Reflections on a Teaching Career in Religion

Edward Mooney, Syracuse University
Guest Editor

From the Editor’s Desk

Describing a sad but true fact, Tom F. Driver frankly notes, “In academia you don’t get many brownie points for loving to teach” (RSN May 2005:16). Yet, as is evident from this issue, even for those who have attained academic eminence through their research, at the end of the day, teaching elicits great love, attention and generosity.

In his special report, Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate — as relevant today as it was over a decade ago — Ernest L. Boyer calls for the American academy to enlarge its perspective of what it means to be a scholar by recognizing the diverse roles that faculty juggle to sustain the creative and critical enterprise of learning and education (Carnegie Report:1990). The status of “scholar” in many societies has derived first and foremost from the capacity to teach — an expansive activity not merely of transmission of knowledge, but through its unrelenting and unending pursuit, of personal and societal transformation and renewal.

It is not a question I get asked much these days, but when I first interviewed for jobs I was regularly asked what drew me to the study of religion. Naturally, I talked about the important role of religions in shaping human history, and described my passion for the aesthetic, poetic and philosophical manifestations of religious life. And then the down-to-earth truth: two professors, in particular, at McGill University — Katherine Young and Charles Adams. The magic of the classroom, the stunning encounter of intellect and passion for a subject eloquently, expertly, and generously shared, the casual common room conversations, the watchful encouragement — all these meant more to me in those years marked by curiosity and experimentation then is possible to describe.

In his article, “Moments for Transformation: The Process of Teaching and Learning,” Jeffrey S. Soleau vividly captures the transformative impact that his philosophy professor had upon him: “Sitting in his class was akin to experiencing a meteor shower... In retrospect, I would describe what happened in this two-semester course as an ontological disclosure . . . ” (JAAR 65/4:812).

Those entering a life in academe may thus take heart that while the challenges of an academic career are intense, as many of us know from our own experience, the influence, love and admiration of great teachers persist well beyond the hours when they directly quickened our minds and hearts, and stoked them with the fires of knowledge. Henry Adams aptly said: “A teacher affects eternity.” Teachers can never tell when or where their influence stops.

The idea for this issue of Spotlight was conceived serendipitously one afternoon over coffee as my colleague, Professor Edward Mooney, mused about what a life of teaching and scholarship had meant to him. Wouldn’t it be fascinating, he said wistfully, to hear the thoughts of other scholars in religion looking back on their careers as teachers, tracing their intellectual biography, reflecting on what moved them to teach, on how changes in the world affected their classrooms, on the ways that their writing had intersected with their teaching, and what they saw in the future for teachers entering the field?

Seizing the moment, I promptly invited Ed to guest edit Spotlight. Fortunately, he welcomed the prospect of putting these questions to the eminent scholars of religion who graciously agreed to be interviewed for this issue. Through the informal style and flow of ideas that dialogue makes possible, Ed’s thoughtfully conceived conversations capture a sense of the intellectual passions, ethical commitments, and delight in learning that nourish an academic vocation capacious conceived. *
Evoking a World You Might Inhabit

Edward Mooney, Syracuse University

Can you give some examples?

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Kassam:

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to the Interior

Mooney:

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Selves in

Where does critique, critical thinking occur in?

Mooney: It’s very important. But criti-

doesn’t guarantee a replacement world when the one critiqued collapses. You have to inhabit a world you respect and love if your critique is going to be re-

vant. You have to inhabit the world you interr-

ogate. Otherwise, your objections miss the mark; people don’t why they should listen. And you learn to inhabit the world of Basho or of a

Dickinson poem by letting its words evoke something. If the words do their work, students can get a glimmer of what it would be like to inhabit the world those words evoke. I’m cautious about critique, especially of the strange worlds of reli-

igious, or quasi-religious, texts. We push words and worlds away without letting their vitality speak. Of course, if someone gets brash or dogmatic or thoughtless about a presumed knowledge of this or that, critique, in large doses, is the appro-

Kassam:

You mentioned pictures and music as evocative, as well as words. Would you ever use hymns or chants in class?

Mooney: Maybe they chant they heard before, or shape note stuff. Hymns they knew would be too obvious, and probably backfire. In teaching a beginning course—say one called “The Meaning”—I might have students listen to the funeral speech of a late Schubert Sonata, and listen to the dead kneel, and have them write about how words rhyme and sounds induce sadness, and why religion evokes and replicates moments of grief and mourning, and thus let us relive them. Sometimes an unex-

pected piece of music works wonders.

Kassam: How does teaching at the graduate level differ from teaching at the undergraduate level?

Mooney: I hear colleagues say that the big difference is that undergraduates need to be initiated into the excitement and rig-

ors of a discipline, while graduate students are already breathing full steam ahead, and only need some direction. That might be partly true. I think an undergraduate needs to be captivated by the worlds the discipline attends to. But graduate stu-

ents need reminders in that direction, too. Sometimes I fear that they are so con-

cerned with establishing their academic credentials—which is a real concern, not an illusion by any means—that they for-

get the pure fun of intellectual exploration and experimentation. As an advisor at the graduate level, I find I have to remind the-

sis or dissertation writers to keep their readers excited about what they write about. They have to watch out not to kill the excitement that brought them into a religion graduate program in the first place. If that excitement stays alive, it can get them through a stuff program, and also keep their teaching alive as they get out on the job market.

Kassam: What’s the greatest reward of teaching?

Mooney: I think it’s seeing a student or several of them—and sometimes, at a magic moment, an entire class—come alive in a moment of discovery. If I see the stage properly, the world I evoke, or that is evoked through my text, will resonate for them, singly, or maybe in pairs, and then all together. It manages to resonate, then something very valuable has happened. And of course, if in my teaching they can come at the texts from the right angle, a world dawns for me, as well as for them, in the evocation of a passage. Good rewards, sharable ones, are palpably there in those moments.

Kassam: How does your teaching intersect with, or recollide from, various public, political displays of religion—every-

thing from 9/11 to the death of a pope?

