



Wallace Best Receives 2022-23 Virginia Ramey Mollenkott Award

The LGBTQ Religious Archives Network (LGBTQ-RAN) honors Wallace Best, Ph.D. with the [2022-23 Virginia Ramey Mollenkott Award](#). The Mollenkott Award honors outstanding research and scholarship in LGBTQ religious history. The review jury selected Best's "Everybody Knew He Was 'That Way': Chicago's Clarence H. Cobbs, American Religion and Sexuality During the Post-World War II Period" from among five papers submitted for the award this year. Best will be given this award at a public event on Wednesday, March 8th, at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

[Wallace Best, Ph.D.](#) is the Hughes-Rogers Professor of Religion and African American Studies and the Director of the Program in Gender and Sexuality Studies at Princeton University. An urban and cultural historian, his research, writing, and teaching merge at the intersections of American religion, African American religious history, urban religion, cultural studies, and gender and sexuality studies. With attention given to the lived experiences of religion in urban contexts, Best employs various historical and literary methodologies to elucidate the ways religious discourses, practices, movements, and institutions shape American society in general and African American life particularly. He is the author of *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915-1952*, which won the 2006 [Illinois State Historical Society Award](#) in the Publications category and *Langston's Salvation: American Religion and the Bard of Harlem*, which was a finalist for the 2018 [Albert J. Raboteau Book Prize](#) and the winner of the 2018 [Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion, Textual Studies](#), from the American Academy of Religion.

Through an examination of the life and early experiences of Rev. Clarence H. Cobbs, Best's research demonstrates that homophobia is not endemic to Black churches but is the outgrowth of a series of historical processes and developments. Prior to World War II Clarence Cobbs and a few other Black church leaders in Chicago and other American cities, who were known to be gay, were largely accepted and embraced by their communities. This changed with the advent of World War II and its aftermath when important shifts in American culture regarding sex, sexuality, family, and cultural conformity radically reshaped the social and theological contexts within Black churches. People known to be "that way" were compelled to make different choices about their lives and loves. Ultimately, the story of Clarence Cobbs highlights how broad shifts in American culture have had transformative effects on African American religion, specific religious communities, and the lives and choices of individual persons. Best's article is published as a chapter in [The Sexual Politics of Black Churches](#) edited by Josef Sorett (Columbia University Press, 2022).

Best is the fourteenth recipient of [LGBTQ-RAN's award for papers](#) since its inception in 2005, but the first honoree since the award was named in memory of Virginia Ramey Mollenkott in the summer of 2022. This is the only award given for outstanding scholarship in this field of study.

Jury members Joanne Carlson Brown, Ph.D., Gillian Frank, Ph.D. and Johari Jabir, Ph.D. described Best's work as "a beautifully written and well-researched essay on Clarence Cobbs that enriches our understanding of African American religious communities in Chicago and the changing ways they managed same-sex sexual expressions and identities in the WWII era. The author is commendable for a rich use of primary sources and for treating Cobbs with human dignity, not framing him as another archetype. The article is interdisciplinary and treats the period and persons in a frame of intersectionality, which is important to interpreting Black Queer history."

Submissions for next year's Virginia Ramey Mollenkott Award must be postmarked or received electronically by December 1, 2023. Complete information on submission guidelines for the award can be found at: <https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/history-award-guidelines>

The [LGBTQ Religious Archives Network](https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/) is a ground-breaking venture to preserve the history of LGBTQ religious movements around the world. It has three primary purposes: a) to assist LGBTQ religious leaders and groups in determining how best to preserve their records and papers; b) to provide an electronic information clearinghouse about LGBTQ religious history for the use of historians, researchers and other interested persons; and c) to encourage scholarship in LGBTQ religious history. Learn more about LGBTQ-RAN at its website: <https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/>

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