

Love Your Enemies: Cancel Culture, Suffering & Faith

Featuring Dr. Cornel West

August 18, 2026

TRANSCRIPT

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Welcome everyone to Cornerstone University's Wisdom and Influence podcast. We are honored to have a very special guest. He serves as the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Chair at Union Theological Seminary, where he teaches the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as well as courses in philosophy of religion, African American critical thought, and a wide range of subjects from the classics to philosophy, to politics, to cultural theory, to literature, to music.

He has a passion to communicate to a vast variety of publics in order to keep alive the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr., a legacy of telling the truth and bearing witness to love and justice. He also is the former Professor of Practice of Public Philosophy at Harvard University, and Professor Emeritus at Princeton University, graduated magna cum laude from Harvard in three years, obtained his MA and PhD in philosophy from Princeton.

He's written 20 books, edited 13, best known for his classics, *Race Matters*, *Democracy Matters*, and his wonderful memoir, *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud*. And I should add, he also was one of our recent distinguished panelists at Cornerstone's Wisdom Conversations back in March, where he joined his lifelong friend, Robbie George, from Princeton, for our panel on America at 250, Christianity and the American Experience.

Please join me in welcoming Professor Brother Cornel West. Brother West, thank you so much for being here. It's an honor to have you on our podcast, sir.

Cornel West: Well, brother, you bless me. You honor me to have me on your show, and I salute you. Brother Robbie and I had a magnificent time there at Cornerstone University. Very, very special university there in Grand Rapids, and very blessed to have you as captain of the ship, my dear brother, President.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Thank you, my brother. It was a wonderful event. I will tell you that people have not stopped talking about it. We believe it was one of the best ones we ever had, and you and Robbie did such a wonderful job of speaking truth and being filled with the Spirit, and it was just a beautiful time. So thank you for all you've done since that time, obviously, but at that time for contributing to our university and our students and mission. We've just had nothing but wonderful comments. And more than that, life-changing conversation. It was really a life-changing conversation for many. So thank you.

Cornel West: No, but I... We thank you. We have very precious memories, golden memories of being at Cornerstone University.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Well, thank you, my brother. There's so much to talk about. Thank you for being with us again. And I thought we'd kick off our conversation together. I've gone through your memoir, and it's such a beautiful story. Thank you for sharing it with all of us. And I wanted to ask you to talk with us about moral formation, the moral formation in your life before you began your formal intellectual training at Harvard, right? You had such a rich experience. And so often in education today, we talk about information, and it's easy to forget that formation is so important, and we're being formed all the time in life, if we let life form us as God gives it to us. So perhaps you can share with us some of these formative experiences in your life before you began your intellectual training.

Cornel West: I think my dear brother, one of the grandest operations of grace in my life was being born to Irene West and Clifton West. I don't have a language, words fall short to begin to capture their love, their integrity, their dignity, their magnanimity, just greatness of character. And they were deeply shaped by Christian traditions, especially Shiloh Baptist Church in Sacramento, California. And so my soul craft, my moral formation, my character cultivation was so deeply grounded in the West household and Shiloh Baptist Church. I mean, those are the two most crucial influences that have shaped my life, and that comes through of course in the memoir.

There's no doubt about that. And by the time I went off to college, to Harvard and Princeton, and then professor in other places, I had already been spiritually grounded. You know, I knew who my anchor was. I knew the ways in which Jesus holds us, the anchor holds. You need some kind of fundamental, spiritual and moral foundation.

Now, I've always fallen short because I'm a cracked vessel, of course, but at the same time, I know what the standards are. I know what the great examples are. And when I think of Dad and Mom, and then my brothers, Cliff, and then just lost Cynthia, just we just buried her just this weekend, to see that Christian formation at work in her own life, you know. She went with a smile. She had her arms around our necks. She knew she was going to glory and a place that was better for her, that she gave us the grand example of conquering a fear of death. And that was something that we always heard around the West table. You got to conquer the fear of death, conquer the love of money and worship of money, try to conquer every form of idolatry, and recognize that your hope rests on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Brother, I mean, one of the things that, and I'm sure you've seen this in the news is, you know, the whole phenomena or what people call cancel culture. But I've seen now cancel culture applied within families, where you have sons and daughters or vice versa, parents canceling each other and not talking for years. That's an entire phenomena out there now where this is happening. At times perhaps it's justified. At other times it may not be, and I always think about the tremendous loss that we subject ourselves to when we cancel each other and fail to listen and learn and love one another, especially in families. I think it's so, so critical. Maybe you can comment on that, Brother West.

Cornel West: Well, you know, I think just raising the fundamental question of what it means to be a serious follower of Jesus Christ, what it really means to try to walk in the footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth, that one of the imperatives is that you cancel all canceling. Because when you love your neighbor and love your enemy — and those are not just words. Now, you can't do it on your own. You can't do it in autonomous self-sufficient way. You're gonna need a whole lot of grace for that, but that's what we are commanded to do, my brother. And that love commandment connected to love of God means that we don't have the right to cancel anybody, that we're supposed to love everybody.

