

Press Release

Heidelberg, June 6, 2012

Universität Heidelberg Presents First James W.C. Pennington Award

Albert J. Raboteau, professor of religious history, receives new prize for research in African American history

Albert J. Raboteau, Professor of Religion at Princeton University, is the first recipient of the James W.C. Pennington Award, which will be bestowed on 14 June 2012. The prize pays tribute to the African American churchman and former slave James W.C. Pennington, who in 1849 was the first African American to receive an honorary doctorate from Heidelberg University. The Heidelberg Center for American Studies (HCA) and the Faculty of Theology established the award in 2011 to mark the university's 625th anniversary. The presentation will be held at the HCA, Curt and Heidemarie Engelhorn Palais, Hauptstraße 120 and begins at 6:15pm. Prof. Raboteau's ceremonial address is entitled "Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement as Precedent for Religion in U.S. Politics."

The James W.C. Pennington Award is given to scholars who have done distinguished work on the African American experience in the Atlantic world. It encompasses a month-long research stay in Heidelberg, during which Prof. Raboteau will not only deliver his public address but will also teach a seminar on African American religious history together with Prof. Dr. Jan Stievermann. A generous contribution from Dr. h.c. Manfred Lautenschläger, long-time supporter of the HCA, laid the foundation for the first awards. When the new award was inaugurated in June 2011, US President Barack Obama sent official greetings to the HCA to convey his gratitude for the initiative and express his conviction that honouring Pennington's achievements would inspire future generations of Americans and Germans.

Albert J. Raboteau holds a professorship in the history of religion at Princeton University. After completing degrees from Loyola University in Los Angeles and the University of California, Berkeley, he earned his Ph.D. in Religious Studies in 1974 at Yale University. He has been teaching and conducting research in Princeton since 1982. In his published works, Raboteau focuses mainly on American and African American religious history and immigration issues.

Born in 1809, Pennington escaped bondage at the age of eighteen. He learned to read and write and in 1834 was the first black man to attend classes at Yale University. In 1838 he was ordained a minister of the Presbyterian Church. At the 1849 World Peace Congress in Paris, Pennington was befriended by the Heidelberg scholar Friedrich Carové. Pennington so impressed Carové that in the same year he persuaded the Heidelberg Faculty of Theology to confer an honorary doctorate on the black minister. He was the first African American to receive an honorary doctorate from a European university. For more information go to www.hca.uni-hd.de.

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