The legacy of Black activist teachers

Almeda Wright’s impeccably researched profiles explore the connections between religion, education, and social action.

by Susan Willhauck in the February 2025 issue
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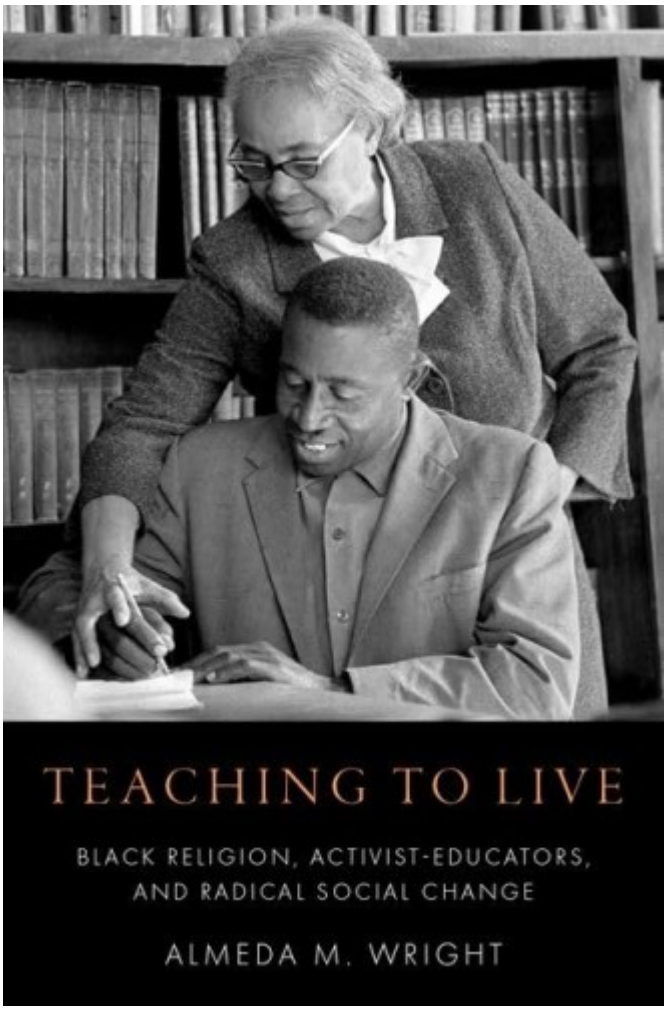
In Review



Teaching to Live

Black Religion, Activist-Educators, and Radical Social Change

By Almeda M. Wright
Oxford University Press
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It is not overly dramatic to say that teaching can be a matter of life and death when it is done in the face of endangerment and affliction to thwart debilitating injustice. The Black activist-educators profiled in *Teaching to Live* lived to teach as a way toward freedom. A book about them is warranted not simply as a tribute to their accomplishments but as a formative text for educators of all backgrounds—one that teaches how urgent it is to follow in the footsteps of these venerable leaders. This impeccably researched work is driven by Almeda Wright's passion to inspire in young people a grander sense of the impact they can have.

Few scholars have explored the connections between religion, education, and social action in the lives and work of Black teachers. Even before the emergence of Black and womanist theologies, faith was intertwined with much of the radicalism and work for social change that arose in the Black community. Wright demonstrates this by investigating the work of three subgroups of Black educators: those who worked in secular education and were inspired by faith, radical scholars who transformed the ways Black religion is understood and valued, and religious educators concerned with the formation of Black people who regarded their work as essential for the struggle for liberation. In doing so, she responds to the criticism levied against Black churches for their perceived failure to be a consistent impetus for social change.

Several of these educators, such as Anna Julia Cooper and W. E. B. Du Bois, were engaged in the project of racial uplift, the practice of affirming the collective status of Black people. Education must engage in the project of reworking narratives of hopelessness, they believed. Cooper brought attention to the gifts of Black women to influence all walks of life. She did not back down on her insistence on the availability of both classical and vocational tracks in the education of Black students, which may have gotten her fired from a school administrative position. An interesting section on the complicated religious life of Du Bois makes a worthy contribution to scholarship on his work. Raised in a New England Congregational church, he became increasingly critical of religion and more agnostic while at the same time maintaining a sense of what churches can do politically and how they function in Black communities.

The phrase “teaching to live” comes from public educator and journalist Ida B. Wells. Speaking to men in prison, she encouraged them to focus on living and to change situations that hinder the Black community. Wells educated people for social change through the press as well as by teaching Sunday school.

Septima Clark, a low-country South Carolina educator, exemplifies the significant role of education in the civil rights movement. She was a founder of the education for citizenship project, which stressed literacy and voting. “I have spent nearly all of my adult life teaching citizenship / to children who aren’t really citizens,” she once wrote in a poem.

Another notable figure is Olivia Pearl Stokes, who in 1952 became the first Black woman to earn a doctorate in religious education. Her life journey took her from North Carolina to Harlem. Stokes had an innate self-confidence in calling out racism and sexism in the church and other public spaces in which she worked. She translated the Black theology of James Cone and others into a program for Black religious education, prioritizing an African-centered pedagogy that promoted the study of African history and culture for identity formation and appreciation.

Albert Cleage Jr. founded the Black Christian Nationalist Convention, which engaged a radical approach to Black power in a political vision that involved establishing Black Madonna shrines and academies that eschewed White education models.

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These and several other leaders in the book combated racism and White supremacy in their lives and teaching by opposing miseducation, a tool of oppression that perpetuates the values of dominant power groups by driving a wedge between Black people and their communities. Many of them faced the ire of White educational leadership for challenging boundaries, and this often led to dismissal from leadership roles. The experiences and philosophies of these Black educators did not fit into the categories established by progressive liberal education, because they were excluded from conversations and debate that formed them.

Wright cautions against the assumption that social change emerges solely from liberal theology or social gospel roots. Some of the theological claims of Black Christian activists, she notes, come from conservative notions of a sovereign God

who empowers resistance to oppression.

Another virtue of this work is its provocation to reclaim the revolutionary tasks of religious education. For an academic discipline that flounders amid declining church trends because it is too often seen as techniques for teaching doctrine, this book provides an intervention. Wright not only profiles strong leaders in education, she demonstrates how they “became movements” themselves—movements that call educators today to discern how best to “teach to live” into justice and freedom.

Wright provides her rationale for the educators she selected for the book while also acknowledging that to include some is to overlook others. Perhaps more volumes are warranted to highlight the contributions of civil rights educators Mary McLeod Bethune and Dorothy Height, theological educators Grant Shockley and Kelly Brown Douglas, and Black women activist-educators who belong to organizations like the Sisters in Education Circle. The list goes on, and the revolutionary work continues.