

YDS IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

by Gustav Spohn '73 M.A.R.

ON ONE AFTERNOON IN March 2005, a producer from CNN's NewsNight was in Yale Divinity School Dean Harold W. Attridge's office interviewing him about the pope and Dan Brown's best-selling novel *The Da Vinci Code*. Meanwhile, just across the hall was a crew from NBC, squeezed into the dean's conference room interviewing David W. Miller, executive director of the Yale Center for Faith & Culture, about faith in the workplace.

It is not every day that two national networks are rubbing shoulders on the Yale Divinity School campus. Nonetheless, the March convergence may be seen as an example, more dramatic than most, of the steadily growing presence of YDS in the public square over the past several years—precisely at a time when public expression of religious faith is a hot topic of discussion.

In 2005, Yale Divinity School was in a wide variety of public venues nationally. For example, Lamin Sanneh, the D. Willis James Professor of World Christianity, appeared



Dean Harold W. Attridge answers questions about the pope and *The Da Vinci Code* for CNN's "NewsNight."

in April on PBS's nationally broadcast "NewsHour with Jim Lehrer" to discuss challenges facing Pope Benedict XVI and delivered a talk entitled "Religious Faultlines in West Africa" to the Council on Foreign Relations. Articles on the new pope in the *Boston Globe* and *Houston Chronicle* quoted Dean Attridge. Thomas Ogletree, professor of theological ethics,

was quoted in *New York Times* and *Baltimore Sun* articles on the churches and homosexuality.

Attridge cites the self-study begun by the Divinity School in 2000 under former Dean Richard Wood as a critical turning point in the school's efforts to recapture some of the prominence it had a half-century ago—when theological giants at mainline seminaries expressed themselves on contemporary issues to great effect, people like Yale Divinity's own H. Richard Niebuhr and Roland Bainton.

"One of the things we said to ourselves when we did our self-study about four years ago was that the divinity school really needed to take its responsibility seriously to articulate a contemporary vision of church and theology for a broader audience than that of our students," said Attridge. This decision, he noted, followed on the heels of "a period of introspection" when faculty and staff were focused on issues related to the shape of theological education and the major controversy surrounding the possible relocation of the Divinity School.

Among other notable 2005 happenings: Margaret Farley, the Gilbert L. Stark Professor of Christian Ethics, appeared in May in Washington, D.C., before the Congressional Caucus on Women's Issues to talk about the role of religion in fighting the AIDS pandemic—particularly in Africa. Then, in October, Farley returned to Washington to continue the conversation about AIDS, speaking to 100 international diplomats and their spouses. At a separate event also in D.C., Siobhán Garrigan, assistant dean of chapel, and Patrick Evans, senior lecturer in the practice of sacred music, were among the leaders of the June 4-7 "One Table, Many Voices" anti-poverty gathering in our nation's capital, which Bread for the World President David Beckmann lauded as a demonstration of "what religion in the public square should really be about."

However, it was Kristen Leslie's connection to the story about religion at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado, that placed YDS most prominently in the public square in 2005.

Beginning in April, Leslie '86 M.Div., assistant professor of pastoral care and counseling at YDS, was at the center of a nationwide controversy over religious practice at the

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Academy after she and a group of her students reported observing "stridently evangelical themes" during a week-long stay at the Academy during summer 2004. Leslie's involvement led to her testimony at the end of June before the Subcommittee on Military Personnel of the U.S. House of Representatives' Committee on Armed Services. Two months later, the Air Force issued guidelines to all of its commanders—at the Academy and elsewhere—cautioning against actions that could be interpreted as Air Force support for one religion over another.

At times during the lead-up to the Congressional hearing, national media were covering the debate, including the YDS involvement, on almost a week-to-week basis. Articles and editorials appeared in newspapers both large and small—such as the *Washington Post*, *Colorado Springs Gazette*, *Charlotte Observer*, *Denver Post* and many others. The *New York Times* ran three editorials on the subject in less than two months. CNN ran a lengthy piece featuring an interview with Leslie on "Paula Zahn NOW," and National Public Radio also picked up the story.

Although Leslie is not entirely satisfied with the Air Force's response—she believes the guidelines on religious activities are too general to make a real impact—she is glad to have engaged the issue.

"I feel that a lot of good things have come out of this, and only some of them have to do directly with the Air Force Academy or even with the military," said Leslie. One of those things, she suggested, was to move along the faculty's ongoing conversation about "what should the School's role be in the public discourse, on having an opinion, on having a voice on larger issues."

