

## Memorial Minute for John Pemberton III

John Pemberton III, the Stanley Warfield Crosby Professor of Religion, Emeritus, died at the Baystate Medical Center in Springfield, Massachusetts, on November 30, 2016, felled at the age of 88 by stroke suffered on Thanksgiving Day.

Jack Pemberton was a noteworthy and paradigmatic figure in the late twentieth century history of Amherst College—a person deeply rooted in the traditions of the College’s past but even more deeply committed to broadening its life going forward. Many personal recollections of Jack, offered after his death, turn on some variation of this point. One colleague recalls: “When I first met Jack, he gave the appearance of a traditional New England college professor from his voice down to his suit. And he was, steeped in his tradition. Yet he was also critical of it, and it is that juxtaposition of tradition and critique that he valued.” Another has observed: “While traditional in manner and temperament, Jack welcomed intellectual risk-taking and innovation and by example and active encouragement of colleagues, especially young colleagues, he helped to make the College the more diverse and challenging intellectual environment it has become for both students and the faculty.”

Born in New Brunswick, New Jersey, on February 16, 1928, Jack Pemberton grew up—along with two younger sisters—in a seriously Protestant home. His father, John Pemberton, Jr., served during Jack’s childhood and youth as the pastor of Methodist congregations in Camden and Ocean Grove, New Jersey, and in Poughkeepsie, New York, moving to the Island Baptist Church in Cape May, New Jersey during Jack’s college years. His father is said to have been a skilled pastor, comfortably engaging with a wide range of parishioners, while Jack’s mother, Ruth McCandless Cockroft, is remembered as a “classic minister’s wife,” deeply and sympathetically involved in her husband’s work, but also active in town affairs and a devoted reader. Jack’s father appears on the public record in the 1930s expressing concerns about such things as gambling or the playing of professional baseball on Sunday. He also publically supported the New York Shipbuilding Company in the Camden shipyard strikes of 1934 and 1935, something Jack himself occasionally alluded to vaguely and somewhat uncomfortably. If Jack came in many ways to distance himself from this world, he also recalled it with real affection. Homer Rodeheaver, the gospel song writer and musician who worked alongside the flamboyant Protestant evangelist Billy Sunday, could apparently play his trombone not only with his hands, but by bracing it against the floor and moving his head up and down—a feat which Jack had seen him perform. Some of us recall occasionally coaxing Jack to describe this event, as he would inevitably dissolve into tears of hilarity in the process.

Jack belonged to the generation that came of age just after World War II. He graduated from Princeton University, at the age of 20, in 1948. As an undergraduate, Jack majored in History and was “best known for his beautiful tenor voice,” displayed in a number of choirs and singing groups. He continued his education at Duke University, where he received a Bachelor of Divinity Degree in 1952 and his Ph.D. in 1958. His dissertation, on “Karl Heim’s Conception of the Apologetic Task of Christian Theology,” examined the work of a twentieth-century German theologian. Jack’s initial academic specialization was thus the history of Christian thought and his early scholarship—though limited—was along such lines.

Jack’s teaching career began while he was still working on his dissertation. From 1954 to 1958, he taught at Randolph Macon Women’s College in Lynchburg, Virginia. In the fall of 1958, he arrived at Amherst, and would remain here forty years until his retirement in 1998.

At Amherst, Jack joined J. Alfred Martin, Jr., a philosopher of religion, in the Religion wing of the two-winged department of Philosophy and Religion. His initial teaching assignment within the department

consisted of courses on Old Testament, New Testament, Religion in America, and Christianity in Modern Western Culture. Importantly, he also regularly taught in Humanities 1 and 2, large courses required of all first-year students in the college's post-war, highly-structured "new curriculum" These courses were designed around "books chosen to illustrate certain important stages in the development of Western culture"—mostly Greek literature and Bible in the first semester, a range of medieval, Renaissance, and modern works in the second.

A decade later, with Al Martin gone to Union Theological Seminary and two new colleagues, Bruce Morgan and Lewis Mudge, added to the Religion faculty, Jack was able to hand off his Bible and American responsibilities to them and teach instead courses on the Western Religious Tradition (covering "Judaism and Christianity from the Talmud and Church Fathers to the present"), Philosophy of Religion, and Contemporary Religious Thought. But Jack in the late 1960s was very far from settling comfortably into the area of his graduate specialization in Western Christian thought. Change was afoot at Amherst—and Jack was an active part of it.

