



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

Why Professor Corey D.B. Walker Looks to the Past to Understand Today's Complex World

Professor Corey D. B. Walker is the Dean of the Wake Forest University School of Divinity, Wake Forest Professor of the Humanities, and Director of the Program in African American Studies. He pursued his education at two HBCUs and two of the oldest schools in America, and talks about how each of these formations gave him the ability to develop into the intellectual he is today. As an expert in the areas of African American philosophy, critical theory, ethics and religion, Professor Walker discusses the overlap between theology and democracy, and explores what it means to be human in today's society.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Since 2018, we have welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys.

Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters, where they spend two days on campus and present free public lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholars' lectures, please visit pbk.org.

Today, I'm excited to welcome Professor Corey D.B. Walker. Professor Walker is the Wake Forest Professor of the Humanities with a joint appointment in the Department of English and the Interdisciplinary Humanities program at Wake Forest University. He serves as the Dean of the Wake Forest University School of Divinity, in addition to being the inaugural Director of the program in African American Studies.

His research, teaching, and public scholarships span the areas of African American philosophy, critical theory, ethics and religion, and American and public life. He is currently completing his next book, *Disciple of Nonviolence: Wyatt Tee Walker and the Struggle for the Soul of Democracy*, to be published by the University of Virginia Press. Professor Walker is the 2023-24 Frank M. Updike Memorial Scholar for the Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar Program. Welcome, Professor.

Corey D.B. Walker: Thanks so much for having me. I'm looking forward to our conversation.

Lawrence: It's often been said that we as academics are disciplinary, but knowledge is not disciplinary. Your work certainly transcends disciplines in an extraordinary way. You hold appointments in English and Humanities and African American studies. You're the Dean of the School of Divinity. How do you see these fields overlapping? How do you see the synergies that exist among them? Do you think of this as one giant approach to the issues of the day, or are they different issues that you find of interest?

Walker: Well, Fred, that's a great question. I've often been asked, how do you define yourself intellectually? And what I've found is that throughout my career in the academy, my intellectual interests have been defined by the questions that I've been raising, questions about how do we understand American democracy across space and time? What are some of the rich resources for us to think through and build a better political community?

How do we begin to understand the role of the human in the world and particularly in our contemporary moment? And one last question is what does it mean to be human in the world today? When I look at those big questions, they do not lend themselves to one single disciplinary approach. In many ways, it's about a conversation around knowledge production and reproduction across space and time.

So I can find myself thinking with some of the great fathers of the African church, so I can think through Augustine or Tertullian, and then I may have them in conversation with some members of the Frankfurt School, Dornier or Horkheimer. And of course, there's always the rich tradition of African American arts and letters. Some of the great 19th century thinkers from Anna Julia Cooper to W. E. B. Du Bois to contemporary thinkers, I think of Reverend Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, or beginning to think with James Cone and Charles H. Long.

So I imagine myself having really a conversation with a great wealth of traditions that are bequeathed to us from a number of intellectual and a number of cultural traditions

that can really inform and better enable us to grab and make sense of the complexities that we face in our world today. I don't think there's any one answer or any one way that we can respond to the crises that we face.

Lawrence: I started with you in the present, and I feel as if I've been in one of your seminars as we've been talking, but let me now take you back a little bit in time. Tell us a little bit about your childhood and your growing up, and the question I want to frame it around is, if I had said to the young Corey Walker growing up that you'll wind up as an academic with multiple posts in multiple fields, would he have said, "That sounds about right," or would he have said, "No, that's not going to happen to me?"

Walker: I think the young Corey would've said, "Well, I'm in a family where there are a number of things that are taken seriously: family, faith, and football."

Lawrence: In that order or not necessarily?

Walker: Not necessarily in that order. And one thing that I wanted to do, I wanted to be a football player. Of course, I played football like all of my older brothers. I'm the youngest of four sons, and of course we all played football. So if that would be one thing, it would be, hey, you're going to play football one day.

But my mother was a librarian clerk and my father was a social worker. So they brought two things together: an ethic of caring for humanity and an ethic of cultivating the life of the mind. I'm a grandson of two Baptist ministers, one who was also a singer and the other who was also an artist and an inventor and a published poet. So when I look at my family formation, although football loomed large, there was always within it that ethic of cultivating the life of the mind and that ethic of serving others.

