

## Katie Cannon, Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education



*Katie Geneva Cannon is Annie Scales Rogers Professor of Christian Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, where she pursues research in Christian ethics, womanist theology, and women in religion and society. She recently served as Davidson College's Lilly Distinguished Professor of Religion and is currently the president of the Society for the Study of Black Religion. In 1974 she became the first African-American woman to be ordained in the United Presbyterian Church. Her books include Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community (1995) and Black Womanist Ethics (1988).*

**Mooney:** You've taught graduates and undergraduates. Do you have a fondness for one or the other — or both?

**Cannon:** Being a visiting professor at Davidson College this semester, which is an undergraduate liberal arts college, has convinced me that I really like graduate teaching. My home base is the seminary, Union-PSCE in Richmond. I like the specificity of doing graduate teaching in the world of theological education. I enjoyed my eight years on the faculty at Temple, an urban research university, in the Department of Religion, where we taught the seven major religions of the world. Then we added African indigenous religions and African religions in the Americas. But there's something about being able to train folks for ministry which I really like. My family has been involved in the Presbyterian Church for more than five generations, really since we arrived here from Africa. African-American ministers in my denomination were formative in helping me develop a critical God consciousness. Theological education is what I get excited about. Yes, I enjoy teaching undergraduates. I enjoy the ever-hopeful expectancy of the traditional 18-to-21-year-old student. I truly appreciate the simplicity of their life-giving energy, but, all in all, I like graduate teaching more than I do

undergrad.

**Mooney:** By the time that they are in seminary they're interested in participating in a religious life pretty seriously, and with undergraduates you have no idea what they're interested in.

**Cannon:** In seminary, people who take my courses know that I'm a liberationist, so they know that I'm going to push the envelope. They know it's not going to be a glorification of inherited, malestream, Eurocentric, Christian traditions. Seminarians know we are going to look at justice issues, counter falsely constructed realities, and investigate every line of demarcation between the valued haves and the devalued have-nots.

**Mooney:** So they're not immediately rebellious when you lead them like that. You can feel them riding along with you.

**Cannon:** I think that's one of the advantages of being an African-American woman teaching in predominantly white schools. Most of our present-day students — black, white, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American — have never had a black woman as a teacher. The fact that I embody difference means that students who elect to study with me tend to be open-minded regarding patterns of diversity.

**Mooney:** So they don't think that you're just pushing some party line but that you're speaking from your own experience.

**Cannon:** When I was teaching at the Episcopal Divinity School, one of the things we would talk about is the idea that professors must bring our own views into the classroom. Since I am a liberation theologian and a Christian womanist ethicist, students know my age, they know my birth-date — because we don't do disembodied ethics. We embrace embodied, mediated knowledge, meaning that I bring my biotext and students bring their existential stories, rooted in remembering, to the common, centering point in each course of study. It is impossible to do liberation ethics sitting in armchairs, working only from the neck up. Seminarians do not have to agree with me, and I don't have to agree with them, but instead we create dialectic space — a learning environment where we can sandpaper with each other's thesis, antithesis, and synthesis as we maximize what we need to know about the subject matter.

**Mooney:** Do you think students have changed over your years of teaching?

**Cannon:** I first started teaching theology in 1977 to an eclectic group of adult-learners at New York Theological Seminary. I taught women and men who supported their families by working fulltime jobs during the week, studied all day on Saturday, and preached every Sunday. Some of my students administered large inner-city congregations, having earned only a high school diploma. Other storefront ministers had bachelor degrees but lacked formal theological training. A few of our students had their Master of Divinity degrees from other seminaries, so they took courses with us in order to enhance their knowledge regarding the theological gifts of the black church, especially how to do urban ministry effectively.

When I traveled north from New York City to Cambridge to teach at the Episcopal Divinity School, I moved into a more affluent teaching environment. Some of the seminarians had been to the best prep schools in New England. Others were Ivy League trained or graduates from one of the Seven Sister colleges. Working with colleagues who were amongst the first generation of feminist liberationist scholars teaching across the disciplines in theological education meant that as faculty we met regularly to hone our skills for shifting pedagogical paradigms. I learned that there is a world of difference between working-poor students who diligently study after eight hours of day labor in order to prove their ontological worth and seminarians of affluence who presuppose an ideology of meritocracy, an inbred monumental sense of somebodiness.

**Mooney:** For some groups of students, do you have to affirm their worth, first and foremost, rather than push them someplace new?

**Cannon:** We have to help those who are “piecing together a world that exists only in fragments” to understand all the stuff they need to know, though it may not be pertinent to their immediate lives. For instance, I had to learn how to read German in order to write about African-American women, because doctoral programs that require the study of foreign languages have credibility and higher academic currency in the greater scheme of things.

In 1992, when I joined the faculty at Temple University, there were 5,000 black students in a student body of 33,000. With more than 100 black faculty in the various colleges throughout the university, I felt as if I had died and gone to heaven because our brand of scholastic

sophistication was the order of the day. Yes, Temple was an awesome African-centered think tank throughout the decade of the 1990s. I was privileged to tap into real and enactable black power by working with professors and graduate students in geography, sociology, psychology, anthropology, history, philosophy, political science, education, dance, rhetoric, and English.