Mooney: If you see things from a broad enough angle, there’s something happening all the time that can intersect with the sort of religious themes I work to bring out in my introductory classes. You can feed off the feelings and thoughts stu-

dents may have about 9/11, say, when the topic of compassion or love of neighbor is foremost. Is it realistic to think one can love one’s enemy? How does one give for one’s dead? The connections are endless. And you shouldn’t be afraid to make them. It’s not a matter of teaching anything. It’s a matter of seeing that the sorts of adjust-

ments we make in our daily lives to injus-

tice, hatred, exceptional love, death, suffer-

ing, are just the sorts of adjustments reli-

gious texts enact and evoke. I’d be happy to be imaginative in finding the correspon-

dences. Is a killer tsunami the flood from

Genesis? Is it just about as unfair in both cases? The questions are key here, not the answers.

Kassam: Do you see any great changes in the way we teach religion programs at the undergraduate level?

Mooney: I think the shift toward visu-

al media, PowerPoint and films for exam-

ple, is going to continue to grow. I think the division between the humanities, arts, and the sciences, viewers of this and that, rather than people capable of sounding their own voices, coming to know the poet, to understand the symbols and registers of their speech. If you slow a film way down, you can let its evocations be more transparent, and give students a chance to muster a kind of dialogical response. Otherwise, you just sit back and let yourself be overwhelmed. Or bored. In contrast, it’s hard to be just a spectator of text. You have to work to bring it alive for yourself. And that’s the main thing I try to pass on in a class, the art of evoca-

tion, of letting something be evoked through words not yet your own, and then finding . . . words that give back a matching evocation.

Kassam: How do you think teaching religious studies among the humanities? Is a killer tsunami the flood from

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tion, of letting something be evoked through words not yet your own, and then finding . . . words that give back a matching evocation — of text you’ve read, but also of the world you inhabit, and a possible one you might inhabit. There’s a kind of mutuality in the art of evocation. We wax or wane with the text. Maybe this is a minority opinion, but I don’t think texts will go away.

Kassam: Did you always know you’d be a teacher?

Mooney: No. It didn’t occur to me when I was in high school that I didn’t like school or teachers. I wanted to escape. And in college I was still pretty ambiva-

lent. It wasn’t that I didn’t like books — music. I read Emerson in high school, played a lot of music, and read a lot of philosophy and literature in college. I was a contrarian. It took a while for me to realize that teaching didn’t mean having to be a clone of someone else, especially when it came to how one taught. By the time I got to graduate school, I began to see that there was a way to teach that wasn’t just information-orientated or wedded to a narrow methodology. It took time to figure out what I wanted to do. I always thought words could set the heart and mind free, because I had experienced moments of that. Gradually I began to sense that was a classroom possibility, too. Now I’m certain that that’s a real possi-

bility, and I can point to a good number of teachers much better than I am that have put together a world of freedom was slow to dawn. Many of my friends became dropouts. I feel very lucky to have been able to do what I loved, pretty much all the time, and to get a job or career out of it.

Kassam: So you’d place the study of religion among the humanities?

Mooney: I’ve met very good people doing exciting work in the area of culture and religion, and in the humanities, part social science. Of course the great theoreticians of religion — Weber, Durkheim, Marx, Freud — all brought philosophical, literary, and historical per-

spectives together with what we might call behavioral or scientific-quantitative con-

cerns. Personally, I think the humanistic
Miles: Well, that's right. I think of The Passion as an example of "misdirection," a magician's term for distracting people with one hand while the other hand is doing the trick. There's something misdirection in that it directs viewers to watch the horrible drama of Jesus's suffering, while ignoring his teachings. In a society that is failing to provide resources for vulnerable people, children, old people, sick people — it invites spectators not to notice that Jesus spent his life teaching about healing. If we focus on what Jesus said and did, rather than on what was done to him, we would get a different image of Christianity.

Mooney: Picking up the idea of delight, it's a kind of perennial worry for academics that they're not being hard enough on students. Don't we have to show students delight in what they study, how to see its beauty? After all, it's their sometimes, it's their social life.

Miles: Delight in learning is communicable. It's infectious. I worry, however, that often the intellectual life of faculty isn't nourishing, so that we have less delight to pass on. A friend who teaches in a graduate college told me, "I never have time to read a book, unless it's for the next class." How can a teacher communicate delight in learning if she's not continuing to learn? I think we go into teaching because we love to learn. There's no way that we can pass on anything but information if we stop learning. Also, in the present job market, learning needs to be thought of as a way of life rather than a way to earn money. Presently, if a student does well his teachers say, "You must go on and get the doctorate." But there aren't enough academic jobs to go around. Delight in learning does not require a doctorate. Learning is an end in itself, a way of life.

Mooney: What if the problem is wider than the university? Most jobs don't leave time on the side for people to relax and read and learn.

Miles: Well, that's true, but it's also a matter of values. If we think we need a high standard of living and a new car every year, we sacrifice time to read and relax. But if students see learning as a way of life, they become addicted to it. They will need to continue to learn, no matter what they do to earn money. It's more rewarding than urging everyone who loves learning to enter the teaching profession.

Mooney: Has the national political and cultural climate affected the way you teach?

Miles: Scholarship needs to be responsive to the needs of the world, but sensitizing students to connections between scholarship and the world's needs can sometimes best be done by discussing a Platonic dialogue that presents a world of different values and different perspectives, challenging those that come to us through mass media culture. It takes a great deal of creativity and imagination to alert students (and ourselves) to what is missing and needed in our culture.

Mooney: What's your best advice to students?

Miles: Read. The problem is that people don't read. I often answer that the capacity to continue learning.

Mooney: Yes, yes, that's what teaching is about. I think most of us become teachers because, as children, we liked to read. Then, as grown-ups, we said in a different context, one thing leads to another.

Mooney: People often want to know what the academic study of religion is all about. The usual contrast is between the humanities and the social sciences.