And when I look back on it, I think the younger Corey who had this passion for helping others and who also experienced at a very young age the beauty and brilliance of immersing oneself in the life of books, that would be the young Corey that says, football was momentary, but these ethics are lifelong.

And that young Corey would not be surprised, although at many points I was surprised because I was formed. As an undergraduate, I majored in finance, and I began my career in financial services, and then I found myself in seminary.

Lawrence: So I was going to ask you, at some point you get a degree in finance at Norfolk State, but then you get a Master's in divinity from Virginia Union University. So that's not exactly a direct route or at least not an obvious route. What was the path that connects those two?

Walker: Well, what connects them is that I had a wonderful group of folks that I worked with in financial services that recognized that I would not be there long, although I did not recognize that. And they saw something in me that I could not also see, and I had a

wonderful, wonderful mentor and intellectual model, and that person is my wife, Dr. Carthene Rolanda Bazemore-Walker. At that point, we got married right out of college and she was pursuing her PhD in chemistry at the University of Virginia, and she introduced me to all of these people in all of these different fields, all these other graduate students, and the only thing I knew about graduate school was to go to business school and get an MBA, but it was really about this experience with these other students by night and my career and financial services by day that really created this sort of tension, and that tension resolved itself when I realized that there was something more to my life than financial services and that I really wanted to give myself over to a life of service to others.

And I wanted to serve humanity. Thenhen I had the affirmation of my colleagues in financial services. They gave me a wonderful banquet and they gave me my first embossed Bible with my name on it, and these were folks who to this day I'm still in community with them.

Lawrence: I'm going to bet that that Bible is not only still among your possessions, I bet it's within hand's reach as we are talking.

Walker: It certainly is, and I keep it close.

Lawrence: So we've been talking about the breadth of the disciplines and the breadth of going from finance over to divinity school and getting a divinity education, but there's another way in which you covered a stretch of the higher education system in this country. You begin with two celebrated HBCUs, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Norfolk State and Virginia Union.

But then your next two degrees are a master's at Harvard in theological studies and a doctorate in the celebrated American Studies Department at William & Mary's. So it's not just that those are traditionally white schools, but you pick the two oldest schools in America. So you go from two HBCUs to the two oldest schools in America that did not have people of color for centuries as they got started, or certainly not in any numbers to speak of.

First of all, talk about that experience and how would you describe the differences between the traditionally white colleges where you studied and the HBCUs where you studied?

Walker: The one thing when you place it in that framework, in many ways, Norfolk State and Virginia Union really prepared me to go to Harvard and to the College of William & Mary, and not just move to go to those two institutions, but to provide the intellectual courage, strength, and stamina to develop a set of unique questions to respond to, to be able to access and develop resources from a wealth of traditions from Europe, Africa, and throughout the Americas, but most importantly, have a conversation with scholars across disciplinary formations.

I can remember auditing an economic seminar, a seminar in political economy, with Professor Steven Margolin, and that seminar left a deep impression on me. Steven Margolin, of course, a famed economist who's written so much, but his care and compassion about what we knew and why we knew it and the questions that we were raising about political economy were so very vital to my formation.

But I would not have had the courage to move across from the Divinity School at Harvard to the Faculty of Arts and Sciences if I had not been formed at Norfolk State University as a finance major with a deep economics background. I just would not have had that courage. It also enabled me to wrestle with some of the great theological minds of our moment.

I can remember taking multiple seminars with Sarah Coakley, famed theologian at Harvard and, of course, at Cambridge, but it was with Sarah Coakley who introduced me to really one of the thinkers that I continue to think with, and that's Ernst Troch, and Professor Coakley provided us with an opportunity to begin to wrestle with and think with not only a theological thinker, but one who's moving across disciplinary domains to engage the social, to engage the political, to engage the cultural.

I would not have had that courage if it weren't for the formation at Virginia Union University, the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology, to recognize that theological thinking and theologies are always contextual. They're always relational, and you have to have a broad understanding of the shaping and formation of intellectual minds and also of particular scholarly character. I would not have been able to do that had it not been for that formation at Virginia Union University.

