

Dr. Cornel West's response to Dr. Marc Ellis's work
American Academy of Religion
"The Persistence of the Prophetic: Engaging and Honoring the Work of Marc Ellis."
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Transcribed and Edited by Isaiah Ellis

Anytime I think of my dear brother Marc Ellis I think of quiet dignity, spiritual integrity, moral consistency, fierce fortitude, and an unstoppable determination to tell the truth, expose lies, and bear witness. That's a bit rare in the ice age of the last thirty years, not just in the academy but in the American empire – with its cultural decay, and political breakdown, and oligarchic rule, and corporate media obsessed with promoting clever gimmicks of mass distraction. But there he is – Brother Marc Ellis – who persists as a prophetic figure. Like the Sankofa bird, looking back to keep in contact with the best in order to forge new beginnings, and new possibilities.

There are three distinctive features of any prophetic thought and prophetic practice. One is an attentiveness to catastrophe, and what separates so much of the work of Marc Ellis, and keep in mind that's thirty-three years – 1978 was the first journals of the Catholic Worker. Thirty-three years later, still strong thus far with his latest book this year – *Encountering the Jewish Future*. And he knows my favorite is *Revolutionary Forgiveness*. Please get a chance to read that book, I know it's echoes of Carter Heyward and Ann Gilson's book when they went down to Nicaragua in '84 – same title – so when you Google it you got two texts. You can order both of them and we love Carter's but read Brother Marc's text first.

But catastrophe is a category that most of us – we want to include *ourselves* in this ice age, we're not just pointing fingers – are distant from. Abraham Joshua Heschel even describes "modernity" as a callousness toward catastrophe in his wonderful text, you recall. And let's not confuse the catastrophic with the problematic. U.S. Slavery was a catastrophe, it wasn't just a Negro problem. Patriarchy is a catastrophe, it's not just women's sensitivity to hurt and pain. Oligarchic rule of the economy is a catastrophe for poor and working people. You can't grow yourself out of a catastrophe, you can't add to what you're doing to somehow overcome a catastrophe.

You need a new light to be cast, a new orientation, and so we begin with the category of the catastrophic - that distinguishes the work of Marc Ellis. It has something to do with his encounter with a towering figure named Richard Rubenstein – profound, unpersuasive, profound in his wrestling with the catastrophic. But no place in that wonderful moment on page two, one to four of *Revolutionary Forgiveness* by Marc Ellis when he says "Rubenstein misses the role of the power of loved and lived history." So Rubenstein backs off and he says 'all I see is cycles and recycles of power, and we Jewish brothers and sisters have been treated viciously,' – and he's right about that – 'we better get our power with our nation-state, and get our military might with our nation-state and our alliance with the U.S. Empire, so there will never ever be another Holocaust.' We can all understand the motivation. Jewish brothers and sisters deserve as much love as any other slice of humanity. But at the same time, when you keep the future of humanity in mind, that encounter with the catastrophic and that response to the catastrophic will reinforce a moral blindness, so you end up with an immoral occupation of Palestinian brothers and sisters who are just as precious, no less and no more, than our Jewish brothers and sisters.

And then there was William Miller at Marquette, biographer of that inimitable Sister named Dorothy Day. *A Harsh and Dreadful Love: Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement*. And Brother Marc, a Jewish brother, would be so moved that he would become part of the movement and spend a whole year with the Catholic Worker dealing with the poor. There's not too many Christians who decide to spend a year with a Judaic organization engaging with poor people. This has been the worst kind of arrogance in the history of my own Christian tradition, and it contributes to the vicious anti-Jewish hatred that's been shot through Christianity – Pre-Constantinian, Constantinian, Post-

Constantinian, up to the present. Dominant forms of Christianity must be very candid about the vicious forms of anti-Jewish hatred shot through interpretations of Christian narratives – not just focused on the Book of John.

