ENGAGED TEACHING IN THEOLOGY AND RELIGION

RENEE K. HARRISON AND
JENNIE S. KNIGHT

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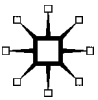

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To my sister, Sharon Marie Harrison,
whose teaching journey ignites mine,
and to my students, who fuel my passion—RKH

To all of the teachers who have transformed my life,
especially master teacher Rouslan Elistratov ("Dr. E")
and Sela Rouslanovna Knight—JSK

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Book Note

The goal of *Engaged Teaching in Theology and Religion* is to guide a process of self-reflection for scholars and teachers of theology and religion that leads to intentional, transformative teaching, dialogue, and reform in theological education and religious studies. Effective approaches to teaching must address the selfhood of the teacher as well as pedagogy, course content, and community engagement. *Engaged Teaching* is set apart from other works in the field because of this holistic approach. In addition to addressing these four areas, Harrison and Knight provide a variety of practices for teaching that take seriously students' cries for a more socially and personally relevant pedagogy and curriculum in a rapidly changing transnational world.

This book is unique because the authors offer humor, insight, and stories of teaching from two distinct perspectives, while also providing a cohesive overall vision. Drawing upon both authors' extensive combined experience with engaged pedagogy, community-based learning, and liberative, Freirian pedagogies in seminary, college, and community settings for over 15 years, *Engaged Teaching* provides a well-reasoned, thorough, and accessible rethinking of teaching theology and religion, so that schools of theology and departments of religion might better live out their stated goals of forming transformative, courageous, and thoughtful leaders and teachers in the twenty-first century.

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Acknowledgments

Harrison

Writing this book with Jennie S. Knight has been a labor of respect and love. Jennie's impassionate quest and plea for teaching to be meaningful, substantive, and engaging, and her commitment to activism and care for underrepresented communities are unwavering. For Jennie, students deserve the kind of education that propels them to think beyond themselves and to be actively engaged in elevating communities. Since our time at Emory University, Jennie continues raising critical questions about the relevance of theological and religious education and teaching in an evolving progressive world. I am grateful to share this moment of writing together.

This book is dedicated to my sister, Sharon Marie Harrison, who began her teaching career in 1975 with the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), and remained in the classroom until 2008. As a teenager, watching her ignite her students' imagination and inspire them to excellence compelled me to teach. Currently, Sharon continues championing the rights of students by championing for the rights of teachers as an Area Representative for the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA). I also like to thank my students to whom this book is equally dedicated. Their presence perfects my teaching and invites me to be a better human being. Thanks to *all* my teachers—professional, and also familial, especially my aunt Edith Direaux and parents, Lloyd P. Harrison and Mary J. Harrison, and my mentor during graduate work, Riggins R. Earl, Jr.—for teaching me to pay it forward, never settle for mediocrity in living, and strive always for excellence and good character. I am grateful for my colleagues at Howard University. It is a gift to be a part of an academic community that honors academic freedom as well as critical and creative approaches to teaching-learning. Honestly, it feels good arriving to work free of collegial competition and expectation, knowing that my gifts are welcomed and balance between work and home is modeled.

Finally, thanks to Garrett Imahn Kynard, my godson and reason, who teaches me every day the purpose of teaching and loving, and to Itutu, whose

love and support teaches me to believe again. Thank you, Itutu for your support, wisdom, calmness, unconditional presence, and laughter during the writing phase of this project. You move me. Finally, to the Ancestors (*Egun*), I pray that I have represented you well. *Ase*

Knight

Writing this book has been a blessing and a joy. It is a rare gift to be able to create with someone as brilliant, wise, and free as Renee K. Harrison. I am so grateful for her inspiration, openness, and encouragement. This book is truly the result of our energizing collaboration process. Her artistry both in and outside of the classroom, integrated with her deep passion and compassion for students and their communities, leads to truly transformative scholarship and teaching. I am honored to share the authorship of this book with her, and excited for readers to learn from her teaching.

I would also like to thank all of the teachers who have engaged me in a way that transformed my way of being in the world. Among these teachers are Mrs. Griffin, Sue Henry, David Purdum, Thandeka, Mary Elizabeth Moore, Frank Rogers, David F. White, Theophus Smith, Kimberly Wallace Sanders, Leslie Harris, and Brian Mahan. Thank you also to my students, who show up wanting to change the world. May we always be worthy of them.

