years later would not only incite one of the

biggest scandals in American political history but present new challenges to conservatives. Despite the failures of the Nixon administrations, the mid 1970s became the launching pad for conservative rule in the subsequent decade. The economic and social crises of the mid-1970s, coupled with the weak administration of Jimmy Carter, set the stage for what would become a turning point in the nature of American government for the next twenty-years. A new stage was set for the future of American politics with election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.

The dawning of the Reagan era in U.S. politics marked the beginning of the end of New Deal/Great Society era and its influence on the social and political landscape of the United States. The election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency was the capstone of a revival of conservatism in American life. A defining characteristic of Reagan styled conservatism was Reaganomics or the Reagan doctrine. It was the belief in the power of the market to address America's economic and social problems. The Reagan doctrine changed the course of American social policy for the next two decades. The appeal of the Reagan doctrine was far reaching. For it found support among evangelical Christian groups that would later become known as the Christian Right. It also found supporters among ex-liberals, ex-leftists and young republicans who would later bear the title of neo-conservatives. The Reagan era had far reaching effects, to the extent that the two-term presidency of Democrat William Jefferson Clinton was made possible due in part to concessions he made to a highly influential conservative constituency, both within and outside of the White House.

Toward An American Meritocracy: The Political End of Conservatism

In my reading of contemporary political conservatism the fundamental goal of conservative political action is the formation of an American meritocracy where competition and individualism flourishes. The American dream, according to conservatives, is based on individual achievements, that are the fruits of competition and merit. And for conservatives, the flourishing of individuals occurs when there is minimal or no government interference, in relation to the individual interests of its citizens. The focus on individuals and merit is fundamental to criticisms of affirmative action policies. Consider two writers, Carol Swain and Dinesh D'Souza, who discuss this issue in relation to affirmative action. I will quote both at length. In *The New White Nationalism* Swain says the following:

> Critics of affirmative action charge that policies of racial, ethnic and gender preference are contrary to core American values regarding fairness, equality, and respect for the worth of individuals. These values, they say, find expression in our Constitution, which guarantees equal treatment to all American citizens as individual persons, not as members of racial, ethnic and gender groups. The language of the Fourteenth Amendment and its equal protection provision is significant, affirmative action opponents often insist, since it speaks only of persons and personal rights.[11]

Now consider Dinesh D'Souza, a non-white (Indian immigrant) neo-conservative opponent of affirmative action. D'Souza extols the virtues of individual rights and merits by appealing to the language of Martin Luther King, Jr. and using the world of professional sports as an analogy to make his point. In his New York Times bestseller, *What's So Great About America*, D'Souza says the following:

> In the 1950s and 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr. championed the cause of merit against that of nepotism and racial favoritism. All we are asking, King said, that we be judged on our merits as individuals, based on the content of

[11] Swain, *The New White Nationalism*, 164.

> our character and not the color of our skins…Eventually leaders of the United States agreed to this. There were strong pockets of resistance, especially in the South, but the heroic persistence of King and his supporters was vindicated…Merit became the operating standard just as King demanded. King fully expected that merit would produce diversity and that equality of rights for individuals would lead to equality of results for groups.[12]

D'Souza then makes a turn in his thought in a later passage,

> It has been a generation since King's death, and we now see that King's premise was false. Equality of rights for individuals has not led to equality of results for groups. Merit, like racism, produces inequality. And inequalities produced by merit are far more justifiable than inequalities produced by favoritism or racism. Consider the example of the National Basketball Association. African Americans are 12 percent of the population but more than 75 percent of NBA players. Why then do we not hear demands for more Jews and Asians to be represented on the courts? Presumably because it is merit that is producing this racially proportionate result. If coaches are picking the best dribblers and passers and shooters, then who cares if one group has more players and another has less?.. If this seems like a sensible approach, it should also be applied to universities, and corporations, and government jobs.[13]

Conservative ideologues are concerned with the formation of an American meritocracy. In such a meritocracy, individual rights, not group rights or group entitlements are encouraged. Overall, the conservative focus on individualism, competition and merit is a challenge to social entitlements, particularly group entitlements based on race, gender and class. As I stated earlier in this chapter, conservative politics in America today seeks to undo the impact of progressive politics since the 1960s. One feature of post 1960s progressive politics is its focus on

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[12] Dinesh D'Souza. *What's So Great About America* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 122. This text is a recent version of what I term the conservative version of the American dream. Written from the perspective of an Indian immigrant who has become successful in the United States, it extols the virtues of individualism and merit. D'Souza appeals to the story of the successful immigrant to criticize the stories of native-born minorities that make claims of racial victimization. Further it is an apologetic for conservatism and a denunciation of multiculturalism or pluralism. For D'Souza, America is the greatest nation on earth affording people from all over the world equal opportunities. In his reading of African American claims to racial victimization, lack of initiative and underachievement, not racism is responsible for the relative state of black progress.

[13] Ibid.

disenfranchised minority groups and the need for re-distributive justice in relation to such groups. From the 1960s until the dawning of the conservative era, the idea of re-distributive justice influenced American social policy. However, conservatives have unsettled such social policy. One way of accomplishing this has been the countering of social policies and decision making which accommodates minorities. For conservatives, the provisions that were made for minorities by way of social policy had reached their limits. Conservatives argued that such provisions were costly for whites or non-minorities. Conservatives argued that entitlements for disenfranchised minorities inadvertently discriminated against whites, particularly males. At the same time, minority conservatives argued that entitlements for disenfranchised minorities only contributes to their stigmatization and does not truly lead to their empowerment. Again, Carol Swain's text sheds light on this issue. The conservative criticism and challenge of affirmative action is one example of preference based social policy that has been questioned.

Perhaps the most telling aspect of the conservative assault on group entitlements is its reasoning surrounding the underclass. It is at the level of entitlements for the underclass where the conservative values of individualism, competition and merit have their most potent effects. For contemporary conservatives, the presence of an underclass may be attributed to a population within society that disregards the values of work and thrift. For conservatives, lack of individual initiative and the absence of middle class values contribute to poverty. In this vein, social programs to remedy poverty proved costly and ineffectual among a populace where the values of work, education and saving are minimal if not nonexistent. The welfare reforms of the second Clinton administration proved to be a major testament to conservative reasoning about the underclass. Overall,

political conservatives have been quite successful at convincing the American public of the costly nature and limits of entitlements for disenfranchised groups within American society. The success of conservative ideology largely lies in how it persuaded large numbers of Americans of the ineffectiveness of tax-payer funded social programs, programs that are perceived as minority entitlements. Again, the focus on competition, individualism and merit is key to their success.

The Conservative Children of Disenfranchised Minorities

One way to gauge the impact of political conservatism in the United States is to map its influence upon minorities. The impact of the conservative focus on individualism, competition and merit and its influence, can be measured by the growing presence of racial minorities and women among the ranks of conservatives.[14] This is significant given the historical relationship between liberal progressives and disenfranchised minority groups. In this regard, the allies of minority interests have been political liberals and the American left. However, the presence of African American, Latino/a and female conservatives, has unsettled the influence of political liberals and leftists on each group. To be sure, minorities have not abandoned their political allies in droves. However, political liberals and the American left cannot claim to be the sole voices of minority

[14] There is a growing body of literature on the phenomena of political conservatism among minority groups. This literature includes texts on minority conservatives as well as texts by minority conservatives. One insightful text on African American political conservatism is Gayle Tate and Lewis Randolph's *Dimensions of Black Conservatism in the United State: Made in America* (New York, New York: Palgrave Publishers, 2002). This text places contemporary African American conservatism in historical perspective as well as illuminate the individual ethos that pervades the thinking of African American conservatives such as Clarence Thomas and Shelby Steele. Among texts by minority conservatives are former Oklahoma Congressman J.C. Watts', *What Color Is a Conservative?: My Life and My Politics* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002) and Linda Chavez's, *An Unlikely Conservative: The Transformation of an Ex-liberal, Or, How I Became the Most Hated Hispanic in America* (New York, New York: Palgrave: Basic Books, 2002). These texts suggest that liberalism and progressivism do not have a monopoly on minority interests.

interests. Symbols of minority conservatism are found in American politics, from Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas to National Security Advisor Condolezza Rice, from Linda Chavez to former Oklahoma Congressman J.C. Watts. Symbols of minority conservatism are also found in the world of higher education, two very prominent examples being sociologist Thomas Sowell and English professor Shelby Steele. The presence of politically conservative minorities suggests that conservative political ideology cannot be limited to race, ethnicity and gender, i.e., white males. Rather, it transcends race, ethnicity and gender.

Political Conservatism and Its Implications for Political Theology and Progressive Politics in North America

Because ethical and theological reflection is not immune to what happens in the political world, it is important to note the implications of political conservatism for ethical and theological reflection. The post-1960s progressive politics of political liberals and the American left, which contemporary conservatism has disrupted, also has a theological counterpart. Since the late 1960s, theologies of liberation have been concerned with minority group interests, particularly disenfranchised minorities. Black liberation theology, feminist liberation theology, womanist theology, Latino/a liberation theology and other theologies of liberation have sought to give voice to the disenfranchised in American society. The theologies of James H. Cone, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Delores S. Williams, Dwight N. Hopkins, Mary Daley, Beverly Harrison, Sharon Welch, Jacquelyn Grant, all claim to represent and articulate the subjugation of oppressed minority groups, be they African Americans, women, Latino/a's or the underclass. However, the theological claims of these North American liberation

theologians are now subject to the political criticism of conservative ideologues. In other words, the theological perspectives born from these liberation theologians are now challenged by the philosophical tenets and social claims of conservative political ideology. Political conservatism challenges these theologies on two levels: first, there is the challenge of the conservative version of the American dream, which focuses on individualism, merit and competition. This version of the American dream challenges the egalitarian hopes that are integral to theologies of liberation. Second, there is the challenge of the conservative aversion toward preferences for the disenfranchised, such preferences being important themes in theologies of liberation. Interestingly, these challenges are embodied in the endless debate over affirmative action in America. In my estimation, the conservative argument against affirmative action is the greatest challenge to these political theologies. For the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss affirmative action in connection to the challenges outlined in above.

One of the most significant achievements born out of the progressive era is the American civil rights establishment. At the level of politics and economics, the civil rights establishment reformed American race relations. Significantly altering the social prospects of large numbers of African Americans, the civil rights establishment increased the number of African Americans in the political arena; it increased the number of African Americans with undergraduate and graduate degrees; it widened the African American middle class and overall; it provided African Americans with greater access to goods within the mainstream of American life. One significant factor that accounts for these achievements is the establishment of affirmative action policies in a wide array of arenas in American life. From college and graduate school admissions to employment

practices in the public and private sphere, to government set asides for African American businesses, affirmative action policies have been vital to the economic and social mobility of African Americans for more than a generation. Affirmative action policies are one product of a progressive era whose achievements have left and undeniable impression on the social landscape of America.

Although the impress of affirmative action on America is undeniable, recent history has shown that this impress is not lasting. As I stated earlier, political conservatism has unsettled the most significant achievement of the civil rights establishment, affirmative action. This is particularly true with regard to higher education. Again, consider the fact that the practice of affirmative action has been eliminated in the university systems of the states of California, Texas and Florida and that the legality of the practice at the University of Michigan was contested as recent as June 2003, in the United States Supreme Court. Fortunately, for the Michigan case, the Supreme Court ruled in its favor, upholding the practice, but with significant modifications. Though the court upheld the practice of affirmative action at the University of Michigan, the debate regarding and the conservative challenge to it is far from over.

The struggle over affirmative action is connected to an epochal shift in American attitudes toward progressive politics. Seemingly progressive politics, which facilitated the rise of affirmative action and has waned with the advent of political conservatism, does not move the American public. One social and political analyst who attests to this shift in American attitudes towards progressive politics is Carl Boggs. In his work, *The End of Politics: Corporate Power and the Decline of the Public Sphere*, Boggs writes about a

contemporary America that is no longer moved by the spirit of progressivism. In addition to conservatism, he maintains that other forces such as corporate power, greed and narcissism have corroded faith in progressive politics in the U.S. For Boggs, the tragic result has led to the depolitization of the public sphere.

> As the twenty-first century dawns, American politics is an ever increasing apathetic condition. Elections have become more meaningless than ever, significant differences between republicans and democrats are scarcely discernable despite all the political hue and cry, public discourse is drawn increasingly toward trivial concerns, and legislators at all levels are in gridlock. Meanwhile citizens in greater numbers have retreated from political involvement out of justifiable feelings of disgust and pessimism. Measured virtually by any set of criteria, the political system is in a (potentially terminal) state of entropy, out of touch with the needs and aspirations of the vast majority of people; citizenship-rights and obligations-has decayed beyond recognition. While at one time in the not too distant past complaints about a declining public sphere, or "commons," was the distinctive province of Burkean conservatives nostalgic liberals and republicans bemoaning the disappearance of a more simple associational life, today it is a refrain heard loudly across the ideological spectrum. Indeed the seemingly irreversible depolitization of American society, perhaps the dominant motif of our times is no doubt harmful to progressive movements that have a vested interest in critical public dialogue and broadened civic participation leading (so it is hoped) to far reaching change.[15]

Boggs also says a word about the status of major ideologies that have been used as tools of progressive politics:

> The contemporary flight from politics occurs at a time of mounting social and ecological crisis on a world scale-indeed at a time of intensifying global disorder-as well as deterioration of classic ideologies (nationalism, communism, socialism, liberalism) that once provided tens of millions of people guideposts for thought and action.[16]

According to Boggs, times have changed. With the changing of times so have assumptions regarding the possibilities of politics, particularly progressive politics. This is a tragedy. This is tragic because progressive politics of the 1960s and 1970s

[15] Carl Boggs, *The End of Politics: Corporate Power and the Decline of the Public Sphere* (New York, New York: Guilford Press, 1998), 23.

envisioned an American society that could be transformed indefinitely, aided by government and political representation. The impulse of progressive politics via the civil rights and women's movements pointed toward an American society that was on course to becoming the Great Society envisioned by Lyndon Baines Johnson. With unprecedented social change and social legislation, the ideal of the beloved community envisioned by Martin Luther King, Jr. was a vibrant possibility. Social progress was being achieved in the arenas of race and gender, and it appeared as though nothing could stand in its way. Then came the 1980s. With the dawn of the 1980s, the era of progressivism and its achievements began to slowly fade away. The idea of social progress, constitutive of the progressive era, was increasingly revealed to be a myth. Social improvements that were that were thought to be permanent were revealed to be tentative, one such improvement being affirmative action. Indeed we have witnessed the eclipse of progressive politics in the United States, and the political and ideological tools that defined progressive politics a generation ago have been eclipsed in terms of their strength and influence.

Given the concerns of this chapter, particularly the challenge of political conservatism in the United States, one is compelled to ask, is a pluralistic democracy in America possible? If the intensifying debate over affirmative action is symbolic of the future of social justice, democracy and race relations in America, Is there much to hope for? Do the concerns of liberation theologians, political liberals and left-wing progressives stand a chance in the market place of ideas and public concern given the landscape of political conservatism? My contention is that projects of social justice, be they liberal, left-wing, secular or theological, must undergo self-criticism and

[16] Ibid., 23.

reformulation if they are going to be contenders in influencing the public sphere. In the chapters that follow, I undertake the kind of criticism that sheds light on why I think post 1960s progressivism lost its influence in the public sphere. In the end, I offer recommendations for the reconstruction of progressive politics and political theology, in light of the affirmative action debate, for a conservative age.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have suggested that conservative political ideology has eclipsed the liberal and left-wing progressivism which has impacted our most recent social and political history. Though liberal and left-wing progressivism has been eclipsed in its influence the voice of progressivism is still alive. In the following chapters I examine this voice, raise questions about its viability and give an account of why it lost its influence. In the next chapter, I turn to one contemporary voice of progressivism, Cornel West, whose social hopes are scrutinized in light of the concerns of this chapter. It is to this voice that I now turn.

CHAPTER II

CORNEL WEST AND DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA TODAY

Can America ever truly be America without a full-fledged multiracial and multi-gendered democracy-a democracy that flourishes in the political, economic, cultural and even existential spheres? Can the dignity of everyday people thrive in an oligarchic and plutocratic economy? Can American democracy be true to its ideals without a nonracist and nonsexist culture and society? Does not pervasive homophobia require a nonheterosexist social arrangement? These are challenging questions of Whitman, Dewey, Addams, Baldwin, Lorde and Martin Luther King, Jr.…These are the great questions of the twenty-first century, the grand challenges of the next wave of democratic possibility. Have we reached the limits of an American religion of possibility? Do class, race and gender hierarchy have the last word on how far democracy can go in our time? My Chekhovian Christian viewpoint says No! No! No!…Let it be said of us centuries from now that we were bold and visionary in our efforts to live with courage and compassion in the face of death, to pursue dialogue over and against the overwhelming odds of misunderstanding and violence and to fight for old and new forms of democracy at the beginning of a century that may well produce novel forms of barbarism and bestiality if we fail to respond to the tests of our time.[1]

Since the publication of his first book in 1982, *Prophesy Deliverance,* to the publication of an anthology of more than ten texts in 1999, *The Cornel West Reader,* Cornel West has established himself as an influential scholar and public voice in American life. His philosophy of social hope and harmony, prophetic pragmatism, has gained the attention of leaders and decision-makers from diverse arenas in American society. His written work and public philosophy have been praised by academics, popular media, social leaders and political elites. However, his work has also been the subject of criticism and debate. In recent years, scholars have given critical attention to his social and political philosophy, prophetic pragmatism, and its implications for public life. Two

[1] Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York, New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), xx.

recent texts, George Yancy's edited volume, *Cornel West: A Critical Reader (1999),* and Mark David Wood's, *The Politics of Prophetic Pragmatism (2000)* have questioned the social hopes of prophetic pragmatism. Similar to these recent efforts, I too question the social hopes of prophetic pragmatism. And I do so in light of political conservatism and its impact on American public life today. Overall, my contention is that West's academic career and public philosophy symbolizes the post 1960s progressive politics that once influenced yet no longer affects, in significant ways, the decision makers and power-brokers of American society. His outlook on social transformation and social hope in America, prophetic pragmatism, struggles for viability in a 21st century American society that is no longer regulated by the progressive politics which he represents.

In this chapter, I question the *value* and promotion of radical democracy that is integral to his social and political philosophy, prophetic pragmatism. In my estimation, radical democracy represents West's utopia, a utopia that he hopes will be realized in America. The questions that I raise regarding this utopia, serve as the starting point for a discussion I forward regarding the limits and possibilities of social transformation in contemporary America. Overall, I am not as hopeful as is West about the social prospects for radical democracy in America, in these early days of the 21st century. Beyond West, I turn to the legacies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Benjamin Elijah Mays as resources for understanding the limits and possibilities of social transformation in America today. For the purposes of this chapter, I begin with an overview of West's prophetic pragmatism. Then I critique what I consider its most salient value, radical democracy. I shall now turn to an overview of prophetic pragmatism.

Prophetic Pragmatism

In *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism,* Cornel West puts forth a conception of pragmatism that he labels "prophetic pragmatism." After crafting a genealogy of pragmatists, which includes philosophers, non-philosophers and persons not typically associated with pragmatism, he lays out a version of pragmatism for our time. This version of pragmatism which, West calls, "prophetic pragmatism," is "an explicit political mode of cultural criticism" that speaks to the cultural and political crises of American society and speaks to what he sees as the overall decline of American civilization. In constructing his conception of "prophetic pragmatism" West draws upon what is, in his consideration, "the best" of the pragmatist tradition. In order to grasp what prophetic pragmatism is, it is necessary to quote West at length.

> The tradition of pragmatism the most influential stream in American thought is in need of an explicit mode of cultural criticism that refines and revises Emerson's concerns with power, provocation, and personality in light of Dewey's stress on historical consciousness and Dubois' focus on the plight of the wretched of the earth. This political mode of cultural criticism must recapture Emerson's sense of vision his utopian impulse yet rechannel it through Dewey's conception of creative democracy and Dubois' structural analysis of the limits of capitalist democracy. Furthermore, this new kind of cultural criticism we can call it prophetic pragmatism must candidly confront the tragic sense found in Hook and Trilling, the religious version of the Jamesian strenuous mood in Niebuhr, and the tortuous grappling with the vocation of the intellectual in Mills. Prophetic pragmatism, with its roots in the American heritage and its hopes for the wretched of the earth, constitutes the best chance of promoting an Emersonian culture of creative democracy by means of critical intelligence and social action.[2]

Here, West lays out the blueprint for his "prophetic pragmatism." He wants to focus on a variety of themes, taken from a variety of pragmatists, and fashion a new version of pragmatism. From six pragmatists, he extracts nine themes that are important

[2] Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 212.

to his conception of prophetic pragmatism. I will identify these themes according to each pragmatist evoked by West. First, there is a concern with *power, provocation and personality* found in Ralph Waldo Emerson. Second, there is the emphasis on *historical consciousness* and *creative democracy* in John Dewey. Third, there is the focus on *the plight of the wretched of the earth* and a *social structural analysis of the limits of capitalist democracy* found in W.E.B. DuBois. Fourth, there is *a necessary confrontation with tragedy or evil* as found in Sidney Hook and Lionel Trilling and in *the religious version of the Jamesian strenuous mood* found in Reinhold Niebuhr. And finally, there is the *tortuous grappling with the vocation of the intellectual* as found in C. Wright Mills.

With these pragmatists and the concerns, that he extracts from their thoughts, West engages in an eclectic synthesis of ideas. The sole purpose of such a synthesis is to foster hope for "the wretched of the earth" and to promote "an Emersonian culture of creative democracy by means of critical intelligence and social action." Interestingly, West's eclecticism excludes the insights of pragmatists such as Charles Sanders Pierce, William James, W.V. Quine and Richard Rorty from his "prophetic pragmatism." Given West's selective emphases I will investigate, thematically, prophetic pragmatism.

Power, Provocation, Personality and Ralph Waldo Emerson

Beginning with Ralph Waldo Emerson, West hopes to foster a kind of democracy which promotes the full participation of human beings in decision making processes while at the same time enhancing human personality. It is a kind of democracy, which makes social experimentation a critical norm and promotes an active citizenry. Emerson serves as a model for this kind of democracy due to his democratic sensibilities toward

philosophy. That is, West sees an explicit questioning of philosophy, particularly epistemology centered philosophy, in Emerson's philosophic disposition, which has important implications for the form of democracy he has in mind. For West, Emerson saw epistemological centered philosophy as a disdaining of and divergence from matters of everyday life. Such philosophy ridiculed common sense and the sensibilities of ordinary people. Hence, such philosophy was elitist and anti-democratic. West claims that Emerson made a swerve from epistemological centered philosophy in service of common sense. This swerve from epistemological centered philosophy led to an explicit focus on human power, personality and provocation.

West suggests that Emerson conceived a notion of power "which enabled himself and others to respond to the crises of his day."[3] He contends that Emerson had a profound concern with the state of the nation, the state of religion and the emerging industrial economy which was shaping the world in which he lived. In explicating Emerson's view of power West states,

> First, his view of power is multileveled: that is, it encompasses and distinguishes the powers of the nation, the economy, the person, tradition, and language. Second, he celebrates the possession, use, and expansion of certain kinds of power, especially transgressive acts of the literate populace that promotes moral aims and personal fulfillment. Third, Emerson's perspective on power accentuates in an unprecedented manner the fluid, protean and dynamic elements in human relations and transactions with nature. In this regard, Emerson's complex and perceptive reflections on power are guided by a profound historical consciousness.[4]

Here, West understands Emerson's view of power in contextual terms. The various contexts he cites, be they political, economic or personal, are inseparable but not identical. Each context yields a certain kind of power. And for West, Emerson is

[3] Ibid., 11.
[4] Ibid., 12.

concerned with expanding power within these contexts in the service of moral aims and personal fulfillment. A salient feature of this perspective on power is that it entails a dynamic notion of human relations via nature.

As for Emerson and the notion of "provocation," West asserts "The primary aim of Emerson's life and discourse is to provoke; the principal means by which he lived, spoke and wrote is provocation."[5] West contends that Emerson's provocation is shaped and driven by the notions of activity, flux, movement, and energy. He further maintains that Emerson's provocation is the result of and reaction to the market forces of his day. West suggests that the market forces of Emerson's day, which created a culture of material insecurity, social instability and overall economic unpredictability, gave rise to selfishness, greed and human objectification.[6] In responding to market forces, West suggests that Emerson produced a kind of self, in service of provocation, which criticizes and lends itself to the dehumanizing nature of the market. That is, the notions of activity, flux, movement and energy, which characterize Emerson's view of provocation, are the very forces which drive the market. And a self that is conceived in light of these forces is either critical of or complicit with a market driven culture. According to West, "Emerson projects a conception of the self that can be easily appropriated by market culture for its own perpetuation and reproduction."[7] However, despite the possibility of co-optation he concedes that the self, driven by provocation, is "antihierarchical, egalitarian, and democratic, for it pertains to human relations." Essentially, the self and the notion of provocation, which Emerson promoted, were paradoxical. It is at once oppressive and

[5] Ibid., 25.
[6] Ibid., 26.
[7] Ibid., 27.

emancipatory. Yet West seeks to reformulate these notions, particularly provocation for his own purposes.

