

# LIGHT SHINES BRIGHTLY AT WILLIAM SLOANE COFFIN, JR. CELEBRATION

by Gustav Spohn '73 M.A.R.

AT THE APRIL 28, 2005 YALE DIVINITY School dinner in honor of the public witness and ministry of the Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Jr., Garry Trudeau '70 B.A., '73 M.F.A., '79 L.D.H. creator of the *Doonisbury* comic strip, told a story about a man who thought he was a moth: "The man walked into a doctor's office and said he needed help. The doctor responded, 'Well, I'm a general practitioner. You need to see a psychiatrist.' Whereupon the man replied, 'Well, actually I was on my way to see him, but I noticed your light was on.'"

Back when he was university chaplain at Yale, that is the way it was with Coffin, '49 B.A., '56 B.D., with a host of students

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flocking around him at Battell Chapel, recalled Trudeau. "We were on our way to something else and noticed his light, this astonishing incandescence of a warrior, pulling triple duty in the service of God, country, and Yale." Religious or not, Christian or Jewish or otherwise, hundreds of Yale students looked to Coffin for guidance, support, and inspiration during his 1958-75 tenure as chaplain. At Yale, the United Church of Christ minister rose to national prominence as a leading anti-war activist, civil rights leader, and outspoken opponent of nuclear armament.

More than 400 former students, colleagues, and admirers attended the two-day celebration in honor of Coffin, now 80 years old, suggesting that Coffin's light has not dimmed—despite age and a debilitating stroke. The celebration included two panel discussions at the Divinity School on activism and ministry as well as the reception and dinner at the University Commons. The evening also featured musical selections by Noel Paul Stookey and Peter Yarrow—of Peter, Paul and Mary—and Coffin's son David, a professional musician.

But it was Coffin's voice that marked the culmination of the evening. When he rose to speak at the dinner, Coffin abandoned his wheelchair and spoke for twenty-two minutes, his remarks sprinkled with his typical combination of critiques, challenges, and healthy doses of humor. "I believe Christianity is a worldview that undergirds all progressive

thought and action," he said. "The Christian church doesn't have a social ethic as much as it is a social ethic, called to respond to biblical mandates like truth-telling, confronting injustice, and pursuing peace. What is so heart-breaking is that, in a world of pain crying out for change, so many American churches today are basically down to management and therapy."

Coffin did not let clergy and seminaries off the hook, either: "Clearly, parish clergy could use a little more starch; they are gumption-deficient. But they also need more instruction from their seminaries to face difficult situations that lie ahead." Some of those difficult situations, Coffin said, include the treatment of same-sex couples, pollution, and nuclear proliferation. The mainline church community should be prepared to "take on" the religious right regarding these issues, he said, raising a theme that

would be echoed the next day during a panel presentation entitled, *The Future of Ministry in the "Prophetic Tradition."*

Members of that panel, all Yale Divinity School graduates, distinguished between the "religious right"—represented by Jerry Falwell and others—and "progressive" evangelicals. Serene Jones '85 M.Div., '91 Ph.D. the Titus Street Professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School, remarked, "I have been increasingly amazed at the level of theological illiteracy that marks the Christian right, and I think that needs to be exposed. It's bad theology." Bishop John Chane '72 M.Div. of the Episcopal Church Diocese of Washington, also on the panel, added, "I think we also have to get rid of this sense of liberal arrogance... which has permitted those on the extreme right to take over a huge vacuum. [This situation] calls for the church to be responsive at a time when it still believes it can sit back and not challenge people whose theology is veneer-thin. We've got to get over that."

The conversation turned to the possibilities of forming partnerships that together might challenge the centrality of the religious right in the public square. Forging such alliances, though, would be difficult on the denominational level, panelists predicted. Dwight Andrews '77 M.Div., '83 M.Phil., '93 Ph.D., a noted preacher and musician who currently serves as pastor of First Congregational Church in Atlanta, reflected, "I'm not quite sure what the new coalitions would look like because one of the things that has

happened in the '60s and '70s is really the rise of the mega-churches. They are kind of completely disconnected from denominational conversations."

While Coffin's role as an activist is well known, many of the comments at the celebration underscored another, less visible side of Coffin—the more personal and pastoral aspect of his ministry. David L. Warren '70 B.D., '70 M.U.R.S., president of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU), worked with Coffin for a decade while serving as general secretary of Dwight Hall, Yale's umbrella organization for social service organizations, and as a member of the Yale Religious Ministry. Warren recalled that behind public scenes there was a quieter defender of the faith. "Many in this room will know Bill Coffin as a personal pastor," noted Warren, recalling how Coffin would "listen with his attention riveted on you."

One Yale student who was—quite literally—in Trudeau's words, "on (his) way to something else" when he stumbled across Coffin in the fall of 1965 was Yale football legend Calvin Hill '69 B.A. A few weeks into his freshman year at Yale, Hill was feeling somewhat down. "I decided to wander across the Yale campus to a beautiful building called 'Battell Chapel,'" Hill told the banqueters in a talk called "Bill the Pastor." "It was there I heard Bill Coffin for the first time." Hill eventually became a Battell Chapel deacon and reader of bedtime stories for the Coffin children. "I didn't want to be like [professional football hero] Jim Brown," said Hill. "I wanted to be like Bill Coffin."

James Ponet '68 B.A., a Jewish undergraduate in the mid-1960s, is now the Howard M. Holtzmann Jewish Chaplain at Yale and the Executive Director of the Joseph Slifka Center for Jewish Life at Yale remarked, "The Coffin legacy is mythic," during the first panel on *Faith and Activism: The Legacy of the '60s Generation*. "It needs to be recovered. The legacy is hard to communicate. You were my rebbe. I went to church regularly because in your presence I felt I was in the presence of the conscience of the nation."

Ponet is not alone in his desire to recover Coffin's legacy. One of the purposes of the Coffin celebration was to announce the launching of an endowed scholarship fund at Yale Divinity School that will aim to carry on the Coffin legacy of ministerial engagement in the political and so-



Dwight Andrews '77 M.Div., '83 M.Phil., '93 Ph.D. offers a response during a panel discussion on the "Future of Prophetic Ministry."



Coffin's son, David, performs with Paul Stookey and Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul, and Mary.

cial questions of the day. Prophetic leadership, passion for justice, and critical theological interpretations of the contemporary social and political scene are characteristics that will be sought in Yale Divinity School students who are named Coffin Scholars. The fund has an endowment goal of \$1 million and was initiated by former students who were deeply influenced by Coffin's ministry, many of whom were present at the dinner and panel presentations. To learn more about making a contribution, please contact Yale Divinity School's Office of Development at 203.432.5358 or visit [www.yale.edu/divinity](http://www.yale.edu/divinity).