

**West, C. (1993). [Race Matters](#). Boston: Beacon Press.**

## **OVERVIEW**

West looks at how race affects both black and white Americans politically and personally, offering constructive criticism to both liberal and conservative approaches to the problem of racism.

Cornel West is professor of religion and director of Afro-American Studies at Princeton University. His treatment of the race issue is unique because he views it both politically and spiritually, and he tries to develop solutions that strike a balance between the two. West identifies his purpose: "...my basic aim in life: to speak the truth to power with love so that the quality of everyday life for ordinary people is enhanced and white supremacy is stripped of its authority and legitimacy." (p. x)

West sets up his problem, stating, "The major enemy of black survival in America has been and is neither oppression nor exploitation but rather the nihilistic threat—that is, loss of hope and absence of meaning." (p. 15) This nihilism, due to a lack of moral nourishment and political power, is the fuel behind the rage black Americans feel. West offers three objectives for a solution. First, black Americans must look to themselves and their common history as sources of power, hope, and help. Second, focus attention on the "public square—the common good that under girds our national and global destinies." (p. 6) And third, black Americans must generate new leadership, which is in touch with the people. Above all, West calls for politics of conversion as a cure to the nihilistic threat: "Nihilism is not overcome by arguments or analyses; it is tamed by love and care...A love ethic must be at the center of a politics of conversion." (p. 19) A love of self and others must undergird any economic or political action—this is the essence of what West calls for in response to the rage and hopelessness of black America.

Cornel West's book is a valuable treatment of racism, because he not only looks at both spiritual and political aspects, he also critiques liberal and conservative responses to it. His insight helps his audience understand that there are aspects of truth in both responses, but that this issue is not simple; it is complex, requiring more than either government programs or individual morality can accomplish alone. He also is willing to tackle tough

issues, such as sexuality, affirmative action, the crisis of black leadership, and the impact of Malcolm X and black rage on black Americans today. Although this book is more on the academic side, it is a challenging and resourceful treatment of race matters in America.

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