The notion of personality that West extracts from Emerson deals fundamentally with "the dignity and worth of human personality." And for him, Emerson is "the preeminent proponent" of personality. West contends that Emerson promoted an enhanced conception of human personality, which was similar to his other conceptions, in that it was influenced by the times in which he lived. That is, Emerson's understanding of personality was informed by the emerging Euro-American Empire of the nineteenth century. And Emerson understood personality in terms of the dominance of the Euro-American. According to West, "Emerson is a typical nineteenth century North Atlantic mild racist" and "his notion of human personality is, in part, dependent on and derived from his view of the races."[8] Despite Emerson's racialized understanding of personality he offers an understanding of personality, which takes the realities of circumstance, fate and history seriously. That is, his understanding of personality, in relation to race, allowed him to see the accidental character of both the dominance of the Europeans and the subordination of non-European.[9] This understanding resulted in an acknowledgement that race can "limit the capacities and potentialities of individual consciousness and will." This understanding constitutes what West labels, "Emersonian theodicy." It is this understanding of personality that serves the interests of West's pragmatism.

[8] Ibid., 28
[9] Ibid., 31.

Historical Consciousness, Creative Democracy and John Dewey

In his invocations of John Dewey, West is principally concerned with historical consciousness and creative democracy. These concerns build upon the notions of power, provocation and personality as found in Emerson. In fact, West understands Dewey as an inheritor of these Emersonian concerns. And when he speaks of an Emersonian culture of creative democracy, a culture which takes history seriously, not only does he have Emerson in mind, but John Dewey also. In Dewey, West sees an expansion of Emersonian concerns. For West this expansionism marks him as "the greatest of the American pragmatists." This is due principally to Dewey's historical consciousness.

According to West,

> "John Dewey is the greatest of the American pragmatists because he infuses an inherited Emersonian preoccupation with power, provocation and personality –permeated by voluntaristic, amelioristic, and activistic themes- with the great discovery of nineteenth century Europe: a mode of historical consciousness that highlights the conditioned and circumstantial character of human existence in terms of changing societies, cultures, and communities. Dewey is the first of the American pragmatist who revises Emersonian motifs of contingency and revisability in light of modern historical consciousness.[10]"

Here, West views Dewey as a creative interpreter of Emerson. That is, Dewey revises and refines Emersonian notions of power, provocation and personality. For West, Dewey's revisionist project is done in light of the contingencies of human existence, which is reflected in society and culture. And such an understanding of contingency is driven by a historical consciousness that regulates his reconstructive project.

For West, what makes historical consciousness so critical and attractive to Dewey is its implications for new forms of intellectual and existential activity. That is,

[10] Ibid., 70.

the emergence of historical consciousness in modern thought made it possible to rethink the past. Again West asserts,

> Dewey views modern historical consciousness-awareness of the radical contingent and variability of human societies, cultures and communities-as the watershed event in contemporary thought. To cross this rubicon is to enter a new intellectual terrain-to shun old philosophic forms of dualism, and transcendentalism and to put forward new social theorectic understandings of knowledge, power, wealth and culture.[11]

Here, Dewey is the pragmatist that leads the way into "new intellectual terrain." This terrain has serious implications for thinking about society and culture. In concrete terms, this means the rethinking of philosophy.

West contends that like Emerson before him, Dewey's project leads to an evasion of philosophy. Again, this is an evasion of epistemological centered philosophy that is remote from human affairs. Instead of being preoccupied with abstract philosophical problems, Dewey turns to the muddy stuff of history. And he links the problems of philosophy to social crises in history. Dewey's concern with history leads to the reformulation of philosophy itself. West suggests that this reformulation of philosophy entails the affirmation and demystification of critical intelligence. Here critical intelligence means the kind of intelligence "manifest in the community of scientists." And the affirmation and demystification of such intelligence is done in service of human flourishing, that human beings may "better control their conditions and thereby more fully create themselves."[12]

For West, human flourishing and self-creation with an unfated attitude toward human circumstances is fundamental to Deweyan creative democracy. That is, when Dewey's historical consciousness and his conceptions of philosophy and critical

[11] Ibid., 70.

intelligence are transferred into the concreteness of human existence, the result is creative democracy. In this vein, West treats the democratic sensibilities in Dewey in the same fashion as he does Emerson. That is, like Emerson, who in West's estimation holds democratic sentiments in relation to philosophy, Dewey too is democratic. However, Dewey goes further than Emerson in that Emersonian power, provocation and personality are coupled with Deweyan voluntarism, ameliorism and activism. For West, Dewey's creative democracy is a much bolder and more direct leveling of philosophy than that of Emerson. This leveling occurs through metaphilosophical criticism of metaphysics and epistemology. And it is such criticism, which creates the conditions for creative democracy.[13]

The Wretched of the Earth, the Limits of Capitalist Democracy and W.E.B DuBois

In West's treatment of W.E.B. DuBois, a historian, West is concerned with the social structural limits of capitalist democracy and the plight of the wretched of the Earth. The former has to do with the overwhelming constraints capitalism places on the fulfillment of creative democracy. And the latter is an explicit focus on the powerless within society who have been excluded from the democratic enterprise. West's use of the term "the wretched of the earth" is derived from the African psychoanalyst Franz Fanon who authored a book under that title. For West, the two concerns mentioned merge in DuBois' life-long concern with the predicament of African Americans. He maintains that, "DuBois's basic concern is the specific predicament of Afro-Americans as victims of

[12] Ibid., 72.
[13] Ibid., 99.

white capitalist exploitation at the work place and of the white capitalists and workers in the political system and cultural mores of the country."[14]

West views DuBois as a social reformer, philosophically and existentially, in the same manner as John Dewey. However, unlike Dewey his reformist energies have a different focus. West contends that DuBois renders a social structural analysis of capitalist society, with reference to African Americans, which questions the very possibility of creative democracy. He cites DuBois's classic text, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy In America, 1860-1880 (1935)*, as an example of how "the struggle for democracy was stifled at a critical period in American history."[15] West argues that "Unlike any of the other pragmatists, DuBois provides an account of the means by which industrial America imposed severe constraints upon an emerging or at least potential creative democracy."[16] Also, his account inadvertently illustrates the "blindnesses and silences in American pragmatist reflections on individuality and democracy."[17]

Interestingly, West suggests that DuBois' concern with the structural limits of capitalist democracy is not simply an analysis of how "the wretched of the earth" are excluded from creative democracy. Rather, it is an analysis, which also highlights the manner in which they contribute to and expand democracy. West contends that DuBios links the democratic contributions of African Americans, contributions, which had future consequences for other minority groups (women, gays and lesbians and et.al), to the historical quest for democracy in the Western world. In this vein, West suggests that

[14] Ibid., 145.
[15] Ibid., 146.
[16] Ibid., 147.
[17] Ibid., 146.

DuBois' concern with the social structural limits of capitalist democracy and the wretched of the earth is infused into pragmatism.

> DuBois provides American pragmatism with what it sorely lacks: an international perspective on the impetus and impediments to individuality and radical democracy, a perspective that highlights the plight of the wretched of the earth, namely, the majority of humanity who own no property or wealth, participate in no democratic arrangements, and whose individualities are crushed by hard labor and harsh living conditions.[18]

West goes on to show how pragmatists fell short of the kind of perspective DuBois offers. And he cites the manner in which DuBois's perspective is an indictment against and surpasses the views of the pragmatists within his genealogy.

> James possessed the ingredients for such a view, but he did not see social structures only individuals. Dewey indeed saw social structures and individuals yet primarily through American lens. Hook too adopts a cosmopolitan viewpoint, but his cold war sentiments give a tunnel vision of the third world as a playground for the two superpowers. Mills comes closer than the others, yet, for him, postmodern historical agency resides almost exclusively in the Western (or Westernized) intelligentsia. DuBois goes beyond them all in the scope and depth of his vision: creative powers reside among the wretched of the earth even in their subjugation, and the fragile structures of democracy in the world depend, in large part, on how these powers are ultimately exercised.[19]

Essentially, for West, DuBois is the pragmatist, who, like Dewey, works for and is in favor of creative democracy. However, his quest for such democracy takes into account its structural limitations, that creative democracy is not always a reality for the powerless. And he also accounts for the way in which the powerless or "the wretched of the earth" contribute to and expand democracy.

[18] Ibid., 158.

Hook, Trilling, Niebuhr and the Sense of the Tragic

When West invokes the names of Sidney Hook, Lionel Trilling and Reinhold Niebuhr, he is principally concerned with what he calls "the tragic sense." Here, the tragic sense is a profound awareness of fateful circumstances and historical limitations. It is a recognition of the limits of the self and human will. West views Hook, Trilling and Niebuhr as maintaining a sense of the tragic as they advance their pragmatist projects. Sidney Hook, whom West labels the Deweyan Political Intellectual, is characterized as a pragmatist in the Deweyan sense in that he promotes creative democracy. However, he also takes the Marxist tradition seriously, which questions the reformist impulse in Deweyan creative democracy. It is the fundamental difference between reform and revolution, the former being optimistic in outlook and the latter being pessimistic in relation to progressive change. And for Hook, the Deweyan reformist impulse must be infused with realism regarding the historical limits of democracy. West maintains that Hook deepened Deweyan historical consciousness by including the sense of the tragic. Interestingly, West notes that in his career, Hook went beyond both Dewey and Marx, but maintained his sense of the tragic.

West maintains that Lionel Trilling, a literary critic, infuses a tragic perspective into pragmatism, which severed it from its Emersonian roots. That is, he stripped the pragmatist ideals of individuality and democracy by denouncing Emersonian theodicy.[20] As a literary critic who initiates a marriage between literature and politics, he links the poetry of Matthew Arnold to the pragmatism of John Dewey. Like Dewey, he takes seriously the values of critical intelligence, individuality and democracy. However, like

[19] Ibid., 158.
[20] Ibid., 164.

Sidney Hook, he accented "circumstances over the self, life over imagination" and "world over the will."[21] For West, this is evident in his harsh criticisms of political liberalism. West asserts that Trilling saw much of what was flaunted as liberalism in his day as maintaining the status quo. This led to a deep skepticism toward the political arena as a context for promoting human flourishing. Political liberalism needed a renovation, for Trilling's liberal hope, democracy, was sobered by tragedy. In this vein, West highlights Trilling's preoccupation with Sigmund Freud, particularly *Beyond The Pleasure Principle* and *Civilization and Its Discontents*, later in his life, which intensified his focus on the "circumstantial and conditioned."[22]

For West, Reinhold Niebuhr's tragic perspective employs what he terms the religious version of the Jamesian strenuous mood. He contends that Niebuhr was a Jamesian cultural critic who "deployed a tragic perspective stamped with Christian imprimatur as impetus to moral critique of and heroic struggle in corporate liberal America."[23] As a theologian with links to liberal Protestantism and American pragmatism, he promoted a version of "Christian pragmatism." This "Christian pragmatism" understood religion as an agent of moral and social change while at the same time advancing a democratic-socialist political agenda. Like Dewey, Niebuhr is an advocate of social and political reform. However, like Hook and Trilling, his democratic sensibilities are sobered by "the dialectic of human will and historical limits, individual volition and fateful circumstances."[24] And this sense of the tragic is most visible in his theological anthropology. Niebuhr's anthropology accents the biblical account of the fall

[21] Ibid., 172.
[22] Ibid., 175.
[23] Ibid., 150.
[24] Ibid.

and overall human depravity. It is a skeptical account of human nature, which modifies the optimistic stance of American pragmatist with regard to the present and future. Interestingly, Niebuhr's sense of tragic, like Trilling, emerged out of his own dissatisfaction with liberalism, both theological and secular."[25] However, Niebuhr's sense of the tragic is distinctively religious and theological.

C. Wright Mills and the Vocation of the Intellectual

In his treatment of C. Wright Mills, a sociologist, West is concerned with the vocation of the intellectual. West contends that Mills struggled with the role of the intellectual in society. He suggests that his struggle emerged out of personal dissatisfaction with "capitalistic profitable production and bourgeois conspicuous consumption," that creates powerlessness among large numbers of people. Also, as a proponent of radical democracy, in the Deweyan sense, he struggled with "corporate liberalism," a bastard child of capitalist culture, which places limits on creative intelligence and social action. West contends that Mills understood the intellectual as having a role in society, a role, which speaks to capitalist culture and "corporate liberalism." But in a capitalist society where intellectual work is commodified such a role is undermined. It is also undermined by professionalization and careerism, which leads to the marginalization of intellectuals and their work. Despite these obstacles West contends that Mills advanced an understanding of intellectual vocation that responds to the crises in question.[26] This understanding upholds the Deweyan ideals of critical intelligence and creative democracy. "Mills views the vocation of being an intellectual as the only

[25] Ibid., 157-159.
[26] Ibid., 137.

alternative to an emaciated liberalism, a traduced communism, and an impotent tragic viewpoint. His conception of the intellectual vocation is value laden; that is, it is shot through the Deweyan ideals of critical intelligence and creative democracy."[27]

West suggests that Mills' preoccupation with intellectual vocation in light of Deweyan ideals points to the need for pragmatists to take such a vocation seriously. A weakened liberalism and the crisis of capitalist culture must be countered by intellectual activity. Interestingly, this counter intellectual activity has no place for tragic perspectives. Mills conceded the circumstantial and the conditioned character of human life and human possibility. However, he had greater confidence in human responsibility and agency.[28] Hence, the high value he places upon intellectual vocation. Essentially, the intellectual is somewhat of a super hero who can rescue society, promoting Deweyan ideals through intellectual agency.

Prophetic Pragmatism in Criticism

Thus far we have seen how West's prophetic pragmatism is spelled out via the themes and pragmatists he invokes. At this point, I will critique what I consider the most salient feature of his perspective, namely, radical democracy. In my estimation, radical democracy represents West's utopian vision for American society and is a normative principle for his philosophy, prophetic pragmatism. Overall, prophetic pragmatism can be understood as a form of left-wing social and political romanticism that has characterized left-wing politics in the United States during the last third of the 20th century. In this critique, I advance an interpretive framework for understanding prophetic pragmatism,

[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid., 129.

especially radical democracy, while at the same time pointing to its limitations. Before probing radical democracy, I want to say a word about the religious impulse of prophetic pragmatism.

The Religious Impulse of Prophetic Pragmatism

There is a relationship between West's conception of pragmatism and religion. In West's conception of prophetic pragmatism, which began this chapter, a fleeting reference is made to religion, the religious version of Jamesian strenuous mood in Reinhold Niebuhr. Though he treats the theological anthropology of Reinhold Niebuhr, it does not fully account for the relationship between religion and his prophetic pragmatism. The relationship of religion to his pragmatism is expounded upon in a fashion that is prior to and subsequent to his thematic formulation. In the introduction to *American Evasion,* he cites his previous work on prophetic Christianity and his connection to liberation theology.[29] And towards the last pages of *American Evasion,* he reveals the Christian roots of his perspective.[30] For the most part, religion serves as a motivating force behind the overall purpose of his project. However, this motivation is only disclosed in fragments. In explicating the religious backdrop of his version of pragmatism, West asserts the following:

> My own version of prophetic pragmatism is situated within the Christian tradition...I am religious not simply for political aims but also by personal commitment. To put it crudely, I find existential sustenance in many of the narratives in the biblical scriptures as interpreted by streams in the Christian heritage; and I see political relevance in the biblical focus on the plight of the wretched of the earth.[31]

[29] Ibid., 7.
[30] Ibid., 232-234.

West goes on to link his version of pragmatism to other pragmatists in his genealogy and then goes further in his explication of what it is.

> Like James, Niebuhr, and to some extent DuBois, I hold a religious conception of pragmatism. I have dubbed it "prophetic" in that it harks back to the Jewish and Christian prophets who brought urgent and passionate critique to bear on the evils of their day. The mark of the prophet is to speak the truth in love with courage come what may. Prophetic pragmatism proceeds from this impulse.[32]

West's explication of the religious origins and purpose of "prophetic pragmatism" helps to illuminate the eclectic vision put forth in his thematic conception. The reasons he provides for his project are existential and political. The existential reason involves a personal commitment to the Christian tradition, a tradition that nurtures him. The political reason has to do with the biblical focus on the plight of the wretched of the earth. This focus is nurtured by the tradition of the prophets as found in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Philosophically, this vision is supported by the pragmatisms of James, Niebuhr and DuBois. Of the three, James is the only pragmatist whose religious tendencies do not conform to the aims of West's of prophetic pragmatism. That is, James did not focus on the wretched of the earth nor the biblical model of the prophet. In relation to the former, DuBois is the closest candidate. In relation to the latter, Niebuhr fits comfortably in his paradigm. Interestingly, West admits that his version of pragmatism has organic links to prophetic Christianity, liberation theology in particular. Similar to West's version of pragmatism, liberation theologies are also concerned with social justice, particularly social justice in relation to the disenfranchised. Typically, such theologies criticize capitalism, as does West, and they place great value on the political potential of religiosity of the disenfranchised, as does West. Also, such theologies envision the

[31] Ibid., 233.

theologian as a prophet in solidarity with the disenfranchised, doing organic intellectual work, similar to West's intellectual prophet, in service of their liberation. However, what distinguishes West from theologies of liberation is the value of radical democracy, a value that I shall now scrutinize.

Radical Democracy

The pursuit of radical democracy entails and is driven by a democratic faith. For West, this means having a Deweyan outlook on critical intelligence, historical consciousness and creative democracy. And for him, it amounts to a critical temper and democratic faith. In an essay entitled, "The Limits of Neopragmatism," written subsequent to *American Evasion*, West explicates the meaning of both a critical temper and democratic faith in relation to prophetic pragmatism.

> Critical temper as a way of struggle and democratic faith as a way of life are the twin pillars to prophetic pragmatism. The major foes to be contested are despair, dogmatism and oppression. The critical temper promotes a full-fledged experimental disposition that highlights the provisional, tentative and revisable character of our visions, analyses and actions. Democratic faith consists of a Pascalian wager (hence underdetermined by the evidence) on the abilities and capacities of ordinary people to participate in the decision-making procedures of institutions that fundamentally regulate their lives.[33]

West's critical temper as a way of struggle and democratic faith as a way of life is a way of being in the world. This way of being in the world promotes critical intelligence, historical consciousness and communal participation in decision making, which is done in service of human flourishing. It is a mode of being that is deeply Deweyan and deeply optimistic about the possibility of relieving oppression and advancing democracy. And it is has a confidence in the abilities and overall competency of ordinary people in

[32] Ibid., 233.

controlling their lives. Essentially, it is a social hope which makes an enemy out of cynicism and fate, in service of radical democracy.

What is intriguing about the manner in which West's "prophetic pragmatism" approaches radical democracy is the extent to which it is indebted to John Dewey. In fact, there is a sense in which "prophetic pragmatism" is a religious reconfiguration and updating of Deweyan ideals. This is most evident in the prominent position Dewey holds in his genealogy. Of all the pragmatists in his genealogy, John Dewey is given the most attention. Next to his chapter-long treatment of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who only serves as a pre-historical figure, Dewey is the only historical pragmatist in West's genealogy who attains chapter length status. Though West spends a great deal of time dealing with Ralph Waldo Emerson as a precursor to pragmatism, it is his treatment of Dewey in a chapter entitled "The Coming of Age of Pragmatism: John Dewey," that marks Dewey as the epitome of what pragmatism is. In hammering his overall significance to the American pragmatist tradition and at the same time giving clue to his indebtedness to Dewey West says the following:

> John Dewey is the culmination of the tradition of American pragmatism. After him, to be a pragmatist is to be a social critic, literary critic, or a poet in short, a participant in cultural criticism and cultural creation. This does not mean that Dewey provides panaceas for philosophical problems or solutions to societal crises. Rather, Dewey helps us see the complex and mediated ways in which philosophical problems are linked to societal crises. More important, Dewey enables us to view clashing conceptions of philosophy as struggles over cultural ways of life, as attempts to define the role and function of intellectual authorities in culture and society.[34]

For West, Dewey is the paradigmatic pragmatist. He sees Dewey as an inspiring resource for projects of cultural criticism and cultural creation. It is Dewey's conception of

[33] Ibid., 140.
[34] Ibid., 71.

philosophy, linked to history, society and culture and linked to societal problems that commands his attention. West takes Dewey as a resource for understanding the conflict of interpretations, within society, as a conflict over which persons or group will set the paradigms for defining reality. And such reality is shaped by philosophy. Moreover, because Dewey's conception of philosophy evades "epistemological philosophy" this makes Dewey all the more relevant to West's project. Dewey is a central, if not the most important, figure in his version of "prophetic pragmatism."

Democracy on Trial

Democracy in America today has an uncertain future. The Deweyan democratic idealism which informs West's conception of radical democracy is challenged by an American society that is polarized along the lines of class, race, gender and ideology. Such polarities and others undermine the values of community and participation that are the hallmark of Deweyan democracy. Where ordinary people are concerned, persons whom West views as the greatest beneficiaries of radical democracy, the fragility of these values threaten what democracy means for their future. One democratic thinker who is concerned about the future of democracy is Jean Bethke Elshtain. In *Democracy on Trial* she speaks of a democratic tradition that is being jeopardized by the polarities mentioned above.

> American democracy is faltering…The signs of the times are not encouraging. To interpret those signs is not easy, unless one reacts automatically from a stance of harsh ideological predetermination, whether of the Left or the Right. Let me begin with a few general considerations that flow from the preoccupations of democratic thinkers past and present. A major concern for all who care about democracy is the everyday actions and spirit of a people. Democracy requires laws, constitutions, and authoritative institutions, yes, but it also depends on what might be called democratic

> dispositions. These include a preparedness to work with others different from oneself toward shared ends; a combinations of strong convictions with a readiness to compromise in the recognition that one can't always get everything one wants; and a sense of individuality and a commitment to civic goods that are not the possession of one person or of one small group alone. But what do we see when we look around? We find deepening cynicism; the growth of corrosive forms of isolation, boredom and despair; the weakening, in other words, of that world known as democratic civil society, a world of groups and associations and ties that bind.[35]

In accounting for the fragility of democracy in America, Elshtain points to the absence or remoteness of democratic dispositions, dispositions that are required for the realization of democracy. In America today, the paucity of democratic postures among political conservatives, ideologues of identity politics, cultural, gender and religious, threatens the realization of democracy in the United States. For a moment, consider political conservatism. The prospects of radical democracy seem bleak given the hold of political conservatism on American culture and politics. With an inflexible hostility to social democracy by way of anorexic domestic policies, especially an uncompromising resistance to affirmative action, political conservatism threatens a normative democratic order, much less a radical democratic order.[36] Increasingly, political conservatism has proven to support a meritocracy, which favors the elite and powerful of American society. There is a sense in which the political conservatism of George W. Bush only caters to one class of citizens, Americans who are socially mobile who have unrestrained access to wealth, education and opportunity. In light of this kind of conservatism, the kind of democratic posture that West commends is difficult to fathom.

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[35] Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy On Trial* (New York, New York: Basic Books, 1995), 1-2.

[36] For an account of the impact of the American Right on U. S. domestic policy and its implications for democracy today, see the introductory chapter for this project, "Political Conservatism and the Eclipse of Progressive Politics in the United States."

Unfortunately, political conservatives are not the only class of citizens that contribute to the impotence of democracy. In an era where identity politics connected to right wing Christianity, feminism, African Americans, gays and lesbians contests for space, media attention and the allegiance of the American citizenry, democratic dispositions are difficult to find, much less promote. It is from this tragic state of affairs that cynicism, isolation, boredom and despair, are bred in relation to the ideal of democracy.

What does it mean to have faith in democracy when one social class, special interest group, political or religious ideology seeks to make its vision the normative vision for all Americans, especially when the details of that vision does not include all Americans? What would it means for the cultural and political agenda of the Religious Right to be normative for all Americans? It has a vision for America that is rooted in the narratives and traditions of Christianity yet it is not inclusive of the diverse religiosity of American citizens. Further, it propagates a social and political conservatism in relation to government and business yet such conservatism is often hostile toward minorities, particularly African Americans and Latino's. Where does democracy stand in relation to the monolithic vision of the Religious Right? How may we talk about community and participation in the face of a vision that sustains and represents only one class of citizens?

The Religious Right is not the only segment of American society to threaten the prospects of democracy. The American left, despite its pretensions toward progressivism contributes to the precarious state of democracy. In this regard, one may consider the vision of radical feminism in relation to this issue. Interestingly, Elshtain is one female democratic thinker who has written extensively about the anti-democratic tendencies of

radical feminism.[37] In this regard, an ideology that is concerned with the victimization and prosperity of women, threatens democracy in its repression of voices and experiences of women who do not conform to radical feminist ideology. Furthermore, its anti-democratic tendencies are played out through the exclusion of men surrounding the issue of gender. There is a sense in which radical feminism mirrors Christian fundamentalism, except along the lines of gender. How is radical democracy possible given this state of affairs?

Overall, the anti-democratic disposition evident in the posture of political conservatives, the ideologues of identity politics, the Religious Right and Radical Feminist, results in an ethics of group separatism which erodes the principles of democracy and threatens any hope for the radical democracy that West seeks and extols as a value. Tragically, this kind of separatist ethics and disposition is not limited to the groups just mentioned. It may be extended to a whole host of groups and associations in American society, which seek to make their cultural and political agendas normative for all. For all of the above considerations, West's propagation of radical democracy is questionable. Yes, I agree with West that the value of democracy must be sustained and fought for. However, like Elshtain, I am concerned about the kind of culture, such as ours, where fixed group interests, fundamentalisms of various sorts and class elitism undermines the best that democracy in America has to offer. Narcissism, both at the level of groups and individuals, individualism and the unwillingness to compromise and sacrifice, pervades the American terrain, which puts the democratic experiment in

[37] Elsthain discusses the anti-democratic tendencies of radical feminism in *Real Politics: At the Center of Everyday Life* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). Another text that deals with this issue is Richard J. Ellis's *The Darkside of the Left: Illiberal Egalitarianism in America* (Lawrence, Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 1998).

America in the line of fire. Radical democracy is a wonderful hope and value yet it is far from being realized in this land that is often called the home of the free and the home of the brave. What is presently at stake is the future of democracy, a future which at the present time is uncertain.

