

**A PERSONAL TEACHING STATEMENT**  
**by KATIE GENEVA CANNON, PhD**  
August 20, 2010

The **impulse to teach** began long before I ever heard the word religion. From my earliest conscious moments I was conversing with God about disorder in the world. Life felt askew and unjust. When I was three years old, my mother took my five year old sister, Sara Elizabeth, and me to school. In 1953 she enrolled us in the Mount Calvary Lutheran Kindergarten, the only place that provided early childhood education for Black children in Kannapolis, North Carolina. Mount Calvary Lutheran day school for African American children was founded by the “Alpha Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Freedmen in America” in 1902. My intellectual curiosity was awakened in this formal world of learning.

Here I was, a nursery school toddler, answering catechism questions about Who is God? and Why God made us? Soon after I was drilled about the attributes of God—God is good, God is great, we thank God for each morsel of food we partake. And yet my early faith formation collided with the violent reality of living in a Jim and Jane Crow society. I grew up in a racially segregated city, state, and nation, a world wherein all of my kith and kin were forcibly restricted to a circumscribed, despised periphery as inferior human beings. Warped theological doctrines were used by politically dominant ecclesiastical groups to damn African Americans to the designated status as God’s failed creatures, the divine mistake.

The **need to teach religion** occurred much latter in my faith journey. The need to teach for transformation emerged when I reached a level of formal education wherein I discovered that powerbrokers during the Enlightenment Period determined the ontological worth of people according to literacy. In other words, the essence of being created in God’s image was based on the Cartesian assertion, *cogito, ergo sum*, “I think, therefore I am.” The evidence that one can think determines what one writes. If things are not written, they do not exist. In other words, for seven generations my ancestors as enslaved and freed African American Presbyterians cultivated an oral tradition. My religious inheritance as a lifelong member of the Black Church community emerges out of the verbal *talking book*, wherein we learned how to mine various forms of prophetic wisdom and usable truth embedded in religious orality.

If the evidence of being a human being created in the image of God is based on what we write, what does it mean that African Americans are the only people in the USA explicitly forbidden by law to learn to read and write? The answer is that for the vast majority of descendents of former slaves we value literacy as a golden treasure. By listening to the precious prayers of foremothers and forefathers, some of whom could neither read nor write, we embrace the vitality of educational activity. The logic of urgency went like this: if a person can write what they think then they have memory, history, and culture, in essence, we are more than chattel, no longer liabilities. Instead, we are genuine assets to civilization.

So, in 1977 when I started teaching theology to an eclectic group of adult-learners at New York Theological Seminary (NYTS) writing was then, and still is, a main requirement in all of my classes. Women and men enrolled in my courses supported their families by working full-time jobs during the week, studied all day on Saturday in the Christian Ministry Certificate Program, and pastored 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 NYTS evening and weekend students had their Master of Divinity degrees from other seminaries, so they took courses with us in order to learn about the theological gifts of the Black Church. In essence, the writing assignments that I required enabled students to piece together, week by week, a world that previously existed only in fragments.

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 co-learners, we develop our capacity to change the world, to introduce into existence new forms of moral praxis.

Scattered throughout my teaching career is the mantra, *there is no value-free space*. It is impossible to do authentic liberation ethics sitting in armchairs pretending only to be dispassionate, color-blind, objective talking heads. Instead, as embodied social-selves, we create collaborative dialectic space – a learning environment where we can sandpaper with each other’s thesis, antithesis and synthesis as we maximize what is crucial for educated people to know about the subject matter.

For instance, in 1983 when I traveled north from New York City to Cambridge as a Research Associate and Visiting Lecturer in Christian Ethics in the Women’s Studies in Religion Program at Harvard Divinity School, I created my first set of lectures for what has become my signature course, *Resources for a Constructive Ethic: The Black Women’s Literary Tradition*. In order for students to become conscious of how existing systems of race, sex, and class affected them, they wrestled with the various ways that Black women’s novels function as textual analogue to international trips abroad.

Exercising ethical diligence, liberationists are imbued with justice-making activism, a desire to free both the oppressed and the oppressors. Therefore, I developed an Africentric method for demystifying domination that proved most effective. I adjusted my courses so that students would be required to construct cognitive maps of the “logic” that sets the perimeters for the intelligibility of institutionalized exploitation. In turn, we identify benchmarks for interrupting socially constructed oppressive myths and life-denying narratives.

Women and men who enrolled in my courses at the Episcopal Divinity School (EDS) in 1984 struggled to expand their epistemological horizons. My lectures do not glorify inherited, malestream, Eurocentric Christian traditions. Instead, as co-learners, we

countered falsely constructed realities and investigated lines of demarcation between the valued-haves and the devalued-have-nots. Teaching at EDS had an immeasurable impact on exposing me to the differences in the cognitive worlds between urban 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 somebodyness.

The impact of moving from Harvard Square to join the faculty at Temple University in North Philadelphia in 1992 coincided with my need to expand the core syllabi to include self-consciously constructed narratives about belief systems, cultural rituals, and kinship patterns by adherents of African Traditional Religions in the U.S. Sea Islands, the Caribbean, and Brazil. This expansion worked particularly well for students interested in African retentions in new world cultures.

Since 2001 the city of Richmond has been the venue for my work as a theoethicist. My thirty-three-year march of time from 1977 in New York until 2010 in Virginia is a realized major milestone in womanist scholarship. When I first began teaching there were no books by Black women theologians. Now, there is a significant body of primary materials published by Black women in the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature. Not only are we writing what we think but our texts answer heretofore undreamed questions of every aspect of the religious traditions to which we are heirs.

In essence, as a teacher I have come full circle. As the Annie Scales Rogers Professor of Christian Social Ethics I am right back to where I began. Who is God? Why did God make us? The joy is knowing that long after my courses end and exams have faded from memory, I still get calls and email correspondences from students struggling to stay open-minded in their growing desire to live ethically as they identify the patterns that must be altered, and the accountable actions that must be taken in order to live justly, love mercifully and walk humbly with our God.