Miles: History is my training and my academic home, but there are different kinds of historians. Social historians really count likeable things, material artifacts, with their cu- rious historical ideas like. Each proposes lens- es for selecting and examining evidence, but those same lenses block other kinds of evi- dence. You need then necessary to look in a re- fracted way, across two or three disciplines to reconstruct a historical conversation or to zoom in on just begining to how to do responsible interdisciplinary work. I predict that interdisciplinarity is going to make the present fields obsolete quite soon.

Mooney: Can you elaborate on that.

Miles: Often we don't like what we see when we look at interdisciplinary projects because one of the disciplines engaged in the work is used irresponsibly. But what's needed is not a perfect interdisciplinarity; but to refine its methods.

Mooney: Will that redraw the map of departments?

Miles: Many of the younger faculty who are being hired today don't fit comfortably in the present fields. The people who are currently doing the hiring are people who have been trained in the traditional fields of study, but many of those currently being hired have been trained in cultural and critical theory and in interdisciplinarity. They will reform departments and fields.

Mooney: If a grad student has done an interdisciplinary dissertation, what do you pass on as advice when it comes time for a job interview?

Miles: An exciting historical moment for interdisciplinary work, but hiring institu- tions often need assistance in recognizing the disciplinary and institutional relevance of that work. I tell students to position them- selves very firmly in one of the traditional fields. If they can show that they are trained in a way those now hiring can recognize, then they can write an interdisciplinary disserta- tion without penalty.

Mooney: If you were going to give advice to a student who has just graduated from college and was excited about intellectual life and realized that you had made life your way, what would you recommend they read the summer?

Miles: My granddaughter is a sophomore at Swarthmore, and we were wondering how she was doing this just last night. She's interested in public policy, which isn't my field, but the books we both read are critical theory, gender theory, and queer theory. I'd recommend Rosemary Hennessey's Pleasure and Profit, because this book examines the economic basis of American cultural life — something we usually ignore in the humanities, where we think that ideas run the world. I'd also recommend reading Freud and his critics, for example, Unauthorized Freud, edited by Frederick C. Crews, or Richard H. Armstrong's A Companon for Augustine: Freud and the Ancient World. Recognition of Freud's construction of "sexuality" and its problems, for example, challenges the tendency of historians to read historical authors like Augustine through unexamined Freudian assumptions.

Mooney: If you were going to give a final lecture, what would you recommend to students for their research and teaching, what might it be about?

Miles: Well, I gave such a lecture at this summer's colloquium on Violence and Religion in Koblenz, Germany. In it I exam- ined desire and its effects. I looked at the social construction of desire in order to both determining and concealing values. In the Platonic tradition — Plato, Plotinus, Augustine, etc. — there are two quite dif- ferent interpretations of desire. For the good is intellectual, freed from temporal objects. In the other, desire is instigated by sensible beauty, leading to an ever more inclusive love and delight. The conference focused on René Girard's analysis of the origin of violence in mimetic desire. Girard draws on an epistemology which holds that desire is contagious, we learn to desire particular objects from our neighbor. We desire what our neighbor has, and then we have conflicts that lead to vio- lence. This analysis has obvious explanatory power and importance in helping us to understand the ubiquity of violence, but it is a very general analysis of the nature of desire. If you go back to Plato, Plotinus, and Augustine you see that the Platonic tradition described two trajectories of desire. Desire (as Girard acknowledges but does not devel- op) can take one of two directions. A bad eros makes idols of self and other, but there is also a good eros — compassionism for the good, as Augustine called it — based on the perception of beauty and leading to aware- ness of the great beauty, the source of all life. A mimetic desire is an older principle, in one, desire for love; the desire underlies the values that inform our more negotiable ideas and actions.

Mooney: So an analysis of desire can reveal the root of violence?

Miles: Yes, but it can also reveal that desire, based on beauty, self and other, that everyone can have and without depriving someone else. It can lead, not to competi- tion and violence, but to a more and more inclusive love and delight.

Mooney: So instead of Girard's competition for a small piece of beauty, you get a larger and larger supply.

Miles: Yes, and Plotinus turn attention from the beautiful object that "catches" the eye to the ability to perceive beauty — a spiritual disci- line. Augustine takes cultivation to a desire for God ("beauty so old and so new", Confessions 10.27) that shapes the self.

Mooney: A lot of academic intellectual work seems to reinforce reasons for despair — how things break down, become inco- herent, lose brute power, and so forth. The world is coming apart all on its own without our finding even more reasons to despair.

Miles: Yes, I began to work on Augustine because I couldn't figure our why, for at least a thousand years, ideas were so clearly attractive and compelling, and our age finds him the villain of everything we dis- like, either ourselves or society or the world and the body. Rather than approaching his ideas as abstract philosophical proposals, I endeavored to reconstruct his perspective as much as any of my colleagues. I thought of the conver- sations and the conversations that informed his thinking. Then I glimpsed his contagious attentiveness to beauty and delight. In conclusion, as you could see, I have been trying to make a case that religions, different religions, are about the same thing.
Peter Paris has taught at Howard University, School of Divinity, Vanderbilt Divinity School, and for the past 20 years he has been the Elmer G. Hanhroghausen Professor of Christian Social Ethics at Princeton Theological Seminary where he is currently chair of the Theology Department. He is a former student of the AAR, the Society of Christian Ethics, and the Society for the Study of Black Religion. His writings include Black Religious Leaders: Conflict in Unity (1992); The Social Teaching of the Black Churches (1985), and The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for Common Moral Discourse (1994).

Mooney: Have you always taught in seminar programs?

Paris: That’s right. What I enjoy in teaching professional students is their commitment to the enterprise. They’re trying to figure out how what they’re learning in classes will relate to either the practice of ministry or to teaching theology or ethics — my field is in ethics. Sometimes I find it difficult when students have very normative commitments that close them off to alternative traditions. I see a large part of my teaching as introducing students to other perspectives — whatever the subject might be — that they may not have a narrow view of the world, and think that everyone thinks in the same way.

Mooney: I suppose that comes up while teaching ethics.

Paris: Yes, it comes up a great deal, and one of the most shocking things that I say to students is that there is no one ethical argument for anything, but rather that there are a variety of ethical arguments, and that it’s important to know something of that variety, so that you can position yourself.