Prophetic Pragmatism and the Eclipse of Progressive Politics in the United States

The democratic hopes of prophetic pragmatism reflect the outlook and hopes of an era whose progressive spirit is no longer influential in the United States. Prophetic pragmatism is a product of left-wing progressive thought and activism that once affected race and gender relations and the economic lot of disenfranchised people during and shortly after the civil rights era. Tragically, the left-wing progressivism which facilitated the civil right establishment, the women's movement, inspired the sexual revolution, birthed the politics of identity and has been consistently stereotyped by the Right as "political correctness," has been eclipsed by social and political conservatism. This eclipse is reflected in the twenty-year influence (1980-2000) that conservative ideology has had on politics in the United States. From the presidential election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and William Jefferson Clinton in 1992 to George W. Bush in 2000, conservative political ideology and its public consequences have ordered American public life. With each consequent year following 1980, the spirit of progressivism, which characterized prior decades diminished in its public influence. What's more, fractures within the American left, splits between those who look to Marx for inspiration and those who look to liberalism, between radicalism and pragmatism, further reduced the potency of left-wing progressivism in influencing American public life. The unfortunate result has been

the proliferation of sects and the promotion of separatism among many within the left such as black Marxists, feminism of all sorts, environmentalists and liberals all seeking center stage in influencing the public sphere. The reign of conservatism coupled with the fragility of the American left seriously challenges West's promotion of radical democracy, its connection to the wretched of the earth and the prophetic hopes of the organic intellectual.

In these early days of the 21st century, democratic social hopes such as those embodied in prophetic pragmatism must contend with a conservative age. The reduction of government power, the de-regulation of markets, the decrease of taxes, the expansion of individual liberties, the privatization of the public sphere and the jettisoning of social preferences based on race and class, represent the conservative impulse in America. As I stated earlier, conservatism in politics, economics and public life only benefits the most privileged members of our society. It benefits members of our society who do not depend on the public sphere for goods and services, namely, the middle and upper classes, who manipulate the market, and are more often than not white and male. Given this description, the promotion of a pluralistic democracy seems hard to fathom.

In these early days of the 21st century, progressive politics does not move Americans. This is not to say that all Americans have embraced conservative ideology nor that progressive political dispositions no longer exist. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that at the level of politics, education, religion and the family, progressive politics does not significantly influence the power-holders and managers of our society. The progressive social and political idealism and activism, born out of the tumultuous 1960s, coupled with a commitment to social transformation born out of

personal and collective sacrifice, does not constitute the status quo in 21st century America. Unfortunately other forms of anti-progressivism such as individualism, narcissism, materialism and cynicism reinforce the spirit of conservatism in America.

Tragically, the diminished influence of progressivism cuts across, race, gender and class. And for West, who has deep concerns about minorities, African Americans in particular, his perspective must contend with the fact that the minorities are no less immune to anti-progressivism than any other group in America. In other words, wealthy white males do not have a monopoly on conservatism. Because West's democratic hopes are viewed from the prism of minority experience, especially that of African Americans, the question is begged, What does it mean to advocate radical democratic hopes when the progressivism of such hopes does not move the people for whom you are concerned with? Interestingly, this is a question that has been raised in his work.

In popular works such as *Race Matters* and *Restoring Hope,* West has written about Black Conservatism, Nihilism in Black America, the Crisis of Black Leadership and other crises among African Americans, pointing to the diminished spirit of progressivism among African Americans. He has spoken to the crises among African Americans by appealing to symbols of struggle and freedom such as Martin Luther King, Fannie Lou Hammer and the black Christian tradition in America. Unfortunately, for a civil rights generation that has already come of age, such symbols only invoke nostalgia and for generations that have come of age in a post-civil-rights America, such symbols invoke indifference and sometimes disdain. What's more, the presence of privileged and disenfranchised blacks that have no connection to the tradition of struggle and freedom,

connected to black religion, that he appeals to, further diminishes democratic social hopes.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the prophetic pragmatism of Cornel West. I questioned the merits of what I consider his utopian vision for American society and the most salient value of his perspective, namely, radical democracy. Overall, I am not persuaded that radical democracy can be achieved in contemporary America. Given the concerns of this chapter, especially the eclipse of progressivism in politics, education and overall, the public sphere, What is the future of democracy in America today? How do we account for the eclipse of progressive politics and the fragility of democracy in the United States? Is it possible to conceive and commend a theological and ethical strategy that offers a progressive response to the anti-progressivism of our times? All of these questions are addressed in the chapters that follow. In the next chapter, I turn to the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr's realism is insightful for interpreting why progressive politics has been eclipsed by political conservatism and why democracy is a fragile political ideal. With this being said, I shall now turn to Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism.

CHAPTER III

REINHOLD NIEBUHR, CHRISTIAN REALISM AND THE ECLIPSE OF PROGRESSIVE POLITICS IN THE UNITED STATES

Though human society has roots, which lie deeper in history than the beginning of human life, men have made comparatively but little progress in solving the problem of their aggregate existence. Each century originates a new complexity and each generation faces a new vexation in it. For all the centuries of experience, men have not yet learned how to live together without compounding their vices and covering each other with "mud and blood." The society in which each man lives is at once the basis for, and the nemesis of, that fullness of life which each man seeks. However, much human ingenuity may increase the treasures which nature provides for the satisfaction of human needs, they can never be sufficient to satisfy all human wants; for man, unlike other creatures, is gifted and cursed with an imagination which extends his appetite beyond the requirements of subsistence. Human society will never escape of the equitable distribution of the physical and cultural goods which provide for the preservation and fulfillment of human life.[1]

In this chapter, I am fundamentally concerned with Niebuhr as a theologian of human tragedy. What I intend by such a treatment, is to disclose how Niebuhr's approach to religious and moral ideals, radical political visions and overall political quests for a just society, is informed by a historical understanding of human fallibility. In relation to Niebuhr, human fallibility is conceived as hubris, sin or finitude. For Niebuhr, human fallibility limits the fulfillment of religious and moral ideals, radical political visions and overall political quests for a just society. In relation to his thought, fallibility is also conceived as collective egoism, the will to power, self-interest, the pride of power and the pride of knowledge. It is through his criticisms of 19th and 20th century liberalism, both

[1] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), 1.

secular and Protestant, and his embrace then rejection of Marxism, that the tragic and fallible dimensions of his perspective comes through.

In this chapter, I argue that Niebuhr's sense of the tragic is useful in interpreting the eclipse of progressive politics in the United States today. The kind of progressive politics that I have in mind includes a broad spectrum of social and political ideologies and social movements in the United States that became popular during the last half of the 20th century. Liberalism, liberation theologies and black and feminist radicalism, fall under the umbrella of progressive politics. If there is a single social phenomenon to emerge during the last half of the 20th century, where the tragic is concretely manifested, it is in the rise and decline of the civil rights establishment and in the fragility of its most significant achievement, affirmative action.

This chapter is divided into three parts. Part one deals with Niebuhr's reflections on the mythic idea of progress and redemption in Western history. Part two deals with Niebuhr's reflections on the political limits of liberalism. Part three deals with his reflections on political the limits of radicalism. I conclude by pointing to the contemporary value of Niebuhr's reflections for progressive politics and political theology today. In probing Niebuhr's thought, I focus specifically on his early political reflections and his mature theological disposition.

The Myths of Progress and Redemption and Western Civilization

In 1932, Niebuhr's seminal text, *Moral Man and Immoral Society,* sent an alarm to middle and upper middle-class liberal progressives, who for him, possessed naïve assumptions about state of American society and that of the Western civilization at that

time. The assumptions in question were connected to evolutionary theory, social gospel liberalism and the overall conviction that human beings were on course to living out the highest of human ideals and that Western civilization was undergoing stages of progressive evolution. The Enlightenment and the industrial and scientific revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries gave historical legitimation to these assumptions. *Moral Man* turned these assumptions on upside down.

In *Moral Man*, Niebuhr sought to give a different account of Western civilization quite different from that, which had been embraced by the progressive liberal culture of his day. For Niebuhr, the story of human beings and Western civilization, in his time, was not written in the ink of high idealism and progress but in that of blood, conflict and chaos. Niebuhr's account is one that depicts human beings as being driven by impulse, egoism, self-interest and selfish power. For Niebuhr, Western civilization is less than an oasis of high idealism and collective social progress; rather it is a bastion of immorality. And it is the immorality of Western civilization, particularly the immorality of social groups, which is echoed in *Moral Man*. In the following passage Niebuhr explicates the thesis of *Moral Man.*

> The thesis to be elaborated in these pages is that a sharp distinction must be drawn the moral and social behavior of individuals and of social groups, national, racial, economic; and that this distinction justifies and necessitates political policies which a purely individual ethic must always find embarrassing…The inferiority of the morality of groups to that of individuals is due in part to the difficulty in establishing a rational social force which is powerful enough to cope with the natural impulses by which society achieves its cohesion; but in part it is merely a revelation of a collective egoism, compounded of the egoistic impulses of individuals, which achieve a more vivid expression and a more cumulative effect when they are united in a common impulse than when they express themselves separately and discreetly. [2]

Niebuhr's concern with the state of Western civilization stems from a reading of history that is characterized by conflicts of human interests; individual interests but specifically group interests. For Niebuhr, the phenomena of conflicting interests in history undercuts the idea that history and civilization are characterized by progress. For Niebuhr, the idea that civilization and history are characterized by progress is a myth. Theologically, the idea of salvation or redemptive history is refuted by the facts of history, namely, conflicts between individuals, nations, races and classes and the rise and fall of civilizations. Salvation or redemption in this reading of history is not the final end of history.

Niebuhr's reflections on history and civilization are insightful in relation to the eclipse of progressive politics in late 20th and early 21st century America. The era of robust progressivism, symbolized by "Big Government" social legislation, civil and economic rights for black Americans and women, group rights, identity politics and the cultural revolutions, has been eclipsed by political conservatism. The dominance of conservative cultural and political ideology in the 21st century signals the end of an era, the end of a progressive era. One symbol of this eclipse is the decline of the civil rights establishment and the fragility of its most significant achievement, affirmative action.

Ideologically, the decline of the civil rights establishment is connected to the diminished influence of political forces that facilitated its rise, namely, liberalism and radicalism. In Niebuhr's reflections on history and civilization, liberalism and radicalism are indicted as forces whose assumptions mirror those related to progressive and redemptive views of history. In this regard he points to their limitations. I will attend to his criticism of liberalism and radicalism in detail later. However, for the purposes of this

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[2] Ibid., xi-xii.

section, I shall attend to Niebuhr's reflections on history and the myth of progress redemption as the ends of history.

History and Salvation

Throughout his career, Niebuhr challenged the notion that Western civilization is on course to attaining some higher stage of moral development. He repudiated the evolutionary and progressive views of history that were born during the nineteenth century. For Niebuhr, these were myths, supported by science, that were carried into the twentieth century. Through texts such as *Moral Man, Reflections at the End of an Era, Interpretation of Christian Ethics, Nature and Destiny of Man, Beyond Tragedy* and *Faith and History,* Niebuhr sought to undermine the notion of progress as it related to history. In other words, he resisted the teleological approach to history, which was paramount in much of the modern thought of his time. In a passage from *Faith and History,* Niebuhr lays out the dilemma of salvation history, refuting the belief of human redemption in history.

> The history of mankind exhibits no more ironic experience than the contrast between the sanguine hopes of recent centuries and the bitter experiences of contemporary man. Every technical advance, which previous generations regarded has the harbinger or guarantor of the redemption of mankind from its various difficulties, has proved to be the cause, or at least the occasion, for a new dimension of ancient perplexities.[3]

In another lengthy passage he expands upon the dilemmas connected to the belief in salvation history, especially as it was manifested in modern forms cultural and political thought prevalent over a century ago.

[3] Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), 1.

> A single article of faith has given diverse forms of modern culture the unity of a shared belief. Modern shades of all opinion agreed in the belief that historical development is a redemptive process…The goal toward which history was presumably moving was variously defined. The most unreflective forms of historical optimism in the nineteenth century assumed that increasing physical comfort and well being were the guarantee of every form of advance. Sometimes the enlarging human community was believed to be developing inevitably toward human a universal human community, for "clans and tribes, long narrowly self-regarding, are finally enlarged and compacted into nations; and nations move inevitably, however slowly, into relations with one another, whose ultimate goal is the unification of mankind."…Sometimes as in H.G. Wells' Outline of History, the historical process is assumed to be moving toward democratization, as well as the universalization, of the human community. The democratic culmination, toward which history was presumably moving was frequently defined in contradictory terms. Libertarians thought they saw a movement toward increasing liberty while equalitarians and collectivists thought they could discern a movement toward more intense cohesion.[4]

Niebhur's reflections on the redemptive hopes of the generation of which he wrote, may be extended to the redemptive hopes of a subsequent generation. The belief in redemption in history, popular during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, are mirrored in the assumptions, activism and hopes of a generation that emerged more than half a century later. Earlier in this chapter, I suggested that we have experienced the passage of an era, an era of progressive politics. That progressive era of which I have spoken had it genesis with the rise of the Civil Rights/Baby Boomer generation. In many respects, what Niebuhr forwarded about an entire generation of the late 19th and early 20th centuries is applicable to the social movements of the sixties, seventies and their impact in the subsequent decades. The children of Civil Rights/ Baby Boomer generation, especially those who had a faith in progressive politics were swept away by redemptive hopes. Redemptive social hopes were characteristic of the actions and rhetoric of liberals,

[4] Ibid., 1-2, 4.

feminists, civil rights activists, Marxists and American liberation theologians. There was an implied belief that the redemption of America was on the horizon.

The social explosions of the late 1950s and the decades of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States and the fall of colonialism in the third world gave support and justification to these assumptions. The social injustice and abuses of prior generations were being unsettled and gave way to new freedoms. African Americans and women, in particular, achieved more social and political freedom than prior generations. To many, the principles of democracy and ideal of justice for all: African Americans, women, the underclass, the earth and even animals were finally being realized. The social injustice and abuses of prior generations were on their way to permanent elimination. The beloved community of Martin Luther King, Jr. seemed a possibility.

Tragically, like Niebuhr's generation, whose optimism was crushed by two world wars and a depression, the social hopes of this generation have been eclipsed. With the dawning of a new era, an era of hardcore social and political conservatism, what appeared to be redemption and progress increasingly became mythical. The social injustice and abuses of prior generations (of race, gender and class) thought to be eliminated, only revived with greater force and sophistication.

The Teleological Dilemma of Redemption and Progress

In his reflections on history and salvation, perhaps the single problem that Niebuhr identified in redemptive and progressive views of history is a flawed teleology with regard to human life. Such views fail to make a distinction between purposive and ultimate ends. In such views the two are synonymous; purposive ends are also ultimate

and may be achieved in history. This implies that a purposive end such as freedom can be realized ultimately. For Niebuhr, there is a distinction between the two; purposive ends are contingent and given to change due to the flux of history; ultimate ends are eternal and outside of the grasp of history. Niebuhr contends that human beings err when pursuing purposive ends with pretensions toward ultimacy. This is tantamount to standing outside of history and forwarding purposive ends that do not change. For instance, what would it mean if one generation forwarded an ultimate goal or a set of ultimate goals for every generation that succeeds it? If freedom is the goal and is at once purposive and ultimate then the nature of freedom never changes. It is once and for all. If freedom is purposive but not ultimate then the nature of freedom is tentative and given to change. It is the once and for all approach to the ends of human life that make redemptive and progressive views of history problematic. In the second volume of the *Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr expands on this teleological and eschatological dilemma in relation to history.

> Everything in human life and history moves towards an end. By reason of man's subjection to nature and finiteness this "end" is a point where that which ceases to be. It is finis. By reason of man's rational freedom the end has another meaning. It is telos. The double connotation of end as both finis and telos expresses, in a sense, the whole character of human history and reveals the fundamental problem of human existence. All things in history moves towards both fulfillment and dissolution, towards the fuller embodiment of their essential character towards death…The problem is that the end as finis is a threat to the end as telos. Life is in the peril of meaninglessness because finis is a seemingly abrupt and capricious termination of the development of life before it has reached its true end or telos. The Christian faith understands this aspect of the human situation. It shares an understanding of the tension between time and eternity with all other religions. But it asserts that it is not within man's power to solve the vexing problem of his subjection to, and partial freedom from, the flux of

> time. It holds, furthermore, that evil is introduced into history by the very effort of men to solve this problem by their own resources.[5]

The Contingent Nature of Social Achievements

Because the purposive ends of human life are not ultimate, Niebuhr contented that there is no such thing as a final or permanent social achievement. All human achievements, whether in the arena of politics, religion or intellectual life, are tentative. This is due primarily to the relativities of history. Niebuhr maintains that if there is one thing that history teaches about the creations of human beings, and the human tendency to replace and destroy such creations, is that nothing lasts forever. The hopes and achievements of one generation recede and give way to the hopes, dreams and achievements of another. The rise and fall of civilizations, the ascension and descent of human systems of thought and the onset of wars, prevent any human achievement from being eternal. And for Niebuhr the fundamental source of this relativity is the egoism of human beings, an egoism, which spawns human achievement, but can also undermine such achievements.

> History is filled with many achievements and constructions which "have their day and cease to be." The rise and fall of empires and civilizations are the most obvious examples of the pluralistic aspect of history, but they are not, by any means, the only manifestations of this aspect. This rise and fall of particular governments and oligarchies within a given civilizations, the growth and decline specific cultural traditions, or of eminent families in a community or of various types of voluntary associations, or of even more minor historical concretions, are equally illustrative of the pluralism of history.[6]

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[5] Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man Volume 2: Human Destiny* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 287.
[6] Ibid., 302.

As we shall see in the next section, Niebuhr's assertions regarding the relativity of human achievements are constitutive of his reflections on history in relation to his life long concern with "human nature," for it is through history that human nature is understood. His reflections on the tentative nature of human achievements are traced back to Niebuhr's earliest political reflections, *Moral Man* and *Reflections*, respectively. However, it is the second volume of the *Nature and Destiny of Man*, *Faith and History* and *Beyond Tragedy*, that the relative nature of human achievements are made explicit. Furthermore, what is also significant about Niebuhr's reflections on history is that no human achievement is worthy of being granted absolute value and loyalty, for such absolutism is a source of idolatry. Also, because the relative achievements lack absolute value, they can often lead to despair and disillusionment when they are dissolved or fail to satisfy human hopes.

The discipline of history was central to Reinhold Niebuhr's ethical and theological reflections. For Niebuhr, the study of history, in his case of Western Civilization, is what shatters myths regarding moral progress through the evolution of human rationality and technology. History also undercuts the fulfillment of political and religious utopian visions such as Marxism and even primitive Christianity. Niebuhr viewed history as a discipline that provides a big picture of human limits and possibilities. It is a portrait of how complex human existence has been, and it is indispensable for understanding current human realities. For Niebuhr, human freedom, its limits and possibilities, is determined by history. History exposes the fallible character of human life. Interestingly, it is the fallible character of human life that gives further insight

into his criticism of redemption in history, and it is to this aspect of Niebuhr's thought that we now turn.

Niebuhr's Theological Anthropology

In many respects, one may look at Niebuhr's criticism of salvation history from a grand view of history. However, to account fully for his outlook one must evaluate his view of the human person. Such an account is not only insightful in understanding of the myth of salvation and progress in history, but it is also insightful in relation to his views on ideology, particularly liberalism and Marxism. Such insight will lead us to consider his criticism of the two as well consider why these ideologies have declined in recent years.

Reinhold Niebuhr's criticisms of faith in progress, liberalism, radicalism and historical achievements are influenced by his assumptions regarding human nature. More specifically, it is important to understand his conception of human beings as sinners. It is here that his criticisms unfold. For the key to understanding Niebuhr lies at the level of theological anthropology, this theological anthropology being fully explicated in the first volume of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*.[7] Niebuhr posits a theological anthropology that employs the classical doctrines of the *Image of God* and the *Fall of Humanity.* Niebuhr views human beings as composites of both doctrines. For Niebuhr, the former represents the transcendent quality of human life, and the latter represent its fallible, limited and tragic character. The co-existence of human transcendence and fallibility represents, for Niebuhr, a paradox. And sin occurs when human beings attempt to escape

[7] Niebuhr's theological anthropology is fully explicated in the chapter, "Man as Sinner," in volume one of *Nature and Destiny of Man: Human Nature* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

the paradox. He conceives sin as the human attempt to escape the paradox by hiding the transcendent or fallible character of human existence. Though the transcendent and fallible are co-present in the human attempt to escape, it is the human attempt to hide its fallible character, that preoccupies Niebuhr the most.

There is a single thread that is key to Niebuhr's anthropology and work overall, and that is egoism. For Niebuhr, egoism is the single human force that causes conflict between nations, classes and other groups contesting for power and prestige. Niebuhr breaks this egoism down in Nietzchean terms as the will to power and the will to live. In *Moral Man* and *Reflections*, the challenge of human co-existence, the life and death of civilizations and the reality of social injustice, is due to the pervasive nature of the will to live and the will to power in society. He suggests that egoism is such an all- pervasive force that it is difficult to regulate it through human rationality and religiosity, that the social strivings of privileged and under privileged classes are under its controlled, and that the fanaticism that often accompanies radical political visions is produced by it.

The Limits of Liberalism

Throughout his career Niebuhr criticized the social optimism of political liberalism. For Niebuhr, the social optimism of the political liberalism of his era was connected with the progressive views of history, views he found problematic. Niebuhr suggested that social optimism of political liberalism was rooted in a misguided faith in human rationality, creativity and virtue in relation to society and its possibilities. Niebuhr's criticisms of political liberalism were fundamentally a criticism of enlightenment inspired liberalism. In his reading of this tradition, human rationality is

central in transforming the moral and social order. For Niebuhr, the liberal focus on reason has serious limitations. His reflections on the limitations of liberalism were a life-long concern that began early in his career with the publication of *Moral Man and Immoral Society.*

In the second chapter of *Moral Man*, Niebuhr takes up the limitations of political liberalism in relation to social problems. For Niebuhr, the overriding concern is the issue of justice. Here, Niebuhr acknowledges a connection between rationality and justice. He contends that rationality is necessary for justice to exist in a society. He maintains reason attempts to correct the moral dilemmas that are derived from social injustice. For Niebuhr, the moralist or moral theorist is involved in an intellectual enterprise that seeks to minimize or eliminate the problem of injustice. He points to historical periods such as the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment and particular moralists such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, that have attempted to make justice a rational force in society. However, despite these efforts at lessening or eliminating the problem of injustice, the problem remained. For Niebuhr, the persistence of injustice is not simply a matter of having more or less reason in society. Rather, it is a matter of reason being eclipsed by other forces that do not conform to rationality. The forces that he has in mind are psychological: impulsive egoism, the will to power and the will to live. For Niebuhr, theses are forces that lessen the impact of justice in society. In a passage that sets the tone for his concerns, as well as identifies his audience, Niebuhr addresses what he perceives as a flawed confidence in rationality in relation to social progress.

> Inasfar as this treatise has a polemic interest it is directed against those moralists, both religious and secular, who imagine that the egoism of individuals is being progressively checked by the development of rationality or the growth of a religiously inspired goodwill and that of nothing but the

> continuance of this process is necessary to establish the social harmony between all the human societies and collectives. Social analyses and prophecies made by moralists, sociologists and educators upon the basis of these assumptions lead to a very considerable moral and political confusion of our day. They completely disregard the political necessities in the struggle for justice in human society by failing to recognize those elements in man's collective behavior which belong to the order of nature and can never be brought completely under the domination of reason or conscience. They do not recognize that when collective power, whether in the form of imperialism or class domination, exploits weakness, it can never be dislodged unless power is raised against it. If conscience and reason can be insinuated into the resulting struggle they can only qualify but not abolish it. [8]

John Dewey: The Exemplar Liberal Optimist

In Niebuhr's criticism political of liberalism, he addresses an entire generation of optimistic political liberals. He singles out representatives from this generation who embody the liberal optimism that he challenges. One such representative is John Dewey. Niebuhr targets John Dewey, whose faith in social progress, predicated upon human rationality, is for him, shortsighted. For Niebuhr, liberals such as Dewey had a misplaced faith in social progress that was derived from the scientific and technological innovations of his day. He possessed a great faith in the scientific method, especially in matters of education and morals. According to Niebuhr, this faith in scientific method results from the achievements of the natural sciences and the belief that the procedures of science are applicable to social life. This faith in scientific method leads liberals like Dewey to believe that human social problems will disappear through proper education, education informed by scientific methodology. Such liberals see human social problems as the result of irrational beliefs, social myths and unquestioned traditions. It is through proper instruction, expanding human rationality through education, that the social problems

[8] Ibid., 23; *Moral Man and Immoral Society*.

stemming from irrational beliefs, social myths and unquestioned traditions are overcome. It is precisely this kind of intellectual outlook that Niebuhr criticizes. For him, this sort of outlook on science and human rational powers is shortsighted and tantamount to bad faith. For Niebuhr, such a faith in human rationality, does not acknowledge the limitations of reason in relation to improving social life.

Liberalism in the Face of Power

Niebuhr's critique of Dewey's faith in rationality and social progress is one dimension of a larger criticism of a liberal-minded generation whose faith in social progress was similar to Dewey's. In an essay entitled "The Wise Men and the Mighty Men," Niebuhr concerns about the limits of rationality and social change is expanded. Here, Niebuhr deals with the limits of liberal thought in the face of power and the failures of social liberals in transforming the conscience of the powerful. For the most part, it is a reflection on progressivism in a tragic society. Here he makes a distinction between the "wise" in society: educators, social scientists, religionists, philosophers and intellectuals in general, and the mighty: the bureaucrats, business people, politicians and overall power holders in society. Niebuhr contends that the wise are impotent in relation to the mighty in terms of persuading the mighty to share their resources and developing a social conscience. He further maintains that this relationship between the wise and the mighty and how they interact is one that recurs throughout history. For the most part, it is a relationship that is characterized by the triumph of power-holders over moralists. This relationship is spoken to in the following passage.

