

Report on AYA Assembly LXIX, November 19 – 21, 2009

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This convocation had two sessions:

- I. *Transformational Dialogue: Spiritual and Religious Engagement at Yale and in the World*
- II. *The AYA Leadership Conference: Update on the AYA Strategic Plan*

The first session was called to order by the Chair of the Yale Alumni Association (AYA), Ellen McGinnis '82, a Roman Catholic, who said she preferred to worship anonymously at St. Mary's church when she was an undergraduate, rather than at the folksier St. Thomas More Chapel. She introduced the topic of transformational spirituality as being important in this fiercely, secular world and noted that Yale was not only founded by the clergy in 1701 but that the first twelve presidents were ministers, who actually taught religious classes.

Dean Harold W. Attridge, Dean of the Yale Divinity School (YDS), spoke on "The Spirit and the Divines: Faith and Intellect in Contemporary Theological Education". He suggested there was a dichotomous approach: the German School, critical of tradition, which emphasized scientific learning, the study of history, of language and the literary form and the Athens School, concerned with education, with the ability to know, the personal development of spirituality and encouragement of students to order their hearts and minds to leadership. He went on to outline the tension between Spirituality and Religion: the former offering one the capacity for transcending oneself and for life integration, the holistic project of linking mind with body, and the latter offering religious institutions with their dogma and ritual. Spirituality, however, without organization risks becoming a cult or a ghetto; whereas, religions often undermine the values they promote by degenerating into empty hypocrisy.

Dean Attridge then described three educational goals of the YDS: (1) To increase global awareness; (2) To develop the transformation of the spiritual mind for religious leaders of the 21st century; (3) To promote justice. He spoke passionately about the need to preserve the environment, which he characterized as a gift from God. Organizationally, the YDS and the Yale Forestry School have cooperated in many ways to mitigate the corrosive effects of industrialization on nature. He then reviewed the change that YDS underwent from one with a Congregational flavor at its beginning to more Episcopal one with its merger several years ago with the Berkeley Divinity School, to its present ecumenical status with the influx of Roman Catholics after Vatican II. Although most of the students are Episcopalians, at present there are Jewish and Muslim students as well. Indeed, there are students from 42 different religious affiliations. The objective to touch the head and heart and hands is approached with non compulsory but popular Morning Prayer and Communion, by encouraging pilgrimages to religious sites like Canterbury and Santiago de Compostela and by retreats, such as one featuring the "Spiritual Exercises" of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. Encouraging social justice, the Dean admitted was the most complex but was increasingly important now with the country in a wrenching recession and in two foreign wars. Students must learn to hear the cry of the poor and understand the need to repair the

world in order for peace and justice to flourish, with the spirit of the late Rev. William Sloan Coffin, a former University Chaplain, as the guiding light.

The dean went on to describe the school as having 390 students, 85% of whom are on financial aid, up from 50% a few years ago, and whose median age in the mid 20s, down from the upper 30s seven years ago. He was pleased that the applications for admission increased from 250 in 1990 to 550 last year and that one third of the graduates became ordained.

Dean Attridge applauded the creation the Department of Religious Studies in 1963 to enable students to concentrate on religious studies, without isolating themselves from history and current events and concluded that a substantial portion of the undergraduates were engaged in religious activities.

Next, Sharon Kugler, the University Chaplain, described undergraduates as formally desiring to learn about religion but not knowing how to ask. Believing her place was not only in the pulpit but also in outreach, she worked with the senior councilors, assigned to live in freshmen entries, and to make certain the students learned about her office and those of the other religious centers. Thus, her office doors are always open, offering respite, fellowship and the promotion of a transformational spiritual dialogue and intellectual awareness between students at meals and in service work, promoting William Sloan Coffin's faith-in-action as the model. She was very proud that 500 students attended a banquet in Commons for the last day of Ramadan. Her office prepared a "Multifaith Calendar for 2009 – 2010", which was widely distributed among students and well received. It records the dates of religious holidays and festivals for dozens of religions and other data, such as the report that 28% of the undergraduates identified themselves as Roman Catholics, 26% as Protestants, and 21% as Jewish. Her presentation included an exciting film of students from different denominations discussing their respective faith and their interaction with members of different persuasions, many of whom exuded belief in their particular affiliation and respect of and tolerance for those of other faiths. She applauded student engagement in community service, such as the weekly soup kitchen at St. Thomas More, the Roman Catholic Center.

