EDITORIAL

A Report on the Edinburgh Gifford Lectures 2024

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Last month, the Gifford Lectures were delivered at the University of Edinburgh by Dr Cornel West, philosopher, activist, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer Professor of Philosophy and Christian Practice at Union Theological Seminary in New York. The series was entitled "A Jazz-soaked Philosophy For our Catastrophic Times: From Socrates to Coltrane". Tickets to attend in person were in considerable demand, and the lectures were live-streamed, both to overflow locations in Edinburgh and around the world via the Internet. Permanent video recordings of all six lectures are available on YouTube.[1]

Dr West developed in detail his idea of 'jazz-soaked philosophy', comprising three key interconnected elements to speak to our catastrophic times: blues (acknowledging catastrophe), swing (hopeful openness to new possibilities to fight against nihilism), and improvisation (a polyphonic conversation involving multiple voices). Jazz-soaked philosophy is not merely an attempt to interpret the world in its past and present catastrophic states but also, inescapably, about action. West developed his ideas in rich conversation with a range of philosophical and literary figures with profound sensitivity to their catastrophic contexts as well as our own. He aimed from the outset to speak in ways that would unsettle, unnerve, and 'unhouse' his audience.

The lectures' content can be seen and heard on the recordings. But what was most remarkable about West's lectures, not wholly assimilable from a recording, was the form, the atmosphere created in the room by West in relationship with his audience. For this not only reflected, but also embodied the message and made it really present.

Speaking directly to this atmosphere at the beginning of Lecture 4 "History Adagio", West described it as being 'like a family reunion'. He referred to the '*Gemeinschaft*-like spirit, real community spirit' that cut against the grain of what might have been expected from the Gifford Lectures, which—as the banner behind him informed us—have been 'promoting and diffusing the study of Natural Theology […] since 1888'.

> You tend to think of a very formal, *Gesellschaft*, impersonal, detached context. And you say, 'No! We've got some blues sensibility, and some swing, to make this place shake a little bit!' Yes, intellectually. But also morally. Also spiritually. Also politically. Not as an empty rhetorical gesture, or a vacuous oppositional move, but as a deepening of a very rich conversation that goes back to legacies of Athens, and Rome, and Jerusalem, and Paris, all the way up to Harlem and Hamlet, North Carolina, where John Coltrane was born.

[1] "Lecture 1: Philosophic Prelude" <https://youtu.be/cAXjezpNKIU?si=IeFZG4vVBxHquN0o>; "Lecture 2: Metaphilosophic Andante" <https://youtu.be/aQ0toc7yCY0?si=Qo4ESZH2kFJwSGGg>; "Lecture 3: Folly Presto" <https://youtu.be/8_TYNgXM3-o?si=AjvvkeIxXWTbqy91>; "Lecture 4: History adagio" <https://youtu.be/Cf24-nPz-N0?si=GdAZ3vd-rLwFWdzV>; "Lecture 5: America Allegro Molto Vivace" <https://youtu.be/aVsFWC2qnVg?si=Kq77XR0P1y73PMzW>; "Lecture 6: A Love Supreme (A Way Through)" <https://youtu.be/yhehelwF-8Y?si=ua8kCRxpAAFAHY_6> [accessed 21st May, 2024].

West describes himself as a 'bluesman in the life of the mind', a 'jazzman in the world of ideas',[2] and he conveyed what this means as much by the *way* he communicated as by *what* he communicated.

West's references to us all, including himself, as 'cracked vessels' and his insightful contextualisation of the thinkers he invoked embodied a profound awareness of the catastrophic state of the contemporary world and the role that we continue to play in this. The varied cultural sources that he drew upon can be seen to share this blues sensibility when viewed as rooted in their historical and cultural contexts: the Peloponnesian wars for Plato; wars, plagues, and famines for Erasmus and Montaigne.

West stressed that his Gifford Lectures were also about 'the fight back' against nihilistic responses to catastrophe. A sense of hope, of 'swing', was conveyed by his animated physical movements as he invoked an army of past thinkers and activists whose ideas remain available to everyone to be mobilised again against nihilism and despair. West's many magnanimous embraces of friends, colleagues, and audience members expressed the love to which he kept returning as the 'drum-beat' of 'a way through'.

The intonation of West's voice as he spoke was reminiscent of a prophetic American preacher. But West is not an ordained minister, and the various texts he was expounding, and often held in his dramatically outstretched hand, were not the Holy Bible but Plato, Erasmus, Vico, Max Weber, and Toni Morrison. The lectures were genuinely polyphonic conversations and delivered, without notes, in a truly improvisatory style.

Any remaining doubt about the jazz-soaked nature of these Gifford Lectures could not have survived the standing ovation to the final lecture, 'Love Supreme (A Way Through)', during which West and his audience broke into an impromptu rendition of John Coltrane's overdubbed vocal chant from *A Love Supreme*. Yes, as West had predicted, we made 'this place shake a little bit' and, as Professor Jay Brown commented in his concluding remarks, 'made the Gifford Lectures swing'!

West both regards and lives the life of the mind as inextricable from religious faith. Like his late colleague Edward Said, he conceives the intellectual life in terms of the Socratic imperative to examine both oneself and the world, to be ready to act on the basis of these insights, and discharge our duty to speak truth to power.[3] To the same end, West's is a faith founded on love that resists dogmatism and the exclusion of marginalised voices with a commitment to 'lifting every voice' to ignite a 'prophetic fire' for justice.[4] West vulnerably revealed what such a faith means for him personally in remembrance of his vacation Bible School teacher, Sarah Ray: '"Little Cornel, wherever you go" (even at the Gifford Lectures) "if the kingdom of God is within you, then everywhere you go, you ought to leave a little heaven behind."'

A striking epigraph from Albert Schweitzer appears in West's memoir:

> At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.[5]

For this audience member, these lines capture the experience of seeing and hearing Cornel West engaging with a multitude of still-living voices drawn from intellectual history,

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[2] C. West, with D. Ritz, *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud: A Memoir* (New York, NY: Smiley Books, 2009), 41.
[3] E. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York, NY: Vintage Books 1996), 100.
[4] C. West, with C. Buschendorf, *Black Prophetic Fire* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2014), 1.
[5] West, *Brother West*, 254. Cf. A. Schweitzer, *Aus meiner Kindheit und Jugendzeit* (Bern: Paul Haupt AG, 1978), 52.

mobilising them in the fight back against nihilism in the face of ongoing catastrophe. They perfectly convey the experience of an audience gratefully ignited (intellectually, morally, spiritually, and politically) by West's unique Gifford Lectures. Dr West acknowledged the ongoing risk that the light may yet go out, but answered this immediately with a clear instruction, a defiant spark of prophetic fire:

> It could very well be the case that we're living at a moment when the best that has been bequeathed and transmitted to us is getting so weak and so thin that the younger generation may not be convinced; it is not worth their time, their discipline, to want to build on it. What a moment to be alive! Full of unbelievable despair. And yet, at the same time, somehow muster the courage to say: that despair must never, ever, ever, be the last word.