Mooney: Do you find that doing ethics and theology has changed over the decades, or do you think they’ve pretty much stayed on the same course?

Paris: From the time I went into PhD studies in the late 50s, there seemed a great difference. Contemporary issues are well-come into the classroom now, and we welcome struggling with them. That was not the case when I went to seminary in the 1950s. It was almost like you left the world outside of the classroom and you came to learn the wisdom of the ages, only to go back outside of the classroom to try to figure out how to apply it.

Mooney: It would be taboo to bring that outside world into the classroom?

Paris: It wasn’t done, and people weren’t oriented in that way. And I think this change had to do with the tremendous social turbulence and cultural changes that took place in the 1960s. It was very grateful to be a graduate student at that time. I remember quite vividly the students at the University of Chicago Divinity School pledging to participate in the decision making at the Divinity school, to sit on faculty meetings and faculty committees. Well, that was an absolutely radical thought. In the 1950s, that idea hadn’t even appeared on the horizons of their imaginations. That was one indication of the tremendous change that was beginning to take place in education, in terms of governance, and then the development of regional, racial, religious, and gender studies, which had their beginnings in the late 60s and took on more and more form and substance in the decades that followed.

Mooney: So students raised their voices to participate in the political processes of the university, and then said, well, why can we bring those things that are of great concern to us into the classroom, too?

Paris: Exactly. I know that the African-American students, in response to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, started making demands for African-American teachers. These were schools that had no African-American students, and the students began making an argument for the study of the black church. When I was in seminary I was being trained to serve the white church. It would never have occurred to me to introduce my own black church traditions into the classroom discussion. Because of the ethos of the 50s, blacks started saying that we need to study the black church. Usually a white church history professor tried to do a course about the black church, and then the black students would seek the need for a black teacher who could teach from experience. So it always seemed to me that the impetus for change in these schools began with these students and the demands that they were making, whether African-American or other students. All of these movements began around the same time, when the universities were organized in such a way that these people were represented in large measure by the student body and certainly not at all on the faculty.

Mooney: So you really discovered that there could be a field of study, the study of the black church, in the process of this social change.

Paris: Yes. Before going to graduate study at the University of Chicago in the mid-60s, I had spent three years in Nigeria, in West Africa. I was very much attuned to the issues of colonialism and the struggle for independence. A hundred and fifty million African people were becoming a sovereign nation. There was a kind of readiness for me to confront the changes in the U.S. Some of the faculty at the University of Chicago had gone to the Selma march, in 1965, and had their lives changed, and that affected their teaching. Al Pitcher, one of my teachers, came back, and decided to dedicate the rest of his life to matters of racial justice. He developed a course on the civil rights movement, and then he taught Reinhold Niebuhr in relationship to civil rights. Jesse Jackson was in the course. I got to know Jesse in that context. The Urban Studies Center and various other faculty, Medicine, and so forth, were filled with people trying out new ideas, but also challenging the ways things had been done by former generations.

Mooney: That period is still very fascinating. It’s one that I think of, and I think remember pretty vividly. I don’t know if we’ve really understood it — there hasn’t been anything else like it, and we are to some extent still feeling the aftereffects.

Paris: I think you’re right. I can remember going to the American Academy of Religion meeting and the number of African Americans who would almost all fit into one hotel bedroom because they were so few. Now, as years have passed, and with more students coming into the schools making demands for African-American faculty, there were a hundred African Americans — to say nothing of Africans — at the AAR meeting, and similar with women in general and many ethnic groups. There was still quite a struggle going on as to whether a woman could be a good academician and be involved in women’s studies, with a dissertation on something pertaining to women, in the same way as with African-Americans; where some wondered whether research centered on African Americans could be respected as real scholarship. That went on for a very long time, and to some extent it still goes on.

Mooney: Has your approach to teaching changed?

Paris: Most of my teaching, about 34 years or so, has been at white universities, with a gradual increase of black students. So what I’ve struggled to do is figure out how I could teach courses in such a way that I could deal with issues of racial and ethnic justice, as well as economic justice, that would welcome the experiences of both blacks and whites, Asians and Hispanic students. That has become my main aim in teaching over the years.

Mooney: So it’s an unfinished work in progress?

Paris: Well, I teach a PhD seminar on the “Ethics and Politics of Aristotle,” trying to take one of the most ancient fathers of the discipline and then ask the students to write a paper that would be an Aristotelian analysis of a social issue, and that social issue can be located anywhere. For example, if a student is from Nigeria, Korea, or elsewhere, they are asked to take a social issue in that context and view it from an Aristotelian perspective in order to determine how far they can get towards a resolution to that problem that would be meaningful in the context of the world. Then they can do a critique of the limits of the Aristotelian way, if they wish. So what I’m saying here is that it doesn’t matter what the subject is, whether it’s Paul Tillich or Reinhold Niebuhr or H. Richard Niebuhr or public policy generally or African and African-American theologies. A very popular course I’ve taught is “The Theology and Ethics of Martin Luther King Jr.” I want students to take their own experience into dialogue with the subject matter of the course.

Mooney: So you’ve avoided that bad choice between the canon — something that’s been sunk there for centuries — and on the other hand something more contemporary and engaged.

Paris: Exactly, that’s what I’ve been trying to do, which is not to change a certain tenet, say of Aristotle or Orthodox theology, but to understand it in its own terms, while bringing it into our own context and trying to determine its relevance in light of the issues of the day. There are contemporary issues that are relevant for issues that was developed in an earlier day. The question is then to what extent is that which was developed in an earlier day relevant to some contemporary issues, and to what extent can it not be a resource.

Mooney: Do you see any radical issues ahead in how we teach?