Analogously, at the College of William and Mary, moving to American Studies was sort of the culmination of a series of conversations across finance, economics, theology and society that were then able to coalesce into a program of study that enabled me to not deny the theological character of my thinking, but to begin to enhance it with the ways in which I draw on the wealth of the humanities and the humanistic social sciences to raise fundamental questions about American democracy, questions of how people make sense of democracy in the everyday, and how we develop the rituals, traditions, and conceptual formations to really inform democracy.

So none of that is absent in any of these formations. I've found myself really having a broad conversation across disciplinary domains to really wrestle with questions that we raise in our everyday lives.

Lawrence:

Corey, I want to ask you a question that could easily fill this entire podcast or several, so in a way it's not fair, and I don't expect a full exposition, but your first thoughts on a very pressing matter of our time that flows directly from your constellation of fields, and that is the role of religion in our democracy at this moment. How do you see the challenges and opportunities of how religious claims are brought to the public square

and how a pluralistic, multicultural, multiethnic society can still function as a self-governing democracy?

Walker: Fred, that's a great question and one that I'm wrestling with now right here at Wake Forest University School of Divinity. I'm teaching a graduate seminar here in the School of Divinity entitled Church and State: The Politics of God, and in that course, we're wrestling with these very same issues, but we're wrestling with them across a delimited timeframe across the 20th century, in the opening decades of the 21st century.

We began with an idea, an idea that has yet to find expression in the world, and that is how do we create and sustain and enhance a multiethnic, pluralist, egalitarian, democratic society? Religion, particularly Christianity, has provided us with a grammar of politics and a grammar of citizenship.

Religion has also served as the very ground of some of our most divisive practices, from the dehumanizing institution of chattel slavery to the diminution of the humanity of women to the denial of human integrity and variety for our LGBTQ+ community to the ways in which we understand normative dimensions of citizenship that deny and denigrate others across the world. Religion has been at the very core of these fundamental issues.

And the way in which we respond to those issues in our moment can't be absent religion. We have to develop what I call a theological thinking that enables us to understand how religion operates both as a panacea, but also as a problem, and in our contemporary moment, we are faced with not only rising anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, but we have a core problem at the core of American democracy with a deeply held belief of wedding Christianity and American nationalism, otherwise what we call Christian nationalism.

That's at the core of the issues that we're facing because it places those issues of politics beyond the realm of politics. Those issues that can be adjudicated politically are now elevated to the level of the ultimate, and when we use absolute languages, when we use absolute ideas and when we authorize them by that significant signifier, G-O-D, we find ourselves outside of the realm of politics and into the realm of theology.

And the question for American society and the question for each one of us is, how do we develop a capacious political language that can adjudicate between our competing theological claims, but also ground our democracy in ways that affirm the worth, value, and dignity of all of humanity?

Lawrence: I'm thinking of ways in which religious claims have not pulled away from the public square or above the public square, but have actually been taken right into the public square. One of my favorite aphorisms, Dr. King as I'm sure you know was asked one time, did he think of himself as a radical? And with that half smile that he was famous

for, he said, "Can you think of anything more radical than taking the teachings of Jesus seriously?" I don't think he was being even 1% ironic.

I think he was being 100% serious and straight down the middle, and I think that's what motivated the work, and he was taking a religious claim as he felt it, a calling as he felt it, but not pulling away from the public square, but taking that into the public square and then making claims that were claims that could be heard by those who shared his religious tradition and those who didn't share his religious tradition and those of no particular religious tradition.

Walker: And that's the beauty of America. One of the issues that I raise and I constantly discuss in my work is the question of religious freedom. That religious freedom is not only about freedom to believe, it's also freedom not to believe, and that's the wide space that we offer, and that's the space that King moves within. It is not a space where one can offer dogmatic formulas that then operate as an absolute way in which we must behave, believe, and belong in democracy.

And I think this is where King provides us with an exemplary example of one who's mobilized by religious convictions and ideas and then moves out into the public square, but does not allow those religious ideas to run imperial over hearing alternative formations, hearing alternative ideas that can be grounded religiously or can be grounded in our intellectual traditions, or it can be grounded in any number of ways of being in the world.

Lawrence: Talk to us a little bit about Wyatt Tee Walker, your current project, Dr. King's chief of staff, one of the founders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, leader of many organizations, institutions in the Civil Rights Movement, who by the end of his career is writing a rather provocative essay questioning critical race studies. Where do you place him in the context of the movement, and do you have a thought as to why is it that he perhaps doesn't quite have the public reputation coming out of the movement that he might have given all the things he accomplished?

