

Peter Paris, Princeton Theological Seminary



Peter Paris has taught at Howard University School of Divinity, Vanderbilt Divinity School, and for the past twenty years he has been the Elmer G. Homrighausen Professor of Christian Social Ethics at Princeton Theological Seminary where he is currently chair of the Theology Department. He is a former president 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 a Common Moral Discourse (1994).

Mooney: Have you always taught in seminary 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 '60s, I have sensed a great difference. Contemporary issues are welcomed 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. I was very grateful to be a graduate student at that time. I remember quite vividly the students at the University of Chicago Divinity School pleading to participate in the decision making at the Divinity school, to sit in 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, ethnic, 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't 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 primarily white schools that had no African-American teachers, 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 '60s, blacks started

saying that we need to study the black church. Usually a white church historian would try to do a course on the black church, and then the black students would see 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 they were African Americans or Asians or women. All of these movements began around the same time, when the universities were organized in such a way that these people weren't represented in large numbers in 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 schools, 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 to me. It's one that I lived through and 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 there could 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 on more faculty, there are a few hundred African Americans — to say nothing of Africans — at the AAR meeting, and similarly 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 thirty-four years or so, has been at white seminaries, 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 make sense in the contemporary 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 bring 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 stuck 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 by bringing it into our own context and trying to determine its relevance in light of the issues of the day. Contemporary issues pose questions and issues for that which was developed in an earlier day. The question is then to what extent is that which was developed in an earlier day a resource for dealing with 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 so, from my point of view, they're keeping 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 discouraging, 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 dissertations on 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 what they had to say.

Mooney: That's both fascinating and disheartening.

Paris: Exactly. Martin Luther King Jr. decided to do a dissertation on the conceptions 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 realities of this country. That's pretty sad. He only becomes "Martin Luther King" afterward. Had he gone to university ten or fifteen years later he could have drawn on his activist 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 and seeing what they 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 steelworker, and I still feel like 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, reading, writing 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 happy 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 by doing a book on *Black Religious Leaders*, and then one on the institutions that they belong to, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches*, and then eventually *The Spirituality of African Peoples*, which enabled me to explore the subject more widely and more deeply. All of that has been integrally a part of this whole process.