

Albert Raboteau Jr., influential Black religion scholar, dies at 78

by [Dawn Araujo-Hawkins](#) in the [October 20, 2021](#) issue



(Princeton University)

Albert Raboteau Jr., the “godfather of Afro-Religious studies,” died from complications related to Lewy body dementia on September 18. He was 78.

For most of his career, Raboteau was considered one of the preeminent scholars of both Black religious history and American religious history. His 1978 book *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*, which centered the perspectives of enslaved people, is still seen as one of the definitive books on the origins of the Black church.

Raboteau began his teaching career at Xavier University in New Orleans, the only historically Black Catholic college in the nation. In 1982, after positions at the University of California, Berkeley, and Yale, Raboteau joined the faculty at Princeton University, where he remained until his retirement in 2013. (See former student Yolanda Pierce’s remembrance on p. 10.)

At Princeton, Raboteau helped found the Center for the Study of American Religion, now known as the Center for Culture, Society and Religion. He also helped develop what is now the Department of African American Studies.

His students at Princeton considered him to be both mentor and teacher—among them, notable scholars Judith Weisenfeld, Michael Eric Dyson, Eddie S. Glaude Jr., and Jonathan Walton.

“It is impossible to account for everything I learned from him about the field of Black religious studies, and it was an enormous privilege to know him as a thinker, teacher, scholar and person,” Weisenfeld said in a reflection on Princeton’s website. “He was a deeply kind man, whose quiet manner called those around him to quiet attention, and a brilliant person in mind and spirit.”

In the same reflection, Glaude shared how, once, when an editor from the University of Chicago Press came to see Raboteau for an upcoming book project, the professor instead talked about Glaude’s dissertation. That editor ended up publishing Glaude’s first book, *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America*.

In 2006, Raboteau was awarded Princeton’s Martin Luther King Day Journey Award for Lifetime Service to honor his work in advancing King’s dream for the nation.