

YALE DIVINITY SCHOOL News Release

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Faith and citizenship panelists: Scrutiny of faith a healthy dimension of election year discourse

WASHINGTON, DC—In the run-up to another presidential election year, almost 100 people packed a room at the National Press Club in the nation's capitol on Dec. 6 to hear a panel of writers and representatives from the government, non-profit and academic sectors speak on the topic "Faith and Citizenship: The Conversation in 2008." The occasion was the formal launch of the fall 2007 issue of Yale Divinity School's magazine of theological and ethical inquiry, *Reflections*, which was entirely devoted to the subject of faith and citizenship.

Several panelists alluded to the speech delivered earlier in the day by GOP presidential hopeful Mitt Romney—under pressure to discuss his Mormon faith—and how such scrutiny of public and private expressions of faith can be a healthy dimension of election year discourse.

"Every election can be a 'seminar on faith,'" said panelist Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, former Lt. Gov. of Maryland, eldest child of Robert F. Kennedy, and author of *Failing America's Faithful: How today's Churches Are Mixing God with Politics and Losing Their Way*. "The election year is a terrific opportunity . . . for churches to ask themselves 'What are we doing (to advance our values) and are we being true to our traditions?' . . . What's going on in this election is very encouraging."

In his speech, Romney promised a national television audience that Mormon officials would not "exert influence on presidential decisions" if he were elected president. Meanwhile, the faith expressions of Democratic hopeful Barak Obama and surging support for Southern Baptist minister Mike Huckabee, another GOP candidate, were also making religion and politics a significant topic in the election campaign.

Several panelists called for a new tenor to the public discourse, where people of different faith traditions are mutually respectful and willing to learn from one another.

"What we need so much now is a certain amount of religious humility," said panelist E.J. Dionne, syndicated *Washington Post* columnist and author of the forthcoming book *Souled Out: Reclaiming Faith and Politics After the Religious Right*. "But how do you combine passion and humility? We need to have passion to move beyond this period of culture war that is making so many problems impossible to solve."

In the fall 2007 issue of *Reflections*, entitled *Faith and Citizenship in Turbulent Times*, a number of well-known thinkers express their views, including each of the panelists.

In addition to Dionne and Townsend, panelists included the Rev. Jennifer Butler, executive director of Faith in Public Life; Prof. Serene Jones, Yale Divinity School and faculty guest editor of the fall 2007 issue of *Reflections*; Congressman David Price of North Carolina, chair of the Homeland Security Appropriations Subcommittee; Prof. Harry Stout, Yale Divinity School, author of the book *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War*; and Ray Waddle, editor, *Reflections*, and former religion editor of *The Tennessean* in Nashville.

The panel was moderated by Yale Divinity School Dean Harold Attridge, a Catholic layman, New Testament scholar and general editor of the revised edition of *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, 2006. In his column introducing the fall 2007 issue of *Reflections*, Attridge wrote, “As we considered the topic at YDS, we came to see how useful it would be to frame the issues involved in a fresh way, by examining our identity as people of faith and as citizens . . .

“In a presiding spirit of theological humility but also urgency, we offer these articles probing the intersection of religious and civil virtues, which takes place now in such a volatile global climate of religious intensity, fragile national identities, and globalization . . . We hope these articles individually and collectively contribute to a vital public discourse concerning faith in public life.”

Like most other issues of *Reflections*— for example, recent issues on *God’s Green Earth: Creation, Faith, Crisis* and *The Future of the Prophetic Voice*—publication of *Faith and Citizenship* followed several initiatives and conferences at Yale Divinity School during the preceding year that helped shape the conversation, both from the point of view of U.S. citizenship and global citizenship.

The 76-page fall issue of *Reflections* also includes stimulating articles by, among others, Oliver Thomas, executive director of the Niswonger Foundation in Greeneville, TN, “The American Consensus: Civic, Not Religious”; John Danforth, former senator from Missouri, “Paul’s Primer for Politics”; James M. Lawson, Jr., associate of Martin Luther King, Jr. and former pastor of Holman United Methodist Church in Los Angeles, “A Nation Faces Its Own ‘Terrible Alternatives’”; Robert Wuthnow, chair of the Department of Sociology and Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton University, “The Divided Generation: Religion, Youth, and Public Life”; and Randall Balmer, professor of American religious history at Barnard College, Columbia University, “The Challenge of Christian Citizenship.”

Reflections, which is distributed free, has a circulation of about 20,000. It is sent to all alumni of Yale Divinity School and to anyone who requests a subscription.

A web site accompanying each issue features a study guide and multimedia presentation, in addition to the table of contents, lead article, and columns by the dean and the editor.

The web site also has provision for ordering subscriptions or individual copies of the magazine. It can be found at <http://www.yale.edu/reflections/>.

Selected quotations from the *Reflections* fall 2007 issue, *Faith and Citizenship in Turbulent Times*:

E.J. Dionne: “The task the Niebuhrs and John Courtney Murray took on in the 1940s and 1950s—to develop what might be called a theology of democracy—is once again urgent.”

Heidi Hadsell, president of Hartford Seminary: “In a radically unequal and suffering world, in a country as rich and powerful as the United States, [globalization] means understanding and critiquing the actions of one’s own nation, not simply according to national well-being, or national self-interest, but according to their impact on others around the globe.”

Harry Stout: “Myths die hard, and, for many Americans, the one truly intolerable, unacceptable notion even now is that America is one more profane nation in the wilderness of this world.”

Jan Egeland, special advisor to the United Nations secretary general: “Religion has to work intensively with itself to avoid becoming a tool of conflict and again clearly be a tool for peace.”

Oliver Thomas: “There is not and never will be a religious consensus in America. It’s one of a dozen good reasons why we should never return to the practice of teacher-led prayers in our public schools. The first and most intractable question would always be: Whose prayer?”

Randall Balmer: “Religion always functions best at the margins of society, not in the councils of power, for when religion hankers after power it loses its prophetic voice.”

Robert Wuthnow: “Whereas young adults are less likely than older adults to think of America as a Christian nation, they are more likely to consider it acceptable for political leaders to talk about religion.”

Kathleen Kennedy Townsend: “The reborn churches of the twenty-first century will care as much about the actions of groups of people and governments as they will about personal moral behavior.”

James M. Lawson, Jr.: “Our government . . . is the number one enemy of peace and justice in the world today. It is the only superpower, and it is managed by its military and defense industry as lobbied by its plantation capitalism, which demands the right to make the entire world its plantation.”

John Danforth: “Christianity does not give us an agenda for American politics. It does not provide policy positions that we can identify with certainty as being Christian. What it does offer is an approach, a way of thinking about and engaging in politics that is highly relevant to our ability to live together as one nation, despite our strongly held differences.”

David E. Price: “Claiming divine sanction for our own power or program does not merely undermine American pluralism; it also flies in the face of our religious understanding of human sinfulness and divine transcendence.”

Jennifer Butler: “As my staff reaches out to unlikely allies, we have been surprised that there seems no limit to how far we might go. Perhaps these new alliances are helped because of a changing of the guard—a new generation sick of the culture wars and willing to try something new.”

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