Paris: I often ask students, when they are doing a proposal for a paper, to write about why this or that interests them — as well as why they think the academy and the church should be interested in the subject, and then how, with some relevant bibliography, they would go about inquiring into the subject. And when they come back and present themselves, the research, and the contemporary issues of the day in conversation with one another. I’d like to see a lot more of this; but I also find, and this is quite disconcerting, students who want only to follow the interest of the professor. There was a time when Asian students would come and say, “Well, we don’t want to do anything with Asian culture, because we would have stayed in Asia if we had wanted to do that.” I was told that when Martin Luther King Jr. was studying at Boston University, he and some other African Americans there decided that they would not do anything having to do with the African-American experience, because they wanted to be credible. They felt that their professors would not be open to them.

Mooney: That’s both fascinating and disheartening.

Paris: Exactly. Martin Luthor King Jr. decided to do a dissertation on the conception of God in the thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman. If you read it, you would have no clue that the author was African-American. It has no reference to the racial identity of the country that’s being said. He only becomes “Martin Luther King” afterward. Had he gone to university 10 or 15 years later he could have drawn on his active interests in his PhD dissertation.

Mooney: What would you say the greatest satisfaction is in teaching?

Paris: Well, I find the whole enterprise rewarding, I’m glad that I’m at a school that takes research very seriously, because that enhances teaching. It’s a sine qua non for teaching, really. The idea that you stay at the edge of your discipline is very important. I also like encountering new generations of students who bring to the enterprise. I feel very, very grateful for having the privilege of being a professor. I love it completely. My father was a stoneworker, and I still feel I don’t seriously work, because I always think of work as being physical labor in the steel factory. The privilege of being paid to have the lifestyle of teaching, writing, reading articles and books, of discussing with colleagues both here and far away, the privilege connected with all the ways I’ve been able to be in touch and be involved with Africa — this would never have happened had it not been for this particular enterprise, being a professor.

Mooney: I sense a kind of interweaving of these different strands in your teaching and activism that makes each more important.

Paris: Yes. In my own work I started off writing a book on Black Religious Leaders, and then one on the institutions that they belong to, The Social Teaching of the Black Church (1985), and then the Spirituality of African People, which enabled me to explore the subject more widely and more deeply. All of that has been integrally a part of this whole process...
Mooney: You’ve taught a lot of gradu- 
ate students over the years and have been a 
mentor to them. What do you say to them 
about the best things in a career, the best 
things in the profession? 

Chopp: I’ve tried to write about and 
tell people about the love of the subject in both 
senses — the subject of theology and also 
the subject who learns, the student, and 
just as important, my learning and listening 
as a teacher. In a profound sense teaching is 
about bringing together how a human 
being interacts with theology and the 
credible traditions of thought represented 
in theology. I think that is what I’d stress: 
that the teacher both teaches the subject, 
theology, but also is the subject, the human 
being, the one who needs to listen to the 
occasion for that interaction. As a 
teacher I’ve always been fascinated by how 
one crafts the classroom or, to use the host-

Mooney: You’ve taught at both the under-grad and graduate level. What would you say about the rewards or trials connected with each? 

Chopp: You know, I think the reward for me, of both, is seeing the individual 
develop intellectually. For undergraduates it’s the tools of critical thinking and basic 
knowledge; for graduates the rewards and the 
trials have to do with mentoring stu-
dents as they develop into peers. 

Mooney: Did you find that the under-
grad students you particularly connected with went on to do graduate work in reli-
going? 

Chopp: Many of them did. But I also 
connected with many who didn’t. 

Mooney: Have you seen any big change in students over the years, or just ripples 
and little things? 

Chopp: I think that on the undergradu-
ate level students are more anxious about what I would call the “résumé phe-
nomenon” — and I guess I would say that phenomenon exists on the graduate school level as well. Early in my career PhD stu-
dents weren’t preparing papers for publica-
tion and weren’t giving lectures at the AAR. Ministry students weren’t so worried about getting a thousand and one things on their résumés. The unfortunate side of this phe-
nomenon is that it’s harder to take the 
reflective space to really learn. And it has 
become more about the production of 
knowledge as a technical accomplishment than an engagement in an ongoing conver-
sation. I think that’s the most serious thing that has changed. 

Mooney: So the kinds of things that 
person worry about as they get ready for 
tenure have filtered down. 

Chopp: Yes, I guess you’re right. 

Mooney: How about the field itself? 

Chopp: I think the field has been radi-
cally transformed. There is a robust plural-
ism of methods, topics, and approaches. 
This diversity has allowed, and I hope 
couraged, Christian theology to take a 
look at itself as one topic among many. 
Different voices are coming from different 
cultural perspectives, races, places in the 
world. That has allowed theology to enjoy a 
much broader conversation. Michael Sandel 
calls for the public to be shaped as a “clam-
orous dialogue,” and I think that’s how the-
ology might be shaped in the current situa-
tion. When I was trained, there was a foun-
dationalist model in place for theological 
knowledge and claims of truth that has been 
decisively questioned. The role of tech-
ology has transformed teaching and 
research, making resources more readily 
available than ever before. The change 
I guess is that the study of religion used to 
be a discipline that fairly few wanted to 
study in the ’70s and 80s. Then suddenly, 
the study of religion became of much greater interest to more scholars and much more visibly present in the public.
Allowing the Possibility of Multiple Truths

Daniel Boyarin, University of California, Berkeley

Mooney: How would you characterize the difference between teaching graduates and undergraduates?

Boyarin: For me, the difference is incredible, but it’s partly a condition of where I teach as well. I teach entirely different kinds of things to undergraduates than graduates. My undergraduate courses are most often fairly large, lecture-type courses on general topics, like “Judaism in Late Antiquity.” Half of my teaching is in the Rhetoric Department, where I give a course on the history of rhetoric in Antiquity. The other half is in Near Eastern Studies. It’s a very, very different experience than graduate teaching, which for me is more like sitting down with a group of junior colleagues and working through a text together — an experience during which I learn a great deal from the students.

Mooney: Do you have any problems capturing your audience at the undergraduate level?

Boyarin: Well, for the most part no. I am a good lecturer, which is something I just figured out over the last few years, because before I came to Berkeley I never taught undergraduate courses. Also, I went to a college where there were no large lecture courses given. So I’d really never had the experience of it. I learned how to do it by team teaching with another, much younger colleague who had had a great deal more experience with that kind of teaching. I learned from her.