I am grateful to my colleagues in the Center for Principled Problem Solving at Guilford College for their support and encouragement as I completed this manuscript. Thank you to Mark Justad, Delilah White, and especially to the multitalented Virginia Ferguson for her invaluable editorial assistance. I am also grateful to be a part of the educational community of Guilford College. It is truly a blessing to be a part of a faculty and staff who care so deeply about their students and their learning and to follow literally in the footsteps of great Quaker educators, leaders, and visionaries for equality and justice.

Finally, thank you to the friends, family, and communities who sustain me and my family through all of life's joys and challenges: Meryl Franco, Sam Worley, Stacy Mattingly, Cyndi Cass, Bonnie Tarwater, Walt Rutherford, Maggie Banda Compton, Karen Spira, Jason Pikler, Jane Harmon Knight, William Donald Knight, Jr., Oleg Elistratov, and Loudmila Seralieva, the wonderful teachers and families at Decatur Montessori School, the International Community School of Georgia, and the New Garden Friends School, the loving, justice-seeking faith communities of Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Georgia, and Congregational United Church of Christ in Greensboro, North Carolina, and numerous others who have blessed the lives of myself and my family.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: "Why Do We Teach?"

Renee K. Harrison and Jennie S. Knight

Why do we teach? In particular, why do we teach theological and religious studies? Why are some of us unbalanced and/or impractical enough to devote five (to ten) extra years of our lives earning doctorates in order to teach and research in the academic study of religion—many for a pay rate lower than an elementary school teacher (much lower if we are among the majority of PhDs stuck in adjunct and temporary positions)? This is not the kind of career path that one just falls into without some burning question or passionate commitment driving these seemingly irrational endeavors.

For many of us who enter the field of religious studies, there are unanswered questions and wounds that drive us. For others, a passionate, insightful, and kind professor when we were undergraduates or divinity students inspired us to imagine that we could be like them when we "grew up." Others teach primarily in order to finance a research agenda. However, even the desire to spend one's life researching must be driven by some inordinate curiosity, some insatiable passion for the topics we explore. In many cases, these are closely linked to who we are and our concerns for social issues that deeply impact us.

With all of this passion driving us, why are our academic institutions—whether, university-based divinity schools, freestanding seminaries, or college departments of religion—often so deadening and outdated, so life-draining rather than life-giving? Why do we hear continued cries that mainline theological education and the denominations they aim to serve are dying, or at least in grave decline? Why do students struggle to translate the interesting information that they learn in their classes into engaged knowledge that is relevant and useful in their work and lives outside the classroom?

What is lost when theological education or religious studies does not have its finger on the pulse of everyday human communities? How can we, as educators, respond with educational approaches (and administrative approaches to support them) that enliven ourselves as teachers and scholars, our students co-learners and teachers, our schools as sites of relevant engagement, and our communities as our partners in engaged, transformative learning? That is the focus of this book—a focus on us, the teachers, and approaches or tools of engagement for transformative learning in partnership with the world around us.

This book is designed for all teachers of religion and theology: at the seminary, graduate, undergraduate, and secondary levels, as well as in faith communities. It is especially intended for graduate students and faculty who are searching for innovative tools and perspectives for effective teaching, as well as for those in need of motivation or encouragement to try different approaches to teaching.

Both of us have been involved in theological and religious education for almost twenty years. The richness of this book is that, while we come from different backgrounds, institutional contexts, and approaches, we share a remarkably similar vision for how education in the study of religion can be transformed. We both spent years working in the community prior to our formal theological/religious training: Harrison, as a director of A Leap of Faith Productions, a nonprofit faith and community-based theater group for young people, and an 11-year veteran of the Los Angeles Police Department; and, Knight, as a VISTA (domestic peace corps) volunteer at a center for pregnant and parenting teens working toward their General Education Development diploma (GED) and as a leader of "service-learning" programs in diverse communities and educational contexts. Important to us, upon enrolling in theology and religion courses, was integration with the world around us. We did not see the academy, the church and other religious institutions, and the community as isolated and separated entities. Each was a necessary part of an integrated whole. Given this, as students in the classroom, we raised questions of relevancy, usefulness, and passion.

