

Cornell West: Idiot-in-Chief

Michael Sean Winters | May. 19, 2011 | Distinctly Catholic

Sometimes a man, especially a public figure, is known by his friends. Other times, by his enemies. President Barack Obama has, evidently, earned the enmity of Princeton professor Cornell West. The President should wear this enmity as a badge of honor.

West has been criticizing the President for failing to live up to West's ideas about what a liberal President should accomplish, not least as those ideas apply to African-Americans. Actually, what I just wrote is mistaken. No one should confuse West's drivel for anything so substantial as an idea.

West has called Obama the "black mascot of Wall Street oligarchs" which is a fancy, post-modern way of calling Obama an Uncle Tom. Not content to traffic in the ugliest of racial stereotypes, West goes on to dabble in psychology, a subject on which he does not, alas, give lectures. "I think my dear brother Barack Obama has a certain fear of free black men." It's understandable. As a young brother who grows up in a white context, brilliant African father, he's always had to fear being a white man with black skin. All he has known culturally is white.

Melissa Harris-Perry, who teaches politics and African American Studies at Princeton, notes the "utter hilarity" of this concern for Obama's blackness because he rose and, rose to success, in a white cultural environment, "coming from Cornell West who has spent the bulk of his adulthood living in those deeply rooted, culturally rich, historically black communities of Cambridge, MS and Princeton, NJ." Ouch.

Obama is not the first politician to be chided by disappointed academics to be sure. The ivory tower is not known for its demands that its inhabitants grapple with the realities of politics, the need to reach consensus with those whose views differ markedly from one's own but whose right to govern is as unassailably grounded in the same electoral success. Armchair quarterbacks are a dime a dozen on college campuses and, of course, they know best.

West has styled himself a "Chekhovian Christian." He wrote that he was inspired by Chekhov because his "magisterial depiction of the cold Cosmos, indifferent Nature, crushing Fate and the cruel histories that circumscribe desperate, bored, confused and anxiety-ridden yet love-hungry people, who try to endure against all odds, rings true to me." What that has to do with Christianity is anyone's guess and West gives no clues. For the Christian, the Cosmos are not cold, they are created and Nature is not indifferent, it is infused with the love of the Creator. But, never mind all that. It sounds so authoritative, doesn't it?

In case you wonder how West's mind came to reach this odd point of convergence between Chekhov and Christ, he is happy to explain the intellectual path that led him to such dizzying heights of insight. "Despite my Chekhovian Christian conception of what it means to be human - a view that invokes pre-modern biblical narratives," West writes. "I stand in the skeptical Christian tradition of Montaigne, Pascal and Kierkegaard." "My Chekhovian Christian viewpoint is idiosyncratic and iconoclastic. My sense of the absurdity and incongruity of the world is closer to the Gnosticism of Valentinus, Luria or Monoimos ... My intellectual lineage goes more through Schopenhauer, Tolstoy, Rilke, Melville, Lorca, Kafka, Celan, Beckett, Soyinka, O'Neill, Kazantzakis, Morrison and above all, Chekhov ... And, I should add, it reaches its highest expression in Brahms's "Requiem"

and Coltrane's 'A Love Supreme.'? The conservative writer David Horowitz rightly asses this screed of self-importance as 'worthy of a character out of Moliere.'

Perhaps, if President Obama had only spent a little more time listening to the Brahms 'Requiem,' or scratched his Gnostic itch a bit more, all would be well. But, I doubt it. For, as West admits, his problems with the President exist not only at the level of ideas. He was unable to secure tickets to the inauguration for his brother and mother, and Obama does not return his phone calls. There it is. Cornell West, unable to matter in the world of ideas because he has none, wants to matter in the world of politics, but he can't get his phone calls returned. 'My personal words had to do with being disrespected by the President,' West recently tweeted. Sorry, Professor: You have spent a lifetime disrespecting yourself by the rank stupidity of your writings. I am glad the President does not return his phone calls. I wouldn't either.

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