Mooney: As teachers-to-be, and often very young ones, we were seldom given any instruction in what you might call the rhetoric of teaching.

Boyarin: Right. And it’s turned out I’ve got a flair for it. It’s just a gift. I’m funny, I’m spontaneously funny. And that turns out to be a tremendous asset. I actually enjoy that type of teaching, which I had dreaded throughout my entire career.

Mooney: One often runs into the presumption that teaching big classes of undergraduates is not the most desirable thing to do.

Boyarin: This was actually new material to me, the material on ancient rhetoric. I got so excited doing the preparation. I spent a whole year preparing it before I had to give it. That changed the course of my research. I actually have an entirely new research project that was generated out of the necessity of having to teach this undergraduate course.

Mooney: So there’s an unexpected payoff?

Boyarin: A tremendous one. And that research project has also led to the teaching being exciting, and therefore more exciting for the students as they are actually, excitedly thinking about learning and developing what I want to think about, too.

Mooney: How has your specialty changed over the last few years?

Boyarin: I was trained as a Talmudic philologist. I worked extensively with manuscripts and lexicographical linguistic matters of interpretation on a very local level, for many years, both in my scholarship and in my teaching. I taught in Israel before I came to Berkeley, and in Israel I taught in a Talmudic department. There I did not need to explain what the Talmud was or why it was important or interesting. That was a given, both for the undergraduates and graduate students. My research and the teaching were very much in the tradition, but in the terms of the tradition, not in the terms of the academy.

In coming to Berkeley, there was a shift in all this. It was partly a result of my coming here, but also caused by a shift in my own desires. I wanted to translate, as it were, in such a way that these texts would become part of a larger intellectual canon — in the university and the research enterprise, but also in the university and the teaching enterprise. That was the goal I set for myself, very explicitly, in terms of my own work, in terms of my pedagogy, and in the terms of the pedagogy of my writing as well.

Mooney: How would you characterize the kind of inquiry that comes out of the Talmudic interrogation of texts in contrast with the Socratic questioning of positions that universities take to be definitive of what they do?

Boyarin: That’s what my current research is about. It’s exactly on that question. My current project is called Early Christian Rhetoric, Early Christian Politics, Early Christian Sex in the Ancient City: I ask: “What is the status of dialogical engagement — dialectic? How is truth conceived of? How is language understood to communicate or not communicate truth?” I want to know how these questions are dealt with in the three traditions: in ancient Greek thought, early Christian thought, and Rabbinic writing.

Mooney: So it’s really a three-way project.

Boyarin: Yes, with the ancient Greek material understood as one of the most important inputs into both early Christian and Rabbinic thought with regard to the notions of truth, authority, democracy, I look at the possibility of there being multiple truths. There’s also a deeper consideration of the role of theSophist, and Sophism in the formation of ways of thinking in the Hellenic/early Christian/Rabbinic world.

Mooney: Do you see your work as social or political or something closer to literature or parts of the humanities?

Boyarin: I find it difficult to understand the kind of work that I do as being very different from the work an anthropologist does, or an economic sociologist, or an anthropologist does. Obviously, there are different intellectual formations involved. I could understand calling what I do humanities and have that be not much different from what my brothers does, and he calls it social science. We’re in conversation with each other, we think about the same kinds of issues, use the same kinds of theoretical materials. He’s called a social scientist because he was trained as an anthropologist, and I’m called a humanist. The idea of a big difference makes no sense to me whatsoever.

Mooney: Did you always know that you would be a teacher?

Boyarin: No, not always. When I went to college I thought I was going to be an actor, and it was during my undergraduate years that I became first of all religious, which was one key thing. Then I determined that what I wanted to spend my life doing was being a scholar of the Talmud. I didn’t think I was so much choosing a teaching career, as much as a life of scholarship, and teaching was the obvious concomitant of having chosen a life of scholarship.

Mooney: There are certainly a number of things going on in the world that are religious in origin and impact. Do they affect your teaching?

Boyarin: For at least the last 20 years I’ve been conceiving of my teaching and my research as having an explicitly political design.

Mooney: Is it about the presentation and acknowledgement of differences, so there can be a dialogism instead of graduate teaching, which for me is more like sitting down with a group of junior colleagues and working through a text together — an experience during which I learn a great deal from the students.

Boyarin: That’s certainly the most general formulation of it. I’ve been very committed to three kinds of social/eethical/political causes: feminism, the struggle against all forms of homophobia, and the struggle against all forms of racism. I’m sure that sounds like a very familiar, very politically correct listing, but that’s my listing. Especially in the latter category, for me it’s been the struggle against Jewish racism as manifested in our Jewish politics directed at our immediate others, the Palestinians. Lately, what has come to the fore is the ways in which the United States religion is being mobilized in what I think is the devil’s work — anti-feminism, homophobia, etc.

Mooney: So scholarship plays out against the background of these wider things, even if the classroom doesn’t turn out to contain these particular problems.

Boyarin: Exactly. It’s not as if I’m prefiguring a particular political line; that would be heavy-handed — and abuses — because of the power relations in the classroom. Through a kind of historicism, I try to open up possibilities for the other ways in which things could have gone. I’m giving a course called “The Rhetoric of Religious Discourse.” We’ve been reading Paul’s Letter to the Galatians. I tell the students, many of whom are committed Christians, that it’s not my job to make anyone religious or non-religious. But I do want them to understand that there are other legitimate ways of looking at and understanding the very texts that they are using as their basis — to not delegitimize their readings, or say that their readings are wrong, but to allow for the possibility that the texts should be read in a good faith manner, different kinds of the same texts. Now that is an intervention in their religious lives. A part of many of their religious traditions is that “there is one, the only possibility” so that to an extent I am subtly intervening. But that seems to me to be an entirely legitimate kind of meddling with the very terms of university teaching.

Mooney: If the university never meddled with the hearts or minds of students, then it probably would have failed. If you had a teenage nephew or niece entering their freshman year of college who asked you what to read this year — over this summer vacation, what beach, what would you recommend?