"I think right now members of the faculty are really quite engaged in that very matter," said Leslie, "not just having opinions about what's going on in the public forum but actually participating in the dialogue, being crucial partners in the dialogue."

Even as Leslie was pressing publicly for a more subdued evangelical tone at the Academy, especially on the part of faculty and administration, David Miller at the Center for Faith and Culture was engaging *The Wall Street Journal* and other national media about the Center's Ethics and Spirituality

in the Workplace initiative, which encourages religious expression at work. However, Attridge believes that both are deeply committed to "appropriate" expression of spirituality that recognizes the pluralistic nature of the 21st century American workplace.

"It's a pluralistic public sphere, and no particular religion ought to be allowed to dominate," asserted the dean. "But religion has something to say and ought to be allowed to be part of the conversation, whether it's in the workplace or in politics or whatever."

In fact, shortly after the Air Force Academy story broke, Miller found himself in the position of having to defend his Yale colleague's activities—when an Air Force Academy graduate and former Air Force pilot approached Miller to complain that the report of Leslie and her students unfairly attacked the academy and his Christian faith.

Miller recalls listening carefully and explaining that Leslie was not trying to stifle expression of faith but rather to ensure that faith is discussed in appropriate ways.

"I think Kristen's work has raised some good questions that need to be thought about," said Miller. If Academy officials were in fact using their positions to impose or dictate a faith expectation, Miller said, that would be wrong. "The key is to find a way to honor the deeply held religious convictions of all in the military, while recognizing that a variety of faith traditions are present."

Leslie said she sees her work at the Academy as a sort of case study that helps elucidate an area where bringing faith into a particular workplace—i.e., a government educational institution—can be especially tricky.

Nationally, the issue of religion in the public square is a hotly debated topic, especially the question of *how* faith is expressed publicly. Across the country, Yale Divinity



Professor Margaret Farley '70 M.Phil., '73 Ph.D. speaking in Washington, D.C., about AIDS in Africa.

alumni have been engaged in the discussion. One of the most prominent voices has been former Senator John Danforth '63 B.D. In a June Op-Ed piece in the *New York Times*, Danforth acknowledged that “people of faith have the right, and perhaps the obligation, to bring their values to bear in politics” but added that “moderate Christians” like himself “think that efforts to haul references of God into the public square, into schools and courthouses, are far more apt to divide Americans than to advance faith.”

Meanwhile, Jack Scott '62 B.D., a California state senator from Pasadena, was quoted in the *Pasadena Star-News* in August urging Democrats to speak out about the religious ideals that ground their positions. The newspaper described

“So let us begin a peace movement... We believe that it is our responsibility as people of faith to witness to the coming of God's peace here on earth.”

Scott as being “in the vanguard” of those who want to bring faith and morality into the political discussion.

U.S. Representative Lois Capps '64 M.A.R. of California, who called for an investigation of the role of religion at the Air Force Academy, said in a public statement made in June that the “coercive and pervasive religious atmosphere at the Air Force Academy has to change.”

The issue of religion in the public square has also been an explicit topic of discussion at Yale Divinity School venues in recent years, including several occasions in 2005.

“Does the practice of faith require the articulation of faith?” was the question posed by Yale Law School Professor Harlon Dalton '73 J.D. in welcoming remarks at the September 15-16 Sarah Smith Memorial Conference 2005, sponsored by Yale Divinity School, the Yale Center for Faith & Culture, and Yale Law School.

After the conference Miller said, “The expectation at a conference like this isn't to come up with the final solution or the one-size-fits-all answer. But what we can do is help begin to frame the question, even give voice to the question, strip some of the vitriol and emotion out of the public discourse on these questions of religion in the public square.”

Stephen Ruckman, a joint Divinity/Law candidate in law and ethics, was one of the primary organizers of a May 2 debate pitting Jim Wallis of Sojourners against Barry Lynn of Americans United for Separation of Church and State to discuss issues like discriminatory religious speech, federal funding of faith-based organizations, and abortion.

Said Ruckman, “For me, the debate was profoundly helpful in its very demonstration of how one can persuasively, and publicly, articulate one's progressive religious convictions.”