Now, that doesn't mean we like what they do. It doesn't mean we affirm their deeds. No, not at all, because we ourselves are sinners, and therefore we know, in fact, there's things about us that are not likable. But when Jesus tells us to love our enemy, love our neighbor and love our enemies, that means that we have a welcoming table for everybody. Now, there's always a critical filter, of course.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Of course.

Cornel West: You know, we're not just embracing everybody's beliefs, deeds, practices, and so forth, but we recognize that they have a precious dignity and sanctity that a living and loving God gave to them that is bigger than us. That we're made in exactly the same image and likeness of the God that they were. And that kind of spiritual connection is something we must never, never lose, but it's always, you know, being in the world but not of it, so we recognize that we're always against the grain.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Oh, there's no doubt about that. Always against the grain. You know, Professor West, in my family, we immigrated to the US 45 years ago. We came from Colombia, South America, and we landed in Rochester, New York. That's where my aunt lived, and she had petitioned for my mother, her sister, to come, and it was a multi-year process, but we made it. And I remember as a little boy, nine-year-old boy in Rochester, New York, living on our own, mom and dad, and my mom called me one day and said, "Find a church for us to attend." So I'm a nine-year-old boy in a new country, and back then, there was something called the Yellow Pages.

Cornel West: Oh, yes. Remember those? Those big old—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Oh, remember those Yellow Pages, my brother.

Cornel West: Right, right. Yes, I do. That was the internet or the commerce internet back then.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: That's right. That's right. And as a nine-year-old, all I could do was, "Okay, I'm gonna go to the Yellow Pages." And I remember, you know, thumbing through about 25 pages of churches in Rochester, New York. I didn't know any of them. And I remember seeing a little ad of one. The church is still there today in Rochester, New York, and here was the motto: Where the Bible is the difference. That was the motto of this church. And I told my mom, "Mom, I think this is the right one, because look at what it says about the Bible." So my mother said, "Let's go to that one," and we did. We went there for years. It was a wonderful, wonderful church, wonderful group of people.

But I wanna ask you about the role of the Bible in America, and even now because it's... You know, we talk about the anchor. You mentioned already so eloquently Jesus Christ has to be our anchor. But I want to talk with you and just give us your perspective, your thoughts on the role of the scripture, the role of the Bible for formation for our country amidst all the other things that are happening now. Perhaps you can share your thoughts on this, even as you speak with your students at Union Theological Seminary. We speak to our students here at Cornerstone about the role of the scriptures. But give us your sense or your thoughts on the importance of it, the uses of it, even the abuses of it, how we... it being abused at times.

Cornel West: Yeah, indeed. Well, you know, that's a... The wonderful novel by the great Thomas Hardy, who was actually born June the 2nd, same date that I was, but he's 1840, I'm 1953. But *The Return of the Native* of 1872 — the first chapter's a beautiful description of nature and the Egdon Heath, and the second chapter begins, "Humanity arrives on the scene hand-in-hand with trouble." You see, so that this notion of sin, this deep, original sin that sets in after a good creation is crafted by a loving God, means, in fact, that any time we human beings arrive on the scene, it's gonna be some trouble, brother. There's gonna be some distortion. There's gonna be some partiality. There's gonna be even corruption.

And so the word of God, Jesus rendered in the biblical text, which makes available to us salvific power, moral and spiritual guidance to equip us, to give us a thick armor, to invoke the sixth chapter of Ephesians, to make it from womb to tomb. In community, but also recognizing you have to make your individual choice, your personal decision to accept Jesus as your savior and deliverer. In that way, the Bible itself is always already in a human context, so you already know there's gonna be certain distortions. You already know there's gonna be certain limitations. But despite those distortions, despite those limitations, there's a power in that biblical text, and that power has so much to do with our encounter with a Jesus who is rendered in that text as the beloved Son of a loving and living God that provides us not just rules, but a spiritual help, a profound grace that can sustain us.

So that it is not an abstract morality, but it is a spiritually driven ethics. But you don't wanna lose the spiritual dimension of the ethics, because one of the problems of our culture is that people think that somehow they can make it on their own. You know, you get these notions of being self-made and self-sufficient and autonomous, and I did it all by myself. I'm thoroughly independent. I'm not dependent on anything, no Bible, no person or tradition or heritage. And you say, "Well, no, no, you got to get off this, the crack pipe there. Now you are experiencing self-deceit and self-deception there." No, everybody undergoes what the great William James called in the Gifford Lectures of 1902. He says, "At the center of the human condition is the call for help." And when we say we lift up our eyes upon the hills of which cometh our help, our help cometh from a loving and living God. Our help cometh from a grace best manifest in the life, deeds, resurrection of a Son of God, of a Jesus of Nazareth, of a Jesus Christ.