Now, we are raising the same questions as educators. We continue to see the need for relevant and engaged learning that inspires students to turn theory into practice and practice into theory. Regardless of which area of religion that we are teaching in, important questions to ask ourselves are: When was the last time I honestly held the attention of my students and inspired them to crave learning? What is it that I hope to accomplish? What kind of teacher am I striving to be?

Theology and religious studies classrooms should be inspiring spaces of engaged learning. This approach begins with each of us, as teacher, and

is expressed in the tools we use to enliven. Breathtaking and inspiring transformative learning can happen when teachers risk engaging authentically and holistically with students, with the subject matter, and with community partners. We have both found this through our years of teaching and learning at the seminary, graduate, undergraduate, and secondary levels, and in diverse faith communities.

However, we also have been frustrated and saddened by a larger academic environment that fails to understand and encourage exactly the kinds of teaching and learning that can lead to institutions' stated desired outcomes for their students. "Public theologians," "engaged citizens," "transformative leaders"—these are just some of the goals named by seminaries and colleges for their graduates. The standard forms of education encouraged and practiced throughout most institutions rarely prepare students for these holistic, embodied, and complex roles. A different kind of teaching is required.

This does not imply that transformative teaching and practices are not taking place in many of America's academic institutions. However, even in institutions where there are transformative programs and courses involving engaged education, these are often marginalized from the core curriculum and from what is considered the most "academically rigorous" learning. For those who are already teaching through engaged and transformative pedagogies, we hope that this book will serve as encouragement, validation, and a valuable resource for continuing the conversation about teaching with colleagues. This book draws upon and adds to already-existing works about transformative theological and religious education, but through a unique, holistic approach.

In the academic field of Religious Education, there has been an ongoing conversation about Paulo Freire's engaged approach to education for decades, and this critical approach is central to the work of many Religious Education scholars. Unfortunately, the field of Religious Education is small and marginalized within Theological Education as a whole (which, generally, prioritizes required courses in Biblical Studies, Systematic Theology, Church History, and Ethics, and sees the more "practical" fields such as Religious Education as less academically rigorous courses where you "apply" what you learned in the other courses). Therefore, scholars in most fields of theological education are not exposed to or engaged with Freirian pedagogy or other forms of critical, engaged pedagogy.

A recent influx of large grants from the Lilly Endowment to graduate programs in theology and religion has encouraged a renewed focus on "Practical Theology" and "Religious Practices" among doctoral students (within which the field of religious education is considered a religious practice and a form of

practical theology.) However, these terms are often poorly defined, misunderstood, and easily manipulated to serve the purposes of a particular institution. It is yet to be determined how this funding emphasis from Lilly will transform teaching and scholarship practices among new generations of Religion faculty.

In addition, in spite of experiential requirements in theological education, such as ministry internships or "contextual education," this field has also remained remarkably separate from larger discussions of experiential education and community-engaged learning. Surprisingly, there has also been very little interaction between the field of Religious Education and the growing body of literature in the field of community-engaged learning in higher education.[1]

In this book, we draw upon both authors' extensive combined experience and expertise in community-based learning and engaged pedagogies in seminary, college, and community settings; Harrison's extensive background in theater production- and other textual and visual arts; and Knight's years of teaching education for academic as well as faith communities—to provide a rethinking of teaching theology and religion so that schools of theology and departments of religion might better live out their stated goals of forming transformative, courageous, and thoughtful leaders and teachers for the twenty-first century.

Engaged Teaching in Theology and Religion is set apart from other works on theological education and the study of religion grounded in educational theory because of our holistic approach. We hold together four major areas of teaching as equally important and interrelated: self, pedagogy, content, and community. While we divide these topics into four sections in the book, they should be seen as an inseparable whole. In addition, this book is unique in that it is a truly collaborative effort for the sake of our common passion for effective teaching —bringing together our two distinct voices and insights in order to provide a cohesive overall vision.

