

Princeton University

Honors Faculty Members
Receiving Emeritus Status



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The biographical sketches were written by colleagues in the departments of those honored, except where noted.

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Faculty Members Receiving Emeritus Status

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Albert Jordy Raboteau



The year was 1982. The Baseball Hall of Fame welcomed Hank Aaron among its ranks; the final episode of the *Lawrence Welk Show* aired; John Updike won the Pulitzer Prize for *Rabbit Is Rich*; President Ronald Reagan met with both Pope John Paul II and Queen Elizabeth II; Martina Navratilova won both the French Open and Wimbledon, *Cats* opened on Broadway; Michael Jackson released *Thriller*; *The New York Times*' "man of the year" was a computer; and Al Raboteau came to Princeton University, where he would stay for the remainder of his illustrious career. As a member of the religion department, Al set the bar very high for the exploration of African American religion, shaping not only the content of that exploration, but also the very structure of how to think about it. His influence on the field of African American religious history cannot be fully measured. It is just too large.

Albert Jordy Raboteau was born in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, in 1943. Three months before his birth, a white man killed his father. The man claimed self-defense and the case was never prosecuted, prompting Al's mother, Mabel, to leave the South, taking Al and his sisters first to the Midwest and then to California. When he was four years old, his mother remarried. Royal L. Woods, an African American former priest, who left the priesthood because of racism in the Catholic Church, would have lasting impact on Al, teaching him Latin and Greek and, in a sense, starting his intellectual journey. Excelling in his studies, Al graduated from a Franciscan high school and entered what is now Loyola Marymount University at age sixteen. After finishing college in 1964, Al enrolled at the University of California-Berkeley to study English, completing his M.A. in 1966. He completed a degree in theology at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, two years later.

The years of intense academic training drew Al to teaching as a profession, which took him to Xavier University of Louisiana, an

African American Catholic university in New Orleans, Louisiana, to assume his first teaching post. It was at Xavier that his desire to teach grew stronger, as did his interest in studying the cultures and religions of people of African descent. So he set his sights on Yale University, where he could study with esteemed scholar of American religion Sydney Ahlstrom, one of the first scholars to situate the black religious experience centrally within the context of the larger narrative of American religious history. Yale also had recently established an African American studies department, allowing Al to also study with the venerable John W. Blassingame, author of *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*.

It was at Yale that Al determined to make the study of black religion his life's work. He recognized that answers to questions about the religious lives of black people and the black past would be found only in careful and sensitive historical examination. He became particularly interested in the religious lives of black slaves, and after a time of exhaustive research completed his Ph.D. studies in 1973 with a dissertation titled "Invisible Institution: The Origins and Conditions of Black Religion before Emancipation."

Al stayed on at Yale after his doctoral studies to teach and to assume administrative responsibilities. He did the same at Berkeley, where he became associate professor of history and African American studies and associate dean of the College of Letters and Science. In 1982, Al accepted an invitation to come and "check out" Princeton as a visiting professor. He did so and found that he liked Princeton very much and, therefore, decided to stay. He was hired as full-time faculty member in the religion department the next year.

From the start, Al distinguished himself as a most faithful citizen of the department and the University at large. In 1987, the year he was named the Henry W. Putnam Professor of Religion, Al became chair of the religion department and served in that capacity until 1992. From 1992 to 1993 he served as dean of the Graduate School. Over the years, he has served in numerous capacities throughout the University, has given countless talks, taught hundreds of undergraduates, and mentored some of the finest graduate students the religion

department has ever had. In recognition of his years of service to the University and for exemplifying the highest standards in scholarship, Al received the Howard T. Behrman Award for Distinguished Achievement in the Humanities in 1998, and was awarded Princeton's Martin Luther King Jr. Journey Award for Lifetime Service in 2006. President Shirley M. Tilghman said of him at that event that he is "a source of inspiration for all who wish to build the kind of society that Dr. King envisioned, a society in which the life of the mind and spirit propel us toward each other rather than apart, where suffering, if it must occur, is redemptive rather than destructive."

In addition to honors bestowed upon him at Princeton, Al has been the recipient of many other awards and honors. He holds four honorary doctorates, and has received a Guggenheim fellowship and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities. In 2012, the University of Heidelberg conferred on him the inaugural James W. C. Pennington Award, named in honor of an African American clergyman, author, abolitionist, and pacifist to whom the University of Heidelberg had granted an honorary degree in 1849. He has also delivered a number of distinguished lectureships, including the Cole Lectures at Vanderbilt University, the Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary, the Saint Thomas More Lectures at Yale University, and the Ingersoll and Wit lectures at Harvard Divinity School.

As a result of his scholarship, Al has authored numerous articles, essays, book chapters, and reviews in some of the most distinguished journals and anthologies in the field of American and African American religious history.

His books include—from most recent to the first—*A Sorrowful Joy: A Spiritual Journey of an African American Man in Late Twentieth-Century America* (2002), a small volume that chronicles Al's conversion to Eastern Orthodox Christianity, as well as meditations on life, love, loss, and belonging; *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (2001) and *African American Religion: Interpretative Essays in History and Culture* (1996, with Timothy Fulop) highlight Al's expert analysis of the history and historiography of African American religion. In *Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African*

American Religious History (1996), Al masterfully integrated personal testimony with historical reflection.

It is for his first book, however, that Al Raboteau is best known. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* is a masterpiece that will endure for as long as the field of American religious history will endure. Developed from his Yale dissertation and published in 1978, *Slave Religion* is of inestimable value, having revealed and shaped what we know about the religion of African slaves in the United States and the very fabric of black religious life generally. For the last three decades, all books of any worth on the topic of African American religion have had to grapple with the arguments and assertions Al made in *Slave Religion*. His task was to correct longstanding false conceptions about the nature of slave religion and do so from the perspective of the slaves themselves. As he eloquently put it, the description of "slave religion as merely otherworldly is inaccurate, for the slaves believed that God had acted, was acting, and would continue to act within human history and within their own particular history as a peculiar people just as long ago he had acted on behalf of another chosen people, biblical Israel."

We learned from *Slave Religion* that roots, remembrances, and fragments of the African past survived the terror of slavery, providing the basis for African American Christianity. More than merely embracing the religion of their oppressors, black Christians reframed and reimagined their faith, making it speak to and work from their own experiences. In this way, they transformed American Christianity, making it the basis of their hope for freedom and ultimate redemption. "In the secrecy of the quarters or the seclusion of the brush arbors ('hush harbors')," Al wrote, "the slaves made Christianity their own."

Al has said that his search for his father, who was so unjustly killed, led him to become a scholar of African American religious history. From that tragedy, then, some of the finest scholarship in the history of the field has emerged. And perhaps it would be all for naught were it not the case that Al Raboteau is simply a superb human being. His kindness and generosity of spirit are legendary, and his mentorship is unmatched. He has modeled before several generations of

young scholars how to do research and how to teach—really teach. Al has left an indelible mark on the field of African American religious history, for sure, but few have left so deep and wide a mark. And even though he now retires from Princeton, those of us who know him best eagerly await what he will do next.