**Mooney:** It sounds like you've adjusted with your audience and you've had several different kinds of audience through the decades.

**Cannon:** Yes, and I love the students with whom I am a co-learner. Each teaching experience is a genuine growing edge for me. However, I think I did my best teaching at the Episcopal Divinity School from 1984 to '92 because I had seminarians who enrolled in every class that I taught, which meant that I created a variety of different ways to teach Christian Social Ethics. EDS was a living lab for me, an accelerated place to study discursive bodies of knowledge and to craft a portfolio of pedagogical methodologies that I continue to refine each semester.

**Mooney:** Did you always know that you would be a teacher of some sort?

**Cannon:** When I was three years old, my mother took my five-year-old sister and me to school. She enrolled us in the Mount Calvary Lutheran Kindergarten, the only nursery preschool that was available to black kids in Kannapolis.

**Mooney:** What state was that?

**Cannon:** North Carolina...right in the Piedmont section. We lived in a textile mill town owned by Mr. Charles Cannon. Of the 40,000 residents, most of the whites were from the mountains of Appalachia, while most of the blacks were from the foothills, having worked, after the Civil War, as sharecroppers and tenant farmers. I will be forever grateful to the members of the "Alpha Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Freedmen in America" who opened a day school for black children at Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church in 1902. By the time I turned four in 1954, I had internalized wholeheartedly the church's legacy of love and learning. From that point on I wouldn't play Cowboys and Indians, nor would I jump rope or shoot marbles. I wouldn't even dance around the circle as Little-Sally-Walker unless we began our playtime activities by playing school. I was always the teacher and I assigned a lot of homework. Yes, I've always loved teaching. Later, as a rebellious teenager in college, I didn't want to major in education because

my mother wanted me to be a teacher. Eventually, after changing my major every semester, I earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Education.

**Mooney:** I was just imagining how different the world would be if, on playgrounds across the country, kids were playing school. I don't think that's a game I've seen there in a while.

**Cannon:** Until this conversation, I never understood my love for playing school as being unique. I thought it was something that every child did.

**Mooney:** I'm sure you have standard topics for Christian ethics. How about other things that are in the news all the time, hot issues — do these things work their way into your *class*?

**Cannon:** Yes, I use the case study method to teach several ethics courses. Especially helpful are the two case study anthologies edited by Christine Gudorf. She and her co-editors look at contestable issues in world religions, as well as specific moral dilemmas in church and society. There's always room in each of my courses for students to do the work that their souls must have. For example, if there's a contemporary issue that's not in one of the case study textbooks that is pertinent to seminarians and their communities of accountability, then there's always an assignment in which students write their own case study after participating in a living lab. If there's an ethical topic that really strikes their fancy, they research it and then visit a resource center or a social service agency or talk to an individual who can provide them with experiential data.

**Mooney:** Did your specialty in religious ethics come pretty early on?

**Cannon:** Well, I started my doctoral studies in Hebrew Bible. I finished all the course work, and when I was getting ready to draft comprehensive exams, my advisor said that due to the fact that I was pastoring a church in East Harlem that he could not in good conscience sign the renewal form for my Ford Foundation Fellowship. Without scholarship money I couldn't stay in school. At that time I didn't understand the politics of the PhD. No one told me that I needed to devote all of my time to studying. Instead, I had been formed in an educational culture that said, "everything that I learned I needed to loop back to the community." So I resigned as the supply pastor at the Presbyterian Church of the Ascension, joined the administrative faculty at New York Theological Seminary, retook the matriculation exams, borrowed thousands of dollars so

that I could learn how to read German and Spanish, and enrolled in ethics courses. After a one-year leave of absence, I started the PhD program all over again.

**Mooney:** So that opened up a slightly different career path for you?

**Cannon:** It gave me another competency. Most people studying the Bible know very little about ethics, and most people doing ethics know very little about the Bible [laughing]. In my teaching I am familiar with both. Students argue, “But the Bible says...” and I say “Wait a minute — let’s exegete that specific pericope, and let’s look at how this particular scriptural passage fits into the overall biblical canon.” Students learn early on that the Bible is just one of many sources for ethical reflection and moral discernment.

**Mooney:** What would you recommend if you had a niece or a nephew who was going off to college and asked you, “Gee, I have this whole summer ahead of me, what should I read?”

**Cannon:** Well, this semester I wrote in the margins of students’ papers the title of books that they need to read over the summer, depending on their intellectual interests. Also, I’ve been thinking about the course I will teach in the fall at Williams College as the Visiting Sterling Brown Professor in Religion. I’ve decided to use more anthologies in my classes. I want students to get a comprehensive lay of the land. Therefore, the two must-read anthologies that I recommend are *Body and Soul: Rethinking Sexuality As Justice-Love*, edited by Marvin Ellison and Sylvia Thorson-Smith; and *Living the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, edited by Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins. Oftentimes, when I am out on the lecture circuit, I talk about major ethical issues that cause the greatest friction in western Christianity: human sexuality and mental illness. Far too many Godfearing people lack the will to wrestle with the theoethical data regarding body and mind. That’s why I recommend these two anthologies so that young women and men can grapple with human sexuality in the twenty-first century from a holistic liberation perspective. Several students who read these texts in my feminist liberation theology class said, “These books changed my life!” That’s why I now recommend them to you.