And so the biblical text really, you know, begins with our acknowledgement of a need for help, and then the direction of that call for help, then a choice to receive the help. But then last but not least, my brother, we then are called on to live a life of helpfulness, of helping others. Because the help that we receive is best manifest in our light shining, our love being manifest, our willingness to help, beginning especially with the least of these, but loving everybody. But there is a certain tilt in the biblical text toward the vulnerable and the weak, the elderly, and the widows, and those folk who have been put down and trashed and subjugated and so forth. Now, it doesn't stop there, 'cause we're supposed to love everybody, but there's no doubt that Jesus of Nazareth has a gospel message where that love zeroes in on the folk who have been left behind. You know, those workers who need a special attention, and so that everybody is included, embraced, and welcome to the welcoming table.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: My brother, thank you so much. I wanna ask you, going back to your formative years and the importance of suffering. It's something that all of us as human beings wanna run away from.

Cornel West: That's true.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: We just do, and yet suffering, there's... it's such a beautiful, powerful thing, and some of the greatest lessons we learn are through suffering rightly understood. And perhaps you can share with us your theology of suffering, right? Biblically speaking, the role of and the importance of it for formation, intellectual formation, spiritual formation, the importance of it for our own country here and now. Uh, we... as you know, we live in a culture that is a creature comfort culture.

Cornel West: Right. Definitely.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And how do we address the importance of suffering for education for a life well-lived?

Cornel West: Yeah. No, and that's a profound question. I mean, as you know philosophically, you've yourself been such a crucial voice in political philosophy, really going back to your own texts, your scholarship, your training and so forth, that in the modern world, when you look at figures like Arthur

Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche, these are not Christian thinkers, but they provide some very powerful challenges to we Christians, because they believe that life is fundamentally a matter of suffering. And for Schopenhauer, it's just the oscillation between boredom and suffering, suffering and boredom. And so suffering is unavoidable. It is inescapable. The question is how do we courageously and creatively and compassionately respond to suffering? How do we transfigure and transmute a suffering into an empathy, a sympathy, a compassion, and a genuine Christian love of others who themselves are suffering?

You know, the great author North Whitehead, who was a process philosopher, had some affiliations with Christianity, but was very profound in his own way. He said that any time human beings encounter one another, you ought to say, "Hello, fellow sufferer." So you got a certain solidarity and community, 'cause one thing you can rest assured is that every human being walking around made in the image and likeness of a living and loving God has undergone some suffering. Or, as my Black Baptist preaching would say, that catastrophe's on its way to their house. Or has already been there.

That's a human connection. I think the genius of the Christian gospel and the genius of the Christian faith, though, is that it gives us the equipment for living in such a way that we can confront the suffering without the suffering having the last word. That we can confront the suffering without generating levels of bitterness, and revenge, and hatred, and contempt for others, because it is a very human response to confront suffering by wanting to either reinforce the suffering of others if you're suffering, rather than respond to somebody else's suffering with an attempt to help them and alleviate that suffering, or to respond with an envy and resentment rather than a deep sense of communion and community.

So there is a spiritual uplift in the Christian conception of suffering. Now, Martin King talked about it, this brother right here. He talked about it in terms of suffering having a redemptive power. You see, suffering was redemptive when it was understood and responded to in the right way, and that itself is a very... I mean, that's a larger theological discussion, but it's one that is really quite, quite powerful because, again, it's his way of saying that suffering must never, ever have the last word. Because see, wholesale suffering with no redemptive possibility at all can lead toward the misanthropy as the later works of Jonathan Swift, or even the later works of Mark Twain, in his writings on that damned human race, where you get just this massive contempt for humanity across the board. All we are are just suffering persons who perpetuate the suffering of others. We have no potential for change. We have no possibility of transfiguration. We have no chance of salvation. And that kind of bleak and grim and dim view really only addresses one pole of the Christian conception of who we are.

We do have a pole of wretchedness, so if you only look at our wretchedness, if you only look at our depravity, how deprived and depraved we are, then you can end up with just contempt toward human beings. But Christians can unflinchingly look at our wretchedness and still acknowledge redemptive possibilities because of the help we receive from a loving God, which is best manifest in space and time in the life and deeds and resurrection of Jesus.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: So building on that, let's talk about suffering and conviction. I had an opportunity recently to speak with Gary Saul Morson at Northwestern. He's the foremost Russian expert on Russian literature.

Cornel West: Oh, yes. He writes on Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky and Tolstoy.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah, and he's got a wonderful essay on Chekhov in a recent book that came out.

Cornel West: He does, and his beautiful book on wisdom and certainty, just a wonderful conversation.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: He's coming in the fall to our Wisdom Conversation, so we're looking forward to having him here.