We offer a variety of practices for teaching in each section that take seriously students' cries for a more socially and personally relevant pedagogy and curriculum in a rapidly changing transnational world. We locate attention to social context and social location within reflective practices for each of these four aspects of teaching. We understand that a willingness to engage the contents of this book on the part of the reader will require a willingness to take risks, to be honest with oneself about the current state of one's teaching and scholarship and about one's educational environment as a whole. Change can be frightening. However, we hope that our straightforward and detailed approach will make it seem less frightening, more possible, and, at the same time, more urgent.

Polemics and Risks Worth Sharing

During a student-led opening exercise in a seminary-level class that I (Knight, a Euro-American woman) taught on community engaged teaching as Religious Education, students in small groups asked each other to name something they appreciated about their classmates. I sat in with a group composed of two young European American women, one of whom was about to graduate. They told me that they appreciated that I treated them differently than most other faculty because I treated them like human beings. They said that I looked them in the eyes, spoke to them in the halls, and genuinely cared about and respected them. I say this not to brag about myself, but instead to say how sad this made me. I was stunned that such a low standard had been set by many of my colleagues for basic human interaction with students that I was appreciated for simply acknowledging their humanity. In a different seminary course that I taught that same semester, several African American women students told the class that some of the white, male faculty did not even say hello to them or acknowledge their existence—even when stuck together alone on the elevator.

A colleague once jokingly confessed her ambivalence about being authentic and friendly with students, saying, "Familiarity breeds contempt." We argue in this book that it is both possible and necessary to maintain authority and appropriate professional boundaries as a professor without sacrificing our capacity to engage as authentic human beings who care about students' well-being and about the subjects we teach. While the competitive, hierarchical, political environment of most academic institutions rarely fosters an atmosphere of authenticity and trust among faculty (a factor that contributes significantly to the fear and discomfort that many faculty may feel in being perceived as vulnerable within the classroom), most of us do have the freedom and authority within our classrooms and our teaching to create a different kind of learning experience for our students. Our presence and engagement with them, both within the classroom and beyond, matters—and teaches.

I (Harrison, an African American woman) remember as a student sitting in my seminary Church History classroom bored to death. Each session, the professor talked endlessly without any student engagement or feedback. Oftentimes, our questions seemed to distract him from his notes, and questions he deemed "dumb" (as he often put it) were frowned upon. My love of history did not begin with him but my desire to teach differently did.

Early in my career, I decided to take a risk during my teaching segment on American slavery. I arrived early to class, choosing not to "lecture history" but rather create the space for students to "feel history"—to interpret, analyze,

and learn of history through their senses. Honestly, this proved challenging—especially in relation to students who are accustomed to rote memorization for exams or listening to a professor lecturing solely from a lectern.

I pressed on by literally turning the classroom into a slave ship voyage with the sounds and smells of the sea all around them. Verbally, I put students in the ship as they listened in darkness to the rocking creaking sounds of its hull upon the waters, and before them were projected images of American slavery. They saw images of enslaved women, men, and children stacked in like sardines, transported as human cargo, and later auctioned, sold, and working on American slave-owning properties. Images of fear, resistance, hope, and longing were flashing before them, telling their own story of slavery's horror. I read poetry and slave narrative and slavers' accounts to bring the realities of slavery to the foreground.

Then came the historical data—the numbers, places, people, and dates. History suddenly became alive and real for them. Some students began taking notes and, by choice, sat in silence for nearly 15 minutes. The next week students arrived nearly 30 minutes early to class and stayed late. To this day, regardless of the institution or social and ethnic makeup of my classes, students, after a 2.5-hour class session, still remain afterward raising questions, seeking answers. I am certain they do not remain for me. They remain because our engagement has opened a portal into a world worth knowing. They remain because they are curious after new information and the unveiling of hidden histories untold to them in elementary and secondary education. They remain because they feel connected to experiencing a new way of learning through someone who cares; the time taken translates into someone saying, *their presence in the classroom and world matters*.

I, too, am often saddened when I hear students express how intimidated and unmotivated they feel in classrooms. I sympathize with students of color who are oftentimes ignored in ivory towers of learning and women students whose comments are neither validated nor praised until they are hijacked and rephrased by their male counterparts. I am saddened by the energy, value, and enormous finances that some students place in their education when such is met by professors who show up late to class, sleep during class, distribute outdated syllabi, teach for the purpose of tenure, and are opportunistic, seeking professional notoriety and position. I am saddened when mediocrity in teaching and administration are the norm.

