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## Book Review: American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and their Struggle for Social and Political Justice by Albert J. Raboteau

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**Raboteau, Albert J., *American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and their Struggle for Social and Political Justice*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016, 224 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95.**

Albert J. Raboteau, esteemed Professor of Religion at Princeton University, briefly examines the lives of seven influential civil rights activists and explains how their political beliefs and religious affiliation guided their view of the world, and their obligation to use this understanding to direct humanity from its primitive state into one in which civil rights were universally upheld and protected.

Raboteau first introduces Abraham Joshua Herschel, lone survivor of his immediate family of the Holocaust. Herschel relied on his Hasidic academic training to understand man's relationship with the world. He concluded that humans are mere agents that God uses to further man's progression in civilized society. Herschel believed religion and politics are intertwined. However, the author omits the inherent danger of asserting the interdependence of the two in a democratic society in which there is a supposed separation of church and state. Herschel's personal experience galvanized his interest to rectify the pervasiveness of civil rights violations and to confront those responsible for its existence.

Raboteau next introduces AJ Muste, a professor and an advisor to foreign dignitaries, who experienced an inner conflict between belief systems—Ukrainian Orthodox, Quaker, Presbyterian, and his political persuasion. He concluded that God is not aloof from human affairs, but is involved in day-to-day affairs. He translated pacifism to be non-violent in one's reaction to injustice and suffering, but proactive in grassroots organizing to defend laborers' rights.

Next, Professor Raboteau discusses activist Dorothy Day, who reconciled her disillusionment with her prior religious beliefs through personal failures into action for civil rights and war protests. Day believed in feeding and sheltering the poor and promoting civil

rights, but it was primarily based in Catholic missionary work rather than advocating civil rights in the broader context of American society.

The author also provides an overview of Howard Thurman's life, highlighting his and his family's experiences with institutionalized racial discrimination. Thurman philosophized that separatism of humanity and nature caused emotional and mental conflict for man who seeks wholeness and continuity in his existence. He understood exclusion had a similar effect of man being separated from man; one sees his existence as part of the whole but is separate from that which he is naturally connected. This is reminiscent of the prolific historian WEB DuBois' assessment of black consciousness amid racial violence and discrimination.<sup>i</sup>

Raboteau thereafter directs the reader to Thomas Merton, a French Catholic convert and monk who migrated to the United States in the 1940s. Merton asserted that monastic life separated oneself only in name and that monks co-existed in the same world as laymen. He concluded that neither would benefit had he remained in seclusion and failed to compassionately speak of the social ills which plagued those vulnerable voices dominant society sought to muffle. For Merton, impoverished areas were a sign of mercy to the white oppressor, and that if America's social tyranny continued it would reap the wrath of the God. It is the consequence of historic social injustice and institutionalized inequality Thomas Jefferson spoke of centuries prior.<sup>ii</sup> Herschel echoed Merton's criticism of the United States, stating that "[The] un-Christianity of American Christianity is going to be inexorably exposed and judged..." (p.134). He, a European, supported the shift from white-promoted pacifism to black militancy and conceded that it did more for black self-sufficiency in the face of overt discrimination without the need of feigned white sympathy. In his social commentary Merton argued that "white

liberals” will only continue to support the same system they benefit from, thus are not effective advocates.

Raboteau then presents well-known civil rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr., who became the face of the movement amongst numerous unsung heroes for the advancement of black Americans in the United States. He was a Baptist preacher in a hereditary line of the same who primarily helped to organize marches. King believed that the civil rights struggle required strong leadership and according to the Professor, prayer was his support.

Lastly, the author provides an overview of Fannie Lou Hammer’s life, a black southerner and sharecropper from rural Mississippi with a strong maternal influence. Her attempts to register to vote resulted in her receiving death threats, being forced to flee her home along with her family and being imprisoned and sexually assaulted by law enforcement. Consequently, these experiences mobilized Hammer to join the civil rights movement. Though raised with a Christian background, she did not suffer a religious crisis that catapulted her into action. She did, however, rely on religion for personal strength in rectifying the racial injustice she and her contemporaries endured. Thereafter, she became a candidate for Congress and sought to secure civil rights for blacks.

This text is suited for students of political science, theology, black history, and modern American history.

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<sup>i</sup> W.E.B. Dubois, *The Soul of Black Folk*, London, Longmans, p. 8 (1965) “...the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation

of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."

ii Thomas Jefferson, "Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that his justice cannot sleep forever. Commerce between master and slave is despotism. Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free. Establish a law for educating the common people. This it is the business of the state and on a general plan." *The Founders' Constitution*, Volume 1, Chapter 15, Document 28, <http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch15s28.html>, The University of Chicago Press.