> The wise and learned men, the seers and saints, the philosophers, social scientists and religious idealists who seek to dissuade the oligarchs of our era

> from their suicidal policies, conform to an old tradition. Since the dawn of history there have been men of wisdom and virtue who stood before the king to speak the truth. The modern wise men have greater confidence that their advice will be heeded than their predecessors had. But the court preachers and the prophets of righteousness of every age have had something of that confidence when they were either defying or cajoling the men of power. Their advice and wisdom seemed to them so logical and persuasive that they could never understand why the potentates should not be convicted of evil by their strictures and turned to paths of righteousness by their guidance. The priest or the philosopher standing before the king is a perpetually recurring theme in human history. It is symbolic of the contrast between the conscience of society and its imperial impulses, a contest which conscience does not frequently gain the victory.[9]

Niebuhr's reflections on the disjunction between the mighty and the wise are simply reflection on power over against social consciousness. In relation to the interests of the powerful social consciousness and even criticism are limited. In our time this dynamic is played out in the image of advocacy groups such as the NAACP, the ACLU, NOW, Amnesty International and etc., petitioning aid from powerful institutions such as churches, corporations and government, only to have their petition lost in bureaucratic red tape or even ignored altogether. It is played out in the peace activist that protests war and the environmentalist who wants to preserve the earth. Both are subject to being ignored by the powerful, government leaders and corporations. It is played out through the cries of an activist like the Rev. Al Sharpton, protesting police brutality and racial profiling by law enforcement officers in the streets of New York. He brings criticism and consciousness to the powerful yet such consciousness does not promise any decision by those with power to make a difference.

Niebuhr's reflections suggest that power may prevail over wisdom and morality. Under this scenario, public moralists within a society may be pushed to the margins,

[9] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era* (New York and London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), 40.

garnering minimal support for their causes. Moral causes can run the gamut from jobs and job training for poor people, workplace discrimination, improving public education, universal health care, prison reform, HIV/AIDS and etc. There is a sense in which the interests connected with such causes are not commensurate with the interests of those who can make a difference, policy makers with political and financial clout. Further, one may consider various kinds of moral criticism; that of African Americans, feminists, gays and lesbians, and measure how they are valued and attended to by the power-holders of American society. The point that Niebuhr makes is that one cannot assume that a particular moral stance promises the allegiance of those who possess the power to make a difference.

The Stubbornness of the Powerful

Niebuhr suggests that power prevails over wisdom and morality because power-holders of a society have little interest in carrying out the objectives and ideals, no matter how progressive or beneficial to others, pursued by a moralist or class of moralists. The moralist may urge power-holders to act in the interests of others, particularly the disinherited. However, power-holders may ignore their compulsions altogether. Again, this occurs when the interests of the moralist collide with that of power-holders. For Niebuhr, if power-holders do extend power to the moralist cause it is when there is no conflict of interest. In this case, power-holders will embrace the criticisms of moralist's as long as it does not conflict with the power-holder's interests and goals.

> Usually the man of power does not yield. He beguiles and captivates his more guileless counselors and dismisses or even destroys his more astute and courageous ones. Frequently he allows himself to be criticized as long as criticism does not threaten his policy…Some of our modern critics of the

> social order take mere criticisms so seriously because they have not yet learned that rulers and men of power are offended by criticism only when it is implemented by political policy. Moral critics are tolerated; but the same toleration is not extended to political foes…Only when it threatens to arouse political resentments and to create an inimical political power is it a peril to the oligarch and dealt with accordingly.[10]

How does this understanding of power connect to contemporary society? Fortunately, American society is not under the rule of an oligarch or dictator, who at any moment can silence their critics through death. However, we do have a representative from of government where the reigning political party and ideology can limit the ideology of its opposition. Consider the posture of the Republican Party and its conservative political ideology, in relation to the progressive agenda of the Democratic Party. In these early days of the 21st century, there is a sense in which the conservative eclipse of progressive politics is due to a lost tolerance for a progressive agenda. Though political conservatism has not killed a progressive agenda, it certainly has neutralized its moral force.

Beyond toleration, the inability of the moralist to penetrate the conscience of the power-holders has to do with the power-holders not sharing the same conscience of the moralist.

> The recalcitrance and stubbornness of the man of power before the strictures and admonitions of the wise man are not simply due to personal defects or self-deceptions. The cause lies in representational character of the oligarch. He expresses not only his own impulses but those of a social group, a class or a nation. He is the incarnation of a *raison d' etat*. [11]

What Niebuhr suggests regarding the representational character of the oligarch is expressed in contemporary politics. In the United States, the moral causes championed by liberal moralists have been countered by power-holders whose interests lie outside of those whom liberal moralist represent, the disinherited. The conservative stronghold over

[10] Ibid., 42.

politics in the United States in the early 20th century is one portrait of this reality. In many respects, the political liberalism of prior eras, characterized by robust social polices that benefit powerless classes in society, are incommensurate with the interests and social policies of political conservatism that serve interest of the rich and powerful in American society.

Overall, Niebuhr's reflections on the limits of political liberalism imply that confidence in the powers of human rationality and goodwill betrays the brutal realities of struggle and conflict in the arena of politics. It is shortsighted to ignore the egoistic and self-interested elements of human behavior, which make a just society difficult. For him, fidelity in human rationality and virtue are limited and only serve as qualifiers of human conflict, but in no way eradicates human conflict. For the most part, faith in human rationality and consciousness is limited in the face of power.

> For all these reasons the men of power are not as amenable to the counsels of the wise men as the whole school of liberal rationalist assume. There is something rather pathetic about the simple confidence of our social scientists and preachers of international and economic righteousness in the redemptive power of their advice. They are quite sure that nothing but "cultural lag" prevents modern society from curing its vices. They attribute to disinterested ignorance what ought to be ascribed to interested intelligence. Even when they recognize the force of self-interest in social policy, they preserve a simple faith in their ability to persuade society to cease from the suicidal policy of pursuing self-interest too narrowly.[12]

The Stubbornness of the Disinherited

Though Niebuhr's reflections are confined to the relation between the liberal-minded optimist and the powerful decision-makers of society, I would go further and include the disinherited in the equation. There is a sense in which the moral stubbornness

[11] Ibid., 43.

of power-holders may be extended to the powerless or the disinherited of society. In this regard, the question must be raised: Are the disinherited more eager to embrace the criticism of moralists than power-holders? In harkening back to the example of the Rev. Al Sharpton and his concerns about police brutality and racial profiling this question is begged. Not only must Sharpton persuade persons with power to take note of his cause, but he must also win the support of the disinherited on whose behalf he purports to speak. Consider an example from more than a generation ago, involving the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. and civil rights movement in the United States. Can it be said in no uncertain terms that all African Americans of his generation were eager to embrace his cause and leadership? Did he not claim to represent their interests? Can it be said that there were African Americans who rejected his cause and leadership? This writer thinks so. What is the point of such a question? This point is, as Niebuhr suggests, rational moral suasion does not promise social progress.

Overall, Niebuhr's his criticisms of the social optimism of political liberalism were directed primarily at a liberal minded power-holders, namely, intellectuals and decision makers of his time; educators, philosophers, social scientists, the clergy, theologians and others whose livelihood involved interpreting and managing society. Like Niebuhr's reading of John Dewey, such persons constituted a liberal minded class of citizens that were misguided by the myth of progress. Like Dewey, such persons viewed growth and development in industry, technology and the sciences as moral growth. Such a view suggested that a positive correlation occurred between technological expansion and the expansion of moral consciousness, particularly social consciousness. He contended that moral consciousness remained underdeveloped despite other

[12] Ibid., 45.

advancements. For his optimistic peers this underdevelopment was understood as "cultural lag." However, Niebuhr understood it in theological terms as *sin*. For Niebuhr it was the world of politics and business that demonstrated how technical growth does not necessarily lead to moral growth. For Niebuhr, it is shortsighted to believe that the expansion of moral consciousness leads to social progress.

In many respects, Niebuhr's "words to the wise" may be extended to a generation of socially optimistic leaders and thinkers who came of age during late 20th century, at the height of the social revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, and are currently in positions of influence and power in early 21st century. The wise of this era include: civil rights activists, feminists, environmentalists, Marxists, egalitarians and a cadre of left-wing political intellectuals, academics, religious leaders, cultural workers, social activists and decision makers. What characterizes the various utopias, which emerged from this generation, is the assumption that historical social problems of American society, e.g. racism, classism and sexism, to name a few, could be overcome overnight. It was assumed that with the appropriate ideologies, political organizations and cultural education, such historical social problems could be overcome completely. These assumptions were supported by unprecedented social events, e.g. the civil rights and women's movement the sexual revolution and other social movements of that era, which implied that American society was on its way to utopian realization. Tragically, cultural, political and religious conservatism in 21st century has challenged these assumptions. In many respects, the various utopias within this generation fall under Niebuhr's critique of the optimism of intellectuals, decision-makers, religious leaders, social activists and persons who influenced public opinion in the early 20th century.

The Limits of Radicalism

Throughout his entire career, from his earliest political reflections in *Moral Man* to his analysis of democratic political theory in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, Niebuhr engaged Marxist economic and political theory. He had much to say about Marxism, its advocates and goals, and its possibilities as a radical vision for society. With the exception of *Moral Man*, which in many ways was influenced by Marxist themes, the bulk of Niebuhr's reflections on Marxism were negative. Niebuhr viewed Marxism and the kind of radicalism it inspired as utopian.[13]

Niebuhr's criticism of Marxism may be extended to liberation theologies in North America, many of which borrow language from Marx's lexicon. Black liberation theology, feminist theology, womanist theology and other liberationist theologies that seek to change the world are influenced at some level by Marx. Not only are theologies of liberation implicated under Niebuhr's critique of Marx, the Marx inspired wing of the American cultural and political left is also indicted. The impulse to usher in a new world order and the romancing of the oppressed are features of liberation theologies and left-wing cultural and political thought that fall under Niebuhr's criticism of Marx.

Though the bulk of Niebuhr's reflections on the Marxist vision were negative, he did acknowledge its insights regarding the impact of capitalism on the underprivileged classes, the need for structural transformation and its affirmation of the revolutionary potential of the proletariat. He was in agreement with the Marxist critique of capitalistic

[13] *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York and London: Harper Brothers Publishing, 1935) and *Reflections on the End of an Era* (New York and London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934) are texts where Niebuhr levels substantive criticism toward Marxism. In the former, such criticism is concerned with the limits of socialism as an economic system. The latter is concerned with the political fanaticism that is sometimes connected to those who adhere to Marxian doctrine. Though he was empathetic towards the outlook and social hopes of Marxism, Niebuhr viewed both as being impractical and in some instances dangerous.

industrial society, that it is fundamentally a creator and perpetrator of poverty and economic injustice for the working class. In fact, in his early reflections on the problems of Western Civilization, one of the demons that he names and calls for its demise is capitalism. However, he was aware of the depths of capitalism and the hold it has on the working and business classes. He knew that it would not dissolve overnight, if at all. He conceded the religious dimension of the Marxist vision in terms of its goals and the zeal of its advocates. For Niebuhr, the Marxist vision mirrored the apocalypticism of the Hebrew prophets and the Christian scriptures, and the passion of its advocates was similar to that of the most die-hard Christian evangelists. Overall, Niebuhr viewed Marxism as a radical social vision, which exposed economic injustices and sought to remedy such injustices through revolutionary social transformation. He regarded its criticisms of society as undeniable and necessary. His early ethical and political reflections in *Moral Man* attest to his appreciation of Marx. However, he did not see its methodology as plausible nor its goals as achievable in history. Overall, he did not think that it was humanly possible to create a "Kingdom of God" on earth, that it is not possible to forward an alternative to capitalism that would create happiness for all. Hence, the economic hopes of Marxism are unrealistic.

Niebuhr viewed Marxism and the radical economic and political vision that its adherents advocated as being thoroughly utopian. For Niebuhr, the ideal of a classless/socialist society that it sought after were not possibilities that could be achieved in history. He admired the noble and buoyant hopes of Marxism, but felt that pervasive human egoism and the permanency of evil thwart the fulfillment of the Marxist vision. For the most part, Niebuhr viewed Marxism as an apocalyptic mythology. In his view, it

is similar to the apocalypticism of the Hebrew prophets. As an apocalyptic vision Marxism contends that the forces of injustice and inequality will ultimately be eliminated in history, with the triumph of the disinherited or the oppressed over their oppressors. Similar to the Hebrew prophets, though Niebuhr does not specify which prophets, Marxism renders a prophecy of doom upon the immediate social order, calling for new social arrangements, a new social order. And the oppressed or proletariat are at the center of bringing about this new social order. In this regard, Niebuhr maintains,

> In common with apocalpytic religion it transmutes an immediate pessimism into an ultimate optimism by its hope in the final establishment of an ideal social order through a miracle of history. In the case of Marxism the proletariat is the active agent of this consummation: yet its success would be impossible without the activity of God who casts the mighty from their seats and exalts them of low degree.[14]

For Niebuhr, Marxism is a secularized religion with a triumphant social vision, albeit a utopian one. It is the attempt to demolish an imperfect and relative social order and replace it with an eternal and perfect one.

> The anarchistic millennium of Marxism, where each will give according to his ability and take according to his need, in which all social conflicts will finally be resolved and all human needs satisfied, is the perfect product of a naturalistic religion which tries vainly to domesticate the eternal and absolute and to fit the vision of perfection into inevitable imperfections of history.[15]

For Niebuhr, the utopian vision of Marx was fundamentally a form of perfectionism with regard to the social order. The Marxist vision assumes that it can guarantee an ideal society, a classless social order where class conflict is non-existent, only social harmony. Niebuhr suggests that no such society has ever existed and it is less than likely, given the weight of evil, that one ever will. He suggests that Marxists are

[14] Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers Publishing, 1935), 18.
[15] Ibid. 18.

naïve in believing that their vision can resolve the ambiguities and paradoxes in history that are tied to injustice. In other words, Marxists are shortsighted in thinking that their vision serves as the final answer to the problem of economic injustice. In assuming that the Marxist vision is the final answer the advocates of Marxism deny the fallible nature of their perspective. In speaking to this issue of the fallible nature of the Marxist vision Niebuhr asserts the following, "It has no means of discovering that its visions and dreams are relative to partial interests and temporary perspectives and that even the universal element in them will loose its universality and unqualifiedness when it is made in concrete history.[16]" In his overall criticism of the Marxist vision, Niebuhr maintains that the Marxist has same problem as the liberal, the naturalist and the philosophical idealists and that is, the Marxist believes that human perfection in economics, politics and philosophy is possible. Niebuhr disagrees.

The Limits of Radicalism and North American Theologies of Liberation

What would it mean to apply Niebuhr's criticisms of Marxism and radicalism to contemporary forms of radicalism today, such as North American theologies of liberation? Are not North American theologies of liberation instances of radicalism? For the most part, Niebuhr's reflections on Marxism point to the fallible nature of radicalism. He maintains that radicalism is not immune to, and does not adequately account for the ambiguities and paradoxes of history. Can the same be said about North American theologies of liberation? Furthermore, Niebuhr suggests that radicalism pretends to have the final answer to such ambiguities and paradoxes. Herein lies the limitations and even dangers of radicalism; it promotes a dangerous absolutism with regard to how to

[16] Ibid., 19.

adequately address the economic and political issues facing a society. In my estimation, North American theologies of liberation commit this error.

There is a sense in which a North American liberation theology such as black liberation theology pretends to have the final answer to the political and economic challenges, that confront African Americans. In this regard, it courts a dangerous absolutism with regard to the parties that should be involved in addressing such challenges and how such challenges are to be addressed. Under such conditions, the participation of whites, in the cause of black liberation, are limited and in some respects prevented altogether. Overall, it does not lend itself to the possibility of democratic political discourse and coalition building that is democratic in nature. In the concluding chapter of this dissertation, I expand on this issue in greater detail. However, the issues outlined above, in connection to Niebuhr's concerns about Marx and radicalism, serve as a starting point for this discussion and a consideration of the limits of radicalism and by extension, liberation theology.

Assessing Niebuhr's Reflections

At the outset of this chapter, I suggested that Niebuhr's reflections on history, liberalism and radicalism, over a half-century ago, are insightful for interpreting the eclipse of progressive politics in the United States. I am persuaded that the dominance of political conservatism in early 21st century America, is to a great degree, the result of the forces outlined in this chapter. The human forces of egoism and collective self-interest have trumped liberal morality. By virtue of its perfectionistic impulses and political absolutism, radical politics is limited by anti-democratic practices that thwart the

fulfillment of its social vision. Given these conditions, it is understandable why Niebuhr deemed the idea of progress in history a mythic notion. Overall, this interpretation is insightful for interpreting the eclipse of progressive politics in the early 21st century America.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I suggested that Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism is insightful for interpreting the eclipse of progressive politics in the United States. I began with an appraisal of his reflections on history and suggested that his reflections on history, especially the idea of redemption in history, are insightful for thinking about the idea of progress and redemption today. Next, I turned to his reflections on liberalism and suggested that his reflections on liberalism, particularly liberal rationality in relation to power, are insightful for thinking about the limits of liberalism today. I concluded with discussion of Niebuhr's reflections on radicalism and suggested that his reflections on radicalism, particularly its perfectionism and absolutism, are insightful for thinking about the limits of radicalism today. In the next chapter, I turn to the theological legacy of Benjamin Elijah Mays. There, I discuss Mays's legacy as a resource for thinking about progressive politics in a conservative age. With a democratic theological and political outlook, and a confidence in practical strategies for social change such as education, Mays's legacy is a resource for progressive politics in our age. With this being said, I shall now turn to Mays.

CHAPTER IV

PRAGMATISM AND SOCIAL HOPE: THE THEOLOGICAL LEGACY OF BENJAMIN ELIJAH MAYS

What the black man needs most are: a better education; technical skills to enable him to succeed in a highly competitive society; decent jobs that pay enough to enable him to live comfortably above the poverty line; adequate housing, with the consequent abolition of slums and ghettos; political strength to influence voting to his benefit and to defeat racist politicians; a sense of pride, self- respect, and self-identity; and a sense of solidarity. I believe that neither black- nationalism nor black separatism has any magic power to provide for the needs of black people. Separatism of itself will not wipe out slums or ghettoes, provide adequate jobs and wages, or create a superior educational system for black children. Separatism may mirror the despair which drives a black man to wish to escape entirely from association with whites. Or it may stem from the desire of blacks to control their own destiny for the good or for ill. But it can never be a lasting solution.
….The central questions confronting every black man are what can he do to enlarge his freedom, to create in himself a sense of his inherent worth and dignity, and to develop economic and political security. He must also consider what can be done to help build a society where each person has the opportunity to develop his mind, body, and spirit without the imposition of artificial barriers. Are these things more likely to be achieved in a separate or nationalistic society than in a so-called integrated society? There is no easy way; there are no certain answers.[1]

The quote above represents the disposition of an African American social leader, whose work as a Christian minister, scholar, college president and human rights activist, serves as a resource for thinking about progressive politics and social transformation in the early 21st century. These words belong to Benjamin Elijah Mays. They were written at the end of his life, at the end of his autobiography, *Born to Rebel.* Mays's words reflect a pragmatic disposition toward the economic and political situation of African Americans during the early 1970s. They were written in the aftermath of the Civil Rights

and Black Power movements. And after a life-long struggle against racism and the institution of segregation, he offers what he considers to be, the most feasible path to social transformation, in relation to African Americans at that time. In doing so, he eschews ethical strategies such as black nationalism and black radicalism, pursued by other African Americans of his era. In his estimation, such strategies were highly impractical.

In the following pages, I argue that Mays's theological legacy is a resource for progressive theological thinking and political action in an age of political conservatism. My contention is that theological and political insights may be gained from African American leaders such as Mays, who addressed what was then called "the Negro situation." The Negro situation involved the economic and political challenges that faced African Americans prior to the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. The single challenge that faced Mays's generation was the institution of segregation and its social effects upon the then American Negro. In his lifetime, Mays appealed to Christianity, democracy and education, as resources for dismantling institutionalized segregation. His theological legacy is relevant to our times; it offers a pragmatic approach to social transformation that is not fraught with the practical dilemmas associated with liberalism and Marxist style radicalism. Mays forwarded a theological perspective that valued democracy, and promoted education, that is insightful for creatively engaging political conservatism. He spent a lifetime challenging segregation in the American South. His legacy as a desegregationist, and an advocate of democracy and education, speaks volumes to the novel forms of segregation, sustained by political conservatism in 21st

[1] Benjamin Elijah Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 308-309.

century America. In my estimation, the social and political conservatism that prevails in early 21st America, is similar to the political conservatism that sought the preservation of a racially segregated America over a half-century ago. However, unlike the segregationists of mid-twentieth century America, who supported racial segregation, the politics of contemporary political conservatism sustains a segregationist ethos that extends beyond race.

My treatment of Mays's theological legacy is divided into two chapters. This chapter is the first part of my treatment of his legacy. Here, I contextualize his style of leadership, social concerns and outline his theological perspective. In the subsequent chapter, I discuss his ethical perspective, particularly his moral confidence in education as a means of social progress. As far as this chapter is concerned, I will discuss Mays's legacy on three levels. First, I will contextualize his style of leadership and the era in which it emerged. Second, I will contextualize his theological perspective. Third, I will outline his theological perspective. I conclude this chapter by pointing to the ethical significance of his theological legacy. The ethical significance of his legacy is further developed in the next chapter.

The Negro Era of African American Leadership and the Ethics of Education

Benjamin Elijah Mays was a product of what I call the Negro Era of African American religious and social leadership.[2] The Negro Era spanned from the early to the middle of the 20th century. This era emerged at the dawn of the 20th century, one generation after Reconstruction. It reached its heights with the Civil Rights movement

and began to decline with the Black Power movement. The Negro Era came to a close during the 1970's with the rise of black consciousness. Significant leaders of this era were Booker T. Washington, Howard Thurman, Mary McCloud Bethune, W.E.B. Dubois, Carter G. Woodson, E. Franklin Frazier, Thurgood Marshall, Fannie Lou Hammer and Martin Luther King, Jr. Negro era leaders were members of what W.E.B. DuBois called the Talented Tenth, a small number of privileged Negro men and women who had access to education, political power and significant social influence. Such persons were essentially, "race saviors," who due to their elite status assumed the social burden of uplifting the American Negro from the morass of poverty and ignorance.[3] Negro Era leaders were fundamentally concerned with social reform that included institution building within black communities, building pride, self-esteem and self-respect among the black masses and the overall emancipating the Negro masses from social, economic and political depravation. Negro era leaders worked within as well as outside of black communities, being involved in coalition building and amassing economic support across racial, ethnic, gender and ideological lines. Moreover, Negro era leaders made their concerns inclusive of a broad public, avoiding separatism and dogmatism. They were fundamentally pragmatic in their orientation with regard to the "race problem" as it was understood at that time. Benjamin Elijah Mays was a public theologian of the Negro Era.[4] To accent the outlook of Mays and his era, I will use the

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[2] See Lerone Bennett's, *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 1993) and *The Shaping of Black America* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 1993) for a full treatment of the figures and events that defined the Negro Era.

[3] See W.E.B. Dubois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 1995) for his conception of Race Leadership.

[4] My treatment of Mays as a Negro theologian builds on Mark Chapman's treatment of him in *Christianity On Trial: African American Religious Thought Before and After Black Power* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996) and a collection of articles in Lawrence Edward Carter's edited work, *Walking*

adjective Negro instead of black American or African American as a racial description for him and the concerns of his era.

Negro Era Leadership and the Ethics of Education

For Negro era leaders, one pragmatic route to social transformation, especially where the Negro was concerned, and achieving democracy in America, in matters of race, was that of education, both secondary and higher education. With the exception of Fannie Lou Hamer and Thurgood Marshall, all of the Negro era leaders previously named were educators. All worked within the context of Negro Higher Education. On one level or another, all viewed the elevated social condition and democratic participation of the America Negro in American society, as being contingent upon education. Under conditions of segregation, especially where education was concerned, the American Negro could only become a partial participant of American democracy. As a pillar of morality in the United States, Negro era leaders such as Mays appealed to the necessity of education in challenging the institution of segregation.

Pragmatism, Progressive Politics and Segregated American Society

Mays's legacy as Negro era leader and public theologian may be characterized in pragmatic terms.[5] His pragmatism may be understood as the recognition of the limits and possibilities that are involved in social transformation. Mays's leadership involved the mediation between social idealism and social realism. His social goals were creative,

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Integrity: Benjamin Elijah Mays, Mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr. (Macon: University of Georgia Press, 1998)

[5] My characterization of Mays's leadership as pragmatic is derived from an understanding of the American pragmatist tradition, particular early 20th century pragmatism. More specifically, it is the pragmatism of

idealistic and lofty, yet they were grounded by historical realities and pursued through practical means. In many respects, his pragmatism was contextual. His efforts at social reform were impacted by the times and context in which he lived, namely segregated Southern society. He was a progressive Negro era theologian, who had to contend with a rigid ideology of white supremacy, that was unsympathetic to the idea of racial progress. One only has to consider *The Conservative Mind of the American South* and race relations, prior to the Civil Rights movement, to understand the necessity and logic of his pragmatism. Since the founding of the colonies to first half of the 20th century, *The Conservative Mind in the American South* has stood as the greatest challenge to progressive race relations. During the Negro era, it stood as a limit to progressive race relations pursued by Negro and white social reformers. Similar to contemporary America, where the dominance of conservative ideology stands in tension with, and as a limit to progressive efforts at social change, Mays's era exhibited the same tensions and limitations. Such tensions and limitations called for progressive social goals and strategies that were pragmatic in orientation.