An April 28-29 Yale Divinity School celebration of the life and ministry of William Sloane Coffin, Jr. raised the level of discussion from form to content, from religion in the public square to “prophetic ministry.” In a talk entitled *A Politically Engaged Spirituality*, Coffin, '49 B.A., '56 B.D. and university chaplain from the late 1950s to mid-1970s, asked, “Why in the academic world are theology and

ethics so sharply distinguished? In prophetic theology they don't even interface; they are one.” The day following Coffin's talk, a standing-room-only audience in the YDS Common Room listened to a panel of Yale Divinity alumni grapple with the challenges of prophetic ministry in a presentation entitled “The Future of Ministry in the 'Prophetic' Tradition.”

Whether Yale Divinity School's engagement in the public square means it is moving toward “prophetic” ministry is open to debate. The bar is set quite high by religious leaders such as Coffin and Otis Moss, Jr., pastor of Olivet Institutional Baptist Church in Cleveland, who delivered the divinity school's 2004 Beecher Lectures on the topic Preaching as Prophetic Ministry. Moss described prophetic ministry as a “bold adventure” that must “speak truth to power . . . to the extent that you're willing to die practicing it.”

What is clear, however, is that recent activity on Sterling Divinity Quadrangle suggests the improbability of any waning of the school's engagement in the public discourse. Director of Supervised Ministries Barbara Blodgett's new “Public Leadership in Ministry” program is honing student skills of leadership and introducing students to theories of faith-based leadership in public life to equip them for making tangible differences in the lives of

others. Blodgett '87 M.Div., '00 Ph.D. reports finding students with “a commitment to justice . . . remarkable skills of analysis and inquiry and a strong desire to find their place among the movements and organizations working toward social change.”

Canaan Harris '06 S.T.M. formed a new YDS student group at the beginning of the 2005-06 academic year called “The Peacemaking Initiative” that he said is “committed to challenging the powers and principalities on issues of war and peace.” In an open letter to the YDS community, Harris quoted the question posed by Salvadoran peace activist Jose Inocencio “Chencho” Alas in a September 22 homily in Marquand Chapel: “Where are the prophets?” Said Harris, “So let us begin a peace movement here . . . We believe that it is our responsibility as people of faith to witness to the coming of God's peace here on earth.”

Two scholarship funds initiated at Yale Divinity School in 2005 are targeted for students committed to activist ministries: The Samuel Arthur Todd Scholarship Fund for students with “a deep interest in ministries committed to social justice, to empowerment of people, and to peace,” and the William Sloane Coffin, Jr. Scholarship for students who demonstrate “gifts for prophetic leadership and passion for social justice.”

The Yale Center for Faith & Culture is establishing a new initiative, the “Reconciliation Program,” designed to bring together Christians and Muslims so that their collective insights can be brought to bear on issues of peace. John Lindner, director of external relations and development at YDS, was named in the spring to the Leadership Council of Churches for Middle East Peace, an ecumenical coalition that maintains an ongoing dialogue with government entities. He is also part of a group of activists forming a network to revive the anti-nuclear movement under the leadership of Coffin.

And there are no signs of a decrease in appearances by Yale Divinity faculty on network television. Three faculty were interviewed in the fall for A&E's biography series, in connection with a series on early Christianity: Dean Attridge, Adela Collins, the Buckingham Professor of New Testament Criticism and Interpretation, and Jeremy Hultin '03 Ph.D., assistant professor of New Testament.



Professor Kristen Leslie '86 M.Div. fields questions about controversies at the U.S. Air Force Academy during an interview with CNN's “Paula Zahn NOW.”

“Yes, indeed, people are going to be taking stands in the public,” said Attridge. “We have the responsibility to do that, to help our students to learn how . . . That can't be our sole and primary focus—our primary focus is to educate the religious leadership of the next generation. But part of that leadership has to be an ability to do precisely this, and I think the faculty can model it.”

Perhaps the words that broke the stillness of Marquand Chapel at Opening Convocation 2005 represent the kind of leadership that will keep Yale Divinity School clearly in the public square. Emilie M. Townes, the newly appointed Andrew W. Mellon Professor of African American Religion and Theology, called for disruption of the “mundane and comfortable” and a “new agenda for living” that will “order and shape our lives in ways that are not always predictable, not always safe, rarely conventional, and protest with prophetic fury the sins of a world, and sometimes theological world views, that encourage us to separate our bodies from our spirits, our minds from our hearts, our beliefs from our actions.”