Walker: It's really an enigma, and it really reminds me that Wyatt Tee Walker really is the protein and mercurial figure in the movement. He's a physics major at Virginia Union University, and then he goes to seminary at Virginia Union, and it was there that Wyatt Tee becomes really an architect of what we call the Black Freedom Movement, and that being an architect really brings together strategies and tactics with the ability to move and mobilize a movement to continue and sustain itself across space and time.

Martin Luther King was at Crozer Theological Seminary and Wyatt was at Virginia Union School of Theology at Virginia Union where they met and struck up a friendship that would last throughout King's life and, of course, would inform Wyatt's life throughout his entire life up until he passed recently in 2018, and Wyatt was informed and framed.

It was really formed by King to really open up, and the movement enabled him to really think about the complexities not only of the US, but he had a wide vision of the world.

Wyatt was involved in the Anti-Apartheid Movement from the early 1970s. He was involved in the Middle East crisis from the late 1970s throughout his entire life. He worked as the faith head of Jesse Jackson's historic 1984 presidential campaign. But most importantly, he had a vision of how religion can serve as a resource for developing King's ideal of a beloved community, and that ideal of a beloved community was not only local, it was not only within the US, but it was also global.

So Wyatt really was a true Renaissance person, one who brought together the best of the sciences as well as theology, undergirded by rich tradition that drew off of the musical cultures of Africa and the Americas, that then mobilized a vision of human society, global human society, in ways that would affirm the dignity of all people.

Lawrence: Well, we will certainly look forward to adding *Disciple of Nonviolence: Wyatt Tee Walker and the Struggle for the Soul of Democracy* to our bookshelves. Do you have a couple of other suggestions to add to our bookshelves? I'm thinking of, for our listeners, those who have a fair amount of background in some of the issues we've been talking about today who might want to take these issues to a higher level, a further level or deeper level, as well as those who've been interested in the conversation, but for whom this is actually new territory and might want a port of entry.

Walker: I just always recommend this text, W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*. Those essays in there, the elegance of the writing, the keenness of mind reminds us that these are essays that are not only timeless, they are timely in terms of wrestling with some of the deep issues that we face, both in the human condition and in our broader society. We can do no better than to start there.

I'm always reminded that the great Gary Dorrien, who's an ethicist at Union Theological Seminary, has come together with a number of books on the African American Social Gospel. But it is this one book on the American Democratic Socialism that I would recommend, because here are individuals who are activated by religious motives, they're activated by non-religious motives, but they're all deeply committed to a democratic experience that is broad, that is deep, and that is experienced at the level of the everyday by all Americans. And so Gary Dorrien's *American Democratic Socialism: History, Politics, Religion, and Theory* is something that I recommend.

And of course, of many things that Toni Morrison has written, it is her recently published collection of essays, *The Source of Self-Regard*, that I find most timely and most prescient. Morrison was not only a great novelist, and of course, after *Song of Solomon*, she reminds us that one of her great passions was to save the novel, to

ensure that the novel as this enigmatic modern form can be a host for these capacious visions of the world and human experience and all of their density and complexity.

Spending time with Morrison and her nonfiction writing is truly a pleasure and truly an experience that would complement any of these books by Du Bois, by Gary Dorrien because of the elegance of craft, and I think that's what really unites all three of these texts.

We have thinkers and writers who are committed to the very elegance and highest standards of craft, and they are wrestling with language and bending it in ways that enable us to not only enter the conversation, but to open up new expressions of ourselves and our understandings for others that we may continue the conversation into the long future.

Lawrence: In your own work across so many different fields, you have spent time and deep study in timeless texts and brought us timely insights, and continue to do so. We are so grateful at Phi Beta Kappa that you're with us as a Visiting Scholar this year and especially holding the Frank M. Updike Memorial Scholar position as a Visiting Scholar. Thank you for doing that. Thank you for what you bring to the American Public Square in conversation, and thanks for joining me today on Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa.

Walker: You so much, Fred. I enjoyed our conversation.

Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Phantom Center Media and Entertainment. Kojin Tashiro is lead producer and mixed this episode. Michelle Baker is Editor and co-producer, and Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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