Despite the historical constraints placed upon Negro era reformers, Mays's pragmatic approach to social transformation was fundamentally progressive. As a member of an American society, particularly Southern society where a racial caste system stood largely unchallenged, Mays represented progressive social change in matters pertaining to race. His life, leadership and overall disposition, stood in contradiction to the tradition and custom bound Southern society then characterized by the polarized social relations between the then American Negro and white Americans.

William James that is akin to Mays's moral disposition. See James' *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1996) for a thorough account of Jamesian pragmatism.

Mays was fundamentally a desegregationist, and being a desegregationist during the first half of the 20th century, especially in the American South, meant being labeled a leftist or a communist. In fact, the label of communist was attributed to Mays, mainly by segregationists, throughout his adult life. From the standpoint of pro-segregationist white Southerners, segregated society was a normal part of their existence that was sanctioned by law and divine command. To challenge segregated society, meant challenging law and God. From the standpoint of this writer, I understand Mays not as a leftist or communist, but as an advocate of progressive social change, particularly in matters in matters pertaining to race. And to be a member of Mays's era, and pursue a desegregated society, located one on the progressive side of race matters. Needless to say, it stood in contrast to the conservative side, which sought the preservation of a segregated society.

Mays's Theology in Context

Benjamin Elijah Mays was a public moralist and theologian who wrote prolifically.[6] Over the course of his career, he published nine books, nineteen chapters in books, over fifteen hundred articles in newspapers and two hundred thirty-two articles for journals. Also included in his corpus, are hundreds of unpublished speeches and sermons. His writings are in no way systematic or strictly academic in nature. Mays used an eclectic approach to writing, utilizing the genre's of scholarly monographs, sermons, commercial media and newspaper articles. They were oriented toward a broad audience, dealing with a particular social dilemma of his day, namely, segregation and it effects on American society. For the most part, his written work was directed at decision-makers,

[6] The Mooreland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University, in Washington, DC, holds the Benjamin Elijah Mays papers. The majority of materials used for this chapter were derived from this source.

both white and Negro, in American society. Within his corpus lies his perspective on race-relations, Christianity and education. His philosophical and theological perspective is reflected in his written work, work that embodies a pragmatic outlook. Before probing his corpus, a word must be said about the contours of his theological perspective.

Protestant Liberalism and the Social Gospel

Mays was influenced by a tradition of reform oriented Christianity, rooted in Protestant Liberalism and championed by the Social Gospel.[7] Protestant liberalism and the Social Gospel of Walter Raschenbaush in particular, informed Mays's leadership and outlook on Christianity and the social world. His outlook on Christianity, segregated society and race relations during his era, was impacted by these forces. His writings, such as his dissertation, *The Negro's God*, a popular work, *Seeking to be Christian in Race Relations*, a book of sermons, *Disturbed About Man*, and other writings, are infused with a liberal theological perspective and themes from the Social Gospel. His ecumenical affiliations with such organizations as the World Council of Churches and the YMCA, and his work with social organizations such as the Urban League, were also informed by these forces.

Mays's attraction to and embrace of Protestant liberalism and the Social Gospel, stemmed mainly from his social concerns, rooted in his Southern upbringing and from his exposure to liberal ideas as an undergraduate and graduate student. From his boyhood days to the end of his life, Mays had a disdain for the repressive and closed Southern society that delayed his personal and educational development, and that of American

Negroes. Protestant Liberalism and the Social Gospel were tools he utilized in raising questions about and challenging the very society that birthed him. Coupled with his Southern background was his education at Bates College and the University of Chicago. These institutions were bastions of Protestant Liberalism and promoters of the Social Gospel during his era. They provided Mays with the opportunity and context to explore reform oriented Christianity. Interestingly, it was the Social Gospel in particular, that would have far reaching effects upon Mays, to the extent that he would edit a volume of Rauschenbaush's writings during his tenure at Morehouse College.

Democracy and Christian Universalism

Another striking feature of Mays's theological perspective is the theme of democracy.[8] As we shall see, the theme of democracy permeates his reflections on God, humanity and the moral life. In his advocacy of education as a mode of social transformation, democracy is the end that is sought. For Mays, the idea of democracy was crucial to desegregating American society. The idea Democracy was necessary in unsettling the institution of segregation, an institution which for him prevented the American Negro from realizing his and her potential and from full participation in a democratic society. Because Mays understood democracy as a value, which ideally

[7] For a thorough treatment of the influence of protestant liberalism and the social gospel on Mays's theological formation see Randal M. Jelk's article, "May's Academic Formation," 1917-1936 in "*Walking Integrity*," 111.

[8] Democracy is a consistent theme in Mays's writings. Examples of articles dealing with the theme of democracy include, "Full Implementation of Democracy" and "Democracy in the U.S.A. and India," Moorland-Spingarn Research Center. For an account of the democratic character of Mays's thought see Verner Randolph Matthews article, "Mays and Racial Justice," in *Walking Integrity*, 264. In Randolph's article, the democratic character of Mays's thought is played out in his understanding of God ,human beings and racial justice.

supported the full realization of the Negro's potential and participation in American life, it became an integral part of his religious and social thought.

Christian Universalism permeates Mays's theological perspective. Mays's universalism is inherent in his appeal to Christian doctrines. As we shall see, his articulation of the doctrines of God, humanity and Christ is directed toward all human beings.[9] For him, the applicability of these doctrines is not limited to one racial group, class or geographical region. As ethical issues, Mays viewed racism and segregation as not simply problems of the American Negro, but human problems that affected all of American society. Furthermore, he understood the race problem as not simply an American problem but a problem of international proportions. His travels to India, Africa and Europe, allowed him to see the global dimensions of race. It was a global understanding of race that precluded Mays from relegating the issue to Negro communities, or to the segregated American South. Under these terms, the enfranchisement of the American Negro was connected to the basic human rights accorded to all human beings.

Seeking to be Christian in Race Relations

In 1954, Mays attempted to flesh out a theological basis for improving race relations and dismantling segregation. This effort emerged in the form of a popular book entitled, *Seeking to be Christian in Race Relations. Seeking* was the crystallization of a theme and theological concern, which Mays had taken up in prior article writing. In these

[9] In his theological writings, Mays consistently affirmed the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God, themes that were integral to the social gospel. In articles such as, "In Behalf of All: We Affirm the Brotherhood of Man and the Fatherhood of God" and "Of One Blood: Scripture and Science Makes No Race Distinctions," Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Mays employs a strategic universalism to

articles and this book, Mays's fundamental theological perspective on race relations unfolds. In *Seeking,* Mays presents a theological perspective that begins with God and ends with anthropology. For Mays, God is a universal reality, upon which all of humanity and earthly phenomena depend. Mays viewed God as transcendent and absolute. As far as the moral existence of human beings is concerned, Mays viewed human moral life as being precarious and in need of transcendent principles for earthly guidance. In this regard, Mays articulated an anthropology that was at once pessimistic and hopeful. In his fundamental theological perspective, Mays mediated the poles of the one and the many. He posited a monistic conception of God in relationship to a monistic conception of the human race. At the same time, he posited the plurality of the human species and moral life, in relation to a monistic conception of God. As far as ethical faith is concerned, ethical faith as consisted of a mediation between the transcendent and the human. He viewed this mediation as best demonstrated in the life and witness of Jesus Christ. For Mays, Jesus Christ is the model for ethical living and the paradigm for human agency. It is from this fundamental theological standpoint that Mays challenged the morality of racism and the institution of segregation. In an early passage, Mays provides the rationale for his endeavor.

> I believe that in seeking a basis for the elimination of race prejudice and discrimination, we must find such a basis in something other than man. It is not enough for us to call upon members of different races to be decent toward one another for the mere sake of humanity, science or democracy. The basis for good relations is found in the Christian religion, in the proper understanding of the Christian doctrines of man, Christ, and God, and in the application of Christian insights and convictions in everyday living. Therefore, this book begins with a statement about God.[10]

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challenge the ontological assumptions of segregated society. Also, see Mark Chapman's, "The Theology of Race Relations," in *Christianity On Trial,* for an insightful account of Mays's Christian universalism.

[10] Benjamin E. Mays, *Seeking to Be Christian in Race Relations* (New York: Friendship Press, Inc. 1957), xx.

Mays believed that the Christian faith, properly understood, could improve race relations. Whether Christianity contributed to poor race relations and segregated society did not enter his reflections. Though he recognized the racism of white Christianity, he conceded the value of the Christian faith in countering racism and segregation. For Mays, it was a poor understanding of Christianity, on the part of whites, which sustained poor race relations and segregation. A proper understanding of the Christian doctrines of God, humanity and Christ was necessary in improving race relations and dismantling segregation in American society.

In the Beginning God: Radical Monotheism

Mays's theological reflections begin with God. The God he presents is monistic, transcendent and absolute. For Mays, all of creation is dependent upon this one, transcendent and absolute God. All that is dependent upon God includes humanity, earth, animal life, the fruits of the human imagination, namely, science and the future. He maintains that the dependent nature of humanity in relation to God necessitates belief in God. His premise and conclusions are derived from his reading of the creation narratives in Genesis, and an empirical view of the world, including human history, science and the precarious nature of human existence. Mays's theological standpoint is outlined as such: 1) Humanity Is Dependent Upon God 2) Tomorrow's World Is Dependent Upon God, 3) The Scientist Is Dependent, 4) Humanity Must Believe and 5) The Christian God Is The God of Every Race. Let us now turn to Mays's perspective in outline.

Humanity Is Dependent Upon God

For Mays, human beings have a fragile existence. Human beings are mortal and incapable of being absolutely self-sufficient. Human beings have no control over death and are dependent upon the earth's resources to sustain their lives. Human beings are ultimately dependent and for Mays the ultimate source for human subsistence is God.

> Call it fate or call it God, man is dependent upon something for the span of his life upon the earth. Somewhere in his earthly existence he comes up against that inevitable event that we call death. He reaches the point where the things upon which he depends for life, such as food, air, sunshine, water, science, wealth, learning and friends no longer sustain him. He dies. And there is nothing he can do about it.[11]

The assertion that human beings are dependent upon God is simultaneously an acknowledgement of human fallibility. As we shall see, human fallibility is an important feature of Mays's anthropology, especially at the level of morality. In this regard, the reality of human fallibility is vital to his moral criticism of the American South, particularly institutionalized segregation and the ideology of white supremacy. In Mays's thought, these institutions pretend to be ultimate and contradict the conviction that human beings are fallible and ultimately depend upon on God.

Tomorrow's World Is Dependent Upon God

Mays valued the human ability to plan for the future, yet he acknowledged that there are limits to the kind of future that human beings may create. Human beings may plan for the future, but in no way can they guarantee what tomorrow may bring. The lessons of history demonstrate how the world of the great planners, civilization builders and architects of the past, could not foresee the fate of their monuments and civilizations.

[11] Ibid., 3.

There are always unforeseen forces that can ruin or propel the works of human genius and creativity. For Mays, only God sees and shapes the future, for the future is dependent upon God.

> The Christian affirms further that man is dependent upon God for the kind of world that he can build…Man cannot build the world as he pleases. Many have tried it-the Pharoahs, Cyrus the Great, Nebuchadnezzar, Alexander the Great, the Caesars, Napoleon, Kaiser Wilhelm, Hitler, Mussolini, and many others-but to know avail…There are forces at work in the universe that are beyond the control of man.[12]

For Mays, the future of a civilization, society and even the end of the world, is open. Consider this meaning of the future and even history in relation to Mays's social concerns. It suggests that finality cannot be granted to the work, of the architects, of Southern American society. For those who intended Jim Crow and the doctrine of separate but equal to be eternal, Mays suggests that such permanence is not possible. Consider this view of history in relation to the Civil Rights movement that was beginning to take off at the time of Mays's writing. It stood as an unprecedented challenge to Southern society and the deterministic nature of then race relations. Overall, Mays's view is deterministic in relation to his understanding of God. However, the point is that the course of human history is not in human hands.

The Scientist Is Dependent Upon God

Mays had a tremendous respect for the discoveries resulting from scientific inquiry. In fact, the he turned to the biological sciences in arguing against the idea of Negro inferiority. He understood that scientific inquiry promotes greater understanding of human beings and the world that human beings dwell in. However, he believed the

[12] Ibid., 4-5.

scientist could not probe the raw materials of the world without the possibility of a world designed by God. The scientist is dependent upon God because God is the supplier of the resources, utilized by the scientist, in probing the world. For Mays, it is God who initially ordered the universe, discovered by the scientist, and is ultimately responsible for the scientific method. Hence, science is dependent upon God.

> The Scientist who may deny his dependence upon God must rely upon a dependable, orderly, trustworthy universe-an orderliness that is there, that he discovers, but that he cannot create…the Christian faith contends that the scientist is dependent upon God. Without a trustworthy, dependable universe, the scientist could not function.[13]

Again, Mays's reflections on the scientist and science, for that matter, point back to his understanding of human fallibility. Like Reinhold Niebuhr, Mays was aware of the kind of intellectual arrogance that results from learning or knowledge acquisition. He did live in an era that placed a high premium on the modern mind, a mind informed by the fruits of scientific investigation and technological achievements. However, he was concerned about the pretension toward self-sufficiency that intellectual discovery can yield. As we shall see later, these concerns are taken up in his reflections on the morality of education. Overall, Mays's reflections on the scientist function to highlight the dependent and fallible nature of intellectual work. For Mays, such work is dependent on God.

Humanity Must Believe In God

Mays contends that human beings are not self-sufficient, yet there is a constant human hunger and thirst for self-sufficiency. This quest for self-sufficiency is seen in human attempts to control and order the world through science and industry, and it reflected in pages of history, in the conquest and building of human civilizations. Mays

contends that such hunger and thirst are simply a quest for God. Even the human embrace of religion, beyond the Christian faith, reflects this quest. Mays contends that this quest for God can only be satisfied by belief in the God of the Christian faith. He suggests that the human being must be devoted to something beyond itself to satisfy the quest for the absolute.

> The Christian faith makes it clear that man cannot live without God. It is the nature of man to look beyond himself for help. The quest for God is a search for something upon which one can rely completely. In this sense every person is search of God. He must either believe in the God of the Christian faith, adopt the god of some other faith or invent a god of his own. He must be devoted to something beyond himself that is worthy of complete allegiance.[14]

In Mays's thinking, the fact of human fallibility requires faith in the transcendent or of God. This promotion of belief in the transcendent or God provides some insight into the idealistic character of his theological thinking. Although Mays is adamant about the fallible character of human life, the transcendent dimension is just as important. This is particularly true with regard to the ideal of racial justice. For Mays, in the broad scheme of things, there is a reason why human beings have pretensions toward self-sufficiency. It is simply a reflection of the human hunger for God. In many respects, this view parallels the concept of "ultimate concern" in Paul Tillich's thought, where the human search for transcendence is simultaneously a search for God. However, unlike Tillich, Mays asserts that this search requires belief in God.

The Christian God Is the God of Every Race

It was suggested earlier that universals permeate Mays's work. His universalism begins with his doctrine of God and its relation to the entire human species. For Mays,

[13] Ibid.

there is only one God, the Christian God. This God is transcendent, absolute and universal. The Christian God compels the loyalty and devotion of the entire human race, including the different races within the human species. For Mays, this God is not partial and does not recognize hierarchies based on race, geographic origin and culture. All of the variations within the human family are equal from the standpoint of the Christian God. Mays contends that the Christian God recognizes and affirms the human quality common to the divergent members of the human race. This Christian God utilizes the following order when dealing with human beings. First, the Christian God treats members of the human family as human beings, second as children of one God, and third, as members of a particular race. Mays concludes that this is the God of every Christian.

> No belief in God is adequate unless it is a belief in a universal God, who is a God of justice, mercy and love. He cannot be a racial nor a national God. He cannot be a class God. He must be a god for all peoples. The God whom Christians worship is that kind of God-a universal God, a God of every nation, race and clan. When we lose sight of this fact, only a god of a particular nation, culture, or race is left. The true Christian can believe in no other kind of God. In his dealing with people, he sees them first as human beings, children of one God, and second as members of a particular race.[15]

Mays's final thesis is a democratic conception of God. In this conception of God, especially as it related to human beings, no racial group, social class or nation is given privilege. Consider what it means to suggests that God does not privilege whites, the wealthy, the American Negro, Asians, the economically disenfranchised and etc. Consider this understanding of God in connection to doctrine of white supremacy and its ordering of the American South of Mays's era. Mays's democratic conception of God unsettled the privilege and supremacy of then whites of the American South and that of any social group or class.

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[14] Ibid., 6.

Overall Mays's doctrine of God is strategic in that it will aid his criticism of and promotion of better race relations in America. It is strategic on two levels: first, by forwarding a conception of humanity as being dependent upon God he simultaneously promotes the idea of human fallibility. This will be crucial for challenging the morality segregated society and the assumption of Negro inferiority. Second, he forwards a conception of God that is non-hierarchal in relation to the various racial groupings within the human species. Ironically, his conception of God offers an order by which God measures human beings. Essentially, it is an ontology where members of the human race are first valued as human beings, second as children of one God and third, as members of a particular race. The non- hierarchal and ontological aspects of his doctrine of God are fundamental to his challenge of racial hierarchy and ontological assumptions regarding the American Negro.

"Disturbed About Man": The Precarious Nature of Human Morality

Another aspect of Mays's Theology is anthropology. He did not have a great deal of confidence in the morality of human beings. In his own words, taken from the title of one of his published books of sermons, he was "Disturbed About Man." The realities of race prejudice, which he dealt with in his own life and in the world, the historical record of human abuses wrought upon by other human beings, and the persistent nature of human evil in the world, infused in Mays a pessimism regarding the essential goodness of human beings. Though pessimism ran through his veins he conceded that human beings were unique and capable of extraordinary achievements. The monuments of civilization, the fruits of science and technology and the moral possibilities of education gave

[15] Ibid., 7-8.

credence to the possibilities of human virtue. Like Reinhold Niebuhr, Mays conceded that the human being is a paradox, a composite of goodness and evil. However, he was more inclined to point out the evil dimensions of human existence than the good. In contrast to his outlook on God, who for him is absolute and transcendent, Mays viewed human moral existence in fallible and precarious terms.

> There is a contradiction in man that is disturbing. He has inherent in his nature elements of the divine. He also has inherent in his nature elements of the Devil. Man may be good or evil, honest or dishonest, loving or unloving, just or unjust. Man is capable of building a heaven or an earth. There is not a sure way of determining which of these natures is going to predominate. This is true because in making man a free person rather than a machine, God gave man the power of choice, the power to decide for himself between good and evil.[16]

Mays turns to classical theological doctrines to articulate his anthropology. There are two dimensions to his view of the moral existence of human beings: the uniqueness of human beings as implied in the classical doctrine of the Imago Dei, and the fallible morality of human beings. Let us now turn to these aspects of his anthropology.

In the Image of God: The Uniqueness of Human Beings

Mays turned to the creation narratives in Genesis as the basis for understanding the uniqueness of human beings. For Mays, human beings are unique because they are made in the image of God. The image of God implies that human beings have value and importance on a level unlike the rest of creation and such value and importance are derived from the image of God. In other words, no other aspect of creation, earth, animal life, etc., is as significant as the human being. Furthermore, the uniqueness of the human being means that the human being has a unique role to play and status in the universe. In

[16] Ibid., 61.

Mays's words, the Image of God means that the human being is somebody. For Mays, the Christian faith affirms the value, "somebodiness" and overall uniqueness of the human being. As we shall see, Mays will connect this view of the human being with the work of science. For the uniqueness of the human being is supported by science.

> The Christian faith as revealed in the Bible makes it clear that man is unique among creatures of the earth. It is not too much to say that when God reached man in the creative process, he did for man what he did not do for any other creature. The author of Genesis tells us that God breathed into man's nostrils his own breath, and man became a living soul. God did not do this for the beasts of the field nor the fowls of the air nor for the fish of the sea-only for man. The writer is accounting for the uniqueness of man. He shows clearly that man is "somebody" and that he is important not in his own right, but because God conferred dignity and value upon him. For this reason it is a foolish notion that man has special distinction merely because he belongs to a particular race, nation or family. It is also important to note that when referring to creation the author of Genesis makes man a unique creature in his declaration that man was created in God's own image. The Christian faith fully comprehends man's unique place in the universe. Centuries before modern science demonstrated man's superior status, the Christian religion had affirmed it. [17]

Mays's turn to the classical doctrine of the Imago Dei in discussing the uniqueness of the human being is strategic in challenging racial assumptions regarding the inherent inferiority of the American Negro. For Mays, white supremacy deemed the Negro sub-human with little to contribute to human civilization. The idea of Negro inferiority diminished the intrinsic value of the American Negro. The Negro was essentially a second- class citizen who was destined to permanent marginality in American society. The function of the image of God was to promote the worth and moral possibilities of the American Negro. God has granted every member of the human family intrinsic worth. Such intrinsic worth undermines the notion of human inequality between the races. To exclude a racial group from the human family is to deny the worth of the human being.

[17] Ibid., 9.

Furthermore, the image of God means that all human beings, including every race and class, have something to contribute to civilization. Each human being, from the various races and social classes of people, brings something unique to bring to the cultural table. For Mays, the uniqueness of human beings cuts across nationality and race. The American Negro is just as unique and has just as much to contribute to the world as every other member of the human family.

The Fallible Morality of Human Beings

On the one hand, Mays contends that human beings are unique creatures among God's created order, creatures capable of doing extraordinary things. On another hand, he contends that human beings are morally fallible, that human beings are capable of committing morally vicious acts. In other words, he suggests that human beings have a propensity towards both good and evil. However, for Mays, the human propensity toward evil often undermines human goodness. It is the human propensity toward evil that creates all manner of evil social conditions such as racial segregation and poverty. What's more, this propensity towards evil is seldom offset by education, an important source of human morality, along with religion, which in Mays's thought functions to foster goodness among human beings. Despite being a strong advocate of education, Mays knew the limits of knowledge in relation to human morality.

The connection between knowledge and virtue is one aspect of Mays's anthropology where the fallible nature of human morality is pronounced. As a champion of education Mays understood the connection between learning, knowledge acquisition and human moral development. Simultaneously, he also understood that learning and the

increase in knowledge does not necessarily increase human virtue. Similar to Reinhold Niebuhr, Mays went against the grain of modern thinking of his day that saw a correlation between the increase in human knowledge and moral development. A close reading of history prompted Mays to challenge the moral assumptions of modernity that placed a high premium on human virtue.

> It is disturbing to realize that when we increase in knowledge, we do not necessarily increase in goodness or senses of values. We used to believe that people did the destructive or brutal thing because they did not know any better. We believed that nations fought wars because their knowledge was limited. We believe that it was all a matter of education and that once men saw the light, he would follow it; and that once he could distinguish the high road from the low road, he would take the high one.[18]

One source that helped Mays understand the distance between knowledge and virtue was the Bible. Mays turned to the New Testament, particularly the seventh chapter of the book of Romans, to understand the disconnect between knowledge and virtue. In doing so, he contends that human beings willfully commit vicious acts with full knowledge of their consequences.

> Men know the truth and lie. Men can know the ways of peace and deliberately plan war. Socrates believed that men did evil things through ignorance. But the apostle Paul was wiser than Socrates and nearer to the truth when he exclaimed: "For I do not the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it but sin which dwells within me. So that I find it to be a law that when I do right, evil lies close at hand" Romans 7:19-21.[19]

After turning to Bible, Mays turned to education in delineating the disjunction between knowledge and virtue. Again, Mays was a highly educated person who revered learning. Yet he conceded the limits of education in improving human morality. He understood that education was limited in preventing wars, eliminating poverty, changing economic

[18] Ibid., 61.
[19] Ibid., 62.

systems and politically transforming the world. For Mays, history was proof of the moral limits of education.

> Men have more learning now than they ever had before more mathematics, physics, chemistry, philosophy, social science, and religion than any other generation. Yet we are as confused now as men have ever been at any period in history. We saw a great war coming upon us and we could not avert it. Germany and Japan were defeated in World War II, but all our knowledge and learning, we hardly know enough to avoid sowing seeds of another war. Our economists are well trained, but they cannot determine what kind of economic system we shall have twenty-five years from now. We find ourselves caught in the midst of catastrophe and chaos, and in one sense the Ph.D. is as inadequate as the illiterate and the world statesmen stands almost as helpless in shaping world politics as the country politician.[20]

On one level, Mays's anthropology may be attributed to his academic study particularly his reflections on history. However, a broader understanding of his anthropological reflection on knowledge and virtue can be derived from his life experience. Growing up in the Jim Crow South, Mays witnessed first hand the worst things that a human being or a human system can do to other human beings. The psychological and economic brutalities, wrought by living as a Negro in the Jim Crow South, made him skeptical of the idea of the inherent goodness of human beings. The legacy of slavery, lynchings, sharecropping and unequal educational systems were all evidence of the limits of human virtue. As far as the connection between knowledge and virtue was concerned, Mays witnessed the disjunction between the two as a school -boy in South Carolina, where the privilege of education afforded to whites was not afforded to Negroes. As a graduate student at the University of Chicago, he experienced racism in a supposedly enlightened context. In his autobiography, Mays recounts how he and his then wife experienced racial hostility from professors and students at the university. Consider the following passage, where recounts the experience he had in Chicago. He

speaks of it in light of a more hospitable experience, in Lewiston, Maine, while a student at Bates College.

