

Katie Cannon, 68, Dies; Lifted Black Women's Perspective in Theology



Katie Cannon in 1989. At a young age she saw a disconnect between much of the Christian message and the heavily segregated world in which she lived.

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By Neil Genzlinger – The New York Times

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The Rev. Dr. Katie Cannon, the first black woman to be ordained in a leading branch of Presbyterianism and a groundbreaking scholar who helped elevate the perspective of black women in church and academic thought, died on Wednesday in Richmond, Va. She was 68.

Her death was announced on Facebook by the [Center for Womanist Leadership](#) at Union Presbyterian Seminary, which she helped found. Dr. Cannon, who was the Annie Scales Rogers professor of Christian ethics at the seminary, announced in June that she had acute leukemia.

Dr. Cannon was a foundational voice in womanist theology, which seeks to escape the white- and male-centered views of religion and ethics and to value the experiences and insights of black women in those areas.

In her teaching, at various seminaries and divinity schools and in books like “Black Womanist Ethics” (1988) and “Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community” (1995), she pushed to broaden the definitions and frames of reference underlying religious and ethical thought.

“What Cannon launched insists that God’s creation is much larger and more diverse when we listen to and learn from the moral wisdom found in the everyday lives of Black women,” the Rev. Dr. Emilie M. Townes, dean of the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University, wrote in an email. “Her insistence that we listen and learn also helped give

other groups who had been left out of scholarship or ministry a way to claim their space under the sun.”

Katie Geneva Cannon was born on Jan. 3, 1950, in Kannapolis, N.C. Her father, Esau, and mother, Emanuelette Corine Lytle Cannon, were both ruling elders in the Presbyterian Church but enrolled her in a kindergarten class at a Lutheran church, the only early childhood education available to black girls in Kannapolis, Dr. Cannon said.

“By 5,” she told The Presbyterian Outlook earlier this year, “I could recite the Lord’s Prayer, the Beatitudes, Psalm 23, the Ten Commandments and answers to catechism questions, such as ‘Who is God?’ and ‘Why did God make us?’ ”

But even at that young age she recognized a disconnect between much of the Christian message and the heavily segregated world in which she lived.

“It was against the law to go to the library,” Dr. Cannon told The Charlotte Observer in 2005. “I couldn’t play on that swing. By 4 or 5, I was wondering: ‘What did we do as black people that was so bad? A good God would not do this.’ ”

As a girl she worked alongside an aunt cleaning and cooking in a white family’s home, the best job she or her aunt could hope for at the time. In 1963 she heard the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech on television, but those stirring words did not alter her day-to-day reality.

“I really thought we were going to be free,” she said. “But nothing really changed.”

She came to see education as her only way out of a limited life. Graduating from Barber-Scotia College in Concord, N.C., in 1971, with a degree in education, she enrolled at the Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta.

The typical course of study for a woman at the center at that time led to a master’s degree in Christian education, but instead she pursued a master of divinity degree.

“It was like being E.T.,” Dr. Cannon recalled in a video made when she received the Excellence in Theological Education Award at the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) general assembly this year. “People weren’t hostile; it was just that you were an extraterrestrial being. ‘We’ve never seen one like you.’ ”

She earned her master of divinity degree in 1974 and became the first black woman to be ordained in the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, a branch of the church that has since merged into the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

She continued her education at the Union Theological Seminary in New York, earning a doctor of philosophy degree there in 1983. It was a period of intellectual ferment at the seminary, and Dr. Cannon was very much a part of that, bringing an academic’s rigor to the questions she had first asked herself as a child and finding that much of what was

heard in churches, including from black male ministers, marginalized the experience and wisdom of black women.

“The number of Black women seminarians and doctoral students reached a critical mass and began to insist that the religious worldviews and insights of Black women were important to the life of the church and the health of the academy,” Dr. Townes wrote in her email. “As a Christian ethicist, Katie Geneva Cannon centered Black women’s voices and experiences in her scholarship and her commitment to the church to broaden and deepen the rich resources found outside of a White, male-centered canon.”

Dr. Townes and Dr. Cannon together edited “Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader” (2011).

Womanism — a term generally attributed to the novelist and poet Alice Walker — examines the intersection of feminism, racial identity and more, finding points of both commonality and conflict. In just one example of how Dr. Cannon applied a womanist approach to theology, she wrote of how the Christian idea of suffering was usually defined from the perspective of a white and male dominant class, which, with a comfortable existence, could view it as a choice.

“In dominant ethics a person is free to make suffering a desirable moral norm,” she wrote in “Black Womanist Ethics.” “This is not so for Blacks. For the masses of Black people, suffering is the normal state of affairs.”

During her career Dr. Cannon was on the faculties of Temple University, Episcopal Divinity School and Harvard Divinity School.

She is survived by her mother; three sisters, Sara Cannon Fleming, Doris Cannon Love and Sylvia Moon; and two brothers, John and Jerry.

In the tribute video made for her education award, Dawn DeVries, one of her fellow professors at Union Presbyterian Seminary, said Dr. Cannon had a rare distinction.

“She literally I think started a branch of theology that didn’t exist before she started doing theology,” Dr. DeVries said. “Not many of us are going to be able to say that at the end of our careers.”