But here's brother Marc Ellis. I'm engaging with Dorothy Day. Why? Because like so many others, Dorothy Day means the world to me. I'd take a bullet for her and she's dead - that's how much I love that Sister. That attentiveness to catastrophe requires courage. First, intellectual courage to understand that the emergence of the catastrophe is a historical construction, a historical creation, which means it can be changed. So we've got to de-naturalize it. It's not part of a given, it can be different. But that means that the intellectual analysis of the emergence of the catastrophe – the historical conditions under which it emerged, how it's sustained, hegemonic structures, elites playing their role and so forth – requires connection with an intellectual tradition that has been in place and an openness to a variety of forms of intellectual weaponry. It could be the radically secular analysis of Edward Said, who Ellis has written of with great power and who was a dear friend – he was one of the great, towering democratic and public intellectual lights upon the 20th century. I'm not just talking about Israel and Palestine, but empires as a whole, *Cultural Imperialism* is one of his classical texts in this regard.

But that intellectual courage also means you cut against a professional deal. It means you have to pay a price – a major price. The intellectual courage means you have to keep track of the lies that are told to prevent us from keeping track of the catastrophe, and those who are suffering under it. The ideologues, the highly sophisticated, smart experts who usually are highly rewarded – big money, big title, big status, big stature, patted on the back by oligarchs, applauded by plutocrats, and yet sometimes laughed at by those in power because the powerful know the ideologues are not telling the truth about how they sustain their power, they're just glad they're lying. Marc Ellis, from the very beginning, said “I attempt to be a truth-teller” and he knew, echoing our half-Jewish brother Theodore Adorno, echoing also Hebrew Scripture, that the condition of truth is to allow suffering to speak. I don't want to hear any truth-talk unless you tell me how it's connected to somebody's suffering, somebody's pain, somebody's misery. And when that is spoken, then we have a serious conversation.

Catastrophe on one hand, courage on the other, and then compassion. Now we should be very clear about this: that the prophetic as a category is a Jewish invention, it's a Jewish construction, it's a Jewish creation, no other people unleashed a whole tradition like this. There were magnificent prophetic moments in Egypt, magnificent prophetic moments in Mesopotamia, magnificent prophetic moments in a host of other cultures, but the whole tradition is a Jewish thing. That's why as a Christian like myself who aspires to be prophetic, I know that even given my profound love of that first-century Palestinian Jew named Jesus, it's still a rich footnote to prophetic Judaism. Now it's very rich, but it's still a footnote in that sense.

But the crucial thing is that category itself: there are Islamic brothers and sisters who use it, even secular folk appropriate it, Christians use it of course – it comes out of this rich, prophetic, Judaic tradition, and you see that at work in Marc Ellis. It takes tremendous intellectual courage and moral compassion to keep alive prophetic Judaism right in the thirty years when American Jews undergo amazing, almost Boom-town upward social mobility as vicious anti-Semitic discrimination fell in the '50s and '60s, and they begin to make their move to the mainstream.

So that intense 'bourgeoisification' of American Jews is a distinctive feature of the American historical landscape between 1950 up until the 1980s and '90s. This pits Brother Marc radically against the grain of his own Jewish community. The same would be true when the 'bourgeoisification' of any people takes place – the seduction of the felicities of bourgeois existence, all of the temptations, the downplaying of talk about the catastrophic, or talk about anybody else's catastrophe as opposed to just our own – it's highly attractive. And every group has that challenge – the bourgeoisification of black people, Irish, Italians, Jews, across the board, we can go on, and on, and on, it's a human thing under conditions of commodification, commercialization, and marketization.

So part of the courage that is specific to Marc Ellis is, as a Jewish brother, having to have that context coming at him, and then the willingness to say 'I still will speak the truth, and I still will work in close alliance with a Christian tradition that has a history of hating my people. That's very rare in this last 50 years, let alone in the academy, and I do not think that Brother Marc Ellis has been appreciated in the way he ought, and that his texts have not been celebrated in the way they ought.

When the chilly effects of the Ice Age, with its hardened hearts and coarsened consciences, begin to melt, his work will surface in a powerful way. They will say 'Brother Marc Ellis was our friend, he was our truth-teller, he was our witness-bearer. You may have mistreated him, marginalized him, undervalued him, not appreciated him, but *we* do – you all just had a deliberate blindness and a willful ignorance of someone who was willing to bear witness intellectually, morally, existentially.