She was followed by a student panel, consisting of an Orthodox Jew, a Roman Catholic, a Hindu, and a Methodist. A Muslim student was invited to participate but had become too ill to do so. They elaborated on what was covered in the film and spoke eloquently about the vibrant religious fervor currently visible at Yale, unlike the more secular nature of the country at large.

Delegates were assigned to various colleges for lunch and the inaugural Big Blue discussion of selected essays from "The Death of Adam", compiled by Marilynne Robinson

In the afternoon, nine breakout sessions were held, one of which dealt with "Sacred Music, Worship, and the Arts in Context: a Window to the Human Soul", moderated by Martin Jean, the Director of the Institute of Sacred Music (ISM). He described the institute as an interdisciplinary graduate center, founded in 1973 to train students preparing for the clergy or the laity to engage with the Sacred through music, worship and the arts in religious communities and public life. At its founding it received a grant from Mr. Irwin Miller to convey Christian values through art and music and is now entirely self supporting. Although not granting degrees, IMS is open to students from the Yale Music School

specializing in choral conducting, organ and voice and from YDS specializing in liturgical studies and religion and the arts. There are currently 65 students, 10 staff members and 15 faculty members, a few of whom discussed their individual specialties in video clips that were shown. He suggested that music in particular and art in general was considered to be “useless” in the modern mind, as merely “art for art’s sake”. However, at ISM the consensus is more akin to a theory of the Enlightenment that true art should enhance meditation or, as Pope John Paul has put it, should be a means to lift up the soul. To that end he distributed a program of IMS performances of religious music including Verdi’s “Requiem”, Kernis’ “Symphony of Meditations” and Bach motets and cantatas.

The Director then demonstrated the new Taylor and Booddy baroque style organ that was recently installed in the Marquand Chapel of YDS and pointed out its differences with the Newberry Memorial Organ in Woolsey Hall. Two students played two different pieces to illustrate its unique sound, which he described as transparent and sweet.

After the breakout sessions, the delegates reassembled for the Keynote Address, “The Impact of Faith in a Globalized World”, by Miroslav Volf, the Director for the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, which he helped to establish with Tony Blair, former Prime Minister of Great Britain and now a Visiting Professor at YDS. Director Volf described the globe as becoming exceedingly interconnected, with people increasingly interdependent: the swine flu and the current economic crisis have global ramifications were current examples. This rapid degree of change is exhilarating to some and a source of great anxiety to others, who fear their jobs are at risk by ever increasing levels of foreign imports. And yet he cited studies with evidence that nations generate more trade within their borders than with other nations. Since the bipolar world conflict between democracy and communism ended with the collapse of Soviet Union, there has been an increase in desecularization, except in Europe. Religions, which help people to understand, to identify and to provide ways to organize themselves, have reversed the expectation of the Enlightenment that the light of knowledge would cause religious superstition to wither and that the power of technology, especially of medicine, would overcome prayer. Rather than disappearing, religions are growing faster than secularization: there are 2.2 billion Christians and 1.6 billion Muslims in the world. The three major faiths have outlived all empires and kingdoms: Judaism for 4 millennia, Christianity for 2 millennia and Islam for 1 ½ millennia and are now becoming more vocal in expressing their beliefs. Until the 1970s, religions were mostly private affairs, but now with the combination of democratic ideals and religious beliefs, fundamentalism has begun to assert itself in the public arena.

Questioning what we will do with our freedom, he suggested consideration be given to what it is to be human and went on to recommend self-absorbed religions be opened up to a sustained reflection on man in society and to the identification of the private common good, the national common good, and the global common good. For those who experience a disorienting life that has little or no weight, the result of the commonly held belief that the political and secular worlds have failed to deliver, along with their governmental agencies, he thought a helpful first step to reestablish a balance would be “Education’s End: Why our Colleges and Universities have given up on the Meaning of Life”, a thought-provoking book by Anthony Kronman. In his seminar he recently assigned a paper of ten sentences or less be written on the topic “What makes me tick” and was electrified with the results.