Cornel West: Is that right? Yes. Wow.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: It's gonna be great. But he talked about just... it was a really... I mean, I had chills as he was telling this story in our conversation where he spoke about a number of prisoners in a gulag who were people of faith, Christian people of faith, who refused to work on Easter Sunday. And to incentivize them to work, the guards at the gulag asked them to walk barefoot on a frozen lake and stand there. And as Professor Morson shared, he said they stood there and they began to sing hymns of praise and worship. And all the other prisoners who were watching them couldn't understand. They thought these are either crazy people or people who are willing to suffer and die for what they believe in. And then they asked themselves this question, "Are we willing to do the same thing?" And they answered, "No, we're not." And it just... it engraved in my mind the suffering and conviction, right? Especially when it comes to our faith and what it means to be truly a follower of Jesus Christ today. And I'm wondering, Brother West, if you'd be able to talk to us and our listeners about suffering, but also suffering for what is true, suffering for the convictions of following Jesus Christ. It seems like in today's world, it's more important than ever to have the spirit-filled spine to be able to do that.

Cornel West: That's true. Well, that's a profound question, though, and I must say that Gary's work has been very important as a scholar of Russian literature, because, I mean, Dostoevsky, who has the most profound critique of Christianity when it comes to responses to suffering, and yet he's one of the most profound Christians as well. So in *The Brothers Karamazov*, you've got the most powerful critique, and it can generate some atheists if they don't read it deep enough, but at the same time, his Christian response is so profound. And Morson's been one of those to accent that among others, so I've always saluted his scholarship in that regard.

But I would say this, though, that the point you made about we live in a culture of comfort and convenience — we live in a culture that worships material success and professional distance from any kind of suffering so that it gives the impression that the end and aim of life is to simply be comfortable and be in some zone of convenience. And you see that's the very opposite of the Christian gospel. Because the Christian gospel really says, "If you pick up your cross and deny yourself and follow me," see, you've got to get ready for discomfort, discontent. You've got to get ready for being hated. You've got to get ready for being trashed and degraded. I mean, the first, what is it? 31 of the first 35 popes in the early church from 0 AD to 300 were executed. The early Christians were thrown in the lion's den. Now, we know that, you know, that's pretty high normative criteria. I mean, my God, to follow Jesus is to be thrown into the lion's den?

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Well, yes.

Cornel West: There was a time when that was required. Now, that might not be required of us at this moment, but we don't know what's coming our way. I mean, my own descendants of Black folk, you know, for what? For over 244 years, it was against the law for Black people to worship God without white supervision. And therefore they could not worship God freely for decade after decade after decade. But what did they do? Well, they stole away in the creeks where they couldn't be heard, so they could lift their voices with those beautiful spirituals, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and other beautiful hymns to glorify the God that they still had personal relationships with. They had some discomfort and lack of convenience, and those are memories that are part and parcel of the history of the Christian Church. And of course, it's not just in the States. It was in the Middle East, it's been in Africa, it's been in Russia, Eastern Europe, authoritarian communist regimes.

We've seen it all around the world. And no ism really has a monopoly on this. I mean, in recent times, of course, authoritarian communist regimes that he's talking about, the Soviet Union, and he's right about that. But you know, pre-communist, pre-capitalist, going all the way back 2,500 years, there's been this kind of persecution of Christians. Then, of course, we also know Christians themselves have persecuted each other. Catholics and Protestants and Lutherans and Presbyterians, and so forth and so on. And we've done the same thing to Jews and Turks and Muslims, and of course, they've done it to us. It's a human thing, and we wanna be honest about that. We wanna be candid about that.

But again, here, I think the good news is that going back to that 12th chapter of Hebrews, first verse, my brother, there's always a cloud of witnesses. Always. There's always a remnant, in the wonderful language of Rufus Jones, a great Quaker thinker in his book of 1920, *The Remnant*. There's always going to be a remnant or cloud of witnesses who try to remain true.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And who follow what the great Dietrich Bonhoeffer used to say in *The Cost of Discipleship*, right? What Jesus says, "Follow me and die." Not just physical death, but as you know, that spiritual death that's required for rebirth, that's symbolized by the baptism, where we are reborn into a new creature.

Cornel West: Even though the old creature persists in our lives, we push it back, as the great St. Augustine lays bare in the *Confessions*. We are new beings, but we're pushing back that old sinful self every day, every month, every year. And that's why, yeah, the drama, the conflict, the contestation, the civil war that's taking place on the battlefields of our own souls, of our societies, of our world, and of our cosmos.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Thank you, my brother. Let's talk about part of this — the part of these civil wars we're fighting internally and externally, as you so rightly mentioned — some of it has to do also how we use, misuse, or abuse the past.

Cornel West: Absolutely.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And I'm wondering if you can talk with us about, you know, how... what do we do with the past? How do we study the past, right? This is a complicated question. I'm always mindful of Voltaire's comments about history and what history sometimes can be or is. I've seen it, as you read history, how it can be misused in so many different ways by so many different people. And so how do we deal with the past and talk about the past? And not just in terms of a grand history or grand narrative, but our own pasts. We each have our own histories, and dealing with the past is so important, dealing appropriately is so important. Or as a friend of mine once said, "The past will deal with you if you don't deal with it yourself."