The post-war curriculum had been replaced by a new program centered on three required "Problems of Inquiry" courses for first-year students. The emphasis here was more methodological and interdisciplinary, with sources now drawn from "literature, music, fine arts, [as well as] works of discursive prose." An intellectual restlessness that would take his own work in surprising new directions made him an energetic participant in this new program. Particularly important for the long-term development of Jack's work was a Problems of Inquiry course that included material on modern art and Africa. In getting ready for the course, he visited a number of museums in Philadelphia and New York, and was deeply affected by what he saw. It gave rise to an engagement with Africa that never left him.

These curricular fresh mixings were part of a larger process of change at Amherst. In the late 1960s and early 70s, the College entered into a period of sustained self-examination and change. New majors and departments were created, established departments were reconfigured, the faculty and student body grew and, more significantly, grew more diverse in every respect. Jack was a strong and consistent supporter of these changes: the creation of the Anthropology and Sociology Department, the Black Studies Department, the Women and Gender Studies Department, LJST, and Asian Languages and Literature all were enthusiastically welcomed by Jack and he went out of his way to make sure that many of the newcomers to these new departments felt welcomed—sympathetically helping them to negotiate the unfamiliar and sometimes uncomfortable peculiarities of Amherst's older culture.

Meanwhile, the study of religion as an academic field at Amherst was also changing and Jack was very much at the center of that as well. Through the 1960s, Jack and his colleagues in religion were all products of Protestant mainline education and (for the most part) specialists in one or another aspect of Christianity, especially Protestantism. Under Jack's leadership, the department of Religion—separate now from Philosophy—took a new and far more diverse form. Jack presided over the hiring of Robert Thurman, a scholar of Buddhism and Amherst's first full-time appointment in Asian religions. Jack won for Amherst a Five College position in Judaic Studies and oversaw the hiring of Reuven R. Kimelman, an orthodox Jewish scholar, to fill the post. When this term appointment ended and biblical scholar Lewis Mudge left Amherst, Jack led the search leading to the dual appointment of Robert Doran and Susan Niditch, Amherst's first tenure-track appointment in Judaism.

Robert Doran recalls that Jack "liked that I was brought up in a traditional Roman Catholic way and yet engaged in historical and literary criticism of the Christian Scriptures. He appreciated the diversity of all of us in the department and beyond, allowing all of us to flourish. Yet he challenged us to be comparative and interdisciplinary, respecting and valuing all religious traditions." Susan Niditch has

observed: "I loved the way that Jack's buttoned-down, tie-wearing impeccability combined with a lively off-beat sense of humor, an exquisite capacity for self-deprecation, and a genuine appreciation for people who seemed so different from him in terms of demeanor, culture, gender, and ethnicity. He gathered around himself a diverse and devoted array of colleagues and friends and, in particular, supported young scholars in every way, intellectually and politically. He was unobtrusive and undemanding, leaving all of them free to develop and become themselves. His liveliness, creative imagination, and analytical depth was evidenced in everything he wrote and in every class he taught. He taught me patience in the classroom and was especially gifted at allowing students to reach knowledge on their own, to sharpen their own ways of thinking and engaging in analytical processes. At every turn, he challenged them productively, making students aware of the normative constraints and assumptions with which they often arrived at religion courses in a liberal arts college, opening their eyes to diverse forms of religious culture and identity and to a deeper appreciation of their own ways of looking at the world."

Jack's embrace of diversity and openness to new avenues of thinking was nowhere more evident than in the extraordinary shift in his own intellectual focus from Christian thought to the study of religion more generally and African religions and art, with a special focus on the Yoruba people of Nigeria, in particular. It is the most striking feature of his academic career. Stimulated by his experience in the Problems of Inquiry course and inspired in part by the advent of anthropology at Amherst College, Jack set out in the early 1970s to develop an entirely new line of research. This was new territory for him, and one has to admire the courage it took to depart from an established career and confront such a totally new challenge.

