

# BUMPER YEAR FOR YDS CONFERENCES

by Frank Brown

**F**IVE HIGH-PROFILE CONFERENCES captured the breadth of Yale Divinity School's increasingly ambitious engagement with the world. Drawing on YDS scholars for leadership and attracting top-flight participants to cultivate fertile discussion, the conferences already appear to be resonating far beyond the confines of Sterling Divinity Quadrangle.

Beginning in February with an event on religious environmentalism and ending in September with the annual *Sarah Smith Conference* (this year on nuclear disarmament), the YDS community had an especially rich year. In April, a major, multi-disciplinary conference on Black religion in the African diaspora took place in venues across the Yale University campus. As the spring 2008 semester wound down, the YDS community was treated to a two-day event on immigration. At the end of July, usually a sleepy time on the Quad, 150 people from three-dozen countries took part in *Loving God and Neighbor in Word and Deed*, a Muslim/Christian conference that transformed the Quad into a high-security zone with special areas designated for praying.

With each of the five conferences, organizers leveraged the events in such a way that the proceedings echoed far beyond New Haven. In some cases, that meant attracting the attention of national and international media. In others, conference participants ended up contributing to YDS-produced publications like *Reflections*, the school's national biannual magazine of theological and ethical inquiry.

The function of conferences at YDS has changed over the years from having largely academic aims to pursuing broader goals that include engaging alumni, invigorating the School's Board of Advisors, empowering current students, and engagement with the world beyond the academy. "Last spring's conference on the Middle Passage (the diaspora conference), for example, assembled leading African American scholars of religion across a broad disciplinary spectrum," said Dean Harold Attridge, who has aggressively sought to expand YDS's public influence. "This is a good example of a confer-

ence that contributed not only to the development of scholarship, but also to the life of the school."

YDS Director of External Relations John B. Lindner said that he looks for specific criteria when mulling ideas for potential conferences. "I have two words to describe what we're trying to do: convene and incubate," said Lindner. "We are looking for pieces that are really important for conversations in the public square and in the church."



Princeton University Professor Cornel West and Antipas L. Harris '02 S.T.M. at the *Middle Passage Conversations* conference

YDS conferences have a way of building upon each other. It was at a two-day celebration in April 2005 of the late William Sloane Coffin's life that the seeds of an upcoming issue of *Reflections* were sown. Coffin '56 B.D.

counted as one of his most lasting legacies advocating an inescapable Christian dimension to nuclear disarmament. Coffin, who died in 2006, addressed several hundred people in University Commons a year before his death with an unyielding plea: "The only way to stop nuclear proliferation is to recognize that nuclear weapons demand a single standard—their total abolition, ours included, under the most stringent possible international control."

In September 2008, over three years later, a recent YDS graduate who had heard Coffin's message loud and clear, Tyler Wigg-Stevenson '04 M.Div., was a key participant in the 2008 *Sarah Smith Conference* on "Are We Safe Yet? Vulnerability and Security in an Anxious Age." At the conference, Stevenson, the policy director of Faithful Security: the National Religious Partnership on the Nuclear Weapons Danger, urged Christian communities to treat the halting of nuclear proliferation as a "theological imperative." To complete the circle, Stevenson, who credits Coffin's inspiration with the creation of Faithful Security, is guest editor for a similarly themed spring 2009 issue of *Reflections*.

Just as the *Sarah Smith Conference* is helping inform that upcoming issue of *Reflections*, so, too, did the two-day May event at YDS "The Challenge of Immigration: Framing a New American Conversation" contribute to the Fall 2008

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*Reflections* issue on the same topic. Contributors to both the conference and the magazine included International Rescue Committee president George Rupp '67 B.D. and Luis Lugo, director of the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

*Middle Passage Conversations on Black Religion in the African Diaspora* spanned three days and encompassed media ranging from traditional panel discussions to performance art, a play and an installation in the Institute of Sacred Music gallery. One innovation that gave the conference spontaneity was a request by organizer Emilie Townes that panelists not use written notes. The result, said Townes, was one of the most satisfying outcomes of the conference, named “Middle Passage” after the leg of the Atlantic slave trade that transported slaves from Africa to slave markets in the Americas.

Townes, the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of African American Studies in Religion and Theology, spent two years preparing for the event. She described an ambitious set of projects that flowed from the conference at Yale, including using the resources of YDS and Yale’s African American Studies Department in connection with postdoctoral positions, pastoral internships, and community-based internships that will focus on issues of social justice.

Like the *Middle Passage* conference, the February 2008 *Renewing Hope: Pathways of Religious Environmentalism* gathering was aimed at building sustainable structures that would outlast the event itself, which attracted some 300 participants.

“One of the outcomes of the conference is that YDS is part of a broader movement to support the ‘Greening of Seminaries.’ This is a nationwide effort to bring an ecological sensibility into both seminary curriculum and lived practices,” remarked Mary Evelyn Tucker, who helped organize the conference and is co-director of the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale. One of YDS’s own, Margaret A. Farley Assistant Professor of Social Ethics Willis Jenkins, is in the thick of the movement, and his online *Encyclopedia of Religion and Sustainability* is set to launch this March.



Mary Evelyn Tucker

As self-contained events, the conferences, of course, attract different people for different reasons. Chris Freimuth, a farmer from Poughkeepsie, NY, who hopes to enter the Pacific School of Religion in fall 2009, attended *Renewing Hope* and, though disappointed in some ways, appreciated the ongoing conversation. “Although I disagreed with much of what was said, along with the ways in which it was said, I was very thankful for the conference,” he said. “I’m glad that the dialogue was initiated in such a large way, and that the dialogue continues.”

By far the most visible effort of the year came in July with an eight-day event, *Loving God and Neighbor in Word and Deed*, that attracted a pantheon of global Muslim and Christian leaders and prompted scores of stories by news organizations from around the world. Organized by YDS’s Center for Faith and Culture, the conference ended with a declaration calling for continued dialogue between Muslims and Christians. Center Director Miroslav Volf was deeply satisfied “to have gathered together many of the worlds most prominent Muslim scholars and clerics discussing with prominent Christian and Jewish leaders at the highest academic as well as deepest personal levels the great and critical issues that divide the monotheistic faiths.”

Although applauded on many fronts, the conference was not without its critics in both the Christian and Muslim worlds, including YDS visiting scholar Sarah Ruden, who published a critique with *The Wall Street Journal* that termed the conference a “phony love-fest” between Muslims and Christians.

But Volf and other conference organizers believe respectful and honest debate is important and healthy and are hopeful that the Christian-Muslim discussion has gained enough traction to resonate for years to come. According to Volf, organizers are intent on creating “an annual forum over the next five years for internationally prominent Muslims and Christians that allows leaders of these two communities to build on and deepen the impact of the Common Word engagements begun at Yale in the summer of 2008.”



Jordan’s Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad speaking at the *Loving God and Neighbor in Word and Deed* conference