Cornel West: That's a beautiful, beautiful way of putting it though, brother. And as the grand scholar of medieval political philosophy that you are, you already know that there's always a timeliness and a timelessness in talking about our relation to the past. The past has something so radically alien, other about it because it is another time and different context, so we have to humble ourselves and try to understand what it was like to be in the shoes of those in the past. That's the timeliness of it. It's rooted in time. But there's also a timelessness, because as human beings, they were still wrestling with the organized greed, the weaponized hatred, the institutionalized cruelty, the routinized indifference toward others. Those are constants, those are recurring features and phenomena of the past that goes all the way back to Adam and Eve. It goes all the way back to the caves. It goes all the way back to the beginning of the species. And so we have to always keep in mind the crucial role of context. Historical context is very important, but at the same time, there's something that transcends context, which is human beings, human nature, the human condition, the constants in human history.

That's why when people talk about the United States and they say, "Well, does it look like ancient Rome?" We go back and we read Edward Gibbon, we go back and we can read Spengler and historians who have made analysis across contexts, across historical moments, and it's never the same. You know, human history never just repeats itself in any mechanical, formulaic way. But human nature, human condition, the human predicament — ooh, here comes that civil war of the soul we were talking about. The struggle against the hatred, the greed, the envy, the resentment, the cruelty, the indifference, and so forth and so on. And we have to be able to keep track. I mean, one of the things about Cornerstone University is that as an unapologetic Christian institution of higher learning, you all are really free to be partial in that theological sense of keeping track with the wretchedness of who we are as human beings, and our potential and possibility of deliverance, salvation on the other. And I think that that's a very, very important feature of Cornerstone and other universities that can be so explicit about the Christian faith and the role of scripture and the Bible and so on, but always acknowledging that we're going to fall short, you know?

No one of us, no institution, no one church, no one school of thought ever has a full-scale monopoly on truth or beauty or goodness or the holy, but we do have access, and that's very important. We have access to a relationship with a Jesus that we know has changed and fundamentally transformed and transfigured our lives. Amen. We have personal experience of that that can never be called into question based on our understanding of ourselves. And yet, at the same time, our humility, which is always a benchmark of spiritual maturity, our humility and our tenacity. See, you got to have both sense of being humble, but you got to be a love warrior and a freedom fighter. You're on the battlefield for the Lord. That's the song that we used to sing every Sunday at Shiloh Baptist Church. I promised him that I would serve him till I die. That's not just a song. That's a way of life. That's a mode of being, and yet it goes hand in hand with an acknowledgement that we will fall short.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: My brother, you touched on something that I wanna explore a bit further with you, which I think is so important, given both of our roles as educators and being in the academy. You know, we have the rise of artificial intelligence now, everywhere. And it certainly is having and will have an impact in the universities and colleges and schools for years to come. And it seems to me that one of the questions surrounding artificial intelligence and the concerns that people oftentimes have, that there's a lack of a beautiful, rich human anthropology to protect, to guide these conversations. It's almost as if for those who really advance AI at times, it's almost as if human beings are infinitely malleable, right? But one of the virtues, as you mentioned already, is the Imago Dei. The being made in God's image and design is a protector, if I can put it that way, against perhaps the excesses of artificial intelligence. And it would be wonderful if you could comment on that, given your thinking on this issue, your teaching of students at Union, and your thoughts in general, on the Imago Dei and the need for a rich human anthropology, which I believe Christianity provides because of the scriptures and what God has done to talk about, to think through as we think about AI and its implication for every area of life.

Cornel West: Well, that's a tough one, my brother. But for me, you know, one of the paradoxes of the challenge of AI is that it is making the hunger and thirst for a, what you call beautiful, deep, rich, profound understanding of what it is to be human, especially for Christians like ourselves, more attractive. You see? So that a Cornerstone University in so many ways becomes even more appealing to a younger generation that has a hunger and a thirst for something that's so much deeper than AI and what AI has to offer. AI can generate that information, composite hybrid shortcuts, push button solutions to various managerial problems. But when the question becomes how to live, what is the good life? What is life more abundantly? What are the permanent and eternal dimensions of our human predicament? See, AI falls short because science falls short. So we're not anti-science. We recognize science has a role to play when put in its proper place.

