

Theologian Serene Jones Leaving Yale Divinity School to Head Union Theological Seminary

Serene Jones, the Titus Street Professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School, has accepted an offer to serve as president of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, a school with a long history of ties to YDS and where Reinhold Niebuhr, one of YDS's most illustrious graduates, once taught.

The appointment was announced Feb. 25 by Union, which said Jones will assume her new position on July 1. Union, which like YDS is ecumenical in orientation, had conducted a six-month search to fill the post being vacated by retiring president Joseph Hough, a 1959 graduate of YDS.

“Serene Jones will be greatly missed at Yale Divinity School and within the broader university community,” said Yale Divinity School Dean Harold Attridge. “She has been a vital member of the YDS faculty since 1991 as a teacher of theology, but her influence has extended far beyond the classroom.

“Serene has been an active participant in day-to-day life on Sterling Divinity Quadrangle, and she has been one of the primary links between YDS and Yale's professional schools, particularly Law, and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences—where she has played significant roles in the Department of Religious Studies, the Department of African American Studies, and the Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies program”

In making today's announcement, David Callard, chairman of Union's Board of Trustees, stated, “Dr. Jones's exceptional leadership style and distinguished scholarship make her the ideal person to lead this vibrant theological institution, which has been home to notable scholars Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

“With Dr. Jones's vision and commitment, Union is positioned not only to continue its role as a leading institution of theological education but also to be a strong voice at a time when religion, with all its pluralistic manifestations, has become an increasingly powerful and divisive issue.”

Jones expressed excitement about taking the reins at Union but noted that she is leaving with fond feelings about her time at Yale—which has included not only 17 years as a teacher but the time she spent earning an M.Div. at YDS and a Ph.D. in theology at the Graduate School, and her early childhood years. Jones was born while her father was pursuing his own degree at YDS, and she grew up around the Yale campus as he completed work on his B.D. and, then, his Ph.D.

“I am thrilled to be at the helm of a institution of theological education as esteemed and historic as Union Theological Seminary,” said Jones. “I am very sad to be leaving Yale, however. My time here—now more than half my life—has been filled with countless treasured friendships and an ongoing sense of intellectual companionship that's been as rich as it has been expansive.

“Yale Divinity School is a magical place for ministerial formation—no other place like it on earth. The Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program is a community marked by

academic earnestness and lively intellectual commitment. And the project I have participated in at the MacMillan Center—The Women, Religion, and Globalization Project—has been the most exciting collaborative endeavor of my career.

“I feel privileged to have benefited from Yale’s many resources over the years, and I will take a great deal of what I learned at Yale with me. After twenty-six years, Yale has seeped into my bones.”

In an interview published in the winter 2005 issue of *Spectrum*, Yale Divinity School’s alumni magazine, Jones described her teaching style this way: “What I spend most of my time doing is trying to engage and expand [students’] imaginations and hence their deepest desires. I teach and write to their imaginative universes—to the landscape of images, expectations, and possibilities that form the dramatic mental worlds in which their thoughts unfold.”

Emilie M. Townes, the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of African-American Religion and Theology at Yale Divinity School and current president of the American Academy of Religion, said, “I do not think it is a wise or faithful thing to stand in the way of a profound call. It is clear that this is what Serene is answering with her decision to accept Union’s presidency.” Townes, who came to YDS from a teaching position at Union, added, “I believe that she will lead Union wisely and with incredible creativity and foresight and not only will Union be blessed by her leadership, but all of theological education.”

And Margaret Farley, a close colleague of Jones and the Gilbert L. Stark Professor Emerita of Christian Ethics, said, “As an outstanding theologian, an interdisciplinary presence at Yale, a colleague, and friend, Serene Jones will be sorely missed at Yale Divinity School. Nonetheless, her talents are multiple and stunning, so I am delighted that she will now have an opportunity to exercise new forms of leadership not only at Union Theological Seminary but within the national and international communities of theological education.”

Laura Wexler, professor of American Studies and professor of Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies program, called Jones “an integral and vibrant member” of the program who is “committed to fostering feminist scholarship and activism.” In Jones’s role as acting chair of WGSS, Wexler noted, she has brought “energy, vision and leadership to the program as it seeks a higher profile in the university at large.”

Said Wexler, “Through her work in gender studies she has also forged a significant new alliance between the Yale Divinity School and the main campus as one of three principle investigators (along with Cheryl Doss and myself) of the Women, Religion and Globalization grant newly awarded by the Luce Foundation to the Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies Program, the Yale Divinity School and the MacMillan Center. I am proud that WGSS has nurtured, and been nurtured by, this exceptional theologian who is so very, very alive to women’s local and global challenges.”

Emily P. Bakemeier, associate provost of Yale University, said, “Serene’s contributions to Yale University have been extensive, varied, and manifest. She has an extraordinary ability to bridge disciplines and gather people together to share ideas and develop creative intellectual and practical endeavors to achieve great results. “How fortunate Union will be to have Serene’s energy, her intellect, and her wisdom dedicated to guiding its future. Serene will be missed

terribly by the many people, programs, departments, and schools with which she has been involved here at Yale."

"Clearly, Serene is one of the outstanding young theologians on the American theological landscape, and Union is fortunate to have her at the helm," Attridge said. "We wish Serene the very best and look forward to continued interaction with her as she pursues new challenges at one of the nation's great institutions of theological learning."

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