In 1970-71, while supported by a fellowship from the Society for Values in Higher Education and the Danforth Foundation, he became a Visiting Fellow at Mansfield College, Oxford University. There he engaged in conversations with such luminaries of African anthropology as Godfrey Lienhardt and John Beattie. But Jack's African research was never of the mere armchair sort and during that same year he made his first trips to West Africa. That was the beginning of his commitment to on-site field research, and over the course of his life, he traveled to the region at least fourteen times. During his first visits in 1970-71 he was an Associate Fellow of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, and in 1981-82 and again in 1986 he was Visiting Research Associate at the University of Ife. Over the years, he developed close relationships with many Nigerian colleagues. Rowland Abiodun recalls meeting Jack at Ife in the early 1980s. "Besides his great personal charm and palpable intellectual curiosity in learning about the art and culture of the Yoruba people," Rowland recalls, "he was loveable, gentlemanly and kindly in the very best sense of those adjectives. We instantly became kindred spirits and that relationship did not change until [his death]."

Jack achieved great distinction as an Africanist and student of African religion and art. He was author, co-author, or editor of fourteen books and catalogues, many done in collaboration with others, especially Rowland Abiodun. He also authored over twenty articles and reviews, curated numerous exhibitions, and was a frequently-invited lecturer on African religion and arts. His work was supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Smithsonian Institution, the Ford Foundation, and the Mellon Foundation, among others. Ultimately, Jack became one of the leaders of the field, as attested by the frequency with which his expertise and judgement were sought by both academic and non-academic members of the African arts community. In the year 2006, he was elected to the Advisory Board of the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution. The bulk of his field photographs (numbering tens of thousands, all of which were painstakingly and carefully annotated) also found a permanent home there. He continued to be actively engaged with the field to the end of his life.

Jack's work not only took him to Africa, it helped bring Africa to Amherst. He was an active participant in the Five College African Studies program. Many African colleagues—and other students of African religion and art—came to Amherst to speak and sometimes for longer stays. He was instrumental in bringing the prominent Nigerian scholar Wande Abimbola, soon to become Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ife, to serve as a visiting professor at the college in 1980-1981. The roster of Copeland Fellows he sponsored includes Rosalind Hackett, Jacob Olupona, and Funso Afolayan—all younger scholars for whom Jack was an important mentor. Rowland Abiodun has also said that “without Jack, I wouldn't be at Amherst today.” Jack's African interests of course also had a deep impact on his teaching. He began to experiment with Africa-related courses in 1971, offering a course on religious change among the Yoruba, and such courses—often taught in interdisciplinary formats in collaboration with other colleagues and over the years widening in the scope of African cultures treated—remained central to his teaching mission until his retirement. One of his last courses at Amherst was a new course on Asian and African Systems of Divination, co-taught with another member of the Religion department.

Yet Jack continued to bridge the old and the new in all that he did. Older interests that lost their place in his scholarship continued to live on in his teaching. He regularly taught a course on Modern Christian Thought—now more about the various versions of liberation theology than the likes of Karl Heim. He annually offered “The Christian Religious Tradition.” Centered on Augustine, Aquinas, Dante, Luther, and Pascal, it resonated with the Humanities courses he had taught at Amherst in his early years. Religion 11 under his supervision was very much in the Problems of Inquiry tradition—methodological, comparative, and interdisciplinary—as was his later regularly offered seminar on “Theories of Religion.”

With his beloved wife Jane, whom he married in 1969 and who was his deeply sympathetic partner in all things, he presided over a family that eventually came to include six children and twelve grandchildren. The Pembertons were the most gracious of hosts. Their home on Dana Street—and later at High Ridge in Pelham—was the welcoming site for many memorable social occasions. With a characteristic blend of formality and ease, they hosted events that drew together a diverse mix of people—family, college colleagues, people from the town, scholars from Africa and elsewhere.

Jack was also for decades a faithful and active participant in the life of Grace Episcopal Church in Amherst, a wise counselor to its rectors and a caring friend to many of his fellow parishioners. In that church, above the pulpit, there is a very striking crucifix. Commissioned and donated by Jack—and Jane, it was carved by Lamidi Fakeye, a Nigerian carver whom Jack had come to know and on occasion had brought to Amherst—a man who is himself a Muslim. It is a fitting expression of the themes of continuity and change, rootedness and expansion, that so notably marked Jack Pemberton's life.

Respectfully submitted by

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