Questioning how the three major Faiths will intersect with globalization, Mr. Volf averred it was crucial that each of them, whose core belief is exclusive, embrace pluralism by entering into conversations with and demonstrating a tolerance for the others and that they work for peace by an accommodation with one another. Although many are pessimistic that the religious leaders would do so, he for one believed they could and would. He hoped they'd stand together to address global problems in the liberalization of democracy and of the market economy.

The Yale Medal Dinner was held in Commons. For more than 50 years, the Yale medal has been conferred to honor outstanding individual service to the University. Among the 5 Medalists this year was Stephan Adams whose generous contribution to the Yale Music School will abolish tuitions and enabled the Class of 1959 to set a Class Gift record.

The Yale Alumni Association (AYA) met on Friday to review its Strategic Plan for Ambassadors for Yale. The Executive Director, Mark Dollhopf, described Yale as a society of scholars and a company of friends. He reported that thousands of alumni gave of their talents to improve various communities in the "Day of Service" program; that there were several successful Yale trips, including one to Iceland; and that many alumni participated in the weeklong effort in a town in Mexico and in another in Brazil to match volunteer skills to the needs of the community by improving health facilities and providing medical treatment. The programs were enormously successful, as illustrated by inspiring film clips.

Mr. Dollhopf announced that the next AYA Conference, to be held in Los Angeles, in March, 2010, has already met with an enthusiastic response; that AYA attention to Special Interest Groups would be expanded; that the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Wiffenpoofs brought 650 of them back to Woolsey Hall; that the clubs in the 7 large metropolitan areas, where almost one half of the alumni live, would enjoy improved AYA services; and that the successful educational trips, 10 in all, for alumni families would continue.

Mark Claypole, the founder of the "Bulldog" program, reported that it is 80% self-funded and experienced by 10% of the undergraduates, who spent the summer in various cities, where local alumni arranged for their housing and employment. In the 36 years of existence, 850 alumni and 500 employers participated and 100 of the "bulldogs", after graduation, returned to make their homes in their respective host cities. In most cases, one of the main objectives of the program was achieved: to train the undergraduates to be gracious guests.

President Levin gave a state of the university address at lunch. He acknowledged that the university budget crisis, caused by the fall in the value of the endowment, meant the 5% drawn from it each year was proportionally lower. He was pleased to report that the projected \$150 million deficit has been reduced to \$50 million by layoffs and selected budget cutting measures, adding that this is an excellent reason for the alumni to increase their gifts to the Alumni Fund. Placing on hold all new building projects, including the addition of the two new colleges, was another casualty of the crisis. He was satisfied with the condition of the college and the graduate schools, with the four devoted to the arts ranking best in the country when compared with those affiliated with a university. There were two disappointments: the loss of two outstanding Law School professors, who will be difficult to replace,

and the less than adequate clinical performance of the Yale New Haven Hospital, which is receiving attention, although its research activities were superlative. Foreign admissions to Yale College were increasing but will probably peak soon at 10%, since foreign students want to come to an American College and not a United Nations college. President Levin reviewed plans to establish a joint college with Singapore in Singapore and was happy six students from India will come to Yale in 2010 from the nine acceptances, compared to one student coming from the nine acceptances in 2009, the benefit of increased recruitment activities in India.

There were 10 Leadership Development Workshops following lunch. One dealt with YaleGALE, a leadership exchange program to advance education by fostering rich cultural understanding, sharing best practices in alumni relations and providing reciprocal educational opportunities among world-leading universities through alumni engagement and leadership. Two such programs have already taken place with universities in Australia and in Japan. Indeed, attending our conference were representatives from six Japanese universities. Plans have been made for a group of alumni to be led by Mr. Dollhopf to visit several universities in Turkey from July 16 to July 31, 2010, along with exciting side trips to artistic and historical sites. Our classmate, Marvin Berenblum, is quite knowledgeable about this program and will be happy to discuss the details of this excursion with any interested classmate.

It is a pity not every Yale graduate could attend convocations like this to be stimulated by Yale's continuing vitality. The administration, the professors, and the students demonstrate that our Alma Mater is still amazing, so much so as to make every delegate proud.

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