

## **“Fire Shut Up in My Bones” : An Interview with Katie Geneva Cannon**

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The 2011 AAR Excellence in Teaching Award winner is Katie Geneva Cannon, Annie Scales Rogers Professor of Christian Ethics at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. Cannon did her doctoral work with Beverly Harrison at Union Theological Seminary and has taught at New York Theological Seminary, Union Theological Seminary in New York, Harvard Divinity School, Episcopal Divinity School, and Temple University. She is also the first African-American woman ordained in the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA). She has received many honors and awards, including the Distinguished Professor Award from Spelman College, and was a Rockefeller Scholar in Residence at the Center for the Study of Black Literature and Culture at the University of Pennsylvania, and a Bunting Fellow at Radcliffe College. She has also served as a visiting professor at Davidson College and Williams College. As her nominees state, Cannon “is a pioneer in Womanist studies in religion and a role model for many Womanist scholars and racial minorities in the profession.” Her teaching career spans more than three decades and her influence is widespread.

On her teaching life Cannon relates, “I’ve been teaching since I was three years old.” The origins of her Womanist pedagogy are in her African-American community. Since her childhood in the segregated North Carolina mill town of Kannapolis, Cannon has fought for justice, and this work is reflected in her commitment to “transformation pedagogy.” The context of this work is the continuing legacy of white supremacy and the new Jim Crow society in the United States. Cannon’s gift is to make this justice work invitational and communal. She asks, “What do you gain (not lose) by being doers of justice?” In the tradition of African-American teaching, Cannon summarizes, “I’m going to give you the best I got and I want you to be better than I am.” In this way she invites her diverse groups of students to participate in justice work, and many of her students have stepped up.

For Cannon, teaching is fluid and multidimensional. A major contribution to education and to the

field and profession is her efforts and presence in mentoring. When Cannon taught at Temple University, she facilitated a structured, interdisciplinary mentoring group for faculty and doctoral students, along with some community and church people, in the social sciences and religion. This group served as a supportive group, pushing people to get “unstuck” in their writing projects, finding any assistance needed to succeed, and celebrating each other and all steps forward. Members held each other accountable for working collaboratively and collectively. In addition, members served as cheering squads at dissertation defenses. Cannon relates, “We held all of life; we were not just talking heads.” Cannon continues this mentoring work at Union Presbyterian Seminary. She has many mentees, including Joan Martin and Miguel De La Torre. Her nominators for the award state that Cannon “has supervised and mentored many doctoral students, who are now movers and shakers in the field of Christian ethics,” and that she has also been influential through her leadership as chair of the AAR Womanist Approaches to Religion and Theology Group, in which pedagogy is a major topic. One of her mentees, Stacey Floyd-Thomas, was awarded the 2007 AAR Excellence in Teaching Award, notably before her mentor, and as a testimony to Cannon’s grace-filled Womanist pedagogy.

As Cannon conveys in [her teaching statement](#) : “The call to teach religion is like fire shut up in my bones. As a Christian Womanist liberation theological ethicist embodied, mediated knowledge is a fundamental component of my pedagogy. I bring my biotext and students bring their existential stories, rooted in remembering, to the common, centering point in each course of study. Working together as colearners, we develop our capacity to change the world, to introduce into existence new forms of moral praxis.”

Cannon invites her students to follow their own interests as they also engage the communities around the seminary. She connects historical ethics with ethical practice today. For Cannon, knowledge is embodied — What is your gut telling you? Cannon’s rootedness in the church and in ministry guides her connecting of word and world. She invites her students to be colearners in these ethically charged spaces. In education for ministry, learning the subject matter connects to being pastoral and prophetic. As one recommender, a former student, commented, “Dr. Cannon produces a teaching-learning environment in which students are invested in the learning process and are committed to the application of course materials to their sense of vocation.” This “pedagogy of possibility” requires risk and rigorous theoretical and practical study. Through weekly talking papers or epistolary journal entries, emancipatory historiographies, conscientization-free writes, feasibility studies, or creative story writing, Cannon provides multiple openings into difficult material and dialogues.

To hear more about her pedagogical journeys, join Katie Cannon at the AAR Annual Meeting in S