But as the great Tolstoy says in his *Confessions in Brief*, which is the very book that Ludwig Wittgenstein used to walk around with in his back pocket — now, he's a Jewish brother, but one of the greatest philosophic geniuses of the barbaric 20th century — but he knew, Tolstoy was saying what? When you raise the question of how to live, then all of the Darwinian, all of the Lucretian, all of the new physics and new materialisms and new secularisms, they don't provide a profound answer that generates the kind of nourishment of soul and heart that can sustain people. And so people begin to look around. Ooh, there's that Christian tradition. Ooh, there's Cornerstone University and some other places that are wrestling with these deep questions. Now, they're humble enough to say, "Look, we don't believe that you ought not to try to raise issues in different traditions and explore different traditions. We're not being narrow about this. We're just saying that wherever you look, you're not gonna find something deeper and more profound than the example of Jesus of Nazareth. You see, that's our claim, and we're willing to live and die with that claim."

Now, that doesn't mean that we're trashing other people. It doesn't mean that we're not giving people the right to make their claims that are counter to our claims. No, that's part of our conversation. But we're very honest saying that you can explore AI all you want, push it to the limits, and you'll never be able to provide the depths of what the love is all about, what this grace is all about, what this faith — and by faith, we don't mean just narrow Christian faith, we mean the fiduciary dimension of the human condition that requires certain kinds of trust. And without that trust, you will not be able to move forward, and you'll find more and more people putting their trust in AI. Ooh, that sounds idolatrous for we Christians. We can use AI, we can deploy AI, but once you put your fundamental trust in science, trust in AI, no, no, we Christians, we don't go there.

No, that's idolatry. No, there's only one God now. And once you begin generating your own gods, then you've got a problem. Great author Whitehead used to say, he said, "The progress of religion is in fact the acknowledgement of a critique, the condemnation of the worship of the idols and the gods." You see. And the benchmark of idolatry is contentment with the idols of the day. And as science and technology and AI becomes your God and you're content with it, we Christians have to say, "Oh, we love you, but that's idolatry." And we are commanded to engage in our condemnation of any form of idolatry. And of course, we also get it within our own Christian churches too, because idolatry is something that can rest. It's promiscuous. It can rest with any tradition, any person, any heart, and any soul.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: How do we, you know, form — my brother, I think of students and children and people that have a hunger for real wisdom. I just think it's such an incredible prerequisite, right? I mean, as I hear you speak and I think about my own life and my graduate training, the thirst and hunger for wisdom is so critical to this because even the role of being, you know, open to critique and being humble enough to listen and to learn, but also humble and appropriate enough to share with others, and that all requires humility. It requires a love for wisdom and a love of wisdom that's so critical, and yet today seems to be in such short supply. Perhaps you can share with us some of the things that you have done in your own life, Professor West, to cultivate — even before you went to Harvard, in your home in Sacramento, in your family or thereafter — to cultivate the hunger for wisdom, the thirst for wisdom, a love of wisdom, the sophia, right? Philosophy. A love for wisdom. How do we cultivate that among ourselves, among our students, among others?

Cornel West: Yes, but I mean, I think that the three benchmarks are formation, cultivation, and maturation, just as human beings who make our way in space and time. When Shakespeare says, "Ripeness is all," he's talking about maturation. But maturation comes by means of formation and cultivation. Now, we call it education in the broad sense. The Greeks called it *paideia*, the Germans called it *bildung*. There's different names for it. But every person, every community, every moment in history

and culture, there has to be forms of formation and cultivation that allow for people to sustain their quest of maturation.

So the first thing is you gotta get exposed, you have to be exposed to it. I mean, one of the roles of the biblical text is that it provides very early exposure to the fundamental need for moral and spiritual formation, what we're calling soul craft. The need for cultivation, the need for being educated in the most profound sense, not just formal education. 'Cause you and I know, you know, I mean, John Bunyan was not formally educated the way John Milton was, but *Pilgrim's Progress* has some profound things to say. James Baldwin didn't go to college, but a college went through him, and he left Christianity, but the Christian love never left him. And so even in his text, you can always see the deep, deep influences, and the relics, and the ruins, and the elements that are vital in his attempt to break away from Christianity, so that all of that's part of education or cultivation. But the end and aim is the ripeness. Now, when Shakespeare says, "Readiness is all" in *Hamlet*, that's not as deep as ripeness in *King Lear*, because ripeness is about maturation.

And of course, in the Christian language, especially in the language of Paul, it's really about how do you end up putting on that full armor that's multidimensional, multi-variegated. It connects your heart, your mind, your soul, rooted in family, institutions, which themselves are grounded in traditions and heritages that go all the way back, so that you then have a hunger to want to come to terms with Boethius, or come to terms with Plato, or come to terms with Dostoevsky, or come to terms with Howard Thurman or Abraham Joshua Heschel. It's not even confined just to the Christian tradition, because Judaic thinkers have much to say, and Islamic thinkers have much to say. Certain secular thinkers like Kafka, who means much to me, and of course Chekhov means very, very much to me, but I hold on to my Christian orientation and disposition and my Christian faith. But I learn so much. I mean, Kierkegaard, of course, was always my godfather. There's no doubt about that. He was my first major, major encounter when I was 13 years old growing up on the of Sacramento bookmobile, that I read about, that you read about in the text. Kierkegaard has always been one of my formative thinkers. But he also introduced me to a whole host of other thinkers who were not always, you know, within the Christian tradition, but I filter it through my own Christian lens.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: I wanna ask who your major informative figures have been. I mean, you arrive with \$300 and two suitcases from Colombia and end up president of a grand institution. But intellectually, you must have had your own influences though, brother.