While we hope these stories are not widely representative, we all can do better. How can we hope (and claim) to prepare students to be engaged citizens who are equipped to lead with compassion, creative insight, problem-solving skills, and thoughtful collaboration with people of diverse

backgrounds when we do not create and model an environment of care, engagement, and respect in the institutions that form them?

We argue in this book that the overall learning context, including the relational contexts of the educational institution and in the classroom, matters greatly in the formation of students. Empathy and emotional intelligence, cultural competency, and creative construction and integration of knowledge through holistic, relevant critical engagement are essential skills that students (and faculty) need in order to live out the stated goals of seminaries and religion departments across the country. In this book, we offer insight, guidance, substantiated research about student learning, and practical recommendations for schools of theology and departments of religion alike to live out their stated educational goals with integrity and renewed energy and passion.

Our Teaching Selves as Context

Each of our passion for teaching has grown out of our unique journeys. As the selfhood and context(s) of the teacher and all that she/he brings to the classroom are central in our understandings of transformative teaching, we each share in this introduction something of our journeys to provide contexts and road maps for the rest of the book's content.

Renee K. Harrison's Story

Shortly after the 1965 Watts riots, my parents moved from the area and purchased a home in another section of Los Angeles commonly referred to as South Central. I was four years old, the youngest of five children and ten years younger than my oldest sister. Needless to say, my arrival was unexpected. The gift of "youngest" was the network of family members and community persons who nurtured me throughout childhood and into adulthood. My father worked as a craftsman for the Los Angeles Unified School District by day, and by night he was a part-time sales clerk in the hardware department at Montgomery Ward. My mother worked in the home as seamstress and child-care provider for the children of teachers and principals who lived and worked in the area. I attended public schools from kindergarten to high school.

Although my public schools were predominately black, my neighborhood consisted of blacks, Hispanics, Jews, and interracial families. This diversity was also represented in culture, class standing, and religion. People were respected regardless of their socioeconomic and religious context or ethnic identity. I learned through these encounters to be more self-reflective in naming my own fears, hopes, and biases. I was challenged often by my community

to articulate my reasons and motivations for human interaction; to be a part of this community meant service and care for others. We were not isolated, detached islands; if one achieved, we all achieved. In this community, I equally discovered the richness and importance of naming, owning, and valuing one's own social location and context, and creating the contemplative space for others to do the same. We were not always perfect in our attempts, but were intentional. Such self-reflective and communal approaches will be discussed further in Chapters 3, 11, and 13.

As a child, I never considered that our family and my neighborhood schools were economically deprived or lacked resources. I did not know that there was a shortage of books until I later discovered that some teachers used their salaries to purchase textbooks for students. I only became acutely aware of limited resources when I competed in tennis tournaments or participated in youth events outside my community. The tennis courts in certain areas of the city were pristine and well manicured. And the schools adjacent to these courts looked like mini-castles. These noticeable injustices bothered me but they did not deter me. My parents were proud people with a strong work ethic and shied away from victimization narratives. They often reminded us that the hands and minds that made this country were black. So we were neither guests nor stepchildren in America.

My parents seldom complained and often told us we could be or do anything we put our minds to regardless of the circumstance. This became clear to me on days of schoolyard fights and drive-by shootings. My mom, knowing that my brother and I were returning home from some of the roughest public schools in the area, always had a smile and warm snack to greet us. Every morning she would wake us with a song. My parents had a way of creating normalcy in the midst of chaos. They could transform any marginal and oppositional space into one of radical openness, possibility, and beauty. They taught me to be keenly aware and informed about the systemic and unjust realities that make if difficult for black people to progress in the United States while showing me how to plant gardens in spaces where previously there was no dirt. They did not accept lack of resources or hardships as an excuse for mediocrity and dinginess. I believed them. So much so that after six years of working at two historically black seminaries/divinity schools, I still have a problem accepting lack of resources as an excuse for mediocrity or complacency on the part of the administration and some faculty members. I still struggle with the "blame game" reasoning and lack of funding as a means of expressing how and why these two historically black seminaries have not progressed or updated their aesthetic appearance and academic programs. They operate as though they are still waiting for external entities to help them be . . . excellent. My father always told us, whatever work we chose to do,