> I found more prejudice at the University of Chicago and in the city of Chicago than I had found at Bates and in the city of Lewiston…At Bates, teachers spoke to Negro students on campus and downtown, especially if the Negro student was in the professor's class. I knew one or two professors at the University of Chicago in 1921 who never recognized a Negro student when off campus or on. We sometimes saw one of them with his wife, and whenever we did we spoke, calling him by name, bowing and tipping our hats. Of course, he had to return the courtesy. We enjoyed that response.[21]

From Mays's racial experience, he knew all too well that education had limitations, despite his being a champion of education. Interestingly, his awareness of the limits of education would not prevent his promotion of it, as we shall see, as a mode of social transformation.

Loving God and Humanity: Ethical Aspects of Mays's Thought

Beyond his reflections on the doctrine of God and humanity are his reflections on the Christian moral life. Mays understood Christianity as an ethical faith whose merits were determined by its applicability in the real world. The ethical concept of love informed his approach to the Christian moral life. Similar to his fundamental theological perspective, Mays's ethical thought was concerned with the then racial hierarchy in America. More specifically, Mays's ethical thinking addresses the question of how Christians should engage race relations and segregation in the United States. For Mays, racial inequality was a contradiction of Christian ethical teachings derived from the New Testament. More succinctly, it was a contradiction of the Christian imperative to love. In his reading of the New Testament, Christians are commanded to love God as well as

[20] Ibid., 64-65.

other human beings. And he views the love of God and others as inseparable. In this regard, the Christian life is fundamentally relational and guided by the concept of love. The model for this way of living is displayed in the New Testament in the person of Jesus Christ. Mays contends that Jesus embodied the love of God and humanity in his life and that faithful discipleship upholds it.

> The Christian faith as stated in the New Testament affirms that the love God and the love of man is one love. Few people recognize the fact that Jesus got into trouble not so much because he believed in God but because he believed in the sacred worth of the individual soul. If Jesus had gone throughout the Palestinian or Greco-Roman world merely talking about God and doing nothing to help man, he would have hardly run into trouble because almost everyone in the world of his day believed in God or in gods. Jesus got into trouble because he believed in man, a belief interlaced and interwoven with his concept of God. [22]

For Mays, the problem of Christian faith in the America of his day was that it misunderstood and even ignored the manner in which the love of God and human beings were inseparable. In relation to racial inequality, the love of God was divorced from the love of human beings. The basic question that was asked was, How can one love God and not other human beings of a different racial background?

For Mays, the Christian imperative to love God and other human beings is integral to the overall character of Christian faith, especially Christian ethics. Overall, Mays's ethical perspective consists of a mediation between these two objects of love. Mays understood Christian faith as a balancing act between faith in God and faith in humanity. Mays viewed this balancing act as constitutive of healthy minded (James) religion. It is a pragmatic understanding of religion that seeks to avoid the excesses of

[21] Ibid., 65.
[22] Ibid., 16.

other-worldliness and humanism. In other words, it is an approach to the Christian moral life that mediates transcendent principles and empirical realities.

> One of the great difficulties of life is to avoid extremes. Professor H.Y. Britan of Bates College used to say in his philosophy classes, "Truth is seldom if ever found in extremes." We need to avoid extremes in religion. We run the risk of constantly making our religion either completely God centered or entirely man centered. When we make it completely God centered, we commit the fatal blunder of trying to establish connection between ourselves and God without due regard to our neighbor. If our religion becomes too God centered, it is likely to become highly otherworldly, a religion whereby we seek mainly to save ourselves from a burning hell or win a place of heavenly rest after this earthly life has ended.[23]

Mays understood the dangers of religion that is removed from the natural world. What he has in mind is Protestant evangelicalism. With a focus on personal salvation and repentance of sin, the individual and other-worldly character of protestant evangelicalism is apt to ignore the social contexts that affects religious life.

> History is full of examples of this kind of religion where the church puts on revivals, calls "sinners" to repentance and seeks to save their souls while the great social evils of poverty, unemployment, slavery, disease, crime, war, racial discrimination, political and economic injustice-go untouched and unchallenged.[24]

Being consistent with his anthropology, Mays also understood the dangers of religion which placed too much of an estimate in human beings. What he had in mind was a secular faith in human beings fostered by the enlightenment, wherein human dependence on religion was lessened and human autonomy increased.

> If our religion becomes wholly man centered, we risk the unpardonable sin of making man into a god. We are likely to ignore the existence of the God whom Jesus believed and the God whom the Christian is supposed worship. The completely man centered religion is likely to lead man to believe that he is self sufficient and that he can lift himself entirely by his own bootstraps.

[23] Ibid., 24.
[24] Ibid.

> His ethics may become a man-centered ethics with no reference beyond itself.[25]

Mays's reflections are influenced by protestant liberalism, particularly the Social Gospel. The manner in which he minimizes the evangelical aspects of Christian ethics and maximizes its social aspects, is testament to the social gospel's imprint upon his perspective. Again, Mays was more concerned with the moral applicability of Christian faith in the social world than with its ability to save souls. His concerns about the morality of a segregated society were no less subject to this approach to Christian ethics.

Belief in Action

For Mays, at the heart of ethical faith is a belief in action. Belief in action is the union of theory and practice, a union embodied in the life of Jesus Christ. Knowing the problem, in popular Protestant thought, of divorcing belief from action, Mays is clear in emphasizing the connection between the two. He makes the case that theory and action are not mutually exclusive. Practices are informed by beliefs and to separate the two is to divorce what we do from what we believe. Mays contends that we do what we believe. Hence, there is no contraction between the two. For example, if a Christian fails to live out the imperative to love in action, in the arena of race relations, it is due to his or her not believing in the imperative, not the difficulty of its practice. Interestingly, he concedes that at times there may be some difficulty orienting belief with practice. However, the union of the two inevitably occurs.

> Contrary to popular opinion, there is no conflict between belief and action. Beliefs are not theoretical ideas divorced from doing something. Beliefs always find expression in action. There may be a gulf between intellectually assent-merely agreeing that something is so-and action, but there is no gulf

[25] Ibid., 24-25.

> between really believing in something and to act constantly contrary to that belief. It may be possible to have a temporary conflict between what we believe and what we do, but the conflict will eventually disappear. Our actual beliefs will soon be found to coincide with what we do.[26]

Embracing the model of Jesus has implications for the social witness of the Christian. When one embraces Jesus he or she simultaneously embraces the moral imperative to act. Interestingly, Mays concedes that negative social consequences may proceed from embracing the Jesus model. He even suggests that individuals as well as generations, throughout history have found it difficult to live out the social witness implied by the life of Jesus.

> Jesus is the central figure and our guide for Christian living. But when anyone is urged to accept Jesus, seldom is the fact taken into account that he is being advised to model his life after a man who was rejected by his generation and who was nailed to the cross between two thieves. The great majority of the members of the human race will never be willing to die for their convictions. Adults urge youth to do what those who are older have not done. We might as well be honest and admit that any person who attempts to live his or her in accordance with the content of the life and teachings of Jesus is likely to find the going hard. It may not mean a physical death, but it may mean less, social, economic and political success.[27]

It must be noted that Mays's promotion of the witness of Jesus as a model for human agency is not cast in terms of a high Christology. Rather, Jesus is cast solely as a model for ethical living, not as a savior. Furthermore, Mays offers a sense of moral realism with regard to the consequences that may follow taking the Jesus model seriously. He acknowledges that following the model of Jesus means going against the grain of popular morality. For Mays, as far as race relations and segregated society were concerned, following the Jesus model was well worth the risk.

[26] Ibid., 75.
[27] Ibid., 72.

Being consistent with his theological perspective, the ethical aspects of Mays's perspective had direct bearing on his concerns regarding race-relations of his era. Loving God and humanity, as modeled in the person of Jesus Christ, meant that racism and segregation were antithetical to the Christian ethic. For Mays, authentic Christianity, in terms of race-relations, meant challenging racism and segregated society. Overall, the Christian imperative to love God and humanity was meant for both whites and American Negroes. And it meant willingly accepting whatever consequences that came with challenging segregation and white supremacy.

Assessing Mays's Legacy

At the outset of this chapter, I suggested that the theological legacy of Benjamin Elijah Mays is a resource for progressive politics and political theology in the United States today. In this regard, his brand of liberal Christianity, embodied in a style of leadership representative of the Negro era, and informed by the social gospel, is a resource for engaging political conservatism. There is theological and political value in the themes of democracy and universalism as they play out in his doctrine of God, anthropology and ethical thought. Overall, it is the pragmatic nature of his leadership and theology that is instructive for progressive politics and political theology in our age. In the concluding chapter of this dissertation, I flesh out, in greater detail, the implications of his theology for theological discourse today.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the theological legacy of Benjamin Elijah Mays. In this regard, I suggested that Mays belonged to an era of Negro social and religious leadership, an era that spanned three generations, between the early post-reconstruction period and the dawning of the Civil Rights/Black Power era. Mays stood as a public theologian of the Negro era. With social concerns regarding the then American Negro situation and Segregated American society, he forwarded a pragmatic theological perspective geared toward race relations. Through a democratic understanding of the classical doctrine of God and a pessimistic yet hopeful anthropology, Mays sought to overcome the idea of Negro inferiority and white supremacy. As far as the Christian moral life is concerned, the Christian ideal of love, as modeled by the life of Jesus, has serious implications for race relations.

In the next chapter, I turn to the role of education in Mays's ethical perspective. Here, I outline his philosophy of education and its application to the desegregation of American educational institutions at the height of the Civil Rights movement. In Mays's thought, the imperative to love God and humanity, in connection to race relations, plays out in his advocacy of education as a mode of social transformation. For Mays, education is connected to the Christian moral life. To understand the moral implications of his entire theological perspective, it is important to consider his promotion of education, especially as it related to the then American Negro and segregated American society. Overall, Mays's democratic understanding of God, humanity and the Christian moral life are constitutive of his ethics of education. With this said, I shall now turn to Mays's philosophy and ethics of education.

CHAPTER V

PRAGMATISM AND SOCIAL HOPE: RACE AND CHRISTIAN ACTION IN THE THEOLOGY OF BENJAMIN ELIJAH MAYS

In this chapter, I will discuss the role of education in Mays's ethical perspective, particularly his promotion of education as a means of social progress. First, I will explore his philosophy of education. Then, I will discuss the application of his philosophy to a concrete situation, namely, the desegregation of universities and public schools ten years after the historic Supreme Court ruling, in 1954, that deemed segregated schools unconstitutional (Brown v. Board of Education). I will conclude with a discussion of the contemporary relevance of Mays's theological legacy and ethics of education. Before I begin, I will expand briefly upon his outlook on race and Christian ethics.

As I suggested in chapter four, Mays viewed race relations of his era as the test of Christian ethics. For Mays, the Christian imperative to act was impeded by racial inequality. Race relations, in the America of his day, was one arena where the Christian belief in action was challenged. He viewed race relations of his era in negative terms. The then dominant racial practices, of whites towards Negro's, were in his mind, not Christian. The Christian ethic of love in action was hardly visible. What's more, the Christian imperative of love in action was weakened by what appeared to be an unwillingness to carry it out.

> Many of us are concerned about race. It is here that we are most likely to be shackled and bound by current practices, which we are afraid to break away from. Our Christian behavior breaks down perhaps more in this area than it does any other. After the Christian faith has its say about the unity of man in

> God and man's duty to man, and modern science has made its pronouncements as to the potential equality of the races, our customary behavior in the realm of race is likely to fall below minimum Christian standards. We seem to lack the motivating power to act on what we say we believe about God, Jesus, and man, and similarly on what we say we believe about science. Our fears make cowards of us.[1]

Again, Mays was concerned with the relevance of Christian theology to race relations. Mays viewed Christianity, particularly Christian doctrines, in positive terms. He believed an appropriate understanding of Christian doctrine in its universal and democratic dimensions would benefit race relations of his era. His appeal to and promotion of the doctrines were both orthodox and liberal in orientation. His appeal was orthodox in the sense that he did not attempt to reconstruct the doctrines. Rather, he reinterpreted them for his social concerns. His appeal was liberal in that the doctrines were meant for social transformation, not evangelization. His appeal to orthodox doctrine and their liberal application are synthesized in his promotion of the life of Jesus as the model for Christian action, especially along the lines of race relations. The end of his reflections was the dismantling of segregation and its effects upon the then American Negro. Having elaborated upon the ethical aspects of Mays's theology, I now turn to his moral confidence in education as a means of improving race-relations.

The Ethics of Education

Connected to the ethical aspects of Mays's theological perspective is a moral confidence in the enterprise of education. Beyond his attempt to improve race-relations through re-imagining Christian doctrines, Mays promoted education as a moral vehicle of social change, especially as it related to the American Negro. Similar to his promotion of

[1] Ibid., 72.

a democratic understanding of God, Mays promoted a democratic understanding of education, both formal and secondary education. Mays spent twenty-seven years (1940-1967) as the president of Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia.[2] The presidency of Morehouse College was the platform where he addressed his greatest social and religious concern, that of segregation in American society and its effects on the American Negro. At Morehouse, Mays used the prestige and influence of the presidency as an instrument in challenging segregation in American society. Though he provided leadership in other arenas such as the YMCA, and the World Council of Churches, it was at Morehouse College, as an educator and administrator, where he made his greatest contributions. A staunch advocate of education as a means of social transformation, Mays spent his entire career promoting education as a means of achieving social progress in race relations. In terms of the social prospects of the American Negro, Mays linked education with Negro social mobility and freedom. Overall, Mays saw a connection between an educated Negro citizenry and the realization of democracy in America. However, segregated institutions, especially educational institutions, stood in the way of democracy being realized for the American Negro. During his lifetime, he sought the desegregation of these institutions. For Mays, the promotion of education was integral to the dismantling of segregated society. Education was so paramount to Mays's moral vision that shortly after he retired from Morehouse in 1967 at the age of 73, he became the president of the Atlanta Public School Board, where he served twelve years. Integral to Mays's educational strategy, is the view that education is one arena where actual social progress can be achieved. The strength of Mays's promotion of education, was derived from his personal development and achievements, via education, which stood as a testament to its possibilities.

[2] See *Born to Rebel*.

Mays's Philosophy of Education

Mays understood education as being vital to the social prospects and future of the American Negro. He believed that education, secondary and formal, was one route to overcoming the individual and collective restraints and negative effects of segregated society.[3] He knew that education could not remove the cumulative effects of the legacy of slavery on the Negro and American society. However, he believed education could provide the Negro with more social freedom and mobility, and greater access to economic and political goods. Mays's philosophy of education was deeply rooted in the impact that education had upon his life. To understand what education meant to Mays, in relation to Negro freedom, it is important gauge his philosophy of education.

In 1972, Mays delivered a commencement address at Alderson Broadus College in Philippi, West Virginia. Entitled "Education To What End," Mays offered a diatribe on the purpose of education. In doing so, he reveals his philosophy of education. He begins by providing a working conception of education and its purpose. Then posits three functions of education: 1) to empower individuals and groups 2) to promote the common good and 3) to instill discontent with mediocrity. To begin, consider Mays's working conception of education.

> Generally speaking, education is designed to train the mind to think clearly, logically and constructively; to train the heart to feel understandingly and sympathetically the aspirations, the sufferings, and the injustices of mankind; and to strengthen the will to act in the interest in the common good. To state the purpose in Christian perspective, the aim of education should be to glorify God and to serve mankind…Specifically speaking, education should be sought for its own sake.[4]

[3] In this section and the pages that follow, I draw upon a commencement address delivered by Mays entitled, "Education to What End?" (Alderson Broadus College) and an article, "The Role of Schools in a Social Revolution" (Teachers Colleges Record, vol. 65, 8 May 1964), Moorland-Spingarn, to discuss Mays's understanding of education. Also, see Barbara Sue Lewison's article "Mays's Educational Philosophy" in *Walking Integrity*, 216, for an insightful on Mays's perspective on education.

[4] Benjamin E. Mays, "Education to What End?", 1.

For Mays, education has a theological and social task. Theologically, it is connected to one's devotion to God; it is a means of rendering worship toward God. Socially, it is not an instrumental good, a mere means to acquiring goods such as fame, fortune and power. Rather, education has intrinsic value. Its intrinsic value is connected to its function in improving persons and society. Hence, education has personal and social value. Essentially, this is a classical conception of education and it is upon this conception of education that Mays's entire theology of education rests.

Education and Empowerment

Beyond the idea that education is to be sought for its intrinsic value, Mays casts education in terms of individual and collective empowerment. Mays maintained that education was an empowering tool that enabled an individual, race or nation of people to protect itself from exploitation. The lack or absence of education makes one weak and vulnerable to being taken advantage of by stronger and more enlightened groups or individuals. Education serves as a source of strength against powerful and enlightened forces in the world.

> An educated man, a trained race or a literate nation is much better qualified to defend itself against the strong and the unscrupulous than an untrained man, race or nation. Whether we like it or not, there is a fundamental selfishness or defect in human nature. We respect strength and not courage and not cowardice, knowledge and not ignorance, the man who stands on his feet in a manly way and not the man who cringes and kow-tows. History shows that strong nations for the most part exploit weak nations, that strong races usually take advantage of weak races and that strong individuals are inclined almost always to push weak individuals around even a blood relative, or a weak brother or sister. As one who believes in the power of religion to transform mankind, I reluctantly make this confession. I have seldom, if ever, known a nation, however religious, seen a race, however, democratic in its

> pronouncement, known an individual, however Christian in his profession, who would not take advantage of the ignorant, the weak and the cowardly. [5]

Next to racism and segregated society, Mays viewed ignorance as the greatest impediment to Negro progress. Although Mays was not an avowed black nationalist, he understood the then Negro situation in nationalistic terms. In this regard, American Negroes were only as strong and capable of self-sufficiency as their intellectual development allowed them to be. And for Mays, the arrested intellectual development of then American Negroes, due to white supremacy, contributed to their weakness as a group. Such weakness made Negroes constantly vulnerable to exploitation. Overall, his career in and advocacy of education among Negroes was his contribution to the intellectual development of American Negroes.

Education and the Common Good

Though education functions to empower an individual, nation or race of people to protect itself from exploitation, it is not reducible to mere self-defense or collective or individual self-assertion. Rather, education also has an altruistic function. In this regard, education functions to promote the common good. Hence there are social aims of education. For Mays, education and the common good operates on three levels: 1) to elevate the masses 2) to identify and nurture the moral potential of persons and 3) to sensitize the human conscience to the social ills of the world. Let us consider the first level.

[5] Ibid.

According to Mays, one aim of education is the elevation of the masses of humanity. It is an aim that counters any notion of education that is concerned solely with individuals and individual interests.

> Education is not designed merely to lift one above his fellows, to enable one to make a living, but rather its purpose is to equip man to help his fellows, to elevate the masses, the less fortunate. For if one has a better mind than his fellows, more wealth than his fellows, has a better opportunity to develop than his fellows, he is obligated to use his skills in the interest of the common good. To use education for the common good is mandatory because trained minds are rare, only a small percentage of the total population of the world is college trained. And to whom much is given much is required.[6]

For Mays, there is a connection between education and human service, especially where the masses of humanity are concerned. It is more than an instrumental tool, to be used solely by individuals, for the sake of instrumental ends, such as fame, fortune and power. Rather, this is an altruistic understanding of education that serves as a special challenge to privileged individuals, those who have been afforded educational opportunity. Overall, Mays suggests that the educated person, by virtue of their privilege, has a social responsibility in improving the lot of the masses, the mass of persons who have not been afforded educational opportunity.

Integral to the function of education in promoting the common good is its connection to fostering human growth and development. In its social aims, education is concerned with identifying and nurturing the moral potential of human beings. In this vein, Mays contends that education is not an elite enterprise that is reserved for and only cultivates the moral potential of the privileged. Rather, it recognizes and develops the moral potential of those who are born at a social disadvantage.

> Education aims to sharpen insights so that we see man not as he is but as he can and ought to be. Education should sensitize us so that one sees not only

[6] Ibid., 4.

> the potential of a Cicero born with a silver spoon in his mouth but also the potential of a Horace, the son of a former slave; and the potentials of a James Weldon Johnson and a Countee Cullen; not only the potential of Milton, born in favorable circumstances, but also the potential of a Shakespeare, whose father was a corrupt butcher; not only the potential of George Washington, the rich Virginia planter, but also the potential of Booker T. Washington, a slave; not only the potential of Nehru, born Brahman, but also the potentials of John F. Kennedy, born with more than he needed.[7]

Mays knew first hand the personal benefits of education. His status as a race leader and college president was made possible due to his exceptional education and the professional experiences it afforded him. He earned a bachelor's degree from Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, and a master's degree and Ph.D., from the University of Chicago. However, his educational development was delayed due to the limited educational opportunities afforded him by his Southern upbringing. Consider the fact that Mays did not graduate from high school until the age of twenty-two. Unequal social arrangements and an environment driven by agriculture resulted in sporadic schooling during his childhood and youth, thus preventing him from realizing his potential at an earlier age. Mays knew all too well how the lack of education contributed to his delayed educational development and to the unrealized potential of the Negro of his era. He also knew how the resource of education aids the development of human beings. Overall, his moral confidence in education as a developer of human potential was connected to his personal history and to the condition of the then American Negro.

Beyond its concern with the moral development of persons, education functions to sensitize persons to the social ills of the world, in service of promoting the common good. Mays maintained that education should make one sensitive to social and moral

[7] Ibid., 5.

condition of one's age. For Mays, the educated person, nation or race is concerned about poverty, disease, war, racism and other ills of the human condition.

> Education should make one sensitive to the needs of the world. The world can hardly be secure as long as more than half of the peoples of the earth are starving, more than half have diseased bodies, and more than half can read nor write. If it is important to train the mind to fly to the moon and walk on it, to build atomic and hydrogen bombs capable of destroying the human family, it is equally important, or more so, to train our children and students to have sympathy and empathy for all classes of men who dwell on all the face of the earth. If parents can train their children in the ways of prejudice by walking 600 miles to protest busing and if our politicians, North and South, so-called liberals and conservatives, can unite against busing, the aim of education should be to create a society where Black and White, Gentile and Jews, Protestants and Catholics can live together, study together and worship together.[8]

For Mays, education should have a humanizing effect on those who benefit from it. In this regard, it functions to expand one's awareness of the world around them, and instills a deep sensitivity to its needs. Hence, education, in this view, is a moral force. As we shall see shortly, this moral view of education unfolds in Mays's criticism of segregation in higher and public education. Overall, the idea and reality of segregated educational institutions contradicted the idea of education as a moral force. Also, this moral view of education is a criticism of education as an instrumental tool, to be used solely by individuals for the sake of instrumental ends (i.e., fame, fortune, power and etc.).

Education and Discontent with Mediocrity

There is an element of transcendence that runs throughout Mays's theology of education. It is connected to his understanding of God and anthropology. Mays believed that one should always strive to be more than what he or she already is. Under these

[8] Ibid.

terms, education should instill dissatisfaction with the ordinary. For Mays, this is the final end of education.

> The final end of education which I shall mention in this address is to create in the individual a wholesome state of dissatisfaction, what I call divine discontent with the ordinary, mediocre performance: To make one dissatisfied with the better if the best can be achieved. Satisfaction means stagnation and death. It comes from two Latin words which means "enough done." The teacher who is satisfied with his teaching will never teach better. The artist who is satisfied with his past performance will hardly make new discoveries. The man who is satisfied with poverty will never have enough bread and to spare…Education, college or university, is designed to make one restless and dissatisfied with things as they are; dissatisfied with war, poverty and disease.[9]

Similar to his understanding of education in connection to human development, Mays's disdain for mediocrity was connected to his personal history. Again, Mays was a beneficiary of an elite higher education. He attained such an education despite his disadvantaged Southern background. Consider the fact that Mays grew up in world driven by agriculture and white supremacy that did not support his educational aspirations. His father was a sharecropper who had no appreciation for book learning and discouraged his college aspirations. Coupled with the discouragement of his father were the social arrangements of his native South Carolina that also discouraged any form of education among Negro's. Moreover, when he did enter and matriculate through college, he was challenged by yet mastered the curriculum of his school, Bates College. Needless to say, his successful matriculation through the University of Chicago, earning a Ph.D., allowed him to stand out among his peers and above the racial assumptions of his age. Overall, Mays's personal experience and elite social status, instilled within him a disdain for mediocrity in connection to education.

[9] Ibid., 6.

The most salient aspect of Mays's ethical understanding of education is the connection between education and the common good. For Mays, the grand aim of education is to improve the lot of human beings and society. This ethical understanding of education was integral to his attack on segregated society. Mays viewed segregation as a barrier to the common good. He believed that educational institutions had a social responsibility in dismantling segregation, in the interest of promoting the common good. In fact, in the years that followed the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court ruling, involving the desegregation of public schools, Mays wrote about the role of schools in promoting the common good.

Education, the Common Good and Social Progress

In an essay entitled, *The Role of Schools in a Social Revolution*, Mays wrote about the role of schools in promoting the common good. It was written at height of the Civil Rights movement, tens years after the 1954 Supreme Court decision, which ruled segregation in public schools unconstitutional. Mays forwarded a proposal of how universities can facilitate court orders to desegregate universities and colleges as well as the rest of U.S. society. The essay is at first a criticism of schools that failed to carry out court orders. Here, Mays indicts public colleges and universities for being complacent in carrying out the imperative of desegregation, which the court decision demanded, and for not providing America with the intellectual leadership also demanded by this event and the times. The most scathing aspect of his criticism was that schools failed to fulfill their responsibilities as torch- lights of democracy in a democratic society. Beyond criticism, however, Mays provides a list of recommendations for how schools may bring about this

process. Overall, the essay promotes the notion that education is one arena where social progress is possible.

Mays's Criticism of Higher Education

Mays begins with an indictment against colleges and universities, asserting that institutions of higher learning were not functioning as they should in facilitating desegregation. The then malfunctioning of schools defy his assumptions regarding the role of schools in a society.