Cornel West: I do. I mean, my wife and I speak about this quite often, and she'll ask me that. I will tell her, I always go back to Plato's *Republic*. I've read it so many times, and I remember reading it and thinking, "What is this? This is incredible stuff." And so I've gone back to him significantly over time. Augustine, I mean, it's hard to get away from his *Confessions*. It's such a profound text that was just beautiful and jarring and just profound in so many ways. His analysis of the human condition of himself, and his humble awareness of his great sin and limitations and need of God. I mean, so Augustine was profound for me. Plato, Aristotle, profound. I remember encountering the *Ethics*, as you know, and just some profound texts that were just jarring and life-changing for me. I will tell you the other one, I've said this many times, and when I first came across Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*. And reading those texts as well, I mean, those were very important texts for me to think through. As much as I love him, sometimes I don't like him, John Dewey.

Cornel West: I mean, I've read all of his corpus, and my doctoral father, you know, told me, "You have to read John Dewey." And so I've gone through it all, and I think, you know, reading his *Human Nature and Human Conduct*, I mean, that was a profound work, I think. So, you know, those things. But when you talk about the importance of the Christian disposition anchor and learning to wrestle with these very

stretching things, but they all touch on important parts of the human condition, and then being able... and it's a, I think, it's a life journey. We talk about it here at Cornerstone all the time. Developing a beautiful Christian worldview is not something you do in one class or in one day. It's a life journey as you think through and you allow Christ to form your mind and your thoughts through the Holy Spirit and the Word, as you read all these things, because you have to. You have to think through all of this.

And it will scare people to say this, but Friedrich Nietzsche was significantly profound in my thinking. I mean, I remember encountering him thinking, "Wow." "This is a serious critique. I've got to think through this." And so those were foundational texts for me. But honestly, for me, I came to... I've said this to my children, my first encounter with the Bible and God's Word was seminal. I mean, it was to me, that's the text I always go back to, and God help me, but encountering this as a little kid in Colombia in a church, in an Assemblies of God Church, changed my life. And to me, that's the text I always go back to. Like, okay, how do I make sense of all these things in light of God's Word?

Cornel West: That's powerful, brother. That's powerful. That's powerful. But I love how you go back to our beloved pre-modern pagan, Plato. Because Plato is full of so many profound formulations, often critical of each other. You know, when Whitehead says that Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato, people say, "Well, that's extravagant. Well, that's hyperbolic." No, in part, what he's saying is if you go through those 39 dialogues, you will find an exemplification of most of the philosophical positions that you find in the history of the West. You'll find critiques of skepticism, defenses of skepticism, critiques of foundationalism, critiques of idealism, defenses of materialism, all of that in dialogue in such artistic way. I mean, it's a level that's even beyond the word genius when you think of Plato. And yet in the end, he's still our Greek brother, you know.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Our Christian Greek brother.

Cornel West: And he was always wrestling with, I think, the sin, original sin. I don't think he used those words, but you sense in the struggle that there's a limit to human life.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Oh, absolutely. That's right.

Cornel West: This, the journey of the soul from God, all those conversations he has, but I always think he's wrestling with the most fundamental questions that we as Christians talk about, original sin. It's absolutely profound. You don't know you. So, well, by the time you get to the Laws and that seventh letter, where he talks about that transformation that takes place. But in the Laws, he's thinking, "My God, these human beings are much more wretched than one would've thought. And I've got to come up with some mechanisms to ensure that we can sustain the policies and so on."

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: That's right. So he's just... it's the profundity. It is the intellectual honesty. It is the intellectual perplexity, the intellectual curiosity, and the need for that paragon. The need for transformation still sits at the center, transfiguration.

Cornel West: That's right. What we Christians would call metanoia or conversion. Still sits at the center. I mean, Eric Voegelin and some of the others, even Leo Strauss in so many ways lays bare these kind of deep connections between what I was calling our pre-modern pagan brother, and the ways in which he's a fundamental source and resource for those of us who then come out of the Christian tradition or any other religious tradition for that matter.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Well, it's so refreshing to hear you seeing Eric Voegelin. I mean, I don't hear that name too often. And I remember when I first encountered his *Order and History*, and I read all those volumes and I thought, "This is incredible."

Cornel West: Oh, it's unbelievable, man.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: It really, really is. But so important in the questions that are being raised about the importance of the transcendent order in how societies organize themselves and cultures organize themselves. And I just had a conversation with someone who was saying to me, "You know, in the modern world, we've done so much to try to take the spiritual and put it in a box and hide it, and yet you can't do it," he said to me on the phone. "It's always coming out. It's always asking for a voice, and you can't hide it." I said, "No, because that's who, that's how we have been made."