Boyarin: Well, one book I would recommend very strongly is Talal Asad’s Genealogies of Religion. That turns me as nichly reflective on the history of religion. In a more specialized way, I would recommend to anybody to read Peter Brown’s biography of Augustine, just to show to what level aesthetic or literary religious studies can aspire, at their best. For a person interested in Judaism, there’s a book by one of my great teachers, Abraham Joshua Heschel, may he rest in peace, it’s called Heavenly Torah: As It’s Been Refracted through the Generations. It is a masterpiece of writing on religion as well as religious writing, it’s a beautiful book, and also good beach reading; it’s 800 page long.

Mooney: You mentioned that you became religious in college, as an undergraduate. Was there a particular text that was important?

Boyarin: Initially I got very attracted to Far Eastern mysticism. We were reading the Taoist classics. At the time I was seeing a therapist, and he said, “Well, don’t you know anything about Jewish mysticism?” And I said, “I didn’t even know there was a Jewish mysticism.” And at that point he told me about the Zohar. I got an English translation, and I read it and I got very interested. Then, at about that time, I had a dream that I was in Israel studying. I took this as a sign that I should be in Israel studying. I arranged to study at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, to study the Zohar and Kabbalah. Of course when I got there people told me I couldn’t possibly study the Zohar and Kabbalah if I didn’t first study the Talmud. So I began studying the Talmud, and I was hooked. I could not have been more enchanted. But I was still not religious. During that year I met the woman I married. We had to go see the rabbi who was going to perform the wedding. I remember him asking me why I’m not religious, why I don’t keep the commandments, and I said “Because I’m not Jewish.” And he said, “From the study of the Talmud do you see light?” And I said “Yes.” And he said to me words I’ll never forget. He said, “Keep studying.” He didn’t try to persuade me to become religious, he just said “Keep studying,” out of this complete faith about what the Talmud says about studying — that it would bring one to the light of God. As it happened, it was only a few months later, I was already married, and we were living in Vermont when in the middle of the night I had a vision. I’m not sure whether I was asleep or awake, but I had a very clear vision of the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. I was so impressed by this vision that I woke up my new wife, and I said, “We need to become religious.” And she said, “Fine — let me deep!” [Laughing] We woke up the next morning and called the local rabbis and said, “Ok, we want to become religious.”

Mooney: So you’ve traveled a path from religious studies, in the broad sense, to entering into a religion in a serious way, and now each feeds the other.

Boyarin: Yes.
Embracing Embodied, Mediated Knowledge

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 feminist ethics, womanist theology and women in religious and public life. She has 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 Cannon: 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-FSCE 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. 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 got excited about. Yes, I enjoy teaching undergraduates. I enjoy the ever-hopeful expectation 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 total new life in the United Presbyterian Church. Is it a learning environment where 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 documentation between 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 our professors would talk about it as an idea that professors must bring out our views into the classroom. Since I am a liberation theologian and a Christian womanist ethicist, students know my age, they know my birth-date — but we do not disembodied ethics. We embrace embodied mediated knowledge, meaning that I bring my biotext and students bring their existential stories. It’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: You’ve always loved teaching.

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 the dissertation proposal I 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 order. 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: You’re sure you have standard topics for Christian ethics. How about other topics? I took my five year old to that I think in the major every semester, I earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Education.

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Mooney: Did your specialty in religious ethics come pretty early on?
I think there is a truly spiritually moving positive center in every religious tradition — otherwise, it cannot survive. What’s difficult to deal with is what the popular idea that Islam is only negative. I talk about my own religious experiences as a starting point. I’ve always wanted to be a teacher but not a teacher in the blind. My argument was from the beginning that the fact that blind people were blind need not be a disadvantage. Blind people should be integrated and I wanted to teach at a university. So when I defended my PhD thesis at Harvard and stood alone with both copies of the thesis that were returned to me by my committee members I started to believe that I made my point and got what I wanted, and so, in my own way, I became a teacher.

Mooney: That’s quite an accomplishment. You were first educated in Lebanon?

Ayoub: Yes, at the American University in Beirut. And then at the University of Pennsylvania and then at Harvard University. I read some of Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s books when I was doing my MA at the University of Pennsylvania. I wanted to learn about Islam, and so I talked to him and ended up doing my degree with him.

Mooney: How has the international climate — and by that I mean the changing perceptions of Americans in general and the political leadership of the world of Islam — how has that affected your teaching? Has it made it easier? Has it made it more difficult?

Ayoub: In some ways it made it more difficult, for the simple reason that now whatever I say that is positive about Islam rubs against people’s nerves. I’d say positive things, of course, about Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, whatever. I think there is a truly spiritually moving positive center in every religious tradition — otherwise, it cannot survive. What’s difficult to deal with is what the popular idea that Islam is only negative. Then whatever I say that might be positive about it is taken to be apologetic. Of course, I’m very happy when my ideas are challenged so that way I can either modify them or defend them. Teaching post-September 11 is so much more challenging than before.

Mooney: What would you say to aspiring graduate students about teaching?

Ayoub: I would say to every student, including my son who is now going to graduate school, that for anything you get interested in, you should really dedicate your life and energy to it, to your specialty. The main thing I try to get across is that you know, of the books that I have not had the chance to do, before I die. I think that the old-style teachers and scholars like me must learn to accept things more gratis than we otherwise do.

Mooney: Did you always know that you would be a teacher?

Ayoub: I’ve always looked forward to being a teacher. If you look at the prologue in my latest book, Islam: Faith and History, it is a lot of struggle and you never try to be him, and I don’t want students to take my ideas and say that now they have the answers for everything. If I can train their minds to think more independently, then I think I have done my job well.

Mooney: If you had a teenage niece or nephew who was just beginning to mature intellectually and was getting ready to go off to college, what would you give her to read over the summer?