> I TAKE IT FOR GRANTED that the role of schools in a democracy differs from that of schools in a fascist or communist country. I also take it for granted that the social revolution means the struggle for civil rights in which Negroes are deeply involved. In asking about the role that schools *should* play, I imply that our schools are not functioning as they should to insure the peaceful success of the present social revolution.[10]

Mays expands on the indictment by placing the role of schools in the context of a twenty year legal battle for civil rights for the American Negro, which had evolved into a full blown social revolution at the time of his writing.

> To begin on a negative note, the schools, including colleges and universities, have done very little to advance the humane revolution now underway. The major battle for a change in the Negro's status in American life was fought in the federal courts between 1935 and 1955. Although schooled men waged the legal battle, university officials for the most part resisted every inch of the way of the Negro's effort to enter state universities.[11]

Mays goes on to cite examples of Universities, primarily in the South, and one northern school, that resisted the imperative of desegregation. Such schools include the Universities of Maryland, North Carolina, Missouri, Georgia, Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, and Clemson in South Carolina. These universities,

[10] Benjamin E. Mays, The Role of Schools in a Social Revolution, 684.
[11] Ibid.

Mays contends, upheld segregation and only admitted Negro students when forced by court order. The violence that erupted when James Meridith was enrolled at the University of Mississippi and opposition of then Governor of Alabama, George Wallace, who resisted the desegregation of the University of Alabama, were concrete examples of the failure of schools in facilitating social change.

Interestingly, Mays maintains that there were universities where faculties and administrators were supportive of desegregation. However, such support did not emerge until two to three years *after* the Supreme Court decision. He asserts that the officials and faculties of the Universities of Georgia and Clemson were supportive of the admission of their earliest Negro students, albeit sometime after the decision. For the most part, support for desegregation came slow. He contends that in the wake the court decision, employees of these universities, particularly professors, did not lend their support for fear of loosing their jobs. He further contends that there was a climate on these university campuses where free and open debate surrounding the support of desegregation was prohibited only that which upheld segregation was allowed. What's more, the pattern of resisting segregation and even gradualism, among the universities, was also found among public schools.

For Mays, the resistance and gradualism of universities, colleges and public schools, toward desegregation, was a travesty of democracy. The inaction of these centers of learning, defy his assumption that schools, particularly, universities and colleges, are democratic institutions, whose task is to sustain and promote the democratic ideal. And at the level of intellectual and social leadership these schools failed miserably. When

speaking of the repressive intellectual climate on many of these universities and colleges, his assumptions regarding what democracy means unfolds.

> Academic freedom just did not exist. It could hardly have been worse in a totalitarian country. With this kind of resistance the universities cannot be given credit for contributing to the peaceful success of social revolution in education. It is the essence of freedom to permit free discussion and debate. This was not the case in the period following the order in the historic *Brown* case. [12]

For Mays the repression that occurred at institutions of higher learning was the result of poor leadership. Leadership, on the part of these institutions, in relation to desegregation, was in his view, what was demanded by the times.

> It is clear that all too many schools provide no leadership to insure peaceful desegregation, either educationally or in the larger society. The proper role of the schools, up to now, should have been what it was not-the provision of more positive and constructive leadership to insure peaceful change and acceptance of change.

Education as an Agent of Social Progress

After indicting colleges and universities for failing to live out their responsibilities as torch-lights of democracy, Mays offers constructive guidance, by suggesting what role schools should play in an era of social change. In Mays's recommendations, there are three levels upon which schools may render leadership. First, to provide scholarly research and promote free and open inquiry surrounding the issues that spawned and necessitated the era of change. Second, to encourage the democratic participation of the privileged class in facilitating change. Finally, to support the expansion of democracy by offering societal leadership through educating the larger society, especially its decision-makers.

[12] Ibid., 685.

Social Progress and the Promotion of Scholarly Inquiry

In Mays's view, institutions of higher education are centers for truth seeking and knowledge production. Colleges and universities promote democracy through the pursuit of truth and the production of knowledge. With respect to the era of desegregation, centers of learning could help society by providing research and forums for debate that would increase social understanding. For Mays, this meant making available resources from the natural sciences that undermined the idea of the inherent inferiority of the Negro. It also meant employing the social sciences in explaining the history, contours and effects of racial inequality in America. Overall, in their function as research centers, searching for truth and producing knowledge, schools could do a tremendous service to society in countering the idea of Negro inferiority.

> The schools, especially the colleges and universities, should provide objective understanding and truth, especially with respect to racial differences. Although there are many people who believe that certain races are inferior to others, the colleges and universities must make it clear that science has reached no final conclusion as to the validity of this assertion. It is clearly established that differences in a so-called racial group are just as wide as differences between the races and that very superior people are found in all groups.[13]

When a society is undergoing unprecedented social change, schools can help society understand the nature and meaning of the change that is occurring.

> Similarly, schools should help people to understand the causes of the current social revolution as a part of our history. Social revolutions do not spring full grown from the head of Zeus, nor do they develop overnight. Western man embraced the most revolutionary doctrine ever expounded to man. It is not communism but the Judeo-Christian religion, with its emphasis on one God and the worth and value of every person, that provides the basic dynamic of today's revolution. Even during slavery, the Christian gospel upset men so much they had somehow to justify slavery to their own souls as being God's will.[14]

[13] Ibid., 685.
[14] Ibid., 686.

Mays understood that desegregation challenged the racial assumptions of American society, particularly the American South. For him, the ideas of Negro inferiority and white supremacy are what created and held together segregated society. It was an institution whose assumptions about the races, prior to Supreme Court decision, went virtually unchallenged. To facilitate the mandate of the decision it was important that academic institutions to examine the assumptions that held segregated society together. It was equally important to examine the assumptions, which yielded the court decision. In democratic fashion, schools could play a crucial role in evaluating the logic of both segregation and desegregation.

Mays also understood the unprecedented nature of desegregation, that it disrupted the social world of American society, particularly the American South. It is no wonder that he understood it in revolutionary terms. Like the American Revolution and the Emancipation Proclamation, the phenomena of desegregation would profoundly alter human relations, especially race relations. Mays understood that institutions of higher learning had the intellectual resources necessary to relate the unprecedented event of segregation to a larger history of social change. In doing so, these institutions would help society understand the meaning and process of desegregation.

If schools are to are to provide scholarship and facilitate social understanding of desegregation and the social climate surrounding it, then scholars and students should be allowed the academic freedom to inquire and debate its rationale. For Mays, academic freedom is a fundamental right within democratic institutions of higher education. And if this freedom is denied, then it must be fought for.

> If denied this freedom of discussion and debate, the schools should fight for this right. The freedom to discuss, to debate, and to seek truth and

> understanding are the ingredients that make a school or a college great. As the church should be free and unafraid to expound and implement a universal Gospel, the schools should be unshackled in their pursuit of truth and understanding. Teachers in the humanities and social sciences should fight for freedom to search fear of truths about social relations, just as men in the natural sciences battle to be free to explore the world of matter.[15]

In Mays's view, desegregation and the spirit of social change that accompanied it was not without any rationale. For him, the Supreme Court decision and the then social climate were connected to a larger history of struggle, connected the Negro's quest for social justice in America. The Negro's struggle and demand for social justice were predicated upon the principles of democracy. Segregated society was a contradiction of such principles. Hence, the Supreme Court decision and the spirit of social change that accompanied it. Given the rationale behind desegregation, academic freedom meant that the logic of desegregation and segregation should be open to inquiry and debate. The end of academic freedom is the promotion of human understanding.

Social Progress and the Role of Privileged Classes

For Mays, one of the barriers to the desegregation of schools was the lack of white participation in carrying out court orders. Mays contended that many whites would not get involved because they viewed desegregation as a Negro issue. He cites white college students in particular, as having an apathetic attitude toward desegregation.

> I sense the feeling that white students in the US are not deeply concerned about what is going on. A white student said to me a few years ago that if a Negro can gain a larger foothold in the American economy, more power to him; but it is the Negro's fight, not his. The idea seems to exist that the social revolution is something isolated from the rest of our culture, affecting only Negro's.[16]

[15] Ibid.

Democracy means that everyone is involved, that desegregation is not a Negro issue. Schools can help to promote this kind of understanding.

> Here schools have a definite part to play. The struggle to make democratic principles applicable to all people alike is not a one-sided proposition. Every American is involved. Either the American Dream applies to all, or it applies to none. The Negro is not on trial; American democracy is. More people look to the United States for guidance, financial assistance, and leadership than to any other nation. No nation has espoused the cause of freedom so sincerely or as vigorously as the United States. No nation has fought for democracy abroad, quite without any motive of conquest, as has the United States. But the test of democracy is not what we do abroad but what we do at home. If the democratic torch is put out there or if it always dims and gutters before the problem of white versus black, I fear for its survival in the world.[17]

If America is to be faithful to the democratic ideal, then the issue of desegregation is not an issue that only affects the Negro. Rather, it is an issue that affects all Americans. For Mays, desegregation not only improves the social prospects of the Negro, it also improves American society. Negro's are not the only group to benefit from desegregation, whites benefit also. For these reasons, white democratic participation was integral to the success of desegregation.

White students are not the only group on college and university campuses to be democratic participants in the desegregation of society; democratic participation is needed from school officials also. For Mays, schools should be citadels of democracy, wherein the democratic spirit is exuded among students, faculty and administrators. Those who govern a school and are responsible for decision-making have a role to play in the dismantling of segregation.

> It is clear that it is the responsibility of every school to become a citadel of democracy. Trustees and board members, administrators, and faculty should make it plain to the students and the public that no color barrier exists on its campus. The policy of the institution on this point should be made quite

[16] Ibid. 686.
[17] Ibid.

> definite…When the key leadership is clear about policies things usually work out reasonably well.[18]

Mays suggests that when democracy happens at every level of an academic institution its impact pours into the community. Because academic institutions draw students, faculty and administrators from communities, the democratic spirit, when cultivated at the college or university, is reinvested into the communities from which they come. In other words, communities are affected by the spirit of democracy upon the return of students, faculty and administrators. This impact is quite significant with regard to students.

> Schools have influence in the community, and what happens on the campus of an important institution is abound to have some effect on its community. Attitudes are molded in the classroom and in college activities, and the attitudes formed in a responsible academic setting will feed back into the various locales from which students come.[19]

What Mays asserts with regard to schools as citadels of democracy can be attributed to what he experienced as a president of a Negro College. The involvement of students, faculty and administrators in the desegregation of society occurred at many Negro colleges and universities. These schools were models for how white colleges and universities could participate in a social revolution. Their participation in the desegregation of society was an affirmation and expansion of the democratic ideal. The model of Negro schools, especially it students, served as the model for white colleges and universities, especially their students. Again, Mays lamented the apathy toward and limited involvement of white students in the desegregation of American society. For him, Negro students and schools could not do it alone. To cast colleges and universities as citadels of democracy is to call for more participation, especially on the part of white colleges and universities and their students, in the desegregation of society.

[18] Ibid., 687.

The Public Role of Higher Education

Mays maintains that colleges and universities can facilitate and promote social understanding by supporting and interpreting the process toward a desegregated society. He contends that schools should take a positive stand toward the goal of a desegregated society. Further, schools should educate citizens, especially decision-makers regarding the value of a desegregated society. He suggests that as society goes through the process of desegregation, schools can play an interpretive role in each step of the process. Essentially he calls for schools to become institutional social leaders.

> Now that desegregation is being generally accepted, the schools should take a more positive stand and exercise more positive leadership in getting society desegregated…The schools can help to interpret the situation by making studies of communities where progress has been made in desegregating certain facilities…Finally, schools should encourage a direct and informed response to legislators when relevant bills are before them…When civil rights bills are defeated, then schools should interpret for the community the nonviolent protestors who demonstrate but who are sworn to the nonviolent way of life and they should permit all students to join in such nonviolent protests…The sooner the walls of separation are torn down and all discrimination based on race is abolished the sooner we will have peace in America. There will be no permanent peace if these things are not done. Can the schools work for peace? [20]

Mays was confident in education as an agent of social change. He viewed the entire enterprise of education, from institutions to scholarship to faculty to students, as an arena where actual social progress can be achieved. In his view, the enterprise of education is capable of changing both the individual and society.

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[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid., 688.

The Contemporary Significance of Mays's Legacy

Mays's confidence in the moral and political possibilities of education is a resource for engaging the social and political challenges of our age. His promotion of education, as an enterprise that is concerned with the common good and the promotion of democracy, is relevant for progressive political activity today. In particular, his appeal to education is instructive for political projects that seek to empower the disenfranchised, particularly disenfranchised minorities.

Today, education is a paramount issue in American life. Both the quality of public education and the politics of affirmative action in higher education are current topics of ongoing public discussion. Under-performing inner city schools, overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages and decreased state spending for schools and academic programs characterize the quagmire of public education in the United States today. [21] At the level of higher education, one does not have to look any further than the affirmative action debate, to weigh the significance of education in American life today. For Americans from all backgrounds, education is an arena that demands serious attention. And it is one arena where I am convinced that social progress is possible.

Historically, education has been one path to social advancement pursued by African Americans. Benjamin E. Mays represents a legacy of leadership, from the Negro era, that promoted education as a social value and a means of progress. The Black college movement, which started in the Reconstruction era, was built on the logic of education and Negro progress. Mays participated in this movement via his leadership at Howard

[21] At a high school leadership summit in October 2003, U.S. Secretary of Education, Rod Paige unveiled a series of measures to close the high school achievement gap in the United States. It was a response to what has become a national crisis in secondary education in America. Among the concerns addressed are high school drop out rates and low on- time graduation rates for high school seniors. See web article, "Paige

University and Morehouse College. His ethics of education remains relevant today. It is relevant at the levels of secondary as wells as higher education. However, its relevance is not simply limited to African Americans but to Americans from diverse backgrounds, particularly the disenfranchised, whose social and economic prospects can be elevated through education.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I gave an account of Mays's ethical perspective. By probing his philosophy of education and its application to the desegregation of American educational institutions, I unearthed his confidence in education as a means of improving race relations. What I contend in this treatment of Mays, is that his promotion of education, as a means of social progress, remains relevant today. Overall, my treatment of the theological legacy of Benjamin Elijah Mays is an effort to identify a resource for social transformation today. In this regard, it has taken seriously the social barriers that limit social change as well as identify possible routes to social transformation in light of such barriers. In terms of the former, the conservative mind of the era of segregation, as well as that of contemporary America, stands as an ongoing challenge to progressive efforts at transforming American society. As far as the latter is concerned, the arena of education, as well as democratic public discourse, are actual means of achieving and measuring social progress. This was true for Mays's era and it also holds true for ours. Though they in no way lead to the realization of an American utopia or the Beloved Community of Martin Luther King, Jr., they do lead to social betterment. To be sure,

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Unveils Series of Measures to Close High School Achievement Gap," 8 October 2003 (www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2003/10/10082003.html/).

education is not the sole arena whereby progress can be achieved. However, it is an important one. In the next and final chapter of this dissertation, I bring together all of the concerns, drawn from my treatment of Cornel West, Reinhold Niebuhr and Benjamin Elijah Mays, and offer recommendations for the reconstruction of progressive politics and political theology in a conservative age. It is to this task that I now turn.

CHAPTER VI

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE RECONSTRCTION OF PROGRESSIVE POLITICS AND THEOLOGY IN THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY

In this dissertation, I have suggested that we have witnessed the eclipse of progressive politics in the United States. In this regard, political conservatism has successfully eclipsed the influence of political liberals and political leftists. Perhaps the most visible manifestation of this eclipse is the waned influence of the civil rights establishment and the fragility of its most significant achievement, affirmative action. In this final chapter, I offer recommendations for the reconstruction of progressive politics and political theology in the United States.

There are two basic recommendations that I offer for the reconstruction of progressive politics and political theology in America today, both are grounded in political realism and democracy. First, I recommend a more realistic approach to the pursuit of democracy. In this vein, the kind of utopianism that accompanies a democratic vision such as Cornel West's, needs modification. A political concept such as democracy, to say nothing of "radical democracy," is utopian enough without the "radical" adjective. Building on the insights of Reinhold Niebuhr, insights pertaining to the myth of progress in history and the limits of liberalism and radicalism, I recommend a pursuit of democracy without illusions. Second, I call for more democratic political and theological discourse among political liberals and especially radical leftists, and for the pursuit of achievable social goals. In this vein, the kind of political perfectionism that concerned Niebuhr in his criticism of Marxism needs to be discouraged among liberals and radical

leftists. When it comes down to public issues such as affirmative action and higher education, political realism and democratic public discourse are needed. It is in this regard that the theological legacy of Benjamin Elijah Mays is of paramount importance. The value of democratic theological discourse is integral to the legacy of Benjamin Elijah Mays. Connected to the value of democratic theological discourse, is the pursuit of achievable social goals in service of the expansion of democracy. In Mays, education is a vital means for expanding democracy and bringing about social change. One means of expanding democracy through education today is public support for two-year colleges. In concluding this chapter, I discuss two-year colleges as a means of expanding democracy and achieving progressive social change in a conservative age. This discussion proceeds in light of ongoing debates about affirmative action and higher education. All of the concerns of this dissertation are brought together in this discussion.

Political Realism, Democratic Political Discourse and Progressive Politics in the Early 21st Century

In chapter two, I raised some concerns about the pursuit of radical democracy in the prophetic pragmatism of Cornel West. Again, I am not as hopeful as is West about the future of democracy in America. The politics of privilege and merit that I see in political conservatism, coupled with the moral absolutism of the Christian Right and the separatist nature of identity politics, prevents me from sharing his democratic hopes for America. Of the three forces mentioned, I view political conservatism as the greatest barrier to his hopes for a democracy that embraces the concerns of disenfranchised racial minorities, gays and lesbians, and women. In my estimation, the kind of participatory democracy sought by West is a remote possibility. Although "radical democracy" is a remote

possibility, the pursuit of more democracy, remains important. However, I am convinced that the pursuit of democracy should be undertaken without illusions. In terms of progressive politics in the United State today, the pursuit of democracy without illusions requires an acknowledgement of the state and limits of progressive politics in the 21st century. In other words, it requires political honesty or political realism. Reinhold Niebuhr's reflections on liberalism and radicalism are insightful in this regard.

Political Realism and Political Liberalism in the Early 21st Century

In chapter two, I turned to Niebuhr's reflections on political liberalism in the early 20th century. His reflections may be extended to liberalism in last decades of late 20th century and the early 21st. Niebuhr's criticism of the optimism of the supposedly enlightened or liberal intellectual of his day can be extended to American liberal intellectuals today. Niebuhr's critique of the liberal of his day was based on assumptions regarding the supposedly evolutionary and progressive course of American society. Consider the political liberalism born out of the Great Society Era. There is a sense in which the anti-poverty programs and civil rights policies, born out of that era, were connected to optimism about America's future. Seemingly, the social dilemmas surrounding poverty and race could be alleviated if not eradicated. Yet such optimism took for granted the conservative forces which sought the preservation the then prevailing social arrangements. In the early 21st century political conservatism has all but crushed such optimism. The idea of "Big Government" as symbolized by Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal" and Lyndon Baines Johnson's "Great Society," is remote if not non-existent in contemporary political affairs. The conservative ideology which reigns today is the

result of over twenty years of social engineering which has limited the powers of government in American life. In turn, corporate power and influence has replaced that of government. It is a consequence of the conservative reaction to "Big Government" liberalism, which dominated the third quarter of the 20th century, has led to the unprecedented social reforms of the 1950s, 60s and 70s. Massive social reform ushered in a conservative backlash at the dawn of the 1980's. Somewhere between 1976 and 1980 political liberalism lost its luster, and it social consequences for subsequent decades were tremendous. From the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 to George Bush in 1988, William Jefferson Clinton in 1992, and to George W. Bush in 2000, conservative ideology has reigned in American politics.

One writer, H.W. Brands, tells a story of the rise and fall of liberalism in the last half of the 20th century. In his book, *The Strange Death of American Liberalism*, Brands speaks to the current state of liberalism and its death:

> The unsolved of American politics is: Who killed liberalism? The decease is undeniable (even if, like the death of Elvis, it is occasionally denied). During the 1960's, liberalism permeated American political life; it was in the very air, supplying the optimism and energy that allowed Lyndon Johnson and the Great Society Congress to declare war on poverty and inequality and believe they could affect the historic foes of human happiness. But by the mid-1970's the liberal dream had died and by the early 1980's "liberal" had become an almost actionable epithet. Subsequent sightings of liberalism's ghost were occasionally mistaken for the real thing, but after a feckless attempt by the Clinton Administration to refashion national health care, even the ghost was rarely seen.[1]

On one level, the strange death of liberalism can be understood as a result of a conservative revolution, which began in the mid to late 1970s. However, it may also be understood in terms of the effectiveness of conservatives at persuading large numbers of

[1] H.W. Brands, *The Strange Death of American Liberalism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), vii.

Americans that "Big Government" is not good for American society. Conservatism reigns not simply because its ideology drew people to the polls. It reigns because conservative ideologues out-muscled political liberals in terms of organization, commitment, finance and political strategy. Overall, the success of conservatism cannot be reduced to politics. It is a matter of conservatives utilizing more than political tools in influencing large numbers of people. Whereas liberals of the 1960s, and 1970s relied primarily upon political representation to garner popular support and implement massive social reforms, conservatives used a multiplicity of tools, namely, mass media, religion and overall culture. In other words, they exerted influence upon Americans by not just appealing to Capitol Hill and who should hold public office. Rather, conservatives appealed to cultural issues such as, child rearing, sex and violence in the media, and moral issues that touch large numbers of people regardless of political persuasion. Furthermore, conservatives embraced religion, particularly Christianity, as a source of value. In doing so, they appealed to the popular religiosity of the American public. Culture, not politics, made their success inevitable.

Another writer, Sara Diamond, has written extensively on conservatism, especially in its evangelical form, and its impact on American politics and culture. In two significant studies, *Roads to Dominion: Right Wing Movements and Political Power In the United States* and *Not By Politics Alone: The Enduring Influence of the Christian Right* (1998), Diamonds attests to monstrous influence of the conservative right. She argues that the success of the right is derived their ability to influence people through cultural politics not simply representational politics. The conservative appeal to culture,

especially as it is connected with religious and traditional values, accounts for why liberalism has been eclipsed. On the enduring influence of the right, Diamond asserts:

> Its successful mobilization has been decades in the making, has been the result of astute planning by movement leaders and the commitment of tens of thousands of adherents, who draw strength largely from sources outside the formal halls of power. The Christian Right remains the most powerful, active forces in U.S. politics today. Partly because the movement delivers votes to the Republican Party. But the Christian right is much more than an electoral faction. . . . It is a political movement rooted in evangelical subculture, one that offer participants both the means and motivation to try to take dominion over secular society.[2]

The death of liberalism's influence in American politics and culture is a tragedy. It is the result of the combined forces of political and cultural conservatism. The ideals of social democracy and tolerance and the practical effects of political liberalism: social legislation for the poor and disadvantaged are not held in high esteem, particularly by the rulers and decision makers in our society. The death of liberalism has resulted in a great chasm between the powerful and powerless, those who live in relative comfort and excess and those who struggle materially (economically) to survive. The dream of the Great Society has proven to be just that, a dream. Herein lies the tragedy of liberalism's death; it is a dream deferred.

The Limits of Radicalism in the 21st Century

Connected to the limits of political liberalism in the early 21st are the limits of radical politics. Reinhold Niebuhr's reflections on Marx are vital to a discussion regarding the limits of radicalism in the early 21st century. Integral to this discussion are the utopian and perfectionistic tendencies of radicalism, tendencies that lead to a political

[2] Sara Diamond, *Not By Politics Alone: The Enduring Influence of the Christian Right* (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 1998), 1.

and economic absolutism with regard to social arrangements. As a result, democratic political discourse on how best to improve our society is thwarted. In my estimation, utopianism and perfectionism are not only the limits of radicalism; they also represent its dangers. Further, there are additional dangers of radicalism that I reserved for this chapter, dangers that I will address at some length. These dangers prevent democratic political discourse and coalition building and are characteristic of theologies of liberation and radical feminism. They involve fanaticism and what I call the romanticization of the oppressed. For the purposes of this discussion, I will revisit Niebuhr's reflections on radicalism, coupled with three contemporary writers, who also seek more democracy in political discourse, and discuss their relevance for political and theological discourse today.

The Dangers of Radical Politics

As Niebuhr points out, the utopian and perfectionistic impulse of Marx called for radical social change. In this regard, he understood the Marxist vision as a form of radicalism. Again, the goal of the Marxist vision and radicalism, for that matter, is the total transformation of the dominant order. Niebuhr conceded the noble aims of radicalism. However, he did warn of its dangers, dangers which resulted in fanatical practices that were undemocratic.

> Radicalism as a method of observation brushes the moral pretensions and cultural elaborations of a given civilization aside to discover what kind of power-relations is to be found at the foundation of the social structure. Radicalism as a method of action seek to level centres of power in the interest of justice. The radical is therefore necessary in every society but he is particularly needed in an era in which old forms are disintegrating and the

> new ones are emerging. Yet the radical cannot built or preserve a society unaided.[3]

Niebuhr concedes that radicalism has a place in a society which is undergoing tremendous social change. In many respects it assists social change under the appropriate condition. In this regard, one thinks of the social movements of the 1960's and how the presence of black radicals, the Black Panther Party, and women radicals, the National Organization of Women, contributed to the dawn of a new era. They were aided by a climate of progressive social change which swept not only the United States, but also the third world.