Cornel West: That's good. We've been made, and the modern world tries to squash it, but it can't be done. That's exactly it. I mean, it's very Augustinian in the sense that, okay, if you create a void, something's gonna fill that void. And Voegelin's conception of Gnosticism, of course, is one of the very important ways of trying to come to terms with if you try to eliminate all forms of transcendence, it's going to find its way one way or the other. That's right. And it's gonna generate ways of being in the world that don't provide any kind of serious armor against the forms of evil that it will produce.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: My brother, as we come to a close, I wanna ask you to talk with us a little bit about popular culture, music in particular. And you've talked so much about jazz and the blues in your work and how you refer to your own work and what you do. And there have been times where my wife and I will be listening to a piece of music, whether it be oftentimes even blues music, and I'll say to her, "They should be playing that music in church." That particular song should be played in church tomorrow. But there's such a spirituality, I mean, with everything that we do, but you really see and feel it with blues music. I mean, it's... or soul music. It just, this crying out, this depth. And I'm wondering if you can comment on that, but also on the state of popular culture today. You know, the church has had such a tense relationship with popular culture. Parts of the church have, parts of Christian faith have. How should we wrestle with it and deal with it and study it and explore it, or what should we embrace of it?

Cornel West: You know, the great Louis Armstrong used to say the fundamental distinction for him was just between good music and bad music. And what he meant by that is that you could have music that wrestles with the phenomena that informs the 32nd chapter of Genesis. Music that wrestles with the angel of death in the midnight hour, that acknowledges the depths of wounds, scars, and bruises, but is transfigured to generate new kinds of vitality and vibrancy and energy. And music that does that, it could be called the blues, it could be country. You know, like my dear brother Robbie, he's bluegrass. Now, all bluegrass is not good, all bluegrass is not bad. Some of it is wrestling with that deep stuff. Hank Williams does in country music, and so does B.B. King and Muddy Waters, but all blues is not good blues. Some folk just can't sing the blues and think they can.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Right, there's just certain poor quality stuff, period, right?

Cornel West: Exactly. That's exactly right. There, Chekhov and Maupassant write better short stories than Pearl Buck. So that you have to be able to make some distinctions here, even though you're not necessarily trashing anybody, people are expressing themselves. Same is true with popular culture. In popular culture, you know, everybody's not a Stevie Wonder or Marvin Gaye or a Bob Dylan, but they're still popular culture, but they are wrestling with what sits at the center of Genesis 32, which is new names, new energies, new vitalities by what? Not denying, not avoiding wounds, scars, bruises, suffering, pain, hurt. And some of those songs could end up in a church because the best churches are wrestling with the 32nd chapter of Genesis, are wrestling with Gethsemane, are wrestling with the cross, are wrestling with resurrection, are wrestling with Pilate, wrestling with all of the elements that go into the complexity of who we are as human beings.

And I think, again, you know, that's what makes scripture both timely and timeless. But that's also true for Dostoevsky, it's true for Shakespeare, it's true for Dante. We haven't had a chance to talk about

probably the greatest Christian poet, who would be Dante, and we don't need T.S. Eliot to tell us that, who's another great Christian poet. Or Cervantes, another great Christian artist and so on. But so that popular culture is to be viewed in the context of good music, bad music, you know, good culture, bad. Bad is superficial, thin, market driven, success oriented, concerned only about money and the moment rather than the human condition and deeper issues of love and care and compassion.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Professor West, thank you for spending this hour with us. It's an honor to have you, and I'd love to have you back sometime in the future if you're willing to come back.

Cornel West: Oh, brother, I, anytime. But you have already blessed me and Brother Robbie in a mighty way. And we'd love to come back. But you bringing some high quality folk in terms of Marshall and the others.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Well, thank you, and thank you for—

Cornel West: It doesn't get better than the Russians when it comes to the [unclear], I can tell you that. That, they're amazing, so we're looking forward to them.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: But thank you for being on the podcast, Professor West, and for all you do, and just spending this hour with me, and I very much appreciate. God's very best to you and blessings to you, and I look forward to speaking with you again in the near future.

Cornel West: Brother, we praying for each other. Thank you, my brother. Absolutely. And Brother Cameron, too.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yes, yes. We appreciate it. Indeed. Thank you, thank you, Professor West. All the best to you.

Cornel West: Thank you so much.

TRANSCRIPT NOTICE

This transcript was generated using automated speech-to-text technology and may contain small transcription errors, including inaccuracies in wording, punctuation, or speaker identification. While reasonable efforts have been made to ensure accuracy, the transcript should not be considered a verbatim record of the podcast. For the most accurate representation of the conversation, please refer to the original audio recording.