Ayoub: I recommend to anybody who wants to learn anything about Indian philosophy a book that I’ve read more than once and I have always enjoyed, a book by a German writer, Heinrich Zimmer. The book is called Philosophies of India and I find that extremely enlightening, wonderful, entertaining reading. There are so many good books out; some of the better ones are on cultural anthropology and art history. I sometimes get ideas from cultural anthropology of the 19th and 20th centuries to apply to the study of religion. But I always tell my daughter, “Don’t go into religion — it is a lot of struggle and you may not get rich” [laughing].

Mooney: I noticed that you have done a lot of work with interfaith groups.

Ayoub: I have done a lot of writing both in Arabic and English on that subject. I try to say what I’ve seen, you know, through the worlds and societies that I’ve been in. I try to create areas of understanding and greater tolerance, and this can be done through interfaith relations and dialogue. I am aware that interfaith dialogue could be unacademic and kind of emotion-laden and all that. You know, I try to do interfaith dialogue through some kind of accessible, academic possibility but also want to say what I see as the goal of interfaith dialogue, namely, to cultivate a delicate space — in humanity where Muslims could strengthen or deepen the faith of Christians and vice versa.

The teacher-student relationship must always be more than simply the imparting of knowledge — it’s helping a mind to grow, and in this sense nothing can take the place of contact between teachers and students.
Now that spirituality is so hot, and evangéli- 
cals make so much noise about their faith, 
there's a license to everybody to be more 
over-the-top, to be less subtle and less 
embarrassed. How that affects the study of 
religion is still an open question.

Also there's the continuous debate about 
what religious studies is. When I see how 
intellectual historians are approaching 
issues today, after critical theory and all that, 
a lacking a def- 
inition doesn't bother me much. There are 
for five or six or seven things in the whole 
study, and the first one is scientific, in 
social science. I get the Scientific Study of 
Religion and the Review of Religious Research, 
and I think the journal's statistical negative 
analysis they measure, measure, measure. 
The historian goes at religion differently, 
looking at the past. There is an approach 
through poetry, the imagination. Literature 
is textually analytic. Ethics and theology feature 
practice, the will, and moral structures, 
through which you try to change the world. 
And a theological seminary will take a text 
with a desire to change the world. An archae- 
ocological center will take a text and 
whether it matches up with what they think 
are in a grave, which will be scientifically 
measured. Religious studies does more than 
that. You couldn't be reductionist in 
"religion is nothing but . . . " nothing 
but what Freud thought it was, or what 
Martin thought it was, or whatever. There 
are many legitimate modes of the study of 
religion, none of which is exhaustive.

An awful lot of the roots of religion and ritu- 
al are bound up with theater and dance and 
so on. Let's go to Black Elk, the noted Sioux 
spiritual holy man who was delivered to the public 
by poet John G. Neihardt. We find out later 
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religion, none of which is exhaustive.
CANNON, from p.vii

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, reread 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 Loving 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 God-fearing people lack the will to wrestle with the theoretical data regarding body and mind. That’s why I recommend these two anthologies so that young women and men can grapple with human sexual-ity in the 21st 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. ✤

MOONEY, from p.ii

approach should be vigorously defended. The social science path doesn’t need defense, as I see it. It already has an impressive momentum as things stand: It’s the foundational texts that seem in danger of disappearing. In a typical university, it’s business or management in the ascendant positions, social science and natural science in the middle, and the humanities, with their texts, at the bottom and shrinking everyday.

Kassam: What would you recommend for summer reading for a bright niece or nephew who approached you?

Mooney: First, I’d check up on what they were already planning to read, and talk about that, if I knew anything about it. Then I’d turn them toward the Dao Te Ching, The Book of Job, some Kafka, some Zen. If they were precocious and theoretically inclined, I’d have them read some Freud or Kierkegaard or Marx on alienation. I’d let them scan my library for ideas.

Kassam: If you were to deliver a “Last Lecture” on the occasion of your retirement, what notes would you sound?

Mooney: I had a chance to reflect out loud on teaching for an audience of friends and colleagues when I retired from a position in California a couple of years ago. I talked about the importance of evoking the appeals (and downsides) of certain ways of life and their values. I stand by that theme. Education is an overwhelmingly reverent (and massively irreverent) ceremony of evocation. We don’t need to pass on dead letters from the past. We need to resurrect the dead, so far as possible. The worthwhile letters are the ones we can bring back from the past into present dialogue. Down the road a bit, I’d talk about deep religious sensibilities and their carrying power — their power to carry us through the ordeals any human must face at any stage of life. When I actually did that retirement talk, I played some Schubert and read some Henry James. The title Wines of the Dove comes from the Psalmist: Fear and trembling are come upon me, oh, that I had wings like a dove. Since Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling is the single text I’ve written most about, it was easy to link James’s prose to those other religious lyrics. James, the Psalmist, and Kierkegaard explore a fragile balance of intimacy and loss, of anxiety and mitigating hope. You can’t get more human or religious or scholarly than that! ✤

CHOPP, from p.v

Chopp: I think there will be more and more opportunities with technology to provide information, engage in conversations around the world, and things like that. But at the end of the day I still think it’s going to be about conversations with real life experiences. I think the tools will change, but I think the nature of teaching will retain continuity with the past.

Mooney: If you had a niece or granddaughter back from her first year of college who asked you for a summer reading list, what would you recommend for nourishment?

Chopp: I have a couple. Augustine’s Confessions; Schleiermacher’s On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers; Coretta West, Prophesy Deliverance! And something, on critical theory.

Mooney: At some schools there’s a tradition of giving a last lecture as one retires, a kind of wise summation. If you had a chance of that kind, is there a theme you'd foregound?

Chopp: Well, a friend once gave a presidential address — I believe it was when she was president of the MLA — a speech I only read and never heard her give. She talked about the importance of teaching what one loves and letting the students see the passion you have for the subject matter. That has always struck me. And I think I would play off that to make a related point. Hannah Arendt says that teaching is the act of loving the future enough to give the students — she calls them children because she’s thinking about primary education — the ability to ask and answer their own questions. You’re teaching what you love to show the passion of living with ideas and truth, but you’re also doing it so they will find theirs, not yours. ✤