Though radicalism does have a place when the conditions are right, radicals cannot go it alone. Niebuhr suggests that despite their noble aims, radicals cannot implement transformation without the aid of others, namely, the dominant class. He maintains that one of the dangers of radicalism is the assumption that social transformation can occur without the aid of dominant classes. Those who manage the dominant social order are needed in its transformation. Unfortunately, radicalism is prone to dismissing the dominant class as allies in social transformation. At worst, members of the dominant class are cast as foes that need to be eliminated along with the dominant order. In this regard, radicals lack what Niebuhr calls a "Liberal Spirit in Morals."

[3] Ibid., 252; idem, *Reflections on the End of an Era*.

> Radicalism is so intent upon bringing the covert conflicts in society into the open and upon discounting the ethical pretensions of power-politics that its eye is not accustomed to recognize and to appreciate the elements of mutual accord which actually develop in every social in every social situation. If the liberal spirit is beset by the sin of hypocrisy because it inclines to provide moral refinements for essential unmoral relations, the besetting sin of a consistent radicalism is cruelty, because it fails to appreciate the motives of honest sympathy and justice which manifest themselves in any society. The pure radical has difficulty in coming to terms with his foe short of the foes annihilation and in organizing a society by other than tyrannical means.[4]

Radicalism can lend itself to social practices that are not democratic. By casting members of the dominant class as foes it runs the risk of loosing potential allies. Consequently, pure radicalism not only prevents alliances with members of the dominant class, it also alienates and marginalizes the radical, thus rendering their aims immobile. Again Niebuhr asserts,

> No old system is supplanted purely by a conflict of interest between the privileged and the disinherited. The influence of the relatively disinherited, who view the struggle in rational and moral terms, is always considerable. No proletarian movement has yet existed that did not receive invaluable aid from middle-class intellectuals. The Negroes did not receive their emancipation nor will they be able to gain further extensions of rights in our society without the aid of white men of sensitive conscience. The struggle for the full political and social emancipation of women was a contest of power in which the new economic weapons which an industrial civilization placed into the hands of women were probably decisive factors. The struggle was nevertheless not purely a contest of power. The women had the support of many men who had become convinced of the justice of the feminist cause.[5]

These reflections, written more than three decades before the civil rights and women's movements, speak volumes about the dangers of a radicalism that does not posses a liberal spirit in morals. Negroes and women who seek to go it alone in changing the social order run the risk of not changing anything at all. The cause of the disinherited is only aided through the assistance of the privileged. In the end, the danger of radicalism

[4] Ibid., 252.
[5] Ibid., 253.

is an “us” versus “them” approach to social transformation. The “us” is the disinherited, the oppressed or in Marxist doctrine the proletarian class. The “us” is the focus of the radicals vision and advocacy, and the prime agent responsible for carrying out social transformation. The “them” refers to the oppressor, the status quo, members of the establishment or the system. In Marxist doctrine “them” refers to the owners of production, the capitalists. In the end, for the Marx informed radical the relationship between the oppressed and oppressor and their relationship is one of alienation. It is this alienation that Niebuhr challenges. Tragically, Marxist thought encourages this alienation. Niebuhr questions this alienated relationship in criticizing what he calls the exaltation of the proletariat in Marxist doctrine.

Romanticizing the Oppressed

An important feature of Marxist thought is the role of the proletariat or oppressed in bringing about a new social order. In bringing about this new social order the oppressed are viewed as moral agents who because of their social status, possess the virtue and perspective necessary for social transformation. Niebuhr criticizes the exaltation of the proletariat or the oppressed in Marxist doctrine. In his criticisms he points to the dangers of ascribing moral superiority and infallibility to the values and perspectives of the economically and politically disenfranchised –the oppressed. In his reading of Marx he contends that the oppressed are exalted because they have an undistorted view of the problems of society and thus have greater revolutionary potential than the dominant classes in transforming it. Hence, the oppressed or proletariat become the elect in bringing about a new social order. Niebuhr contends that this outlook is

illusory because it imposes a messianic burden upon the oppressed and it assumes that the oppressed are not vulnerable to the kinds of corruption found among dominant classes. Further, exalting the oppressed inadvertently encourages collective egoism and the will to power among the oppressed, which for Niebuhr can have destructive consequences. In speaking of the messianism and egoism extolled by the primacy of the oppressed in Marx and the logic behind it Niebuhr asserts the following:

> It is not difficult for the moralist to detect immoral elements in the Marxian exaltation of class. It is charged with both vindictiveness and egoism. The egoism is the more pronounced for being a compensation of frustrated ego in the contemporary situation. The class which has its human meaning and significance destroyed in the immediate situation, declares itself the most significant class for the future of history. While this may lead to a deification of the class, reaching absurd mystical proportions, it is on the subjective side an understandable reaction to present inferiority, and, objectively considered, it may be justified by the strategic importance of the proletarian class in the task of rebuilding society. Who is better able to understand the true character of a civilization than those who suffer most from its limitations? Who is better able to state the social ideal in unqualified terms than those who have experienced the bankruptcy of old social realities in their own lives? Who will have more creative vigor in destroying the old and building the new than those whose lives hunger, vengeance and holy dreams have compounded a tempestuous passion. [6]

For Niebuhr, there is a danger in exalting the oppressed. This danger exists on three levels. First, exalting the oppressed denies that the oppressed are fallible and vulnerable to corruption, and assumes that the new social order, ushered in by the oppressed, will not replicate the abuses of the old order or implement new abuses within the new order. Second, in ushering a new social order through radically transformation, the oppressed run the risk of not preserving anything of value from the old order. It is less than likely that a messianic proletarian class, in its desperation to create in a new order, will be concerned with preserving anything from the old. Finally, there are the

[6] Ibid., 156; idem, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*

consequences of collective egoism and the will to power among the oppressed. Such consequences involve political and economic loyalties and commitments among the oppressed that do no go beyond their class. In this manner, the oppressed duplicate the abuses of dominant order. Essentially, the exaltation of the oppressed is illusory. In Niebuhr's word's,

> The question which confronts society is, how it can eliminate social injustice by methods which offer some fair opportunity of abolishing what is evil in our present society, without destroying what is worth preserving in it, and without running the risk of substituting new abuses and injustices in the place of those abolished. That question raises two issues which the proletarian is not willing to consider. From his perspective there is nothing good in modern society which deserves preservation. In his mood he is not inclined to worry about the future. Like all desperate men he can afford to be romantic about it.[7]

Exalting the status of the oppressed is tantamount to making the oppressed a totality, a totality with possibility of tyranny and corruption. Niebuhr warns that romanticizing the oppressed only conceals their limitations. In other words, the oppressed are just as fallible and prone to error and hegemony as the dominant classes. Moreover, what makes this doctrine problematic is that it denigrates the dominant classes or oppressor and it renders them impotent in being a potential ally. To ascribe moral superiority and infallibility to the oppressed deems the dominant classes as inferior to the oppressed. It denies the fact that the oppressed and the dominant classes are dependent upon each other and prevents alliances and communication between the two. Such alliances and communication could aid the cause of the oppressed while simultaneously minimizing the potential for corruption and tyranny among the oppressed.

The dangers of romanticizing the oppressed, that Niebuhr cites in reference to Marxist thought, are evident in North American theologies of liberation. In contemporary

terms, the romanticization of the oppressed in Marxist doctrine is equivalent to the exaltation of blacks in black liberation theology, that of women in feminist and womanist, theologies, and the poor in all. The romanticization of these groups is the equivalent of the moral superiority and infallibility ascribed to the oppressed in Marxist doctrine. The denial of possible tyranny and corruption among the oppressed are concealed. The consequence is the totalization of the status of the blacks, women and the poor, with the dominant classes being deemed inferior. Concretely, this means that political activity and discussions surrounding race, gender and class become one-dimensional. Hence, whites have nothing to contribute to political activity and discussions regarding race and racism, men nave nothing to contribute to political activity and discussions involving gender and sexism, and the rich and powerful have nothing to contribute to political activity and conversations surrounding class and poverty.

Perhaps the greatest limitation of romanticizing the oppressed is the potential of the oppressed for failing to distinguish genuine allies from rivals. Consequently, blacks are left without alliances with whites, women without alliances with men and it leaves the poor without alliances with the rich and powerful. In the end, the totalization of the oppressed only hurts and does the oppressed a disservice. It places a gargantuan responsibility on the shoulders of the oppressed to escape oppression. It tempts the oppressed to go it alone and take on a system without the help of dominant classes. It tempts the oppressed to go it alone when, in actuality, it needs allies from and among the dominant classes.

Consider black liberation theology, as a case for thinking about the romanticization of the oppressed. Beyond its radical demands, a consistent feature of

[7] Ibid., 168.

James H. Cone's perspective is the primacy of the black oppressed as agents of black liberation. By virtue of their social status blacks have higher moral potential and insight than whites in undertaking black liberation. By virtue of their privileged status whites have lower moral potential and little to contribute (beyond money) to the cause of black liberation. In Cone's perspective, alliances between blacks and whites are not given thorough treatment and the idea that the black oppressed are morally fallible is concealed. In the end, it places an unfair and unrealistic messianism or moral responsibility on the shoulders of African Americans, while at the same time contributing to the ongoing polarization of African Americans and whites in American society.

Further Criticisms of Radicalism in Contemporary Political Thought

Niebuhr's criticisms of Marx, particularly its utopianism and romancing of the oppressed, holds true for Marx inspired radicals today. In American political and cultural life today, the anti-capitalism and pro-proletarian impulse of the legacy of Karl Marx exerts little if any influence upon the power-holders and decision-makers of our society. What's more, the forms of radicalism informed by Marx's legacy, such as communism, socialism, various kinds of nationalism and radical feminism, have been eclipsed by the very economic forces which Marx eschewed. The children of Marx's legacy, particularly those on the cultural and political left, who invoke Marx's name or categories from his thought, are hard pressed to find popular support for their Marxian loyalties. This is especially true for the champions of the oppressed in American society, i.e. black Marxists, liberationists, radical feminists and others.

Richard Rorty speaks to the eclipse of radicalism in an essay that is concerned with the plight of the cultural and political left in the 20th century. In his book, *Achieving Our Country*, Marxism in the West is indicted in the following passage:

> At the end of the twentieth century, Marxism is the position of Roman Catholicism at the end of the seventeenth. By then the full horror of the Renaissance papacies and of the Inquisition had been made known. Many Christians thought that it would be best for the bishops of Rome to close up shop. Christianity, they pointed out, had long antedated the papacy, and would be much better off for its demise.[8]

Rorty's comments on the fate of Marxism are not that of a faithful loyalist who laments that the savior has not arrived, but one who sees the limitations of Marxism, especially its abuses, and parallels its fate to that of Catholicism on the eve of the Enlightenment. In this regard, Rorty proposes a repudiation of Marxian loyalties, particularly among the cultural and political left, who turn to Marx for inspiration. In another passage, he suggests that Marx's legacy is limited and should not determine the course of the American left, neither should the story of the left should be told by and through a Marxist lens.

> For us Americans, it is important not to let Marxism influence the story we tell about our own left. We should repudiate the Marxist insinuation that only those who are convinced the capitalism must be overthrown can count as leftists, and everybody else is a wimpy liberal, a self-deceiving bourgeois reformer….I think that we should abandon the leftist- versus- liberal distinction, along with other residues of Marxism that clutter up our vocabulary-overworked words like "commodification" and "ideology," for example. [9]

Rorty's reflections point to the limits of Marx's legacy. Such limits are reflected in the undemocratic tendencies of Marxism that led to repression in many regions of the world, Europe, the Soviet Union and Africa. Its limits are also reflected in its impotent

[8] Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 41.

history in the U.S. Rorty derides the monopoly Marxists have had on leftist thought in America, that its anti-capitalism and pro-proletarian impulse defines the true spirit of justice. Those who are not so moved by such an impulse cannot be considered genuine leftists. Such sentiments in his view are undemocratic and polarizing. Hence, he calls for a democratization of leftist thought. Such democratization leads to the relinquishing of Marx's stranglehold on leftist or progressive thought. Such democratization extends to left-wing beneficiaries of Marx's legacy. One beneficiary already mentioned is black liberation theology. Another such beneficiary is radical feminism.

Earlier I discussed the dangers of romanticizing the oppressed. This discussion dealt primarily with liberation theologies, particularly black liberation theology, where dominant and powerless classes are forever alienated from one another due to the romanticization of the oppressed. However, another issue is connected to this discussion. This has to do with the alienation and abuse that occurs between and among victims of oppression, especially when members of oppressed groups refuse to romanticize oppression. In other words, what does it mean when the oppressed oppress each other? Radical feminism is one arena where this question may be raised.

The dangers of radicalism, which concerned Niebuhr and worries Rorty, are also evident in radical feminist thought. The Marxian vocabulary of exploitation, oppression, commodification and ideology are a part of the radical feminist lexicon. As Rorty suggests, such vocabulary has been overworked and even abused. One writer who points to the dangers of romanticizing oppression, especially where women are concerned is Jean Bethke Elshtain. In Elshtain's work, romanticizing the oppressed results in repression. Elshtian maintains that radical feminism is repressive in its demands for

[9] Ibid., 41-42.

absolute solidarity and conformity, by way of thought and political practice among women. She maintains that it is repressive because it does not allow for difference nor substantive debate among women. In Elshtain's estimation, radical feminism only allows a singular approach and perspective towards the lives of women. Furthermore, it distorts the concrete social realities that women face. In calling for women's liberation, Elshtain suggests that radical feminism contributes more to the oppression of women than to their freedom. In an essay treating the repressive quality of radical feminism, Elshtain asserts the following:

> I have characterized as repressive the major statements of that wing of feminism which terms itself "radical." I use the term advisedly. It is not deployed in a loose and pejorative sense but as a careful depiction and evaluation of a version of liberation that, as it is internalized by individual women, requires that they deny whole dimensions of their lives and experience. These denials are then buttressed and kept in place by incessant and intrusive demands for solidarity by the constant reiteration of doctrinal truths. Ultimately, the denial is itself denied and placed, as a burden, a judgement, and an accusation, upon others with the implicit aim of silencing them.[10]

Elsthain writes not as one who belittles nor disregards the real suffering of women. Rather, she writes as an empathizer who has serious concerns regarding how the suffering of women is articulated, advocated, and contested. In another passage she maintains the following:

> I do not question the genuine problems and suffering found by women within this-or any other-society. But I do question the level at which radical feminist arguments are couched; insultingly simpleminded; replete with contempt for rigorous, systematic thought; insistent upon naïve and dangerous rejection of the need for tentativeness, deliberation and criticism in both politics and the arts that cannot be expected to turn on a simple set of truths. Radical feminism becomes the paradigmatic instance of repressive feminism in the

[10] Jean Bethke Elsthain, *Real Politics: At the Center of Everyday Life* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1997), 174.

> degree of self- repudiation and denial it demands and in the muddled and ultimately numbing coherence of those analyses it fears. [11]

For the most part, Elshtain views radical feminism as one-dimensional. It is a one-dimensionality, which regards all men as unredeemable oppressors and all women as oppressed. It prevents men from being genuine allies of women in their search for more freedom and treats women as perpetual victims. Like the proletariat in Marxist thought, women as a class are viewed in messianic terms responsible for their liberation. It has a quality of fanaticism which Niebuhr wrote about when dealing with radical Marxism. And as Rorty suggests, it has led to repression, giving leftist thought a bad name.

Romancing the oppressed in black liberation theology and radical feminism is one reason for the eclipse of progressive politics in the last twenty years. There is a sense in which the success of conservatism at the end of the twentieth century has been aided by the abuses of progressives. The polarizing tendencies of radicalism: the polarities of black and white, rich and poor, male and female, coupled with absolutist perspectives, have facilitated its eclipse. These polarizing characteristics of radicalism that I term "the romanticization of the oppressed," is what Richard J. Ellis has called, "The Darkside of the Left." Ellis suggests that the polarizing tendencies of radicalism betray the best of the liberal progressive tradition. Like Elsthtain, Ellis turns to radical feminism as case study for "Illiberal" practices among radicals. Ellis calls for a repudiation of "Illiberal" leftist thought and practice, radical feminism being one instance. In providing a definition of "Illiberalism" Ellis posits:

> By "Illiberal" I mean, as Webster's dictionary defines it, "intolerant, bigoted, narrow minded," but also I have in mind a broader collection of related attitudes and behaviors, including disregard for civil liberties and individual autonomy, an authoritarian, antipolitical or antidemocratic ethos, Manichean

[11] Ibid., 174.

> view of the world as a battleground between absolute good and absolute evil, demonization of the enemy or moral absolutism, a conspiratorial, apocalyptic or millenial outlook, and glorification of violence.[12]

"Illiberalism" betrays the liberal progressive tradition. Unfortunately, Marxist thought and its radical offshoots such as radical feminism are guilty of committing the sin of "Illiberalism." Again, radical feminism is not the only branch of leftist thought which guilty of this sin. African American radicals: black Marxists and black liberation theologies and womanist and feminist liberation theologies are implicated also. These instances of radical discourse have repressive and "Illiberal" tendencies. The "Illiberalism" of these branches of thought place limits on genuine conversation and debate and prevent coalition building around substantive issues, namely, those surrounding gender, race and class, overall progressive social transformation. Such "Illiberalism" and its consequences is a tragedy.

Overall, I am convinced that democratic political discourse is necessary if progressive social change is to occur in America. I will concede the value of radical politics under certain conditions, like a totalitarian government. However, I do not think it has value today's political climate. The dominance and persistence of political conservatism is testament to its limitations. What I call for is more democratic political discourse surrounding the substantive issues of our age. Not only is democratic political discourse needed, but democratic theological discourse and practical ethical strategies are needed also. The legacy of Benjamin Elijah Mays is instructive in this regard.

[12] Richard J. Ellis, *The Darkside of the Left: Illiberal Egalitarianism in America* (Lawrence, Kansas: The University of Kansas Press, 1998), xi.

Democratic Theological Discourse and the Expansion of Democracy in a Conservative Age

The pursuit of more democracy is not only aided by democratic political discourse; it is also aided by democratic theological discourse, and by the pursuit of achievable social goals. The legacy of Benjamin Elijah Mays is instructive along these lines, especially where theology and education are concerned. The value of democratic theological discourse and the pursuit of an achievable goal, such as the education of African Americans, are instructive for political theology today. At the level of theology, Mays appealed to a democratic understanding of the image of God, in connection to the inherent worth and potential of human beings. This view affirmed the inherent worth and equality of all human beings. In this regard, no individual, social class, race or social group is precluded from contributing to the flourishing of the world. This includes American Negroes, the rich and powerful, the disenfranchised of society, persons from different cultural backgrounds, women, etc. Throughout his lifetime, Mays employed this theological concept to de-center white supremacy and the idea of Negro inferiority. For the American Negro was precluded from contributing to American civilization. Given Mays's democratic conception of the image of God, What would it mean to employ democratic theological discourse in such terms today?

One way to improve theological discourse, particularly at the level of political theology is to move away from theological discourse that privileges any particular social group, race, class or gender, In my estimation, theological discourse that privileges the powerful and wealthy of society, whites, African Americans, women, the economically disenfranchised does more harm than good. Again, I must refer the earlier discussion surrounding black liberation theology and the dilemmas that arise from romanticizing the

social status and experience of the oppressed. Such privileging denies the moral fallibility of the oppressed and opens the door to all manner of abuse by the oppressed. What holds true for black liberation theology, theologies of liberation and the American left, for that matter, is also true for political conservatism. In my reading of political conservatism in the United States, there is an overt privileging of the affluent and powerful in American society. The conservative focus on individualism, competition and merit is an idolization of the privileged classes in America. With such a focus, especially where merit is concerned, political conservatives are committing the same errors as their liberal and left-wing opponents. In their obsession with merit, political conservatives deny the morally fallibility of those who have privilege, power and prestige. Consider, for example, the financial scandals in the corporate world involving the ENRON corporation and corporate powerhouse Martha Stewart. Also, consider the endless speculations surrounding election fraud in Florida and the presidency of George W. Bush in 2000. Due to these considerations, I contend that theological discourse should move away from privileging any social group, class, race or gender. More democracy is needed in theological discourse today and the theological outlook of Benjamin Elijah Mays is a resource in this regard.

In terms of social ethics, Mays viewed education as one arena where social progress is possible. Interestingly, he did not view education as *the* means of resolving *all* the social dilemmas that plague the disenfranchised, particularly the disenfranchised American Negro of his era. Rather, education was one means of improving the social lot of the American Negro. My contention is that education is a valuable arena for pursuing

social progress today. For a moment, I will discuss the possibilities of education in relation to the affirmative action debate.

One of the limitations of the affirmative action debate is that it tends to focus solely on minority admission into four- year institutions of higher education. It is easy to walk away from arguments for or against affirmative action, with the impression that the education of minorities is solely determined by these institutions. Unfortunately, two year colleges, as possible sites for minority educational advancement, are seldom factored into the discussion. Just consider the conservative argument against affirmative action that focuses on the performance of minorities on standardized tests such as the SAT. This argument, citing low test scores and even poor academic achievement among minorities, is perhaps the strongest case against affirmative action. If one concedes to this argument, does this mean that the educational pursuits of minorities are permanently thwarted? Is it possible that there are colleges in the United States that better serve the needs of minority students, particularly students that do not perform well on standardized tests and are even ill prepared for college? Is it possible to transcend the affirmative action debate and at the same commend formal education for minorities, especially minorities that do not perform well on standardized test and are even ill prepared for higher education? For this writer, there are colleges that better serve such students. One system of higher education that works in this vein is the junior or community college system.

One way to transcend the dilemmas of the affirmative action debate and at the same time promote social progress by means of education is to promote junior or community college education. In the United States there exists a system of junior and community colleges that serve students that either lack the financial resources necessary

for a four-year college or university or are sufficiently insufficiently prepared, academically, to compete at such schools. Typically, the financially challenged student is also academically ill prepared. However, it is the ill prepared student that I am principally concerned with. Unlike elite institutions of higher education where the issue of affirmative action is endlessly contested, junior and community colleges provide ill prepared students with the necessary resources, context and leverage required for further education advancement. In my estimation, the junior college system in America is democracy in practice. It makes social mobility possible through providing educational opportunities to persons who otherwise could not afford them.

In a recent issue of *Black Issues in Higher Education*, a series of articles were devoted to community colleges, African Americans and higher education.[13] They were written in light of a recent Supreme Court ruling that favored affirmative action at the University of Michigan. The articles were proactive in responding to the high court's positive ruling. The articles acknowledged that the affirmative action debate is far from over and pointed to junior colleges as an overlooked and undervalued resources where African Americans and higher education are concerned.

By highlighting educational statistics from the Department of Education and interviewing community college administrators, the articles suggest that junior colleges are a vital means of preparing minorities for bachelor degrees while at the same time transcending the affirmative action issue. According to the research, junior colleges enroll the highest percentage of degree seeking African American in higher education. In 2000, of all degrees conferred to African Americans, 28% came from community

colleges. Associate degrees which were secondary to bachelor degrees, constituted 50.3 % of all degrees conferred to African Americans. Master's, professional and doctoral degrees represented 17.3, 2.4 and .9% respectively of all degrees conferred to African Americans.

One junior college highlighted in the articles was Miami Dade College in Miami, Florida. Miami Dade College is the largest junior college in the United States with 160,000 students. It leads the nation is producing minorities with associate degrees. It is also the school where this writer earned an associate degree. Miami Dade is a feeder school for public and private colleges and universities across the state of Florida. Schools such as Florida International University, University of Central Florida, Florida Memorial College, Florida A&M University and Florida State University, to name several, are sites for further educational advancement of graduates of Miami Dade. To be sure, schools outside of the state of Florida are also targets for graduates of Miami Dade. For non - traditional students, especially the academically ill prepared minority students, Miami Dade is a port of entry of higher education. For the ill prepared minority student the two-year junior college is a viable starting point for obtaining a higher education.

In my estimation, it is less than likely that the affirmative action debate, in relation to undergraduate education, will go away. As long as an objective measure such as the SAT is used to question the ability and potential of minority students, and as long as minority students fall below such measures, the affirmative action debate will continue. In fact, the elimination of the practice, in the distant future, is not inconceivable. In light of such prospects, there remains the ongoing challenge of

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[13] See "Community Colleges: A Port of Entry," in *Black Issues in Higher Education*, 28 August 2003, volume 14. Two insightful articles in this series are "An Overlooked Oasis?" by Kendra Hamilton, and

preparing minority students for college. The junior or community college is an undervalued and underexposed resource that is a proactive means of serving students that are ill prepared for four year institutions.

Overall, I acknowledge that greater effort has to be made in preparing minority students for higher education and that there is a link between higher education and social mobility. I further acknowledge that education alone will not resolve the dilemmas wrought out of the injustices of history. Connected to this limitation of education, is the fact that the route of education is not desired or pursued by all. Notwithstanding the said limitations, education remains viable arena for social progress in a conservative age.

Conclusion

In a conservative age, progressive efforts toward social transformation are challenged to be creative and self-correcting. There is a sense in which the dominance of conservative ideology is due in part to the imaginative and organizational efforts, of conservatives. Through the use of think tanks, media outlets, and organized religion, conservatives have eclipsed the public influence of liberals and radicals. Again, such influence is not the result of politics alone. Although politics is a major arena of conservative domination such dominance is not the result of politics alone. This insight should not be lost on progressives.

The concerns of this dissertation lead me to label early 21st century America an age of conservatism. This dissertation has dealt primarily with political conservatism and its implications for political theology and progressive politics. However, there are forms of conservatism beyond politics, such as cultural and intellectual conservatism, that are

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"Taking an Alternate Route" by Pamela Burdman.

also deserving of ethical and theological reflection. Political conservatism is a starting point for discussing the future of progressive social change in contemporary America. And I am eager for others to join me in this conversation.

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