

## **The Honorands of the 1999 Commencement**

### **Bowdoin College**

#### **Cornel West Doctor of Humane Letters**

Cornel West is a scholar, philosopher, and writer who serves as a professor of religion and Afro-American studies at Harvard University. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., chairman of Harvard's Department of Afro-American Studies, describes West as "one of America's most important public intellectuals, and a formidable scholar by any measure."

West was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1953. When he was four years old his family settled in a black, blue-collar neighborhood on the outskirts of Sacramento, California. His father was a civilian Air Force administrator, and his mother was an elementary school teacher who would later become a principal. West views the unconditional, unstinting love given to him by his parents as the most fundamental element of his life – supporting his spirit, soothing his soul. After attending public school in Sacramento, West went to Harvard University, where he graduated *magna cum laude* in 1973, after only three years of study. Martin Kilson, one of West's professors, recalls him as one of "the most intellectually aggressive and highly cerebral students I have taught in my 30 years here."

West went on to Princeton University, where he received his master's degree in 1975 and his doctorate in 1980. He returned to Princeton in 1987 as a professor of religion and director of the Afro-American studies department. After helping to build that department, West returned to Harvard, where he now serves as full professor of Afro-American studies and philosophy of religion. Recently promoted to university professor, a title held by only 14 of Harvard's 2,200 faculty members, he is one of the first black scholars to be appointed to the university's highest faculty post.

West has written numerous articles and 14 books, including *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, *Jews and Blacks*, *The Future of the Race*, and *Restoring Hope*. His book *Race Matters* quickly achieved best-seller status and gained the attention of *Time* and *Newsweek*, which both ran extensive profile articles on him. He co-wrote *The War Against Parents* together with Sylvia Ann Hewlett, with whom he co-chairs the National Parenting Association's Task Force on Parent Empowerment. His most recent publication (written with Roberto Uner), *The Future of American Progressivism*, teaches how the growing divisions in society foster the despair and distrust that undermine the democratic process.