

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

November 22, 2011 at 10:03am

Cornel West Chooses the Road Seldom Taken

by Ken Briggs

NCR Today

Cornel West's decision to leave his tenured faculty position at Princeton to teach at Union Theological Seminary in New York is both a rare act of voluntary down scaling and an act of faith in a branch of Christianity that has been languishing.

It might seem like a small sacrifice, as if he were swapping a Jaguar for a Toyota Camry, but I think it is highly significant within its own framework.

Princeton is the gold standard in terms of prestige and pay, the pedestal most professors would crave to stand upon. Union has its own proud pedigree, of course, as a premier academy whose faculty has included luminaries such as Ray Brown, Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, functioning as a theological adjunct to Columbia University across the street.

But the move goes against the creed that we rise to the highest level of money and status that we can attain and do everything possible to stay there.

By moving to Union, West heads down the other road, allowing his heart and spirit to give up some of both. He'll leave behind some perks that only an institution as rich and influential as Princeton can provide and will take a big -- a big -- cut in pay.

Everything about West suggests he has consciously chosen to "take his talents to Union" for ethical reasons that were conspicuously absent from LeBron James's famous announcement that he would transport his own basketball aptitudes to South Beach.

West is perhaps the nation's best known and most influential prophet, a tireless teacher, author and activist in the cause of justice, a tall, rangy man with a big laugh and a fearless demeanor.

He knows Union, having started out as an assistant professor there in 1977, later moving on to Harvard and Princeton. He has never settled for the privilege of being privileged on the peak of the academic ladder, but questions both himself and the venerated institutions that have paid him handsomely.

He takes risks that make Harvards and Yales uneasy because they tweak its "manners" and become "controversial." This past summer, for example, he and radio-tv personality Tavis Smiley conducted a "Poverty Tour," and he has been an outspoken critic of Obama's bank rescue and debt reduction efforts as devastating to poor people. He has been arrested for protesting. As befits a prophet, he is restless.

Without pretending to grasp West's inner motives, I see two major implications in his decision to go back there.

Most importantly, perhaps, is the freedom it gives him to escape the velvet restraints that operate on those within the elitist institutions. It's nothing spoken or consciously designed, but rather a code of expected behavior that curbs freedom of thought. There is an "accepted" set of standards go with being a chosen one. I imagine West chafed under that and welcomes the lack of an invisible straight jacket at Union.

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The other impact is to bring his extraordinary gifts to the kind of seminary that has struggled in an age that has largely bypassed liberal Protestantism and open theological inquiry. By its own definition, Union isn't any longer contiguous with mainline Protestantism, and hasn't been for many years, opening its doors to many traditions, but it represents a religious outlook that is regularly attacked for being "relativistic" or too committed to social justice.

Union has a long history of rigorous scholarship and integrity. It has been a place for religious thinkers to wrestle with the meaning of faith in an increasingly secular world. It has stayed on this mission rather than succumbing to the lure of easy answers or doctrinaire curricula. For that it has won plaudits.

The religious mind that it nourishes has been having a hard time of it, however, to the extent that it's very existence in the mainstream of American life is in doubt. Union has about 250 students now -- a mixture of PhD and Master's candidates and some candidates for the traditional ministry. Following World War II it's student body was more than twice that number, a majority looking to ordination into parish life.

I can't help thinking, therefore, that with all due modesty, Cornel West has chosen to cast his lot with this declining venture as an act of giving what he has to somethin he deeply believes in, whatever its fate.

It is in keeping with the prophet I admire as willing not only to speak truth to power but to walk away from it for a greater good.

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